



**Blue and White Bow Plate c1760**

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## Editorial Note:

The Newsletter is edited, typeset and produced by Rosemary Taylor with the assistance of an editorial team comprising Philip Mernick, Doreen Kendall, David Behr, and Doreen Osborne.

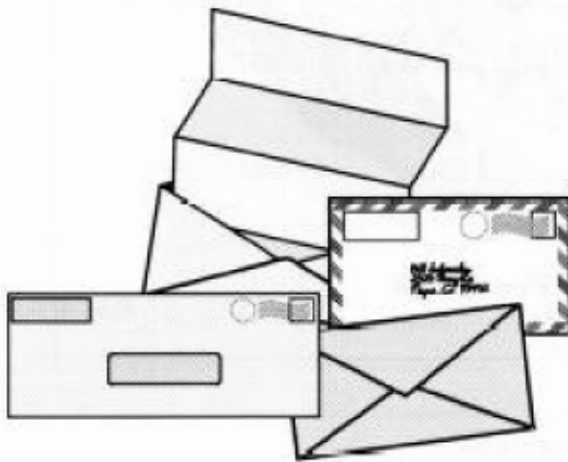
Our grateful thanks to all the contributors of this edition of the newsletter. We have a wide variety of topics and we trust our members will enjoy reading it as much as I have, whilst compiling the newsletter. Letters and articles on East End history and reminiscences are always welcome and we make every effort to publish suitable material. Whilst hand-written articles are acceptable, items of interest that are typewritten or even better still, on disk will get priority!!

Enquiries to Doreen Kendall, 20 Puteaux House, Cranbrook Estate, Bethnal Green, London E2 0RF, Tel: 0208 981 7680, or Philip Mernick, email: phil@mernicks.com

All queries regarding membership should be addressed to Harold Mernick, 42 Campbell Road, Bow, London E3 4DT

Check out the History Society's website at [www.eastlondonhistory.org.uk](http://www.eastlondonhistory.org.uk).

The present committee are: Philip Mernick, Chairman, Doreen Kendall, Secretary, Harold Mernick, Membership, David Behr, Programme, Ann Sansom, Doreen Osborne, Bob Dunn, and Rosemary Taylor.



## **The History Channel**

We are a production company making a house history series for The History Channel. We would like to feature a London house during the 2nd World War which probably still has a shelter in the back garden which we'd like to excavate.

Do you have the names of anyone who may have such a thing and would be interested in finding out more about how their house went into, survived through and emerged out of the 2nd World War?

*(If any of our members are interested in the above, or would like to participate in this project, please contact Philip Mernick for details. This information came via email on the 16<sup>th</sup> May, so it may be too late, but worth a try.)*

## **Obituary**

### **Allan Young 1930 – 2006**

Allan Young lived the first ten years of his life in Salmon Lane, moved to Essex during the war and eventually to Tonbridge in Kent. His vivid memories of his childhood and his high quality photographs, mostly from the 1950s, were published by ELHS as "The East End I Knew" in 2003. As a member of our society he contributed to our Newsletter correspondence and was recently enthusiastically researching The People's Palace (see page 4).

We offer sincere condolences to his wife Ann, daughter Berenice and sons Andrew and Sam.

### Subscriptions for 2006-7

If you don't get a reminder form with this newsletter, you have already paid.

**EAST LONDON HISTORY  
SOCIETY PROGRAMME  
2006-7**

**Thursday 21 September 2006**

**Tower Hamlets Archives Collection**  
Malcolm Barr-Hamilton

**Thursday 19 October 2006**

**Jewish Firemen in the east end in World  
War II**  
Stephanie Maltman

(preceded by AGM at 7.00)

**Thursday 16 November 2006**

**Muriel & Doris Lester of Kingsley Hall**  
Alex Stratton

**Thursday 7 December 2006**

**Victorian & Edwardian Music Hall,  
illustrated by records of the original artists**  
Chris Sumner

**Thursday 25 January 2007**

**Social Benefits and William Perkin's  
discovery of Mauvine**  
David Leaback

**Thursday 15 February 2007**

**Recent research on Eighteenth Century  
Wapping**  
Derek Morris

**Thursday 22 March 2007**

**How the body snatchers of Bethnal Green  
turned to murder to supply the surgeons**  
Sarah Wise

**Thursday 19 April 2007**

**Reminiscences of a Trade Unionist**  
Max Levitas

**Thursday 17 May 2007**

**Open meeting - inventions: how they have  
changed our lives**

The lectures are held on Thursday evenings at 7.30 pm in the Latimer Congregational Church Hall, Ernest Street, E1. Ernest Street is between Harford Street and Whitehorse Lane, off Mile End Road (Opposite Queen Mary and Westfield College). The nearest Underground Stations are Mile End and Stepney Green. Bus No. 25.

Suggestions and ideas for future topics and/or speakers for our Lecture Programme are always welcomed. If you can suggest someone or indeed if you would like to give a talk yourself, please do come along to the Open Evening in May, and meet David Behr, our Programme co-ordinator.

Alternatively, email our Chairman Philip Mernick at [phil@mernicks.com](mailto:phil@mernicks.com) with your comments and suggestions.

## A GRAND IDEA: THE PEOPLES PALACE, MILE END ROAD

The building East Londoners know as 'The People's Palace' is the theatre building situated on the north side of Mile End Road just east of Bancroft Road. Perhaps we should refer to the building in the past tense, for over recent decades it has ceased to function as a community theatre and has been fully integrated in the University of London Queen Mary College complex. The original distinctive façade has been retained and although the entrance steps have gone the building is still recognisable as 'The People's Palace'.

Some confusion arises in compiling the early history. Originally the 'People's Palace' was the building we now know as Queen Mary College, and the place East Enders know as the 'People's Palace' is, or was, the separate 1936 theatre building adjacent to the College. In essence, Queen Mary College was originally called the People's Palace. However, it is not the two buildings themselves that are interesting, but the concept of how and why they came into existence.

The very name – the *People's Palace* – has a Communistic ring about it. The name would not be out of place in China or the old Soviet Union. But this connotation is not valid: the records make no mention whatever of political motivation. Indeed the inspiration of the original building was philanthropic. It was, to quote, *'a place in the East End for healthy recreation and intellectual advancement'*. Victorian social reformers considered that the East End population needed an establishment to provide entertainment and mental enlightenment to relieve the drudgery of their work-a-day lives. Lofty aspirations – and maybe wishful thinking?

There is no single origin of the People's Palace, several strands develop in sequence, so how far back should one go? A convenient place to start is perhaps with

Alderman Francis Bancroft (1667-1727). It was quite common in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries for men of means, often associated with craft guilds, to bequest in their Wills for the creation of almshouses and schools for the working classes. Such a gentleman was Francis Bancroft, whose Will provided for the building of twenty four almshouses for old men, together with a school for one hundred boys of the Drapers' Company. This Company, of which Francis Bancroft was a member, were the trustees of the bequest. In execution of their duties, they purchased a five acre field on the north side of Mile End Road for the buildings and grounds. The almshouses were opened in 1737 and the boys' school in 1738.

In the early 1800s another thread emerges, that of John Thomas Barber – a man of many facets. He was an artist and a soldier, he founded a bank, and started the first life and fire insurance companies. For some reason in 1812 he added Beaumont to his name, – he died in 1841, leaving a considerable sum in trust for the continuation of his philanthropic ambitions.

In 1882 the notable Victorian novelist Walter Besant published his novel *'All Sorts and Conditions of Men – an impossible story'*. Although a work of fiction, it had a strong social content, and while it may not have had a direct result in the creation of the People's Palace, the story uncannily foretells the concept of the Palace.

To administer the Barber-Beaumont bequest Sir Edmund Hay Currie established a Charity for *'the benefit of the inhabitants of Beaumont Square and the surrounding neighbourhood for the purposes of affording the intellectual improvement and rational recreation...'* The Trustees were influenced in stating these aims by a 1883 Royal Commission which reported that 'England was losing her lead in world markets owing to the lack of workers with technical skills....If opportunity was given for technical training,

men could once more be proud of their skills and supply a need in modern industry'.

This charitable venture coincided with the availability of the original Bancroft site, the school had moved to Woodford in Essex and the almshouses were in now 150 years old.

Ultimately sufficient funds were assured and plans were drawn up, and in 1886 the Prince of Wales laid the foundation stone of the Queen's Hall of the People's Palace. The benefaction and ideals of those three people – Francis Bancroft, Barber-Beaumont and Walter Besant, seemed at last now likely to come to fruition: the idea of building a centre of recreation and learning for the advancement of East Londoners.

In May 1887, less than a year after the laying of the foundation stone, Queen Victoria opened the first facility, the vast 2,500 seat Queen's Hall, with its curved stained glass roof, large concert organ and choir accommodation for three hundred singers. Walter Besant, now Sir Walter, was present at the opening and it must have given him immense satisfaction to see his 'impossible story' come into being.

With the completion of the Queen's Hall construction of the remainder of the complex proceeded at a pace: the octagonal library, the winter garden, the swimming pool, the gymnasium, with its roller skating rink. The technical schools were opened in 1888 and 300 boys were enrolled, fees were £2 per year, but many boys received a Drapers' Company scholarship. By 1892 the whole People's Palace complex was complete. In only six years Walter Besant's dream had become a reality.

From the records there seemed no doubt that the People's Palace was fulfilling its function of providing healthy entertainment for the East Londoners. There were shows of domestic live stock and horticulture, there were art exhibitions, military displays, the

library served around twelve hundred people per day. Twenty thousand people attended a chrysanthemum show, and the 1888 bank holiday attracted twenty six thousand people. The concerts given in the hall also appeared well supported. Sir Edmund Hay Currie, defending Sunday opening, fancifully commented that '*...the East End husband turned out of doors while dinner was got ready, lounges about Mile End Road and leans against posts until one o'clock, when he goes to the nearest bar and remains there ... .. now however he finds the great Queen's Hall, well warmed and lighted, open to him, and excellent recitals of sacred music performed for his benefit*'. It is perhaps stretching credibility that the typical East London worker from the docks or brewery would resort to a recital of sacred music to while away his time till the pubs opened? But who knows, the records show attendances in excess of three thousand for these concerts; but at least there was somewhere warm and dry for the husbands while waiting for their dinner!

The educational side of the Palace prospered also. The numbers attending day and evening classes were encouraging. Even so, Sir Edmund had higher aspirations – he visualized the facilities assuming a 'university' status – not in today's understanding of the word, but in the sense that every East End workman proud of his trade should have 'graduated' from the school.

Towards the end of the 1800s it was becoming clear that a conflict of ideals was developing between the recreational and the educational facilitators. This was not only a dilemma for the Governors, but also although the Palace had received substantial capital sums, there was no continuing endowment. By 1891 the Palace was almost at the end of its resources and unable to meet its interest payments. Fortunately short term relief was secured for the next ten years by the continuing generosity of the Drapers' Company.

The facilities and status of the College went from strength to strength – more buildings were added on the site and other buildings were acquired, more advanced subjects were added to the curriculum. The library became a problem, for it did not serve the school specifically, but was for all the East End people. In due course it was transferred to the Mile End Old Town Vestry in Bancroft Road.

Moving on to 1931, an event occurred that was of momentous importance in the history of the People's Palace. On the night of 25<sup>th</sup> of February the Queen's Hall in the College caught fire, the roof fell in and the Hall was completely destroyed. The Palace Governors immediately approached the College regarding restoration, and received a definite rejection. They considered that the recreational nature of the hall was incompatible to the growing prestige of the College and asked the Palace to consider re-siting the hall elsewhere.

Yet again, the Drapers' Company was to save the situation. It was their view that it would be a mistake to rebuild the Queens Hall in its previous position, agreeing with the College that the educational and recreational facilities should indeed be separated. It transpired that the south west corner of the old Bancroft Almshouses and School bequest was previously disposed of by lease for the erection of a row of houses – the St Helen's Terrace fronting Mile End Road. This would be a very suitable location for a new theatre building, and with a generous cash donation from the Drapers' Company for a new theatre, the St Helen's site was acquired.

The architects appointed for the new Peoples Palace building were Campbell Jones and Sons and Smithers, with Mr George Cole for the interior. The building was quite modern and luxurious, not imitating the ornate traditional West End Victorian / Edwardian theatres. Most of the ground floor was devoted to a spacious entrance foyer and a huge 1600

seat theatre. On the first floor was the balcony and box seating of the main hall together with a second theatre. There were the usual technical and scenery facilities to serve the two theatres, and in the basement was a restaurant.

Carved stone panels on the façade were by the famous sculptor Eric Gill, representing 'Fellowship', 'Drama', 'Music', 'Dancing', 'Sport', and 'Recreation'. A further panel records the date: 1936.

However this splendid building was dogged with financial difficulties from the start. The local MP, George Lansbury, appealed to the public for £60,000 towards the £140,000 needed for the construction. Somehow the money was donated and borrowed, and construction began. The foundation stone was laid in 1936 by the Lord Mayor and the building was officially opened in 1937 by King George VI.

In the 1950s the BBC rented the theatres for music broadcasts, the main hall also served as a cinema.

The theatre building in Mile End Road that East Londoners knew as the People's Palace had the short life of only seventeen years, from being opened in 1937 to becoming absorbed in the Queen Mary College complex in 1954. Deducting the dormant six war years, the effective life as a community facility was reduced to only eleven years. When one reads of the huge attendances for events at the original Queens Hall, and the Winter and Summer gardens, it is obvious that the new building never achieved the same popularity or regained it's former glory.

In retrospect we might consider why the original intention of the People's Palace, as visualized by Walter Besant and J T Barber-Beaumont, started to decline after the 1931 Queen's Hall fire. It could be said that the whole purpose of this venture of providing 'healthy recreation and intellectual

advancement' for the East End community ultimately failed. Now, in 2004, just over one hundred years after the completion of the original People's Palace, Queen Mary College is a prestigious University in its own right, offering high academic studies for students from all social streams and backgrounds. But the 'recreational' aspect of the original conception has all but disappeared.

There were several reasons for this situation. One reason was that to combine educational and recreational facilities with equal emphasis under one roof, was indeed unrealistic, the two aims were not compatible. In the earlier days of the Palace, the great Queens Hall, with the Winter Gardens, the gymnasium, swimming pool and tennis courts were community recreational facilities, the technical schools were of secondary importance. But as time progressed, the academic side grew in importance vis a vis the recreational side. Ultimately by 1954 the accommodation requirements for the Queen Mary College overtook the declining fortunes of the People's Palace Theatre, and a major re-design was carried out to incorporate the original 1936 theatre into the College.

Another reason was that the level of entertainment provided by the Palace was hardly likely to ever appeal to East Londoners, who generally preferred the Variety theatre. The visionaries and bequest trustees of the People's Palace had admirable intentions, bringing 'culture' to the East End, but were misguided in thinking that East Londoners actually *wanted* culture; 'entertainment', certainly, but there is a difference between culture and popular entertainment.

Also, one has to recognize the changing habits of working class society. Events at the original Queen's Hall in the late 1800s and early 1900s attracted thousands of people, because there was little alternative entertainment - no television or radio or cinema, there was no holiday travel, very little home comforts, no money for visits to distant

theatres or exhibitions. For the majority there were the easily accessible pubs and the music hall and local dances. So the varied events at the old People's Palace did indeed fill a vacuum in the lives of East Londoners. Gradually the lot of the ordinary people did improve, the Second World War was the watershed.

So, the People's Palace was a brave concept - it came into being with the best intentions - the original Queen's Hall and the technical school served their respective purposes for a time. But eventually the artisans' school became a modern University, and the People's Palace theatre did not provide the entertainment the East Enders wanted.

The lofty ideals and generous benefactions of Francis Bancroft, John Barber-Beaumont, Walter Besant and the Drapers Company from way back in the eighteenth century did come to fruition, but the fundamental concept of providing both culture and learning for the East Enders was mis-judged: a matter of timing. For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the East Enders have had to cope with two world wars, poor working and living conditions, and poverty - so concerts, opera and study had little priority. In the present day it would have probably worked. A grand idea, nevertheless.

#### Allan Young

Note: This article, which was included in this edition prior to the news of Allan's death, is a much edited down version of a booklet produced by the author 'A Short History of the People's Palace', which includes many illustrations. Allan had offered to produce copies of this full version if requested, but this may no longer be possible. Philip Mernick will check.

## MEMORIAL RESEARCH

Don't forget, Doreen and Diane Kendall, with Doreen Osborne and a dedicated group of volunteers are in the Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park on the second Sunday of every month at 2 pm, meticulously researching graves and recording memorial inscriptions. They would welcome any help members can offer. This labour of love has grown into a project of enormous proportions and complexity, with an impressive database of graves researched, with illustrations attached.

Unfortunately, due to the pressure of work, Doreen and Diane cannot undertake any research on behalf of individuals seeking their ancestors in the cemetery, but would welcome any information that has been uncovered through personal searches. Owing to a hiccup on the Cemetery website, they were inundated with requests – one week alone they had over fifty, many with long lists of names!

## BOOK SHELF

Huguenot Tales by Stanley Rondeau, 2005, 30 pages, card covers, A5, £5 from the author (23 Oakwood Crescent, London N21 1NX) or Tower Hamlets Local History Library.

The author has packed a lot into these 30 pages. The subtitle reads "An Everyday Story of Huguenot Folk" and he follows the Rondeaus from sixteenth century Sedan, then independent of France, to Spitalfields, and traces the complex history of the family through to modern times. Even if one is not particularly into family history research this "detective story" makes for fascinating reading and shows how much can be found out if you really work at it. The author has included many pictures, usually coloured.

## CORRESPONDENCE

*Philip Mernick receives many enquiries via email, and endeavours to respond to them all. Below is a selection of emails, with responses.*

03/04/06

**From Michael Coughlan:** Can you help me? I am researching my evacuation. I returned from Devon on, or soon after, 20 June 1945. The local paper of the time (Dagenham Post) says that all the evacuees that returned to Dagenham over a period of days (some hundreds) stopped at a centre in Whitechapel. They were fed and cleaned up after rail journeys from various parts of the country and moved on by bus to Central Hall, Dagenham. Can you tell me where that took place in Whitechapel, please? Presumably it applied to all evacuees returning to East London and was used as a marshalling operation.

*This enquiry was forwarded to Tower Hamlets Local History Library. Malcolm Barr-Hamilton, Borough Archivist replied:*

I am afraid we are unaware of which the institution in Whitechapel to which you refer may have been. Evacuation from this area was organised by the London County Council particularly its Education Department for which the records are held at the London Metropolitan Archives ([ask.lma@cityoflondon.gov.uk](mailto:ask.lma@cityoflondon.gov.uk))

5/04/06

**Jim Lay asked:**

I have found that a great great aunt was born at Wellington Street in 1839. Much later Charles Booth paints a very dim picture of the street. I wonder if you might know if it had the same reputation in 1839?

*PM replied:*

I am afraid I don't know much about that area. Certainly Shoreditch had a very bad reputation at the end of the 19th century being the site of the notorious Old Nichol slums,



"immortalised" by Arthur Morrison as "The Jago". This was just the other side of Kingsland Road to Wellington Street. It must have been quite narrow as it isn't shown on many maps. I doubt if it was much different in 1839. Wellington Road and the surrounding streets have now vanished. I suggest you contact Hackney Archives who may be able to give you some more information. They have a good collection of old photographs but I don't know if they have anything of Wellington Street. <http://www.hackney.gov.uk/history/ca-archives>

5/04/06

**From RW Standing:**

On the 13th Dec 1940 a pilot named Peter Campbell crashed in Canada and died there. His parents were, I believe, Alexander and Dorothy. There is reason to believe the family may have been living at Poplar, at least in 1916 when Peter was born. It would be of great assistance if you could advise whether any such name is recorded on the war dead for the area. I understand the aircraft and remains have been found. Peter Campbell may have been born in my part of the country in 1916.

*Malcolm Barr-Hamilton advised that there is no general war memorial for the war dead of Poplar for the Second World War.*

24/04/2006

**Fran Walsh asked:**

I'm doing a bit of research for a friend. He is searching for his father's house in the east end. His father came to the UK in 1940 and he thinks he used to live in a house called Helen or Helena House. Its postcode is E1 and the street was called Wallis Ward Street - they think! They think the building has been demolished but its 20 years since his death and he and his family would like to visit the area in his memory and explore where he lived etc. Do you know where it is and if was demolished etc? Or could you let me know where I could find out these details?

*PM replied:*

The sole Helena House I can trace in E1 was in Lolesworth Street, Spitalfields. There was/is? a Helen House in Bethnal Green (E2). Please ask you friend if they know which part of E1 it was.

2/5/2006

**From Bernice Rubenstein:**

Ref. Old Montague Street. Do you know if this street was known by another name as it can't be picked up in the old census documents.

*PM replied:*

The section between the current Osborne Street & Greatorex Street was called already called Old Montague Street in 1831. Before that it was just Montague Street. The eastern section of the current Old Montague Street was originally called Prince's Street

13/05/06

**From John Boyens:**

I'm researching my family history and wondered if you could help me? I live in New Zealand. My Great Grandfather William Henry Boyens was a Blacksmith and was killed by a run-a-way horse and cart on June 6th 1867 at Whitechapel. I would love to find any news report, or a Coroner's Report, about the accident and wondered if you could help with sources that I might explore. I would be so grateful, for any advice.

*PM replied:*

I suggest you contact Tower Hamlets Local History Library. I usually find them very helpful. <http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/data/community/data/libraries/data/history-archive.cfm>

They have all of the local newspapers on microfilm, there is a fair chance that the event was recorded.

16/05/06

I have been researching my family history and have today been introduced to another line of

Godiers of which I was not aware. My new contact tells me that my family had links with Victoria Park and that a statue exists or existed of one of my ancestors - James Godier I believe - have you any records of the ownership of the park? I am told that the deeds were all destroyed in WWII and the Godier link was lost.

*PM replied:*

*Can you be sure which Victoria Park it is - there are hundreds of them in the UK and across the Empire. The one I know of, in East London, has always been in local authority ownership. As far as I know it has never had any statues of people.*

I was told it was the one in London E2 but I'm not sure so I thought I'd do a bit of checking

*Looks as if it could well be. The 1881 census has a James Godier born in Bethnal Green in 1880.*

19/05/06

*Enquiry name not on message*

Dear society member,

I write after reading your website to see whether you can help me to find my great grandparents William Henry Hunt and his wife Alice, nee Jewell.

My grandfather, Thomas, was their youngest son, born on September 10th. 1843. He left England on July 15th. 1861 on the ship Blackwall for South Australia.

His older brother - named William Henry - married on April 10th 1854 at the Parish Church in the Parish of Bethnal Green. He and his wife Margaret Beety give their place of residence as 10 White St. on their marriage certificate. This couple migrated soon afterwards and lived in the state of Victoria, Australia.

Both these sons named their parents on their marriage certificates and their father's occupation as Sawyer. My grandfather gave

Poplar as his original birthplace, and this was confirmed on his brother's death certificate.

What I would like to learn is - 1 - where White St. is and 2 - possibly find the death certificate of both my great grandparents. Can you help me to discover these, and if not, have you any suggestions to make?

*PM replied:*

White Street is now called Vallance Road. If you search for "Vallance Road, E2" on Multimap <http://uk8.multimap.com/> you will get a map showing the location.

I am afraid I have no expertise as far as genealogy goes. To obtain a death certificate you would need to know either date or place of death and unfortunately William Hunt is not an unusual name. A quick search of the internet found a death record almost every year.

28/5/06

**Ken Russell** advised about the Bethnal Green photo archive on <http://tinyurl.com/mukk> Well worth a visit.

30/7/06

**From Hazel Clarke:**

I have a photocopy of a document regarding an ancestor of mine, William Lightness, being sworn in as a Special Constable on the 7th April 1848 at All Saints, Poplar. We believe that this was because of the Chartist demonstrations. Is it possible to get any further information on this matter?

*PM replied:*

Yes 7th April is when 150,000 special constables were created to cope with the announced Chartist demonstration on the 10th. See link for details of Chartist activities. <http://www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/chartism/ventcha.htm>

## Notes and News

The Emery Theatre in Annabel Place, Poplar, part of the local cultural scene for the last thirteen years, has been closed down by the trustees of the Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest, as there are plans for a major refurbishment of the building complex. This has caused great distress and unhappiness amongst the actors who have been staging their shows there since 1993. The history of Tower Hamlets' only fringe theatre has been a short, but eventful one, and its closure can only be viewed as a great loss to the community. The theatre was the brainchild of the Methodist Minister at Trinity Church, the Revd David Hill, a musician and playwright of considerable skill, who conceived the idea of creating a performance space in what was a derelict hall in the Mission. He wrote and directed a Musical, **Silent Paddy**, which told the story of the Queen Vic, from its inception to the present time. First performed in 1993 as part of the Centenary celebrations, by the newly formed Lansbury Players, it was a great success. I witnessed the very first performance, and like many in the audience, was moved to tears by the music, words and sincerity of the performers. Over the intervening years, over 60 shows have been staged, from plays and musicals, to pantomime and dance. From its rudimentary beginnings, the theatre was refurbished with seating, lighting, dressing room and toilet facilities. The Lansbury Players shared the theatre with Consenting Adults Theatre Company, and were recently awarded funding to stage free courses at the Emery for local residents. They are now understandably annoyed and distressed at the loss of their home, and Poplar is now the poorer in cultural terms. Though some might question the inclusion of this item in the newsletter, I thought it worth recording, as yet another East End theatre consigned to the pages of history.

**Rosemary Taylor**

*(Two items contributed by Roy Hayes – I hope you enjoy them as much as I did!)*

## THE BATH HOUSE

"More hot in number three, please". The cry echoed from the tiled cubicle, soon answered by a shouted "Stand clear!" as the tap, shaped rather like a car starting-handle, was operated from outside to release a rush of steaming hot water into the large, enamelled cast-iron bath. Such a scenario was part of the ritual for the weekly visit to the Council run bath-house when few had a bathroom in their house or flat. In the absence of a conveniently close establishment many families made use of the galvanized, or tin, bath, which, when not in use, would be hung on a nail outside of the back door.

Thus, when Hackney Borough Council built a combined laundry and bath-house in Eastway it received instant patronage. The official opening was among the earliest duties of the newly crowned King George VI and Queen Elizabeth during a visit to the 'Wick'; the tour also encompassing the Kingsmead Estate, Homerton - then the 'last word' in Council accommodation.

The laundry section can be described, loosely, as an early type of laundrette but, in reality, bore little resemblance to to-day's version. Large sinks, where the housewives scrubbed away at the 'handwash', were overlooked by the even larger washing machines and calenders serving a communal use and operated by a male attendant. After two or three hours the women escaped, red-faced and exhausted, from the steamy atmosphere.

Saturday morning was the favourite time for us boys to visit the bath-house. There were, of course, separate entrances for males and females and we would troop up the steps, rolled-up towels under our arms concealing a clean pair of socks. Twopence (2d.) for the basic bath, extra if you wished to hire a

Council towel or buy a piece of soap. The former was like rough sandpaper, guaranteed to invigorate; the soap would certainly identify where you had been for the remainder of the day! The all-pervading smell of bathwater became apparent as soon as you left the ticket office to sit with the other bathers waiting to be called to a cubicle. Taps could be operated only from the outside and strict instructions were given not to enter the bath until they had been turned off and you had checked the water temperature. Half-an-hour was the allotted period and the time of entry was chalked on the outside of the door.

Amidst the general hubbub many conversations would be taking place simultaneously, sometimes between people many cubicles apart leading to ever-raised voices. Extra hot, or cold, water was available on demand and the call was usually made whether the bather really needed more water or not. Likewise, we rarely vacated the cubicle until the final demand, "Time's up, number three", accompanied by a banging on the door, followed by the water, again operated from outside, being drained away.

So, wearing clean socks, hair plastered down with water, we emerged, pink and shining, to return to our bathless homes in the 'Wick'.

## THE ROAR - AND THE DREAM

### *A small boy's first visit to the Speedway*

From the time the track had opened I lived within the sound of Hackney Wick Speedway but, for a few years, was considered too young to watch such an activity, particularly as it involved being out quite late in the evening. When it was finally permitted I became a regular supporter for the final two seasons before the outbreak of war brought about the closure.

The Hackney Wick 'Wolves' team was formed in 1935 and competed in the First Division of the Speedway League. The team was managed by Fred Evans, colours were broad bands, or hoops, of black and white and the members included riders from overseas. Dicky Case, from Queensland, Australia, was team captain and he was supported by the likes of Cordy Mime, U.S.A., whose elder brother, Jack, rode for Wimbledon, Bill Clibbett, George Wilks and Wally Lloyd. During the season many of them lived at the White Hart public house and hotel, in Temple Mills, run by Bill Cockhill, and on the day the Dane, Morian Hansen, landed his single-engined aircraft on Hackney Marshes hundreds came from all over the Wick to have a look. Cars were rare enough in our part of the world, but - an aeroplane!

For several years my "boy's mind" dreamed up pictures of a race merely by listening to the sounds heard from our back garden. The revving engines at the start, the roar as the tapes went up, then the four circuits as the riders struggled with their brakeless machines until a sound like a gunshot signified the end of the race and we could hear the crowd once again. Immediately came the between-race music interrupted by the announcer giving the official result, leading to more crowd noises. How I envied those thousands who, earlier in the evening, had walked past our house on the final six or seven hundred yards to the stadium, sporting scarves and hats in team colours and producing a rousing clacking noise from their home-made wooden rattles. They had plenty to cheer about in 1936, when the team won the London Cup. By 1938 I was considered old enough to attend my first meeting. My older sister had been an early enthusiast but the sad death of Herbert 'Dusty' Haigh (one of the rare fatal accidents in prewar speedway) had dampened her appetite for the time being, thus I was in the care of next-door neighbours for the evening. In the meantime Hackney Wick had dropped to a lower division, losing, in the process, many of the star international riders.

Captain was now Frank Hodgson, who had originally joined the stadium as a signwriter, and other team members included Archie Windmill and George Saunders. Colours had also been changed and were now champagne and claret (yellow and red to us) quarters. They were still known as the 'Wolves'. Entering the stadium was quite an experience for an eight-years old as, for the first time, I was shepherded along the terracing to a spot on the final bend. I did not appreciate it at the time but, thinking back, there was a wonderful atmosphere of bonhomie among the spectators which seems absent from present day sporting crowds. 'Rival' supporters intermingled and exchanged banter throughout the evening; all ages were represented and I was, by no means, one of the youngest. There was a constant roar from the pits as the J.A.P. machines, produced by J.A. Prestwich, were tuned by the mechanics; then the tension mounted as we caught the strains of the 'Entry of the Gladiators' heralding the appearance of the assortment of people without whom the meeting could not take place. Stewards, marshals, rakers and St. John Ambulance men, the latter, somewhat ominously, toting stretchers as they took up their positions around the track. Then it was the turn of the crowd to roar as the teams completed the parade lap.

After that, it was down to business and the first four riders appeared, to line up behind the starting tapes; as they crouched over the handlebars - waiting - the tapes flew up and the race was on. On Hackney's 345 yards (315 metres) circuit the four laps were completed in about one minute and a quarter and the crowd was cheering the winner. I may have been a novice spectator but I cheered with the rest of them - the dream I had cherished, and from which I had been separated by some six or seven hundred yards, had, at last, come true.

**Roy Hayes**

Note: For the main substance of this piece I have relied on my memory, which, over the years, may have glamorized events. Some of the factual details have been gleaned from 'SPEEDWAY RIDERS', the series of fifty cigarette cards, issued by John Player & Sons, probably in the latter part of 1937.

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### **Remembering St James the Apostle – 'Santiago de Compostela'**

A few weeks ago we travelled to Santiago de Compostela, (spelt with a double l in English) in the north west of Spain, and were in the cathedral on the 25<sup>th</sup> July, the Feast of St James, or Santiago, the patron saint of Spain. I had waited for 13 years for this moment, in fact ever since the ELHS received an enquiry asking members if they remembered St James' Day, and the creation of grottoes. This raised considerable interest, both from our members and those of the East London Family History Society.

In our Spring 1993 Newsletter we published a letter from Mrs Marie Morris of Maidenhead, who wrote that her mother, born in West Ham in 1912, and whose family had migrated from Norfolk late in the 19th century recalled her that every year on 25<sup>th</sup> July, St James' Day, all the children would make patterns with shells on the pavement and later in the day the parents would come and inspect them. She wondered how this custom arose. 'Do you remember Grotto Day?' she asked. Further research has shown that this was once a popular custom and the grottoes were usually made of scallop or oyster shells, and the children would stand beside their creations asking 'A penny for the grotto'. The grottoes were apparently a descendant of a medieval custom of erecting shrines to St James de Compostella by people unable to travel to Spain to visit his shrine at Santiago in Spain – the traditional resting place of James the Apostle. Pilgrims were entitled to wear his badge, a scallop shell. Grotto Day was sometimes on 5 August, 'Old St James Day'

prior to the calendar change, and as this marked the opening of the oyster season in London, oyster shells were more commonly used. Apparently the custom was still celebrated in parts of London in the 1950s.

George Renshaw recalled (Winter 1993 Newsletter): Many children would make Grottoes using seashells from shell fish. They would be laid out in a pattern on the pavement, chalked around with coloured chalk and after stones and trinkets 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.

Mrs Morris's letter was also sent to the Cockney Ancestor, and the Spring 1993 issue published a few replies from members of the ELFHS, and it was clear that the custom of creating grottoes was widespread, and not restricted to the East End of London. Frank Jensen JP, who remembers the grottoes from his Islington childhood, stated: Sea shells were a significant part of the design (in our case small shells obtained from the sands of Southend-on-Sea, or one of the Kent resorts) forming the surrounding border, at least, and sometimes making patterns within the grotto. Various small objects and pictures would also complete as attractive a layout as possible and cigarette cards would help towards the design'.

Dolly Scannell, who was born in Poplar, and lived there until her marriage, wrote in *Mother Knew Best* (1975). *Sometimes we would have grotto season. Someone would build the first grotto and then on every street corner a grotto would arise ..... The grottoes were a work of love and squirrel-like searching for stones, flowers, leaves, broken ornaments, texts and pictures from magazines. I once saw a little blue egg on a grotto yet the only birds I ever saw, all the time I lived in Poplar were sparrows. Perhaps in my ignorance I thought all birds were sparrows. Winnie and Amy would place their grotto near a public house – clever Winnie, for they might catch a reeling man whose thriftiness was befuddled by an*

*extra pint. Winnie was found out because a man gave her a lot of money for one kiss.*

The huge cathedral in Santiago, Spain, marks the site of the field where the grave of the apostle credited with converting Spain to Christianity was found. The remains of the saint are in a special vault within the cathedral. The story goes that around 814 AD the local Bishop decided to look into the strange reports that shooting stars and flashing lights were seen in a field in Galicia. A grave identified as that of James the Apostle, was found in the field, 'Campus stellae' – the field of stars. The local legends claim that the body of the Apostle was brought back to Spain in a 'stone boat', and buried on that site. (This is pure conjecture, but on reading these words, I recalled the Roman burials uncovered in Bow, Spitalfields and other areas of East London, where the body was interred in a stone coffin. Could there be a connection here somewhere?)

The Church of St James the Great in Bethnal Green Road was constructed in 1844. In order to encourage couples to marry rather than cohabit, the vicar conducted wedding ceremonies for a fee of 6d. In 1983 the church was closed and merged with St Matthew, Bethnal Green. St James' Chapel is in the south west corner of St Matthew's Church, Bethnal Green. This shrine to St James the Great was moved here when that parish was united with St Matthew's in 1984.

### Rosemary Taylor



St James the Great Church, Bethnal Green Road, c. 1910



**St James the Great**

When the parish of St. James the Great was reunited with that of St. Matthew in 1914, the Shrine of St. James was transferred to St. Matthew's Church.

## COVER PICTURE

The cover picture is a typical product of the New Canton (aka Bow) Porcelain Factory established on the Essex side of the River Lea in 1749 and closed in 1776. Its output was considerable as the demand for an English substitute for imported Chinese porcelain was high. However the secret behind the production of true porcelain (the use of China Stone or Kaolin) was not at that time known and Bow and its contemporaries made what is now called soft paste porcelain. Ironically in their attempts to improve their product they pioneered the addition of bone ash and "bone china" has now largely replaced true porcelain for household use.

By 1760 Bow was the leading English producer of household and ornamental china. They used the familiar blue on white Chinese influenced designs on cups, saucers, plates etc and also multicoloured hand painted designs imitating the Chinese "famille rose" and "famille verte" styles and the Japanese Imari wares. In common with most early factories their technology and products eventually became outdated and unfashionable and they ceased manufacture in 1776. The remaining

stock was sold to the proprietors of Derby and the site was converted for use as a pitch and tar works.

The eastern part of the site was not excavated when Central House was built in the 1960s, but the western side is currently undergoing comprehensive archaeological examination as the former Dane & Co Printing Ink works is demolished and the site developed for housing. It is believed that many fragments of porcelain have been found. These "wasters" are a very valuable source of information to researchers as they confirm the origin of wares that were very rarely marked with the name of their factory of origin. The location of the very first experimental works at Bow has yet to be located. It is believed to have been on the Middlesex side of the Lea but no "wasters" have been found.

The factory site was located between the current Stratford High Street and the Bow Back River to the south and north and Cooks Road and Marshgate Lane to the west and east and it is hoped that the developers will allow members of the public to view the dig on at least one "open day".



Bow c1760



# AUTUMN COACH TRIP

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 30<sup>TH</sup>

## DISS AND BRESSINGHAM

**W**e will be going first to Diss, an attractive small town in South Norfolk, with a museum and a good church.

It was a particular favourite with John Betjeman, who wrote a poem about the bliss of arriving at Diss. There are plenty of places to lunch, and the lake in the town centre is an attractive place for a picnic.

In the afternoon we visit the Bressingham Steam Museum and Gardens, a short way away. John Betjeman would have travelled to Diss by rail - it has no railway now but Bressingham has three miniature steam ones you can ride on. It also has a steam roundabout and a Dad's Army collection. The gardens are also spacious and fine. Tea is available here.

The entrance charge is £7.50 including rides, or £5 without. I will collect this on the coach.

The coach fare is £10.50. It is not a very long journey but some bit further than Coggeshall.

The pick-up will be at the bus pull-in in Grove Road, round the corner from Mile End Station, at 9.00 am.\*

**Please fill in the booking slip below and send to me, Ann Sansom, 18 Hawkdene, London E4 7PF. Tel. 020 8524 4506 for enquiries. (Photocopy it if you don't wish to spoil your newsletter.)**

\*PLEASE NOTE this earlier pick-up time.



**AUTUMN COACH TRIP**  
**Saturday September 30<sup>th</sup> 2006**

I/We would like to reserve \_\_\_\_\_ Ticket/s for the coach trip to Diss & Bressingham.

NAME/S \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

TEL NO. \_\_\_\_\_

(Cheques made payable to the East London History Society.)