

East London History Society

Newsletter

Winter 1993

Vol.1 No. 5



Seasons Greetings

50 YEARS AGO

The East End - Christmas 1943

The war weary East End staggered towards the fifth Christmas of the war. Many of the houses were bomb blasted and boarded up. Victoria Park was only a shadow of its former glory, with most of its acreage occupied by AA guns, barrage balloons, bomb shelters and allotments (the Dig for Victory campaign was in full swing). There were AA gun placements on Hackney Marshes and Mud Chute Millwall as well.

Shops made a brave effort for the festive season; J Roberts Department Store at Stratford Broadway had dress materials at 2/- per yard (10p) plus two clothing coupons. Black-out materials sold for 2s.5d per yard. Matches were in short supply and disappeared 'under the counter' for regular customers only.

The Ministry of Food restricted all Christmas puddings to not more than two pounds in weight and the ingredients must not cost more than 3s. 5d (35p).

Out of this gloom there shone a bright spot, and that was the local cinema. There were so many of them, with so many different films showing, a person could go to the 'pictures' many times in a week. They were not as many people today think of them 'flea-pits', but good, cheap entertainment, which transported the East Enders away from the dismal streets for at least a few hours. The Troxy Cinema at Stepney was showing **Alexander's Ragtime Band**, plus a Christmas stage show, the Odeon, Mile End had **The Road to Morocco** with Bing Crosby and Bob Hope, the East Ham Odeon had **Bachelor Mother** with Ginger Rogers. Al Philips, the Aldgate boxer knocked out George Pook of Torquay in the fourth round at the Albert Hall.

In High Street North, East Ham, a five-roomed house with scullery plus

Anderson shelter in the back garden had a sale price of £575.

In Crisp Street, Poplar, an epidemic of bag-snatching broke out, people lost not only money, but items much more important in those days, ration books, clothing coupons and identity cards.

St Andrews Hospital received a large number of toys from the American Red Cross. Children at Poplar Hospital were entertained at a party given by Canadian soldiers, and the Fern Street Settlement received a number of gifts from Queen Mary.

At 3.05 am on the 20th December, during an air raid a plane caught in a searchlight dropped one of its bombs. It landed in the LNER goods yard at Warley Street, Bethnal Green (close to Meath Gardens). Four people were injured, houses nearby damaged, a chimney stack at Quinns Buildings, Russia Lane, was blown down.

There were no air raids on the UK over the Christmas period. January 29/30th 1944 saw a much larger air raid on London. Large fires were started in Poplar and Rotherhithe; Leytonstone Railway Station was destroyed with eleven killed and forty injured, also badly hit was Walthamstow and Southend.

John Harris

Letters from our Members.....

Stan Newens, MEP, London W11, writes:

As I was born at 31 Quilter Street - not more than three minutes walk from Baxendale Street, where George Renshaw was born, eight years before me - I have read his articles with enormous interest. My family also shopped at Curtis' sweet shop, on the corner of Elwin Street and Quilter Street, at Jack Lee's oil shop in Barnet Grove, and at Maudie Gillett's cats' meat shop on the corner of Wimbolt Street. Like him, attended Columbia Road School - though not Danie' Street.

On this basis, I can confirm much of what he recalls. His reminiscences are fascinating and he is to be congratulated on setting pen to paper.

Both my parents' families were well established in the locality. One of my great grandfathers, James Sheen (1843-1936) had an upholstery business in Brick Lane and, at one time, seven of his children and their offspring lived in Quilter Street or the immediate neighbourhood. My paternal grandfather, Thomas Newens, was a police constable attached to Whitechapel Division from 1888 to 1913, and brought his family up in Gascoigne Place.

After difficulties over unsatisfactory employment, following demobilisation in 1919, my father and mother established a haulage business, which they operated from our home. Many of the small businessmen - particularly in the furniture trade - hired my father's vans. My parents also undertook removals.

George Renshaw says he never saw any blackshirts on the day of the Gardener's Corner confrontation in 1936. I wonder if he remembers them, as I do, marching along Barnet Grove on a Sunday. Although from a non-Jewish family, I was even then aware of anti-semitism and remember children making remarks at school. The Jewish barber, Mr Shire, who cut our hair in a shop in Bethnal Green Road, near Barnet Grove, told my father about the suffering of Jews in Germany while he had him in the chair.

The blackshirts once approached my father to use his vans, but he refused. However, anti-Jewish feeling was regretfully common in the gentile population. I must say that my sympathies are very much with those who

marched against fascism and I hope the lesson will not be lost on us today.

I hope one day to get my father's autobiography, which he wrote in retirement, published. The area in which we lived is as fascinating as any part of the East End, and George Renshaw's efforts to shed light on it are most welcome.

Ed: The final part of George Renshaw's reminiscences appear in this issue. The first two parts created considerable interest and we've received several letters from our members, whose memories have been stirred by George's story.

Mr A L Hellicar, Benfleet, Essex writes:

Elsie Sanders, writing in the Autumn Newsletter, refers to her school as Limehouse Central. Was not this school known as Thomas Street Central? That is how it was referred to when two cousins of mine attended it.

I do not remember ever seeing George Green's scholars wearing a mortar board. Surely this headgear would only have been seen on teaching staff. Perhaps Elsie is confusing the grammar school with Howrah House Convent of the Faithful Companions which stood a little distance away to the west. The building was at one time the residence of Duncan Dunbar, shipbuilder and owner of Dunbar Wharf, Millwall. My eldest sister went there and I remember her wearing a mortar board.

Mrs C Abbott, Chelmsford, Essex, has sent in her memories of the same school:

I went to Thomas Street Central School, off Burdett road, we were called the Bug Squashers for some reason. I was there from 1932 - 1936 while living in Ida Street, Poplar, not far from Aberfeldy Street. Maybe that is the Central School that Mrs Sanders refers to.

The Hall was very large and had a glass roof, which when raining one had to be careful to dodge the drips during assembly. The classrooms were around the hall. At the age of 13 years you had to choose between going on to Commercial Studies or Technical work. I chose commercial and was taught typing, book-keeping etc.

My Form Teacher was Miss Sizer, who also taught English, and the French Mistress was Miss French, the two teachers also lived together in a house on the edge of Epping Forest, and every year would invite us to tea, after a walk through the forest, having to take off our shoes before entering the house. The trips were always enjoyed by the girls who went.

Another occasion, we went to the Old Vic, where we saw 'St Joan' by Bernard Shaw, this was very exciting and gave me an interest in the theatre which I have never lost.

One year I went to the Isle of Wight, a school journey as it was referred to. We had to pay weekly during the year, and those unfortunate in not paying the full amount were still allowed to go providing they had the school uniform, which was a navy tunic, with white blouse in the summer, or with a red blouse or red jumper, in the winter. This was worn with black stockings and shoes, with a dutch school cap or beret. In the summer during the last years of my schooling, we were able to purchase for 6 1/4 old pence a yard of material, blue and white checks with a fine red stripe going through, we were allowed to wear white socks with our black shoes and if possible, a panama hat. The whole school was divided into Houses, Yellow, Red, Blue and Green which made things more interesting, and the classes into A, B and C. It was a very good school, but you never realise that until you get older.

Mary Ellen Edwards (nee Smith) has her own memories of Poplar from 1914-1933:

After the death of my mother in 1914, I moved from Margate to Tetley Street, Poplar, to live with my great aunt and uncle. My father, Charlie Smith, who was a Punch and Judy man, stayed in Margate, as for many years he and his father performed on Margate beach. During the winter he would come back to his mother in Tetley Street, next door to where I lived and do shows in some of the large departmental stores, and also on the streets of London. I had two sisters and four brothers but I didn't know where they went to live. My brother, Charlie, stayed with my father to help with the Punch and Judy Show and took over from Charlie Smith senior on Margate Beach when he died in 1940. I had very little to do with my father or my brothers and sisters, as I was not allowed to mix

with them. My great aunt and uncle regarded my father and other show people as not the type of people one should associate with - it was not a highly thought of means of earning money.

One memory I have is having to go across the road to the Public House to buy half a pint of old ale which they put into the jug which I took with me. My great aunt would have put a poker in the fire while I was gone so that when I returned with the jug, she would put the red hot poker into the jug to warm up the beer. It was an errand I absolutely hated as I didn't like going into the pub, nor did I enjoy the smell of the beer when it was heated.

I used to be given a halfpenny every day by my great aunt and would go and buy some scrubbed carrots to eat on the way to school, Thomas Street Central. I also used to buy Tiger nuts and Locust bars from the corner shop on Tetley Street.

During the summer the Star of the East Public House in Tetley Street used to arrange charabanc outings to Southend and as they set off, the people used to throw out their odd coppers and all the children would scramble for the coins. I was never allowed to join in as I was not allowed to play in the street. My life was mainly helping my aunt clean the house and witen the hearthstone round the doorstep. When I got older I did not spend a lot of my leisure time at St. Frideswide's Church Convent.

I have the idea that when my mother married my father, my mother's family were disgusted at the thought of her marrying a Punch and Judy man and therefore had nothing more to do with her, although I do think that my mother's sister was still friendly with her. I understand that she wanted to adopt me on condition that I had no more to do with my family, but my father wouldn't hear of it. My mother's name was Edith Emma Watts and her father's name was James Watts, a lighterman, and her mother was Susannah Rachel Watts. I believe that her sister's name was Elizabeth Watts and she ran a dairy in Ilford.

Editor's Note:

I had been puzzled about the references to both Limehouse Central School, and Thomas Street, (now Thomas Road), and I must thank two dear ladies, Daisy Jarrett and Gladys Manister (William Whiffen's daughter) who also attended Thomas Street Central School, for setting me right.

'Up the Roman'

As a child in the early 1930's I lived in Tredegar Road, Bow and everything in that area centred around Roman Road, known to all as 'Up the Roman'. I well recall Saturday nights, the lit shops, the shouting vendors at their stalls accompanied by the cry of the newsboys shouting "Dog Winner". Not forgetting, of course, the relative smells, vegetables mingled with the smell of the fish shop and the aroma of the paraffin lamps that lit the stalls.

If you walked from Lefevre Road going towards St Stephen's Road, you would come to Parnell Road, on the corner of which was the Hand and Flower Public House. On the other corner was Abbotts the pawnbrokers and a few doors along Dr Lightstones surgery. Next was Usher Road, which had The Rose and Denmark PH on the corner. On the following corner was Dean's the chemist, and on the corner of Armagh Road was Toddy Holes fish stall. He was outside of Cohen's Stores, who I believe were the forerunners of Tesco's. Further along was the HMV radio shop and next door to them was Caters and Applegates, the butchers. On the corner of Cardigan Road was Andersons the Bakers, on the other side was Woolworths and next door to them Beards, men's outfitters. There was an old church on the side of Foxes's PH and then Foxes the chemist on the corner of Vernon Road. On the next corner was Bow Library and then Ramsbottoms the leather shop, then Berry's the Corn Chandler. further up on the corner of St Stephen's Road was Kings the butchers.

Coming back on the other side you had the Rifleman PH and Roman Road School, next door to that The Needle Gun PH. Then you came to Pridaux the chicken and egg shop. Dr Hersmans surgery and the swimming baths. There was the Maypole and the Home and Colonial and after Libra Road, Wiggins the toy shop and Waltons menswear. On the corner of Armagh Road, the Ranlagh PH and the Stanleys the butchers. After Usher Road was the Cooked Meat Shop where one could buy a penn'orth of crackling and crossing Parnell Road you had the barbers shops and Earls the oil shop. There were many more which I have forgotten, but I am sure this will stir up many old memories.

Billy Scotchmer

Notes from Doreen's Diary:

My obsession with Victoria Park and its history rewarded with the discovery of a page in a new book on 'Bridge House' formerly the 'Out and Out Mission' Bow 1893-1993. Dealing with the lectures they held on the demonstration ground by the Drinking Fountain, taking their banners and portable harmonium to attract large crowds on a Sunday afternoon. The book, **100 Not Out** by Jean Hewitt A4, 40 pages Price £4.75 + P&P is available from the author at Bridge House, Bow E3.

The Making of Modern London, the life of James Pennethorne, Price £45, has a whole chapter on his work designing Victoria Park.

A visit to Buckingham Palace when opened to the public in August, and in the official brochure, James Pennethorne is noted as having erected a ballroom 123 ft long and 60 ft wide with a throne dais, an organ and musicians gallery for Queen Victoria in 1854. Below he placed spacious kitchens and a Marble Hall. What a shame this beautiful ballroom is not open to the public. "Packed high with chairs," a guide said. Still you do get to walk through the Marble Hall on your way out.

Interesting letter and then a visit to Mrs Helen Wilson, re her French Huguenot weaver grandfather Walter Rolfe who lived in Type Street, Old Ford Road E2 and made Queen Mary's wedding dress with silver thread running through it. His brother Thomas made the silk for Princess Marina's gown. The looms were in the loft worked by his daughters and reached by a big ladder in the passage. Walter Rolfe had a goatee beard and moved to Braintree, Essex where his family consisted of four boys and three girls. His wife Jane died aged 40 by falling down the stairs. He then married Adelaide, and had seven more children. When growing up Mrs Wilson's favourite food was a thick slice of bread and dripping with salt. With her 1/2 penny pocket money spent on sherbet and 2 bottles of fizzy drink.

Looking for the perfect gift for that special person, here are a few recent publications on local history. Most of them are available directly from the publisher or author, but should you prefer to browse, the newly refurbished Eastside Bookshop has a good selection of local history publications.

□ *Journey Through a Small Planet* by Emmanuel Litvinoff, £5.95. *A series of autobiographical sketches, in which Litvinoff recalls what it was like growing up in Whitechapel in the 1920's and 30's.*

□ Three beautiful coloured pictorial maps of the East End have been produced by Geonex Ltd 92-94 Church Street Mitcham, Surrey CR4 3TD. Published Sept 1993. Available in two formats poster or folded:

1. London Street Life 1850 - price £4.99
2. Jack's London - Price £2.99 (No prizes for guessing who 'Jack' is!)
3. London Street Life (No price available)

□ In *Letters of Gold, the Story of Sylvia Pankhurst and the East London Federation of the Suffragettes* price £4.95 inc. packing and postage, from Rosemary Taylor, 5 Pusey House, Saracen Street, Poplar, London E14 6HG.

□ *The History of Sutton House* by Anne Blackburn and Mike Gray -£3.00 +p&p from Sutton House, 2-4 Homerton High Street, Hackney E9

□ *Clacton-on-Sea, A Pictorial History* by Norman Jacobs, illustrated, £11.95 from *Phillimore, Shopwyke Manor Barn, Chichester PO20 6BG*

□ *The Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest -150th Anniversary Brochure, £10.00, enquiries QVSR, 121 East India Dock Road, London E14 6DF.*

HOUSE

A three-storey house made of concrete in Grove Road is the latest sculpture that helped Rachael Whiteread win a top national prize, the Turner Prize. A row of typical Edwardian East end houses along Grove Road were bulldozed to make way for Mile End Park extension, leaving behind No. 193 which was granted a temporary stay of execution for three months, so that Rachael could make a huge white concrete cast of the house and make it a memorial to a home, at a cost of £50,000. The house was reinforced with steel rods before being filled with concrete, after which the outer walls were chipped away to

reveal an 'inside out' house. Thousands of art connoisseurs and the plain curious have flocked to see this gigantic sculpture, and it has received wide coverage in the national and international press. The sculpture is not permanent - it will be razed to the ground very shortly. Understandably, local people have (very) mixed reactions to it.
Doreen Kendall

Gladstone on the Move?

Bow Neighbourhood has given notice that it is proposing to move the statue of William Ewart Gladstone, which has graced the site in front of Bow Churchyard since 1882, to the more salubrious surroundings of the traffic roundabout at the junction of Old Ford Road and Grove Road, which no doubt is deemed a fitting resting-place for the illustrious Victorian.

This is not the first time Gladstone's likeness has been under threat of eviction from his hallowed perch on the King's Highway, the Bow Liberals made an earlier attempt to transport him over to the newly-named Gladstone Place in Roman Road, only to have their plan scotched by the Powers That Be. Let's hope reason and a sense of history prevail and the memorial erected to honour PM Gladstone during his own lifetime (a rare honour) by the proprietor of the Bryan and Mays Match Factory, Theodore Bryant, who like his hero was a firm believer in Victorian Values, the work ethic and other social mores all reinforcing the role of women as the underclass, is allowed to maintain its vigil in the proximity of the Match Factory undisturbed.

The proposed site overlooking Victoria Park will make the memorial to Gladstone meaningless. The only time the great Liberal came to the East End was on a visit to Limehouse Town Hall. He had no connection with Victoria Park, which witnessed many a demonstration by working women, including the match girls and the suffragettes, and women trade unionists, all fighting for their rights as workers and as citizens, rights the great man did not subscribe to.
Rosemary Taylor

SAVE CANAL WORKS

Occupied by **Evans of London**, furniture manufacturers since 1955, this factory at 225 Old Ford Road is now the last working Victorian factory on the six miles of canals in Tower Hamlets. Evans were established in Shoreditch in 1868 and now employ about twelve craftsmen. They have just made linenfold panel screens for the House of Commons. Their factory is threatened with demolition.

The building started in 1860 as Wimshurst's Patent Foil and Sheet Metal Works. From 1871 to 1901 it was Smiths' Imperial Chemical Colour Works. From 1902 to 1906, it was the Cocoa Butter Manufacturing Company. From 1908 to 1955 it was one of Waterlow's printing works, making and printing railway tickets for many different countries.

It is a small factory with a square chimney rising from a steam-engine and boiler house, a large cast iron water tank, two north lights and two lantern skylights. On the canal wharf are the remains of the fixings for a hydraulic crane and some old tramlines running into the factory.

The two long buildings with the lantern skylights and the chimney in between were specially built without windows to house the process for making lead and tin foil: patented by Henry William Wimshurst in 1858, when he was living in Dalston. He had been born in Poplar in 1829, the first son of Henry and Rebecca Wimshurst. Henry was a joiner, probably at the Blackwall Shipyard. He went on to build the world's first two-screw propelled ships in 1838 and 1840, at his yard in Coldharbour, Blackwall on the Isle of Dogs.

The **Archimedes** was launched in 1838 with a screw propeller based on Francis Pettit Smith's patent screw propeller. This had been first tried out on the Paddington branch of the Grand Junction Canal. **Archimedes** was seen by Brunel and, as a result, he built his **Great Britain** with a screw propeller in 1843 and

his **Great Eastern** with paddle-wheels and screw propulsion, which was eventually launched at Millwall in 1858.

Henry Wimshurst's **Novelty**, launched in 1840, carried cargo to Constantinople and had Henry's own patented screw propeller which could be removed when the ship was under sail. **Novelty** was the first screw cargo vessel in the world. In 1873, Henry Wimshurst presented stern models of **Archimedes** and **Novelty** to the Science Museum, where they are still on display.

Henry and Rebecca's second son, James, was born in Poplar in 1832. He achieved fame as the inventor of the Wimshurst Machines for generating static electricity. The Wimshursts moved to Limehouse and their fourth son, Everden, was born there in 1838. Everden Wimshurst became a marine engineer and took out several patents. In 1881, he was living with his wife and their six children at 21 Campbell Road Bow.

At the time of the 1841 Census, all the Wimshurst family were living in Commercial Road, between St Anne's Church and the Limehouse Cut, where Henry was in business as a boat and barge builder and mast and block maker. It was about this time that he moved his shipyard from Coldharbour to Millwall. Henry and his three sons were variously involved in the family shipyard at Ratcliff Dry Dock from about 1849 until about 1865 and later, in the firm of Wimshurst, Hollick & Co, mechanical and electrical engineers at their Regent's Canal Dock Works from 1868 to 1899. By 1884, the four men had taken out at least twenty-four patents.

Mid-victorian factories, complete with steam-engine house, boiler and chimney are now very rare in London. Built especially for a patent process and linked with a highly inventive East End family - involved in a major development in the history of ship-building - and now the only mid-Victorian canal factory in Tower Hamlets still being

used for manufacturing makes this a unique survival. It is also the last furniture factory on the canals, which once moved all the timber for the sawmills and veneer factories supplying the renowned furniture trades in Shoreditch and Bethnal Green.

Canal Works is in the recently extended Victoria Park Conservation Area. But, like the nearby barge builder's building at Twig Folly Wharf on the Regent's Canal in Globe Town Neighbourhood, it is not listed as of architectural or historical importance.

Canal Works is in a proposed residential zone and Twig Folly Wharf is zoned for residential development in the Tower Hamlets Urban Development Plan, which has policies to keep old canal buildings and other waterside features - but there are very few left. In addition to the pubs and the three old lock keepers cottages and about half a dozen late 19th/early 20th century factories, there are only eight major mid-Victorian industrial buildings left of the six miles of waterway in Tower Hamlets. They are: Hydraulic Pump House, Limehouse Basin, the oldest surviving in the world; Ragged School Museum, Copperfield Road, canalside warehouses; Bow Outdoor Pursuits Centre, Cordova Road, paraffin warehouse; Barge Builder's Building, Twig Folly Wharf, Roman Road; Park Wharf, Wennington Road, disused factory; Canal Works, Old Ford Road, working factory; Small Arms Factory Gatehouse, Gunmaker's Lane, disused; Limehouse Court, Dod Street, includes former cabinet works.

Each one of the above is a unique surviving fragment of our East End industrial heritage. Most of them are already being well used or may be converted to new uses which only leaves the pump house, barge builder's Canal Works and the Gatehouse with an uncertain future. So, there is a major UDP policy which really only applies to about four buildings and they are all at risk. All four buildings are very much part of the Borough's industrial archaeological heritage which is UDP policy to protect and preserve. The UDP is now being finalised at a public enquiry and, somehow the Borough and the Neighbourhoods must be persuaded to comply

with the UDP policies DEV41 & 45. The Ragged School Museum Trust has made a late objection, in an attempt to ensure that these policies are capable of being put into effect.

We need to have a few reminders of what the canals were for, especially as we have the best canal and river network in London. These few old buildings add variety and interest to the canals, which are being used by more and more people for recreation and could even be used for a safe alternative public transport system in Tower Hamlets and the neighbouring Boroughs. The canals and their few surviving buildings are also important for teaching our children about their local history - which is something the schools have to do as part of the national curriculum.

Canal Works is owned by British Waterways and, because they have outline planning permission for residential use of the site, they gave notice to Evans of London to be out by the end of September. BW has now very generously given them until the end of the year to allow time for a full historical survey and reconsideration of the factory's future.

It is hoped that BW will withdraw their notice to Evans of London and allow them to continue making high class furniture at Canal Works. With a few alterations and repairs, Canal Works could be made an attractive, as well as useful and appropriate part of the Hertford Union Canal.

A full report on CANAL WORKS by Tim Smith of the Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society and Tom Ridge of the Ragged School Museum Trust is in preparation.

GEORGE RENSHAW REFLECTS ON BETHNAL GREEN IN THE 1920'S

PART 3 - FUN AND GAMES

Children living in our area had to be enterprising otherwise there was nothing, we were very lucky in as much that the people around us were good, everybody looking after everyone else. People were concerned for one another, there was no television and in many cases no wireless either. This meant there was a greater social life with people knowing one another better.

There was little traffic in the streets in the 20's so consequently the children spent most of their play time in the streets. There would be girls with their long skipping ropes stretched right across the road taking it in turns to skip on it to the chanting of verses like: One, two three alairy etc. There were the whipping tops and peg tops made of box wood and the Diaboloes which consisted of a tapered wooden spindle with round sides and a narrow middle which was precariously balanced on a piece of cord tied to two sticks. Moving the sticks up and down started the top spinning and when it reached a certain speed it would be tossed again and again in the air and recaptured on the cord.

Many children would make Grottoes using sea shells from shell fish. They would be laid out in a pattern on the pavement, chalked around with coloured chalk and after other stones and trinket had been added would look a work of art. A tin can would be held out and as people passed by they would be asked to remember the Grotto. Although this may seem like begging, hours of work would go into the Grotto's construction, making those few pennies justified.

In Teesdale Street there was a supposedly haunted house and for a number of days the street was crammed with women and children. The ghost was supposed to have moved furniture and thrown things about. Now and again someone would shout, 'Look'

and a roar would go up from the crowd. The kids loved it, in fact we all played on it, pretending to see something. Sometimes imagination is a wonderful thing. In the end a clergyman was brought in as a sort of exorcist, but I think this was only to disperse the crowd. Someone said as he came out of the house that the ghost had been laid, which finished the affair.

The first I remember of the Cinema was the **Belmont** in Seebright Street off Hackney Road. This was the time of the silent films where there were captions which showed the words that were being spoken by the actors. A Mr Eagle who lived in Baxendale Street played the cinema piano and it was his job to alter the tempo of the music to suit what was taking place. If there was a chase then he would play fast, and with a love scene something slow and sentimental. The Picture House, as it was called, had no single seats, everyone sat on a bench which curved to the shape of the building. Upstairs, (the gods) there was a front railing where the children sat on the floor and dangled their legs through. The entrance fee for the cinema was a penny which you put in a bowler hat as you went in. There was always a cheer for the good guys and a boo for the bad ones, but much was left to the imagination.

As the technology of film making progressed more cinemas opened. There was **The Central** in Hackney Road where on Saturday you were given a bag of sweets, an apple and an orange. The entrance fee here was twopence. There was also **The Standard** in Goldsmiths Row where they showed serials on a Saturday morning and you would have to return the following week to find out the outcome. Serials like *The Lost Squadron*, about an Air force base hidden in the side of a hill. There was Pearl White, Harold Lloyd and *The Clutching Hand*. We would all come out spellbound. At **Smarts Cinema** in Bethnal Green Road you could bunk in the back door. We would go in one at a time, but should you be caught you were chucked out with a clip round the ear. It was always better to bunk in on the first night of a new showing as the

ushers had not seen the film and were less alert.

There was also the **Hackney Empire** and **The London** in Shoreditch. We would line up with our parents for admission to the gods, high up in the balcony, about an hour before the show. Buskers would entertain you until opening time. On the stage inside there were acts such Max Miller, Ernie Lotinga, Elsie and Doris Waters, Florence Desmond, Stainless Stephen, Harry Lauder, George Robey, Joe Loss and his Orchestra and Carol Levis. Believe me the kids today ain't seen nothing!

During an ordinary day we went to school, did a job when we came home and still found time to play with our friends, and all of us were friends. We had so little but we acquired a wealth of things through our initiative, that money cannot buy. We would make our box carts from old prams that cost us nothing other than a few nails and know-how. We would make a scooter from two lengths of board, a block of wood, two screw eyes and a bolt and a couple of ball bearing wheels from Wilkinsons on the corner of Gossett Street. This would be constructed in less than an hour, and what a scooter!

In Wellington Row there was a square of asphalt which ran to Columbia Road and the top of Quilter Street. This was our skating rink, we called it the 'Ashley' and as I said there was so little traffic about which meant that after school was finished we could skate with very little risk of being hit by a vehicle. A pair of skates cost around two and six and most children had them. You would have a key which operated a claw on the front of the skates, which clipped to the welt of your shoe. It often happened that the sole would pull away and you would be barred from using them by your parents until you obtained a strap which would take the strain off the claw.

We were always smiling and laughing and the competition around us gave us a sense of well being. Doors were never locked and we

would be in and out of one another's houses because we all trusted one another and even when our parents fell out it never affected the friendship of the children.

The old Columbia Market was a large gothic building with spires which has long since gone, it should have been preserved. It was built to be a vegetable market but the railway was too far away. One part of the market was sloped and it rose upward to about ten feet. It was known as 'The Droppings.' We would get over the railings and drop on to the cobbled road, much to the consternation of the local residents. The young children found this very high and would sometimes hurt themselves.

Certain things were seasonal. There would be Marble (glarnies) time, Top time, Conker time, Cigarette card time, Roller Skate time, Catapult time, Scooter time and Pea shooter time. You could purchase a peashooter in the top shop for a penny. It was a ten inch piece of tubing with a raised flange at one end which you put to your mouth and blew a pea through it like a blow pipe. Accuracy came with practice. You could buy the peas from Blenko's or Gunns or any Corn Chandlers shop. Billy Houghton, myself and friends were in the pub toilet which had round holes in the door when this little old man came along. I took a shot at him through the holes and caught him on the cheek. He chased us out of the toilet and down the road at a fair lick, but although he came pretty close he never caught me. When my Dad heard about it the peashooter was confiscated. They were dangerous things. A boy at school was blinded in one eye with one.

We all looked forward to the school summer holidays when we would go down to the canal towpath and drag for fish with the rim of a bike wheel covered in sacking and secured in four places by strong cord. On this a ten foot rope was tied and in the centre of the sacking a weight was placed to hold it down under water. We then pulled it along the canal occasionally lifting it out and removing what fish we had caught. Tiddlers

were thrown back in. The fish were then put in a jam jar and were purchased off us by Mr Lamey who had a pond in his garden.

When we were older we would swim in the canal, but this was a dangerous practice and forbidden by our parents. I remember going with a boy from Wimbolt Street, Bertie Asavado, down to the canal and playing on a moored barge. I looked round for Bertie and he was gone. I looked over the other side of the barge and he was struggling in the water. I shouted for help and a young fellow standing on the bank dived in and pulled Bertie out. He could easily have drowned, but was lucky enough to suffer nothing more than shock and cold. A friend of my mother's, Mrs Richardson lived in nearby Cambridge Road. I took him there and she dried him off and dressed him up in some clothes belonging to one of her daughters, she had no sons. Bertie and I concocted a story that he had fallen in a pond in London Fields, which we told his mum when we got home.

The next day at school Bertie was absent so I told the teacher the concocted story of the pond. Unfortunately, he had since told his mother what really happened. She in turn had told the teacher and called in the doctor. The teacher asked me to repeat my story which I did, and of course, was caught out in the lie. I received four handers with the cane for lying.

Sunday morning always meant a walk down the Row, or the lane. There was Club Row, Slater Street and Brick Lane, through to Wentworth Street and Petticoat Lane. Birds in cages sang everywhere. Dogs could be purchased from a shilling upwards, also cats and monkeys. You could buy almost anything down the Row, and although we had no money to spend, we got one hell of a kick from window shopping.

On one stall would be a tray of secondhand spectacles. If you found a pair that suited, they would cost you sixpence. Further along would be a stall that had a green beige cover on which they sold secondhand false teeth.

There was a bowl of disinfectant on the stall so that after dipping in a set you could see if they were suitable, and once again buy for about sixpence. We would stand round fascinated as people tried the teeth and when someone got the teeth stuck in their mouth we would roar with laughter. My dad told me that all these teeth were obtained from undertakers, who took them out from the dead bodies. From Virginia Road to Bethnal Green Road were the second-hand clothes stalls, where for a few shillings you could purchase a suit or dress. When there were crowds of people in Brick Lane we would help ourselves to an old top hat or bowler, which we would take turns to wear, and it would eventually end up on a window ledge, left for other kids to play with. You dare not tell your parents you pinched anything, as you would be confined to the house for a period as punishment.

We could not afford holidays but would be treated to a trip to Southend on Sea. Weeks before, we would save our coppers to spend on the carousel, and enjoy rides on the various contrivances that were there. Mum and Dad would have to be in one of the many pubs along the front and we would paddle in the sea. Then we would eat our sandwiches that Mum had brought with her. We would also have a penny plate of cockles or whelks with lots of vinegar and pepper. What a relish!

Much water has now passed under the bridge and as I meditate in my twilight years I thank my lucky stars my childhood and youth were spent in what I think was the best time for anybody to have lived.

Editor's Note:

We would love to hear your story - do put pen to paper, and send us your reminiscences. We've had tales of Bethnal Green, Poplar and Bow. What about life between the wars in East Ham, Canning Town or Stratford?

Out and About with the Society

Sunday 5th September - Our Society's winter programme started with a stall at Island Gardens Fete. What a fantastic venue, with the frontage of Greenwich as our backdrop, country and western music, children dancing, clowns and Danny La Rue - and in between we managed to sell the Record, Rosemary's book and publicise our lectures and walks for the winter. We also met up with old friends, renewed acquaintances, and exchanged views with other societies.

15th September saw the Society visiting the Humanities Education Centre where our newsletter is photocopied. Margaret, the librarian, showed us many of the old books on local history that had come to the Centre when schools had been amalgamated. Also the huge lending library where books can be taken out on loan for a whole term. Everyone wished the books and visual aids had been around in our young days. Education seems to be far more fun these days.

Our first lecture on 23rd September on George Lansbury by Prof. John Shepherd, who travelled with his wife from Cambridge to talk to us, was outstanding. The talk was based on Prof. Shepherd's research for his forthcoming book on George Lansbury, and although he said that he was preaching to the converted, we found the lecture fascinating, especially the details of the voting system in 1912, and the fact that a woman, Unity Dawkings of Campbell Road, Bow, actually voted (Conservative) in the by-election, because her name was on the register!

Nobody told the weatherman it was the Society's coach outing, and the visit to the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum, so eagerly looked forward to by so many of us, had to be called off. However, thanks to Ann Sansom's forward thinking, the coach-load of hopeful excursionists arrived at Petworth House for an unexpected, but delightful visit.

Sunday 3rd October saw the opening of the exhibition on East End Suffragettes at the Ragged School Museum, thanks to the efforts of Maggie Hewitt of Oxford House, and Sophie Perkins at the Museum. The exhibition will be open until the first week of January 1994, and has attracted a great

deal of interest already. The programme began with a walk down the Bow Road for members of the National Trust, who thoroughly enjoyed their excursion into East London, as they trustingly followed Rosemary and Doreen down the canal towpath to the Ragged School Museum. The walk had been arranged by Mary Cable and was followed by a talk on Barnardo given by Tom Ridge. The opening day attracted a large number of visitors and Doreen and Rosemary were on hand to guide visitors around the exhibition, while Tom obligingly repeated his lecture, much to the delight of a group of children who were given an impromptu lesson in the Victorian classroom.

For our lecture on the 19th October, we met up at the Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest, where Terry Simco, the General Manager gave us a talk on the history of the Mission, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year, followed by a guided tour around the premises at 121 East India Dock Road. Terry had many touching stories of elderly seamen of all nationalities who, through the years had boarded at the Mission between ships, and on retirement came to the 'Vic' as they affectionately call their home, to end their days, having lost touch with family and friends because of their years at sea. Their stories, along with the story of the creation of the Mission is told in an anniversary brochure, A4, 36 pages, price £10 plus postage, from T J Simco, QVSR, 121 East India Dock Road, London E14 6DF. Profits go to the support of the Mission.

27th October was a great day for St Matthias' Church, as it celebrated its restoration through funds made available from the LDDC and English Heritage to repair and restore the fabric. Heritage London Trust helped towards repair to the tombs, replacement and repair to the stained glass, and the clock. Local members of our Society over the years have written endless letters to the LDDC and local papers urging that action be taken to save this rare example of a mid 17th century church.

Rosemary and Doreen were invited to the Gas Museum Bromley by Bow, as guests of Wapping History Society. We had a long walk from the station which was well worth the effort because we went over a private bridge across the River Lea, where it meets the Limehouse Cut, not far from Three Mills. The Museum is a must for those

interested in the detailed history of the production of gas and the gasworks of East London. The site at Beckton of 640 acres built in 1868/70 was the largest gasworks in the world, with 52 locomotives working, its own railway station and trams that ran 1 1/2 miles into Beckton Works. 4,000 workers were employed at the site, which included two churches and a clock tower. In the period kitchens we saw some of the old gas appliances in use during this century, some of which would look quite out of place in our modern kitchens. Hopefully we will be able to plan a visit for our own members in the near future.

November 7th was the first Sunday of the month, and another Suffragette walk down the Bow Road. Despite our misgivings, we had twenty well wrapped up walkers, and a photographer from The Times, and the cheerful group obligingly waited whilst Rosemary was photographed on the steps of the Bromley Town Hall (see page 18 of the Times, 8th November). We had a lively walk all the way to the Ragged School Museum, where welcome cups of tea awaited us.

The AGM on November 11th was well attended and all the committee members stood for re-election, and hopefully we shall be joined by some new helpers on the committee. Any more volunteers? We do need help. The meeting was followed by a lecture on the excavations at Sutton House, given by Christopher Philpotts. This, the oldest house in London to survive, was built in 1535 by Ralph Sadler and was known as the Bryk Place/Milford/Ivy/Picton House at different times. It was renamed Sutton House after Thomas Sutton who founded Charterhouse in 1611 and was believed to have lived there. However, it has been established that he lived next door, in Tan House. Slides took us through the house and step by step through the process of excavations of various parts of the building, including their most exciting find, a covered well in the rear garden. Christopher said that, contrary to popular local belief, they had found no evidence of a tunnel into Hackney marshes. The National Trust have produced a History of Sutton House by Anne Blackburn and Mike Gray, Price £3 + p&p from the house.

Tower Hamlets Cemetery has a new Field Study Centre for natural history, which was opened on November 8th by the renowned Naturalist David

Bellamy, who organised a nature walk around the cemetery for children. The Society hopes to assist the Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery with walks and lectures on the famous and infamous who lie buried there.

Doreen Kendall

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 1994 PROGRAMME

In 1885 Lord Rothschild was the leader in the founding of the Four Per Cent Industrial Dwellings Company Ltd, established to provide poor Jews with decent and cheap housing. The first model dwellings erected were the Rothschild Buildings in Flower and Dean Street, Spitalfields. Those buildings have since been demolished, but under another name the company continues as a housing association to provide housing in the East End for Jews and non-Jews. On **Thursday 20th January**, at 7.30 pm Clifford Lawton will discuss Lord Rothschild's motives in the founding of the company. - were they 'benevolent dictatorship' or 'despotic philanthropy'?

On **Thursday 17th February** at 7.30 pm Dr Daphne Glick will speak on 'Cephas Street School Evacuated'. She will be drawing on a series of letters written by the late Alderman Kershaw and will talk about the evacuation of the school from the point of view of the Headmaster. In particular, she will describe the practical problems, the pleasures and the emotions, from the day they departed until the day war was declared over. Alderman A Kershaw JP was her father. He was a founder member and Secretary of the Mile End Labour Party and served on the Council from about 1920-1947.

The Latimer Church provides welcoming accommodation for the Society in its modern building. Jean Olwen Maynard has written its history, tracing it back to the church's origins in the late 17th century. On **Thursday 17th March** at 7.30 pm her talk entitled 'Not by Law Established' will describe the voluntary church life at Latimer Chapel and that of the neighbouring Roman Catholic Parish of Guardian Angels.

Readers of the East London Advertiser will already have learnt of the knowledge of railway history acquired by Bob Dunn, a member of our Society. On **Thursday 14th April** at 7.30 pm he will be speaking to us on the Coming of the Railways to East London.

Caroline Benn is the latest biographer of Keir Hardie. On **Thursday 28th April** at 7.30 pm she will talk on how relevant Keir Hardie's causes are to politics in East London today.

Finally, on **Thursday 19th May** at 7.30 pm, bring along your memories, mementos and photographs for a sociable Members' Evening on East London Pubs.

David Behr

Time to Take a Bow

Here is a tiny note to say how much I enjoyed coming along to the meeting in Ernest Street.

It was very satisfying to be able to put faces to the names of Committee members who I had known only through the Newsletter, and I became highly conscious of the measure of effort put in by Rosemary, Philip, John, Doreen and others on our behalf.

I doubt whether adequate appreciation of your communal endeavours was voiced at the meeting but I am sure I am not alone in expressing my gratitude to you and your colleagues.

Stephen W Denny

Thank you very much indeed for your kind words. We hope to keep up our efforts, and continue to be deserving of such high praise.

The East London History Newsletter is published by the East London History Society and distributed free to all members.

Contributions are welcome from anyone with an interest in East London history. Letters and articles may be sent to Doreen Kendall, Secretary (address below)

The newsletter is edited, typeset and printed by Rosemary Taylor, Chair, ELHS on DTP. Editorial team: Doreen Kendall, Philip Mernick, John Harris, Ann Sansom and Rosemary Taylor.

EAST LONDON HISTORY SOCIETY PROGRAMME 1994

All lectures begin at 7.30 pm and are held in the Latimer congregational Church Hall, Ernest St, Stepney E1 - nearest undergrounds, Stepney Green & Mile End.

Thursday 20 January
Lord Rothschild and the 4% Industrial Dwellings Co
Clifford Lawton

Thursday 17 February
Cephas Street School Evacuated
The experiences of Alderman A Kershaw JP
Daphne Glick

Thursday 17 March
Church Life in Mile End
Latimer Church and the Roman Catholic Parish of Guardian Angels
Jean Olwen Maynard

Thursday 14 April
The Coming of the Railways to London
Bob Dunn

Thursday 23 April
Keir Hardie's Politics
How relevant are they to the East End today?
Caroline Benn

Saturday 7 May
Coach Outing to Ipswich - see leaflet

Thursday 19 May
East London Pubs
Reminiscence Evening
Members share their memories and research

For further details please contact
Doreen Kendall,
20 Puteaux House, London E2 ORF

Enquiries:
Rosemary Taylor Tel.: 071 515 2960

Our Programme Secretary David Behr welcomes any ideas you may have for future talks and visits and will be happy to meet you to discuss these at any of our lecture evenings.