The East London History Society

(founded 1952)

The East London History Society exists to further interest in the history of East London, namely the London Boroughs of Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets.

The annual programme includes monthly lectures in the winter, walks and visits in the summer.

Information about the Society can be obtained from:-

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No. 2 1979

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The East London History Society publishes the *East London Record* once a year. Original articles concerned with any aspect of the history of Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets should be submitted to the Local History Librarian, Tower Hamlets Central Library, Bancroft Road, London, E1 4DQ, (01-980-4366) for consideration by the editors.

Articles may be based on personal reminiscences or scholarly research. Contributions should not normally exceed 5,000 words and shorter items would be welcomed. The editors will be pleased to discuss plans for projected articles and work in progress.

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THE 1832 CHOLERA EPIDEMIC IN EAST LONDON

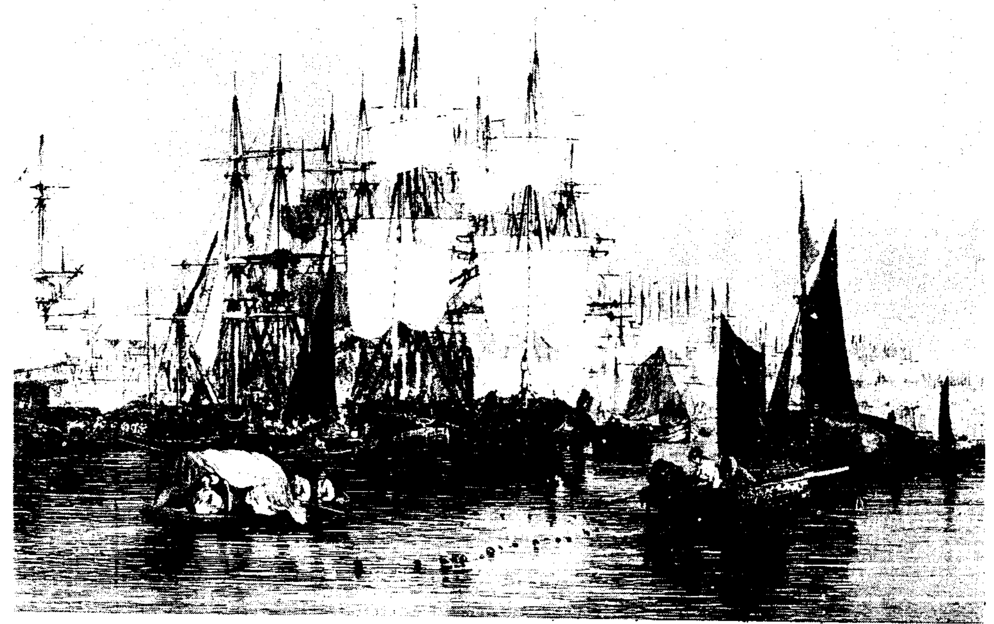
Robert McR. Higgins.

> Thus did the fatal disease rise like a demon bent on destruction; it took its course, not heeding mountain, sea nor clime; death was its object, man its victim, and the uttermost ends of the world its destination; wherever its cold hand was extended - the people died . . . . Death struggled with time itself, and gnawed the moments that separated him from his victim. (1)

The 'Cholera Morbus' was first described near Jessore, India, in 1817. In 1823 it had spread to Russia; by 1831 it was in Hamburg, and the first case in East London was on 12th February, 1832. For all the romance and fear attached to this seemingly inevitable march across the world, only about 800 persons died of the disease in the East End. In 1832 more people died of tuberculosis than cholera, and a child born of a labourer in Bethnal Green had a life expectancy of only 16 years. However, cholera evoked a response in social terms, and a contribution to the development of public health, of far more significance that its effect on mortality at the time.

Although the 'Cholera Morbus' is what we now call just cholera, the terms 'Asiatic', 'spasmodic', 'malignant', 'contagious' and 'blue' were also used to describe this new disease, generally thought to be a more serious form of the contagious cholera already well known. It was confused with, or thought to be the same as, 'common' or 'English' cholera, dysentery and food poisoning frequent in this country during the summer months. What actually caused the disease or how it was spread, was not understood until well after 1832 but it is now clear that the bacterium *Vibrio comma*, if drunk in water contaminated with infected sewage, causes a mild fever that usually gets better within a week. A poison produced by the bacterium however stimulates a profuse diarrhoea that may prove fatal if the vast quantities of water and salts lost are not replaced. Thus it is not a serious disease if treated correctly, but doctors in the 1830's generally tried to restrict fluid intake, to prescribe emetics and purgatives, and even to bleed their patients, trying to 'equalize the circulation'. (2)

The disease was first noticed among British troops in India, and vivid accounts appeared in the press of the effects of cholera in St. Petersburg, Russia. This first-hand knowledge of the disease, and reports of the mortality it could cause in large cities, led the Privy Council to put all ships for Russia arriving in England under quarantine in January 1831. The Privy Council had set up a Central Board of Health in 1805, after concern about yellow fever arriving in Britain. This was reconstituted, and met daily from June 1831 to May 1832. It issued circulars and gave advice to parochial Vestry Committees, who were responsible for the precautionary measures taken within their own parishes.



The Thames near Limehouse. Drawn by E. W. Cooke, 1830.

As the disease spread west to Hamburg, all ships from Baltic ports were put under quarantine. Those arriving in London had to spend 10 days in Standgate Creek, near Deptford, before a doctor gave the ship a clean bill of health.

> the last three days of this period to be bona fide employed under proper supervision in opening hatches . . . . and ventilating the spaces between decks by Windsails, and opening, airing and washing the Sailors' clothes and bedding.(3)

Vessels from Sunderland were put in quarantine by the end of November 1831, soon after the cholera had arrived there. The measures were not completely effective, as the first cases in London occurred on the river, mostly on colliers from the Tyne.

During December and January there were a large number of cases of suspected cholera in London, and the prospect of an epidemic received a lot of attention. Even a play was produced, called 'Cholera Morbus, or Love and Fright', in which a man dispersed a crowd in terror by shouting 'collar her' after a girl who had picked his pocket, allowing her to run free. *The Times* thought this an outrage and an indecency. (4)

Of the 48 cases investigated by the Central Board before February, probably only one or two on the river were the Asiatic cholera; the illness of John Potts received the most attention, although it was only dysentery.

He was a sailor recently arrived from Sunderland on the collier *Mould,* and waiting to work north on the *Dirt.* Taken ill with vomiting and cramps, he was removed to Shadwell Workhouse, where he soon died, on 18th January. A postmortem examination was performed, and a twenty-inch length of his intestines carried to the Central Board at Whitehall by the parish beadle. The inquest was held in the George and Dragon public house on Shadwell High Street, and was attended by representatives from all the neighbouring parishes, but the verdict was that 'the deceased had died by the visitation of God, from natural causes, and not from the Cholera Morbus'. (5)

The Central Board had been supervising activity in the parishes for three months when the cholera did arrive in London, in February 1832. The Vestry Committees had been asked to form local boards of health on 20 October; there was little initial response, but a flurry of activity followed the news of the arrival of cholera in Sunderland on 5 November. With the encouragement of the two Central Board Inspectors for East London all the parishes formed boards, apart from Holy Trinity Minories where the Vestry asked the Clerk and Wardens of the Liberty to use their 'discretion' as necessary 'on the spur of the moment'. (6)

Most of the boards seem to have examined the cleanliness of their parishes, and cleared nuisances off the streets. There were initially no powers for statutory cleansing of private property, but Poplar Board of Health kept a free supply of brushes, buckets and unslaked lime at the Town Hall for the poorer inhabitants to borrow. Surviving accounts of the living conditions paint a picture of overflowing cesspits, pigs in the backyard, and inadequate drainage and water supply. In Spitalfields,

> The low houses are all huddled together in close and dark lanes and alleys, presenting at first sight an appearance of non-habitation, so dilapidated are the doors and windows:- in every room of the houses, whole families, parents, children and aged grandfathers swarm together. (7)

Cross Street, Poplar was not in a particularly dirty area, but the report of the Board of Health says it

> wants cleaning, especially a pool of stagnant water at the top of Mary Street which has no protection against children falling in, one case having occurred, where the child would have been smothered had it not been for the timely assistance of its mother and a boy. NB the pigs which wander about these parts turning up the earth and heaping up ashes etc., contribute to the nuisance. (8)

Drainage in East London was very poor, as indeed it was over the whole of London. The Commissioners of Sewers, set up by Henry VIII, collected a rate and were meant to maintain the sewers in their area. However, many of the sewers were open ditches, and those which did run underground had not always been properly surveyed, so that the course became blocked up. The worst drain was the 'Black Ditch', an open sewer running from the parish of Christ Church Spitalfields and emptying into Limehouse Dock. The Tower Hamlets Commissioners of Sewers had made an attempt to drain it by diverting the flow, but this had made the stream stagnant and more offensive. The Act for the Prevention of the Cholera Morbus came into force in February 1832 and allowed boards to perform some compulsory cleansing of houses for the first time, but was passed too late to have much effect on the epidemic already in progress.

Water was supplied to London by private companies, the New River Company and the East London Water Company serving respectively the inland and riverside parts of East London. The East London Water Company took its water directly from the River Lea north of Bow, and despite having recently replaced the wooden mains piping, the mortality from cholera was very high in the area it served. Only about a third of houses were supplied directly, most people relying on pumps in the street.

Ordering the provision of cholera hospitals was the other major measure the Central Board took, and all the local parishes made some arrangements, except the Hamlets of Mile End Old and New Towns, Bromley and Spitalfields. The London Hospital, in common with other voluntary hospitals in London, affirmed its general rule not to admit anyone with infectious diseases. All new patients were examined in the waiting hall before admission, to check for any symptoms of cholera. A ward for cholera victims was set up first in the Library, and then in the attic above Harrison Ward, but only for patients already in the hospital who happened to catch the disease.

Limehouse, Wapping, Shadwell, Whitechapel and Bethnal Green converted parts of their already crowded workhouses into wards, but the Central Board favoured the use of detached houses, where the risk of contagion was less. The only good surviving description of one of these hospitals is of the one in St. George's in the East. It was in two adjoining houses on Vinegar Lane, with a back entrance from Sun Tavern Fields. The Board of Health

> had provided 16 beds, with entirely new bedding, nurses, a surgeon to attend on the patients, and pipe conductors of steam, to convey heat to the afflicted persons and beds. (They) had also provided a litter, made of wicker, and which could be covered in at pleasure, for the easy removal of persons from their houses; and immediately under the patients a portable steam apparatus, which would act to keep the patient warm during his conveyance through the open air. The hospital . . . was situated in the most airy part of the parish. (9)

Although there had been a number of Central Board circulars on hospitals, only Poplar had actually set one up by the time cholera had reached London, and the other parishes made more or less hurried attempts to rent houses or convert parts of their already overcrowed workhouses in early February.

The parishes of East London were certainly not well prepared for the first cases of cholera. The local boards were free to do largely as they wanted, and were not guaranteed support from the Vestry Committees; the Limehouse and Ratcliffe boards received little co-operation or money from their parishes. A long-standing conflict between the Vestry and local Magistrates of St. Dunstan's Stepney resulted in the formation of a 'voluntary' board. This spoke out against excessive expenditure, asked for a public subscription, and proclaimed 'the poor want bread not warm baths and physic'. (10)

The attitude of each board was strictly parochial, and anyone who was not the proven responsibility of a parish would receive no aid, nor even burial. Thus when the captain of a vessel moored off Hermitage Pier, Wapping, was brought ashore in a state of collapse, and it could not be decided which parish his ship was moored nearest, he was left lying alone on the wharf.

While it was a well-meaning body, the Central Board had very few actual powers, and the preventative measures it recommended were inadequate to control the disease. As *The Courier* observed;

> If, instead of so many pompous regulations about the means of curing cholera, we were to think of the means of preventing it, by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, it should be more to our credit as men and Christians. (11)

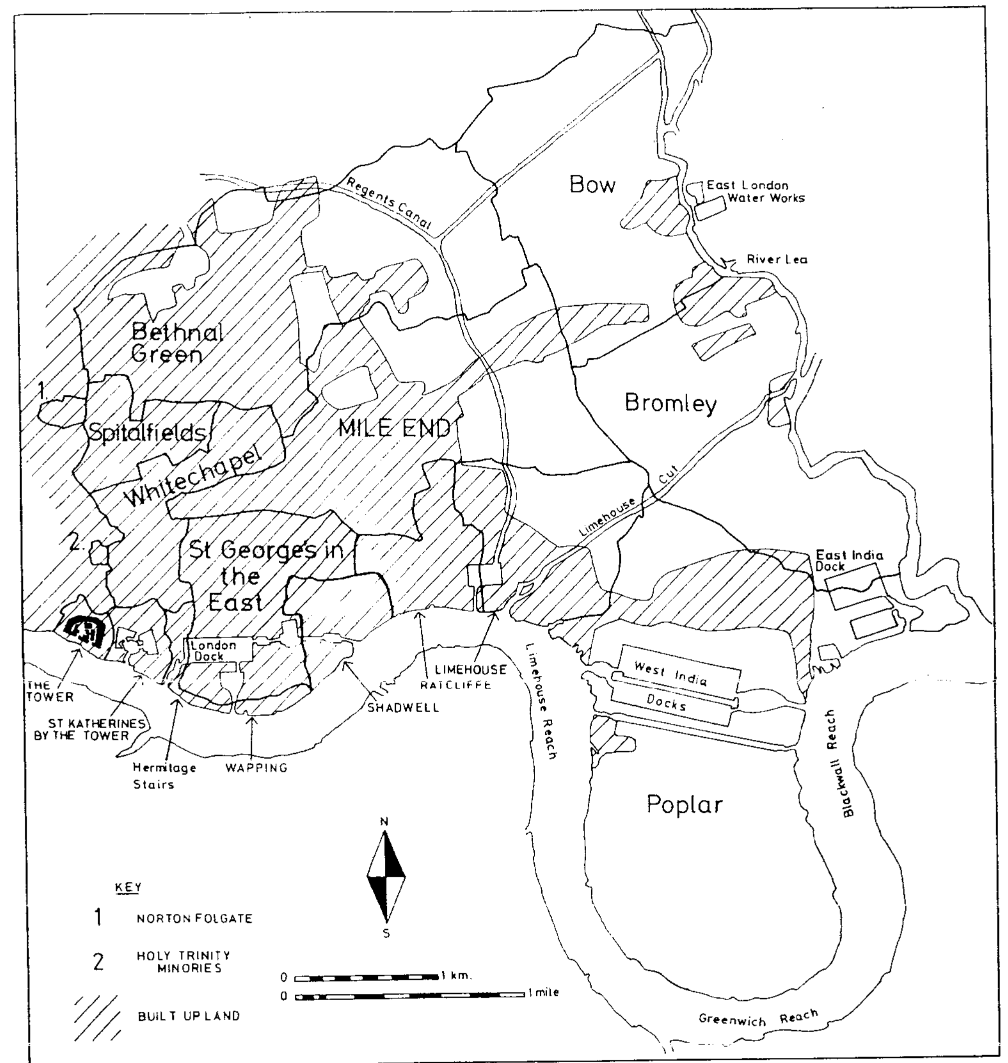
After the first death in Sunderland, on 26 October 1831, the epidemic spread to Newcastle and then northwest to Scotland. The disease reached London by the sea, and there were a few probable cases of cholera on the river in January and February 1832. John James, a ship scraper two days off the *Elizabeth* from Sunderland, was the first death ashore, in Rotherhithe on 11 February. North of the river the first case was that of Sarah Ferguson, taken ill on the afternoon of Sunday the 12th. She was quickly moved from White's Rents Nightingale Lane, to Limehouse Workhouse, where she died eight hours later. Her extremities turned a blue colour shortly before death, confirming this was indeed the 'Asiatic' or 'blue' cholera. In life she had been

> of robust health and gained a living by picking up coals and pieces of timber along the riverside, and was in the habit, even in the most inclement weather, of wading knee deep in the water and mud. (12)

Another woman, Mary Shea, and her daughter Caroline, were taken ill at the same time and both died. All three were buried as soon as possible in deep graves in the corner of the churchyard.

There was immediately considerable panic not only in Limehouse but the whole of London. Almost any mild bowel problem was thought to be cholera and even 12 horses that died of a 'rapid febrile disease' at Taylor's brewery, Limehouse, were rumoured to be victims of the epidemic. (13) As the disease carried off relatively few people in its early stages, this alarm subsided a little, although East London found itself almost in quarantine. The chairman of a meeting of the Mechanics Institute in Limehouse failed to attend for fear of catching the disease, and a member wrote to him that 'gentlemen at the west end of the town are mightily afraid of the cholera; he hoped they would get their share of it.' The Marquis of Stafford would not permit his staff to venture east of Charing Cross, and had post thrown into his house from the street. (14)

The Central Board soon took special precautions on the river, using the frigate HMS *Dover* as a cholera hospital. The Admiralty had offered another frigate HMS *Grampus* as a hospital as early as November 1831 but the Central Board did not take up the offer until cholera was actually in London. The *Dover* was first moored near Limehouse, then off Hermitage Pier, Wapping, and at Greenwich from the end of May. On board were a lieutenant, eight



The parishes and hamlets of East London in 1832. From *Crutchley's New Plan of London and its Environs*, 1833.

crew, medical staff and nurses; female nurses had to be taken on board from Greenwich after the original male crew refused to attend the sick. A boat rowed along the river front every day, and collected any new patients.

The doctor in charge, Surgeon Inlay, treated 64 patients in the first two months of the epidemic, mostly off colliers - the *Formosa*, the *Blessing*, the *Blossom*, the *Maxwell* and others lying off Hermitage Wharf and Stone Stairs. It could not have been an easy job, as Inlay and his three nurses all got diarrhoea themselves.

There was always trouble over where the bodies could be buried. Poplar was closest to where the *Dover* was first moored, but together with Limehouse,

maintained that the bodies should be buried on open ground south of the river, by the convicts' cemetery at Woolwich. This Inlay was forced to do, after the first bodies had spent a week on the ship - despite orders sent down to Poplar from the Central Board.

There are no reliable figures on the number of deaths from cholera. Parish returns were made daily to the Central Board but stopped in early May when the epidemic was officially declared over in London. In fact it seems from contemporary accounts and the Bills of Mortality for the Metropolis that the early period of the epidemic, from February to late April, was followed by a considerable increase in mortality from early July to late August. This accounted for about two-thirds of the total number of deaths, which amounted to at least 3,000 in the whole of London, and over 800 in the east. Of this 800 about 300 were along the riverfront, and 263 were reported in Whitechapel alone. Over twice as many people caught the disease and recovered as died, so there were probably around 2, 500 cases in East London. It does seem that many cases and deaths were ignored or not reported in some parishes, notably Bethnal Green.

All the deaths in February were of Irish labourers or north country seamen, before the disease spread inland towards Whitechapel. Doctors could not agree on its exact symptoms, so it is easier to describe cases individually than in general.

Elizabeth Connolly was aged 53 and lived in White's Rents, Limehouse. On 16 February she ate a dinner of ox's cheek, and thought her feeling of illness the next day was due to this first meal of meat for a week or two. At 1.30 pm she was returning from a shop, where she had bought some herring, when diarrhoea started, forcing her to stop at a house on the way home. This continued, with vomiting, until 5 pm, when she called a doctor. She was taken to the workhouse, where a hot-air bath, an emetic, an enema and brandy did not prevent her dying at 3 am.

Another case is that of John Salmon, who lived in White's Yard off Rosemary Lane in Wapping. He, like Sarah Ferguson, picked wood and coals by the riverside. It was not until after three days of diarrhoea and vomiting that he called for medical help, at noon on 24 February. Until 8 pm that evening he was treated at home, with laudanum, brandy and other stimulants, external treatment of hot flannels, friction with coarse blankets, and bottles filled with hot water. His condition worsened, so he was taken to the cholera hospital, but died at midnight that night. (15)

What then were the reactions of those whom the disease attacked? Certainly there was a lot of confusion about its existence and significance, as *The Courier* commented:-

> 'The disease is undoubtedly in London, and undoubtedly it will spread' say one party.
>
> 'The disease is not in London, and it will not spread', say the other.
>
> 'The woman died of the real malignant cholera', say the Doctors on the other.

> 'It is a mere alarm of the Anti-Reformers', says a member of the Political Union.
>
> 'It has been spread through interested motives; the druggists shops are profiting by it', says a Newspaper correspondent.
>
> 'It is the last blow to the commerce of London, already declining under the competition of Liverpool and the other northern ports', thunders the 'leading journal'. (16)

Although the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of colonial trade had increased the prosperity of London, its secondary importance as a centre of industry, and the development of rival provincial ports, meant that the river was not so busy as it might have been. Quarantine of incoming ships was thus unpopular with merchants and ships' owners, and was lifted as soon as the cholera reached London. However, outgoing vessels were put in quarantine at their port of destination, an action which was blamed for even more loss of trade and unemployment. There was not such an active lobby as in Sunderland, where business interest dominated the Local Boards of Health, and issued statements that there was no cholera at all in the town. *The Times* blamed the arrival of cholera in London on commercial interests but did not actually accuse any ships of breaking quarantine.

People by the river refused to believe in the existence of the disease, thinking it to be a form of the 'common' cholera always present in the area. When sailors caught the disease, they would not allow themselves to be taken on board the *Dover* until in a state of complete collapse, and the boat that collected patients from their vessels was the butt of frequent hoaxes and much abuse from the seamen. But the coal whippers and other people on shore were adamant that a vessel with a case of cholera aboard should immediately be towed back into quarantine. (17)

The silk industry, concentrated in a small area of Spitalfields and Bethnal Green, was in a period of decline in the early 1830s. The repeal of the Spitalfields Acts in 1824 and the removal of import restrictions in 1826 had been welcomed at the time by manufacturers, but it had become clear that London could not compete with imports of patterned French silk and the production of plain silks was cheaper in the provinces, where child and female labour were used in factories. There had been virtually no mechanization in London, and one employer, Barret Wadden, had reduced his workforce of handweavers from 300 to 60 or 70 in the six years up to 1832. About two-thirds of the looms in Bethnal Green and Spitalfields were idle. There were 6,000 registered for parish aid in Bethnal Green alone, and the Vestry were unable to pay all the necessary relief from the poor rates. This led to unrest among the workless, and in late February 1832, a man and two women were arrested for breaking the windows of an overseer's house, after being refused aid, and a large mob had gathered as the police arrived.

Tory Radicals embraced the Malthusian principles of 'political economy', maintaining that any help given to the poor would only enable them to multiply faster, in the long run causing more suffering. Many respectable people thought it best to give little help to the workless and ill, even in the face of quite obvious suffering. The press largely agreed;

> with respect to those persons who are supposed to contribute greatly to the spread of the disease, Beggars and Vagrants . . . we call for the vigorous execution of the law . . . surely with our highly effective Police, we may be freed from this scourge. (18)

Certain middle-class philanthropists, however, formed organisations such as the Spitalfields Soup Society and the Bethnal Green Benevolent Society to distribute clothes and food to the poor. A soup kitchen was set up in the yard of Limehouse workhouse, to be maintained by public subscription. Some of the poor, it seems, welcomed this aid brought by the threat of cholera.

> We really, for your sakes, offer our sincere thanks to 'the dreadful Plague' and hope he will continue to take you under his protection, at any rate he will not leave us until you are provided for the winter.

wrote *The Poor Man's Guardian.* Others thought that the cholera was an attempt by the Government to poison the poor, and reduce the size of the population. (19)

A National Day of Fasting and Prayer was called in February, to be held on the 21st March, as 'the disease . . . was proof of the judgement of God among us'. (20) The Fast was announced in Parliament after the Strangers' Gallery had been cleared; a speech deplored the sins and state of the nation, the 'houses of the nobles and gentry entered and robbed'. *The Poor Man's Guardian* replied 'No, no; to tell the *poor* to fast would indeed be superfluous', as they were lucky to eat meat once a week, let alone be able to forgo it. (21) It was called a 'farce' day, and the National Union of Working Classes wanted all to have a 'feast' day instead, calling a large public meeting in Finsbury Square for the 21st.

On this day, despite the 500 police quartered in Spitalfields, about 1,000 members of the Trades Union of Bethnal Green and Spitalfields marched west. Meeting the police in Windmill Street, by Finsbury Square their leader advised them publicly to disperse, after which they disappeared, and then marched up Bishopsgate Street, brushing aside a few police and proceeding northwards.

The same day, a crowd reported to be about 500 threatened to demolish the Bethnal Green Workhouse, but desisted, although only 25 police were present. (22) Politically the cholera was not an important issue after this, becoming overshadowed by the first Reform Bill, about to pass through Parliament. Once the disease was seen to be less serious than in Paris, where more than 9,000 had died in the first month of the epidemic, the popular attention paid to it declined.

Amongst the medical profession, the exact nature of cholera was the cause of much debate; a large proportion of doctors adhered to the 'non-contagion' theory of disease, that it did not spread from person to person but could arise spontaneously, as a result of bad air. The Westminster Medical Society followed this line, and insisted the disease was an altered form of 'common

cholera'. The popular *London Medical Gazette* and many doctors were content to agree that there was a serious disease in London, and discussed means of prevention and cure, rather than the origin of cholera or its causes.

Fear of cholera produced a brisk trade in medicines, so much that

> there had been a feeling abroad that the medical men have been getting up to what is vulgarly called a job, and that the accounts of the disease have been magnified and exaggerated for purposes not the most praiseworthy. (23)

The value of preparations that appeared, such as 'Rymer's Peruvian Tonic Drops', 'Asiatic Antipestilential Essence' or 'Hancock's Anti-Cholera Galoshes' is not recorded, but many of the medicines were based on brandy, as this examination at the Thames Police Office suggests. Mary Wilson, a 'dashing Cyprian', was accused of theft from the captain of the collier *Juno;*

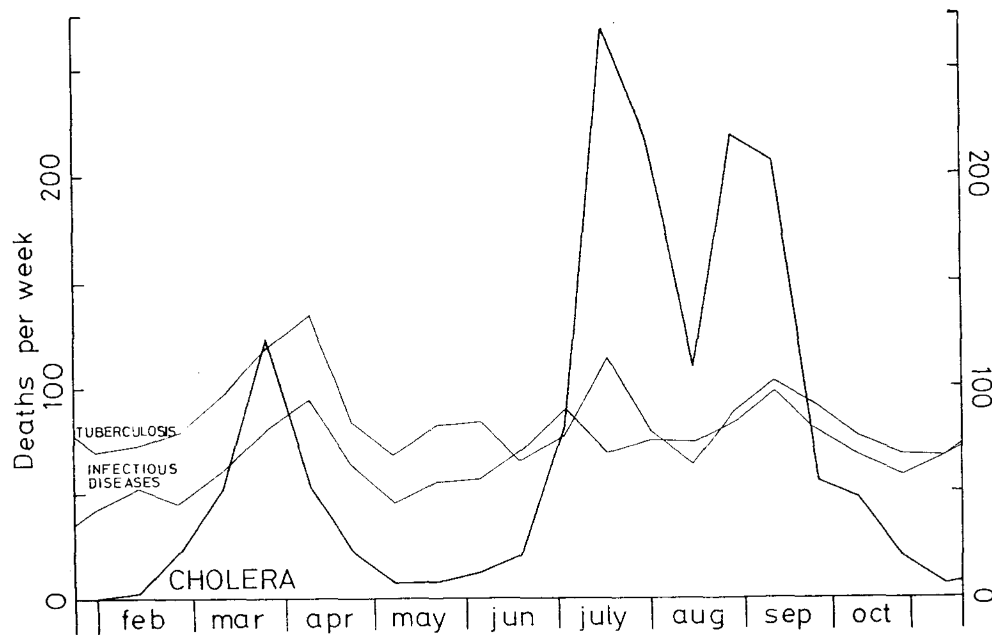
> The prosecutor met the accused in Shadwell, and after taking sundry drops of 'Anti-Cholera' which made him feel 'half seas over', he accompanied the prisoner to a house of ill fame, where she succeeded in robbing him.

As the magistrate said, the captain had made an ill voyage of it. (24)

When someone did actually contract the disease, it was customary for the ill person to be surrounded by as many of his family and friends as possible, often packed into small rooms. The closeness of the atmosphere was thought to cause more illness. and doctors wanted to isolate their patients and move them as quickly as possible to a better ventilated hospital, though this in fact could have made little difference either to the patients or to the spread of the disease.

If a doctor was called, and often one was not until the patient was nearly dead, his treatment was not always trusted. In late May 1832, two women in Johnson Street, Mile End Old Town, contracted cholera. Their friends thought the medicines sent by the parish doctor were only making the women worse, so they fed some to a cat, which shortly after died. A mob of them attacked two pupils of the doctor who came to examine the patients, and when more of the family subsequently became ill, they refused to be taken to hospital. (25)

A further reason for not wanting to go to the hospital was the fear of being used for dissection. The major hospitals had for some time been very short of cadavers, and there was a flourishing business for the 'resurrectionists'. The Central Board had asked for bodies of cholera victims to be wrapped in a tar-soaked blanket, and several shovelfuls of lime put in the coffin, not so much to disinfect the corpse as to make it unsuitable for dissection. Even this did not dissuade all the 'resurrectionists', however, as on at least two occasions the burial pit dug for cholera victims from the *Dover* at Woolwich was emptied, and sometimes only empty coffins were interred. The *London Medical Gazette* commented that these bodies could be readily identified in the dissecting rooms of major London hospitals by the amount of tar on their skins. Bodies from the *Dover* were subsequently buried in Plumstead, Kent, but even there the bodies of two sailors from the *Justista* were removed, and two people were caught carrying away two more. (26)



Mortality from cholera, tuberculosis and infectious diseases over the whole of London in 1832, taken from the Bills of Mortality.

'Infectious diseases' are 'Fever', scarlet and typhoid fevers, whooping cough, measles and smallpox.

Total deaths in London from tuberculosis	– 3537
infectious diseases	– 3727
cholera	– 3101

The Anatomy Act, being discussed in Parliament at this time, proposed allowing the bodies of paupers who died in the workhouse to be used for dissection. This produced an outcry from the poor, and a suspicion that anyone taken to a cholera hospital might be killed and used for dissection. There were no demonstrations in London as dramatic as that in Dublin, where hospital cots were broken up and thrown into the River Liffey; but a visitor to London wrote that

> It is only a few days since an infuriated mob attacked the Cholera Hospital of St. George's in the East, and threatened to pull down the house and murder the surgeon exclaiming that they were 'Burking' the poor wretches who were admitted. At risk of his life one of the gentlemen in attendance rushed out and seized the ringleader, dragged him within the house and succeeded in fastening the door. 'Now', said he, 'wretch, you will not go out until you have asked every patient in the house how he has been treated, and you have heard his answer. You shall see the agonies of the sufferers, and the efforts made for their relief'. The man received from all grateful acknowledgements of the humanity exercised towards them, and being thoroughly humiliated, said, 'Sir, I am ashamed of myself: let me go out and explain to the mob'. He did so, and they presently dispersed. (27)

Burial of cholera victims was meant to take place within 12 hours of death, the body not entering the church itself. This was very unpopular, especially among the Irish, who kept a vigil or 'wake' over the body for several days after death. On a number of occasions police were used to break into the houses of Irish labourers and remove a body. In Wapping in July 1832 a family wanted to keep a body in their house for a week, so they could collect money from a funeral fund. At least occasionally, cholera victims were buried with undue haste: one being carried in a funeral procession down Bishopsgate Street in July 1832 was heard knocking from inside the coffin. (28)

The Central Board (which continued to answer letters despite being officially discontinued in May) maintained during the height of the epidemic in July and August that the cholera was merely endemic and occasional outbreaks were bound to occur. It is not clear whether this was a deliberate attempt to calm public opinion, or merely due to lack of information, as all the Central Board Inspectors had been dispensed with and there were no official returns from the parishes. However, by December nearly the whole country was free of cholera, though few areas had escaped the disease. The mortality in London was not especially high, the Black Country around Birmingham probably being the worst affected. The disease may have reappeared briefly the following summer, and again in 1837, but there was not another major epidemic until 1848.

Most of the precautionary measures were allowed to lapse, although Poplar kept their hospital in North Street, and Norton Folgate gave their street cleaner, the 'Scavenger', a longer contract. The Act for the Prevention of Cholera had however created a precedent for some compulsory cleansing, and more significantly had allowed discretionary payments to be made to the parishes from the Treasury if the parish poor rate was inadequate to pay for the necessary measures.

There was no official examination of the effects of the 1832 epidemic until the first report of the Metropolitan Sanitary Commission, in 1838, but the epidemic did leave behind it an awareness of the importance of public health. This prompted action by individuals such as Hector Gavin and Edwin Chadwick, whose investigations, carried out largely in East London, formed the basis for sanitary reforms later in the 19th century. There were, however, to be far more serious epidemics than that of 1832 before much real progress was made.

Notes

1. J. Hogg, *London as it was; being a series of observations on the health, habits and amusements of the people of London*. (London 1837).
2. There is little information on the treatments used by specific doctors in East London. The methods of one doctor from Limehouse are set out in a letter to the Central Board of Health (CBH), whose records are now in the Public Record Office. PC 1/102, 11 September 1832.
3. CBH Letter-book PC 1/93, 17 November 1831.
4. *The Times* 11 and 12 November 1831.

5 CBH Letter-book PC 1/103, 20 January 1832; *The Times* 20 January 1832; *The Morning Chronicle* 23 January 1832.

6 Vestry Minutes, Liberty of Holy Trinity Minories, in Tower Hamlets Libraries (Local History Library) (THL) S. 197, 20 February 1832.

7 *The Poor Man's Guardian* 18 February 1832.

8 Minutes of the Board of Health for the Parish of All Saints Poplar THL P. 497, 19 November 1831.

9 *The Courier* 17 February 1832.

10 *The Times* 18 February 1832; Vestry Minutes of St. Dunstan's Stepney (transcripts), THL LP. 3544 8 March 1832.

11 *The Courier* 27 February 1832.

12 *The Times* 15 February 1832; *Cholera Gazette* 14 February 1832, p. 131.

13 *London Medical Gazette* 3 March 1832.

14 *The Morning Chronicle* 15 February 1832; *The Times* 3 March 1832.

15 CBH In-Letters PC 1/103, 17 and 24 February 1832.

16 *The Courier* 20 February 1832.

17 *The Courier* 20 February 1832; *The Morning Chronicle* 27 February 1832.

18 *The Morning Chronicle* 13 February 1832.

19 *The Poor Man's Guardian* 19 November 1831; *The Brighton Gazette* 29 March 1832; *The Times* 24 and 26 November 1831; *The Morning Chronicle* 17 February 1832, 10 March 1832.

20 From the sermon of the Bishop of Chichester given in Westminster Abbey on the Fast Day. *The Times* 22 February 1832.

21 *The Poor Man's Guardian.* 11 February 1832.

22 *The Times* 22 March 1832; *The Courier* 22 March 1832.

23 *The Sun* 23 February 1832.

24 *The Morning Chronicle* 15 March 1832.

25 *Ibid* 25 May 1832.

26 *The London Medical Gazette* 24 March 1832; CBH Minutes PC 1/105, 13 March 1832; CBH Letters PC 1/94, 14 March 1832; *The Spectator* 21 April 1832.

27 *The Brighton Gazette* 29 March 1832. This event is not reported in the London papers apart from a direct extract of the original letter in *The Standard* 30 March 1832.

28 *The Times* 13 July 1832; *The Morning Chronicle* 21 July 1832; *The Courier* 21 April 1832.

General Reference Books:

Norman Longmate, *King Cholera* (London 1966).

R.J. Morris, *Cholera 1832, the social response to an epidemic* (London 1976).

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SOME EAST END BALLADS

Arthur Robinson

Long before there were popular newspapers, printers of broadside ballads were purveying news, gossip, songs, scandal and even literature to the less literate sections of the community. An area as rich in history as the East End of London naturally became the background to many of these ballads:

The Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green
Buxom Joan of Limehouse
The Cruel Cooper of Ratcliffe
The Love-sick maid of Wapping
Tit for tat, or the merry wives of Wapping
The frolicsome bricklayer of Mile End Town
Ratcliffe Highway, and Whitechapel Road

The ballads dealt with in this article have some connection with sailors and the sea. The importance of the East End location varies considerably, but it serves to remind us that Wapping, Ratcliffe and Whitechapel were well-known to sailors, whose amatory exploits during shore leave are the real subject of many of these stories.

Sometimes the titles are almost more interesting than the text:

The Love-sick maid of Wapping: her complaint
for want of apple-pie. Tune of *Jenny Gin,*
Fair one let me in, Busie fame, Hey boys up go we. (1)

Sometimes the text was an ingenious exercise in *double-entendre.*

Brimful of grogg this rowling dog
Began to storm and bluster
Six flashing whores come from the doors
around him in a cluster.
I do declare by Mars I swear
You make my chaps to water
Be not in a surprise so d.... your eyes
I'll be in your larboard quarter
If you will stoop I'll lash your poop
Unto my yard-arm tackle
Into your hull I'll shoot my gull
And all your charms I'll shatter ......

The Jolly Tar (of Wapping) (2)

Two closely related shanties *Whitechapel Road* and *Ratcliffe Highway* may originally have been of this type.

Oh, as I went a-walking down Ratcliffe Highway
I spied a flash packet, her wind blowing free
She 'ad up no colours, no flag did she fly
I could tell she was Dutch by the cut of her jib . . .

In most of the versions the girl steals the sailor's money. It has been suggested that the surviving verses form the outer sections of the ballad, and that

the unprintable middle section utilised nautical metaphor to explore their relationship in considerable detail. (3)

One fine narrative ballad is *The Cruel Cooper of Ratcliffe*. (4) There are several version, the one used here being a garland in the usual eight-page format which is bound together with other garlands in an 18th century volume in the British Library. It belongs to a familiar genre in which the hero finds himself in a strange country. The best-known example is probably *The Honour of the London Apprentice* which has given its name to several public houses. A local tavern, *The Turkish Slave*, described in a list of 1775 as being in Brick Lane, commemorates a similar story. (5)

As a busy port, Ratcliffe must have had a number of coopers, since in those days much of the cargo was carried in barrels.

Near Ratcliffe Cross lived a copper there
Who had a virtuous wife comely and fair
He by this prudent woman had a son
Besides this youth they children ne'erhad none.
Tho ' wise and prudent yet this cruel man
Did oft times beat her with a cruel hand

The son finds his domestic situation intolerable and remonstrates with his father, who promptly turns him out into the street.

He, having knowledge of his father's trade
went Cooper's mate to Turkey as 'tis said
So well he liked the country we do find
The ship came back and left the lad behind
He plac'd himself with a native to dwell
whose family loved him very well
The young in years he was grown tall
and of a comely countenance withal

His Turkishe master dies and the widow married the lad. Meanwhile, fate is catching up on the father:

Near Ratcliffe-cross he lived years 'tis known
and to his wife he was a cruel man
and in process of time Death did them part
and 'tis supposed this man broke her heart
After her death he could not thrive at all
Day by day he down at heels did fall

He falls into debt and is forced to take a job as cooper on a ship. But the ship is siezed by pirates:

And on the raging deep where billows foam
To their great Grief this man and twenty more
were carried pris'ners to the Turkish shore.

He is sold as a slave, beaten for laziness and taken before his master who, to no one's surprise, turns out to be his own son.

He said "The man who thus for you hath done
behold he is your dear and only son
I'm griev'd to think that I prov'd so severe
to lay my hands upon my father dear.

But God I hope will pardon me because
I did not know Dear Father who you was".

Now to conclude, young Men, let these lines
Be well engraven on your hearts and minds
That is, to serve the Lord and shun the Devil
And like this young man still do good for evil.

I commend the story to local producers of pantomime, since it has just as much dramatic and comic potential as Dick Whittington, Puss in Boots, or any of the standard entertainments.

Other narrative ballads are simply bawdy stories in verse, though none the less interesting for that:

The Taylor's wanton wife of Wapping, or a Hugh and Cry after a laced petticoat, flounc'd gown and rich Cornet with other apparel which was lost in the chamber of love. (6)
To the tune of *What shall I do to show how much I love her.*

After such a title, the ballad itself is something of an anti-climax. It would be hard to think of a less appropriate tune than Purcell's song, which incidentally was also used in *The Beggar's opera.* The story concerns a young wife of New Crane, Wapping, who picks up a sailor in a tavern and steals his money. He sees her picking his pocket and decided to teach her a lesson. They retire to his room, and just before dawn, he takes back his money and all her clothes as well.

Tit for tat, or, the merry wives of Wapping (7) comes from a collection of old ballads in the British Library. Its plot could be described as Chaucerian, though the same could hardly be said of the quality of the verse.

All you that delight in my frolicsome song
I will tell you a story before it is long
It is of a sea-captain, a frolicsome spark
who played with a sailor's fair wife in the dark.
With a fal la . . .

John Hanson, a sailor, so called by name
Whose wife was a fair maid and beautiful dame
and she came on board her husband to see
The Captain said Girl your a supper for me . . .

The wife withstands the Captain's advances until he raises the price to fifty guineas, and later that evening goes with him to his cabin. But the sailor has overheard the arrangement and hides under the Captain's bed.

Then straitways they stript and to bed did go
Where he fell a-riding as you do know how
He jostled the sailor so under the bed
Finding the Captain had horned his head.

The sailor waits until they are asleep, then dresses in the Captain's uniform.

The dressing himself from top to toe
away to the Captain's fair bride he did go

He knocked at the door with courage so bold
being dressed in clothes embroidered with gold

The captain's wife thinks he is her husband and lets him into her house.

He lept into bed the candle put out
And the lady turn'd her back side in a huff
He grumbled and growl's as sots often do
With pulling and howling her to buckle to

He said not a word but play'd with her knees
At length the lady began to be pleas'd
And then Tit for Tat with the Captain did play
And kept in his arms till it was broad day

In the morning the unobservant lady recognises the seaman, and together they go to the seaman's house to confront his wife and the Captain.

Notes

1 *Roxburghe ballads* II. 295. 1685
2 British Library (BL)
3 Doerflinger (W.M.). *Songs of the sailor and lumberman.* 1972
4 BL 11621 b 60. circa 1750. Also in *Roxburghe* III
5 The London Apprentice is in *Roxburghe* III, 747. For the story behind the Turkish Slave, see *Encyclopedia Londinensis* Vol 15 p. 48., quoted in *East London Antiquities.*
6 *Roxburghe II,* 493. 1692
7 BL C 20. C 30. 1790

The Seamans adieu

to his pritty *BETTY:*
Living near *WAPPING*
OR,
A Pattern of true Love, &c

Sweet William to the Seas was prest,
and left his Love behind;
Whilst she her sorrows oft exprest
and blam'd the fates unkind.
To the tune of, Tender hearts, &c.

The Seaman's Adieu.
J. Deacon
c.1680
(British Library)

TOWER HAMLETS 1888

William Fishman

The 1978 Tower Hamlets Annual Local History Lecture at the Central Library, Bancroft Road, was delivered by William Fishman, Senior Research Fellow & Tutor in Politics at Queen Mary College. In 1888 international attention had been focused on the area by two dramatic and often described events - the Match Girls Strike in Bow and the Jack the Ripper murders in Whitechapel. William Fishman, therefore, chose to describe the background of conditions in the area at the time, as evoked by two contemporary novelists - John Mackay and Margaret Harkness - and the local press. The following is an abridged text of the lecture.

One may ask why 1888? A reasonable question. My choice rests on a year in which the repercussion of events within Tower Hamlets would extend well beyond the frontiers of London's East End. One could claim that it was an 'annus mirabilis' of happenings, some of which are particularly relevant to today - 90 years on.

It was that year that the Jewish immigration problem first broke surface. In those very same parishes, where racial violence prevails today, political agitators were already mouthing the same rhetoric derived from the lowest common denominator - the irrational fears and hatred festering in the mind of the slum dweller. With local unemployment and housing shortages, then, as now, a major pressure gauge, 1888 was the year of opportunity both for political demagogues flying the anti-alien kite and the new style social investigator.

The old scapegoat, the Jew, was available in all his vulnerability. The great patriot, imperialist author Arnold White, writing en route for South Africa in the mail steamer *Athenian* had the previous year directed (under the stirring title 'England for the English') a broadside through the *Times*: 'Will you permit me to fire a parting shot at the pauper foreigner? He is successfully colonising Great Britain under the nose of H.M. Government'. (1)

Our local press took up the cry with a vengeance. We read *The East End News* of February 21st, 1888, quoting an interview with Captain Colomb, M.P. for Bow & Bromley (then quite outside the Jewish ghetto) who stated 'I object to England with its overcrowded population, being made a human ashpit for the refuse population of the world'. The *East London Advertiser* kept a watchful and critical eye on the 'alien invasion' throughout the year, sniping continuously and lamenting that the local poor were hard driven with high rents and the competition of *foreign Jews* (30th June, 1888) and later (6th October) 'Notwithstanding all the outcry about the immigration of foreign paupers the cry is "Still they Come"; ad nauseum, backed up outside by fierce warnings and rumblings in the national press.

The novelist John Law (i.e. Margaret Harkness) that year reveals the isolation of the East End Immigrant Jew, with anti-alien sentiments being ex-

pressed by the enlightened of working folk. In *Out of Work* the radical carpenter vents his spleen on them *furriners* . . . . . 'They'll go to hell'. And his wife echoes: 'Why should they come here I'd like to know? London ain't what it used to be; it's just like a foreign city. The food ain't English; the talk ain't English. Why should all them foreigners come here to take our food out of our mouths, and live on victuals we wouldn't give to pigs?' (2)

Even the politically conscious female radical labour master forcibly maintains 'No, I never take on a foreigner. It's bad enough for us English and I won't help to make it worse by giving work to a Jewess!' The *ELA* editorial of 3rd March, 1888, posited local attitudes 'The swarm of foreign Jews, who have invaded the East London labour market, are chiefly responsible for the sweating system and the grave evils which are flowing from it - the brunt of the hardship involved (falling) with tenfold severity upon the English men and women'.

Anti-alienism at local and national level voiced attitudes which were early accepted by government. By 10th February, 1888, the appointment of a Select Committee of Enquiry was agreed upon in Parliament. That year two committees met to investigate what was, in effect, the Foreign Jewish question: a House of Commons Select Committee on Alien Immigration met between 27th July and the 8th August, and a House of Lords Select Committee on the Sweating System reporting after 11th August. Both, in effect, *vindicated* the East End Jew, but local anti-alienism went on unabated. The Whitechapel murders provided the setting and the opportunity for a minor outbreak of *Judophobia.* After the third 'Ripper' murder on the 16th September, the Editor of the *East London Observer* under the heading: 'A Riot against the Jews' records'

> On Saturday in several quarters of East London the crowds who assembled in the streets began to assume a very threatening attitude towards the Hebrew population of the District. It was repeatedly asserted that no Englishman could have perpetrated such a horrible crime as that of Hanbury Street, and that it must have been done by a JEW - and forthwith the crowds began to threaten and abuse such of the unfortunate Hebrews as they found in the streets. Happily the presence of a large number of police prevented a riot actually taking place.

In the last context, those of us who often traverse Brick Lane from Bethnal Green to Whitechapel will know what this is about - of course, the new victims nowadays being the Bangladeshi.

That year gave ultimate definition to Tower Hamlets as a grand repository of the poor and dispossessed. Two little-known, but perceptive writers, who embarked on a voyage of exploration into our area were John Mackay, and the sometime friend of Eleanor Marx, Margaret Harkness, and they gave on the spot and, in my view, unrivalled description and evaluation of East End life.

Ninety years ago the young Anglo-German Mackay, who had taken to walking the streets of Whitechapel, observed an Empire of Hunger:

> The East End of London is the hell of poverty. Like one enormous, black, motionless, giant kraken, the poverty of London lies there in lurking silence and encircles with its mighty tentacles the life and wealth of the City and of the West End. (3)

Parish guardian statistics, compared with previous years, are terrifying. The *East End News* reports near the end of the year (13 November, 1888) that the total known mean number of paupers in London in 1887-8 was 108, 638 compared with 104, 431 the year before. In East London at the beginning of December 1888 official pauper numbers parish by parish were:-

Whitechapel	1, 503	(Indoor Poor)
St. George's	1, 164	(plus 333 Lunatics)
Poplar	3, 956	(2, 192 Indoor and 1, 764 Outdoor Poor)
Mile End	1, 842	(1, 340 Indoor and 502 Outdoor Poor) (4)

Thus the army of paupers, living precariously on the margin of existence was mobilised - a dangerous concentration which engendered a sense of *grand peur* - the great fear - as much among the respectable working class (i.e. the regularly employed) as among the more affluent middle class inhabitants of the West End. It could be argued that to portray the East End as merely a sink of pauperism is a gross distortion. This is true. Nevertheless, according to the cold, scientific evidence (his words!) of Charles Booth, based on the years 1887 - 1888, 35% of the total population of Tower Hamlets, i.e. 35% of 456, 877 souls, lived on or below the margin of subsistence. Another 20% wavered on the brink and it was this overwhelming proportion of poverty that provided the qualifying image of the area as a 'city of dreadful night'. It was perhaps the more impressionistic approach of a number of middleclass observers, who laboured earnestly in vineyard, that the horrifying picture was reinforced.

Margaret Harkness - socialist, feminist and novelist - was one of these. Tower Hamlets 1888 is brought to life for us in a series of brilliant vignettes portrayed in her remarkable novels (written significantly under the pseudonym John Law): *Out of Work* (published 1888) and *Captain Lobe: or In Darkest London* (1889). She certainly must have lodged in East London from her description of minor streets which were very familiar to me as a boy.

Her revelation of the degradation of women is striking. In the predatory climate engendered by casual 'laissez-faire' women appeared to be the most vulnerable. The affliction of labour in constant competition for work bore heaviest on East End women. Observing a group of girls applying for work in a local factory Harkness notes:

> A more miserable set of girls it would be difficult to find anywhere. They had only just escaped the Board School, but many of them had faces wise with wickedness, and eyes out of which all traces of maidenhood had vanished . . . "the universal adjective" fell from their lips as a term of endearment, whilst the foulest names were given to girls they did not like, also blows and kicks by way of emphasis. (5)

They were offered work at 5d. a day - 'enough to buy bread with'. As new recruits to the vast reservoir of the labourless, they had no alternative but to accept. 'It's no good to talk to the girls about combination, they're so down-trodden and mean-spirited. It's work, work, work with them from

Strike committee of the Matchmakers' Union, 1888. (From Annie Besant, *An Autobiography,* 1893).

the time they get up till they go to bed, except on Sundays'. At the lowest level it could be an unrewarding struggle for life. As a child the girl would be 'mother' to a large ever-increasing brood, should her own be out charing or 'taking to the laundry' to augment her man's meagre income (if not already unemployed!). She faced continual hazards; possibly an incestuous attack by father or brother, a constant beating by drunken parent, perhaps the only relief by taking to the streets. Innocence always short-lived - here the story of man's inhumanity to woman is most blatant. Harkness reiterated that the overwhelming pressure was the need to eat. 'Virtue is easy enough when a woman has plenty to eat, and a character to keep, but it's quite different when a girl is starving'. Yet mutual aid, the poor helping the poor in adversity, was never absent, it is *still* endemic in East End life.

> They're good to one another, they are. You'd be surprised to see what they'll do to help a girl that's ill, and how they'll put themselves about to buy crape when a girl is dead and has to be buried. (6)

The suffering of a lifetime could be compensated by the prospect of a 'correct burial '. For the poor, the ultimate horror went beyond dying. It was the threat of a pauper's grave which, in its cold anonymity, evidenced society's final rejection of their human identity. Harkness recalls an old woman who only accepts alms to ensure that her dying daughter 'met the Almighty like a lady. I've got a smashin' dress, in which she made her first communion, to lay her out in. I'd like to think as she'd stand before the Almighty in a pair of white silk stockings!'.

Like today, Tower Hamlets 1888 was faced with the problem of housing its citizens - but much more so. Far less East Enders then could claim a permanent roof over their heads. That year we were already an over-congested ghetto of displaced labour, when housing was at a premium. Hence the recent expansion of lodging, or temporary, doss houses which added an even less salubrious dimension to the image of East London.

The most horrific conditions were attributed to these catering for the casual poor. At their best they were free of criminals, prostitutes and vermin. The majority located in Spitalfields, St. George's and the Dock area were not. Harkness describes a typical cheap 'doss' priced at 4d. single for the night. A gloomy, decaying two-storeyed house is divided into 'dormitories' i.e. rooms 'full of small iron bedsteads covered with a grey blanket. They were arranged in two rows against the walls, and were so close together that it was impossible to move between them'. Downstairs in the main kitchen, whilst a gambling session is in full play:

> Men and women stood cooking their supper; emptying into tins and saucepans bits of meat, scraps of bread and cold potatoes they had begged, stolen or picked up during the day. Hungry children held plates for the savoury masses, and received blows and kicks from their parents when they came too near the fire, or interfered with the cooking arrangements.
>
> Crouching on the floor, gnawing a bone was a hungry man. His face was sodden with drink. He had swollen features, palsied hands and trembling feet. He had probably begun his life in this Christian country as a homeless boy in the streets and most likely close his days in the casual ward of some workhouse.
>
> Then
>
> "Rattle his bones over the stones
> He's only a pauper, who nobody owns!"
>
> The lodgers threw him scraps, and laughed to see him tearing his food to pieces, devouring it like a dog on the ground. (7)

This probably exemplified a more respectable establishment. Others served as a rendez-vous for the underground - thieves' kitchens where only the Salvationist slum lassie could enter without fear, and no policeman dare venture alone. Harkness notes one where 'A clergyman found his way in one Sunday evening. He was stripped, in order that the men might see if he was a detective. Finding all his linen marked with the same name and nothing in his pockets, they kicked him out naked, advising him never to come there again unless he was plentifully supplied with soup tickets!'.

For the homeless 'armies of despairs' - and they were in their hundreds here - there were two legal alternatives for survival - a charitable institution, like the Salvation Army, or the ultimate humiliation conferred on both genuine unemployed and pauper alike - the hated *Bastille* - the workhouse.

Here is an 1888 description of the Whitechapel workhouse, a model of its kind, recalling the clinical inhumanity of a labour camp. (8)

> Ringing the workhouse bell, they enter into a forecourt of neat flower beds, closely shaven grass plots, smooth paths, and trees which had been pruned until

their branches had reached the *legitimate* amount of foliage. The Bastille stretched further than the eye could see, and seemed a standing rebuke to its poverty-stricked surroundings, for it was clean . . . not a spot on it, not a stain, nothing to show a trace of sympathy with the misery and sin of the people who lived in this neighbourhood.

The Whitechapel Union is a model workhouse; that is to say it is the Poor Law Incarnate in stone and brickwork. The men are not allowed to smoke in it, not even when they are in their dotage; the young women never taste tea, and the old ones may not indulge in a cup during the long afternoons, only at half past six o'clock morning and night, when they receive a small hunch of bread with butter scraped over the surface, and a mug of meat beverage which is so dear to their hearts as well as their stomachs. The young people never go out, never see a visitor, and the old only get one holiday in the month. Then the aged paupers may be seen skipping like lambkins outside the doors of the Bastille, while they jabber to their friends and relatives. A little gruel morning and night, meat twice a week, that is the food of grown-up people, seasoned with hard work and prison discipline. Doubtless this Bastille offers no premium to idle and improvident habits, but what shall we say of the woman, or man, maimed by misfortune, who must come there or die in the street?

The master was proud to report that *his* House was run on Samuel Smiles' precepts of self help. 'We grind our own corn, we make our own clothes, boots and coffins; in fact meat, grain and clothes stuff are all that we take from the outside public'. This was borne out by a visit to the labour rooms, where the able-bodied worked on their dull, monotonous tasks without respite.

An evening at a Whitechapel "Gaff". (From James Greenwood *The Wilds of London*, 1876).

Tailors squatted on tables, bootmakers cobbled and patched, men plaited mats; each pauper had his task, and each knew that the morrow would bring the same work, that as surely as the sun rises and sets, his task would be the same tomorrow as it was at that moment. Six o'clock would set him free for tea, but after that he would be handed over to an instructor until bed-time.

The Whitechapel Union allows no man to remain idle from the time he gets up until he goes to bed again. A sodden look has settled on the faces of the older men and they apparently thought little of what they were doing . . . not a voice was to be heard in the workshops, the men did not whistle or sing; they looked like schoolboys in disgrace rather than free born English citizens.

It was no wonder that, after the freedom of the streets, for the chirpy East Ender this was Hell incarnate. Jack London was probably right when he later deduced that fear of the Bastille was one of the principal causes of suicide among the local working class. Even now the wounds it inflicted remain embedded in folk memory.

Under the comparative benevolence of the Welfare State there are still many old folk, raised in the shadow of the 'Union' who, though in need of extra cash to make ends meet, would rather *do without* than apply for supplementary benefit which, in their mythology, is equated with the hated parish relief.

Yet again it would be quite wrong to suggest that the East End was a sombre mass of unmitigated misery. The culture of poverty, gloomy and precarious as it was, was not devoid of relief, expressed in rituals of uninhibited joy and the devil with the consequences. What most social investigators failed to perceive was the resilience and humour which sustained *most* cockneys in adversity. Both Booths identified their fun-making with fecklessness. Litterateurs with more catholic perception caught glimpses of the reality. MacKay's monotony of human suffering in the Jago and Brick Lane is quickly transformed by the bright lights and gaiety of the Whitechapel Road - 'the greatest public pleasure-ground of the East End accessible to all'.

Large music halls with broad lobbies and high stories and galleries are located there, and small hidden penny gaffs, in which there is little to see on account of the tobacco smoke and little to hear on account of the noise. . . . . There is the medicine man with his wizard oil which cures all ills - no matter how taken, internally or externally - as well as the shooting stand, whose waving kerosene oil flames make the gaslights unnecessary. There we meet the powerful man and the mermaid, the cabinet of wax figures and the famous dog with the lion's claws - his forefeet have been split; all that is to be seen for a penny. (9)

Harkness etches in, in greater detail, a host of pleasures afforded by the ever popular 'gaff' and contributes a rare picture of the more deleterious gin-palace cum dance hall. Local murder and mayhem are always available to provide extra entertainment: 'a murder gives them (East Enders) two sensations . . . . Was the person poisoned or was his throat cut?' 'Did the corpse turn black or did it keep till the nails were put in the coffin?' (10) Violence, the norm, ever present above and beneath the surface ready to erupt. And when it did, *in extremis*, as in the 'Ripper' murders of that year, it created a folk legend which persists to this day.

THIS PROGRAMME IS SUBJECT TO ALTERATION

TELEPHONE 4470

Monday, May 21st, 1888,

and Every Evening.

Each Number will be shown from the right and left-hand side of Stage, corresponding with that in this Programme, indicating the Name and Particulars of Business.

No.	Item	No.	Item
1	OVERTURE by the Band. "L'ETOILE DU BRESIL," H. de. Mesquita. Conductor .. .. Mr. W. G. EATON	10	SAM REDFERN The Black Diamond
2	SISTERS LYSTER The Pleasing Duettists	11	Miss MINNIE MARIO Charming Burlesque Actress and Vocalist.
3	STEBB AND TREPP The Vienna Droles	12	SELECTION by the Band. "BOHEMIAN GIRL," Balfe.
4	Miss LAURA LYLE Serio Comic & Dancer	13	DOG AND MONKEY CIRCUS By Professor BUKER'S Performing and Highly-Trained Dogs and Monkey
5	THE LEOPOLD BROS. In Original Acrobatic, Aquatic, Pic-nic, Melange. New Scenery and Effects.	14	SWEENEY & RYLAND
6	O'CONNOR & BRADY Irish Character Comedians & Music Hall Butchers.	15	CHAS. GODFREY Favourite Vocalist & Actor
7	J. W. ROWLEY	16	THE ALBERT & EDMUNDS TROUPE In Laughable Sketch.
8	Miss ETHEL VICTOR The Paragon Favorite	17	CHARLES MURRAY Topical and Comic Vocalist
9	THE LEOPOLDS In Grotesque Musical Eccentric Act, "Music hath Charms."	18	GOD SAVE THE QUEEN

All BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS to be Addressed to the Manager, Mr. A. THIODON.

NOTICE.—The Grand Lounge, open every day from 10 in the morning to 12.30 midnight. Luncheons, Dinners, and Suppers. Chops and Steaks from the Grill, Welsh Rarebits, &c., from 12 till 11.30. Open on Sunday Evenings from 6 till 11. The fashionable Lounge East of Temple Bar.

Paragon Theatre of Varieties, Mile End Road. Programme for 21 May 1888.

Individuals had their hour of glory. Youth's a stuff will not endure, and the young were fully cognisant of its advantages however short-lived. Both the *East London Observer* and *Advertiser* constantly complain in their Editorials of the young mobsters jostling or accosting Sunday churchgoers (especially young women) during their weekly monkey parade between Grove Road and Bow Church.

For the poor lass of Mile End or Bethnal Green 'keeping company' with her man was a public display of a successful catch: the few heady days when, with pride, she could show off her prize, until the prison house of marriage and childbearing closed in. Even then there was temporary escape to the nearby Victoria Park on Sundays to be uplifted by the home-spun socialist or itinerant preacher, or the 'cockney' countryside, Wanstead Flats and Epping Forest, where Arthur Morrison records, on Whit Mondays:-

> You may howl at large . . the public houses are always with you; shows, shies, swings, merry-go-rounds, fried fish stalls, donkeys are packed closer than on Hampstead Heath; the ladies tormentors are larger, and their contents smell worse than at any other fair. Also, you may be drunk and disorderly without being locked up, - for the stations won't hold everybody, - and when all else has palled, you may set fire to the turf. (11)

At the corner of the street was the locus of freedom - the pub - offering nightly its ritual joy session - amidst the brash glitter and warm camaraderie of the bar; while, within walking distance, was the Paragon music hall, near the Charrington Brewery, the Pavilion Theatre by Vallance Road (its proprietor, Mr. Abrahams, was that very summer inviting local traders to *invest* in the new Queen's Music Hall, in Poplar!), where one could burst out in a euphoria of collective maudlin or the ribald chorus of a popular song. Always good for a belly laugh, the East End cockney was, as Pearl Binder rightly notes, 'adept at snatching wit from want'.

Much of this was lost on outsiders - reformers, 'explorers', philanthropists alike. Even the more astute like Jack London, Beatrice Webb, Charles Booth and the founder of the Salvation Army heard what they wanted to hear, saw what they wanted to see. The culture of poverty evolves its own responses towards the stranger. For the poorest of East Enders, daily engaged in the struggle for life, and razor-sharp in seizing on any advantage for survival, caught on to *their* 'game' and played along with it.

Notes

1 *Times* 13 July 1887.

2 John Law *Out of Work* (1888) p. 63-4.

3 J.H. Mackay *The Anarchists* (Boston 1891) p. 152.

4 *East London Advertiser* 1 December 1888.

5 John Law *Captain Lobe: or In Darkest London* (1889) p. 103 - 4.

6 *Ibid* p. 108.

7 John Law *Out of Work* (1888) p. 110 - 1.

8 John Law *Captain Lobe* (1889) p. 196 - 7.

9 J.H. Mackay *The Anarchists* (Boston 1891) p. 171 - 2.

10 John Law *Captain Lobe* (1889) p. 10.

11 Arthur Morrison 'Lizerunt' in *National Observer* 22 July 1893. Reprinted in *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894).

MEMORIES OF MILE END

C.A. Brown (1887-1978)

In an attempt to transform my memories of the last years of the 19th and the early years of the 20th century, I should begin with the very first episode in my not very eventful life.

I was born in 1887 in White Horse Lane, Stepney, I started school in 1892 at Trafalgar Square School, and remained there until 1901 when I was 14. When I first began to read, I practised by reading the white enamel letters on the window of our shop (my father was in business as the local builder and decorator). Those letters were "Welsbach Incandescent Gas Light" a "modern" invention - an asbestos sheath suspended over the gas jet; it gave a wonderful white light, a blessing after those awful "fish-tail" burners.

A sight not unusual in those days was a lone policeman pushing a stretcher (mounted on wheels) with its burden just a drunk, generally a man, but sometimes a woman. They were securely strapped down and were taken away to Arbour Square Police Station, followed by the usual rabble of urchins many bare-footed, and all of them ill-clad. Yes, drunkeness was unfortunately the rule, rather than the exception. There was very little work done especially on Mondays. Beer was fourpence a pot (quart) and that was the usual order, a pot consumed in the "four-ale bar", with sawdust floors and the ghastly spittoon. The ferocious "pot man" at the behest of his boss would pitch the argumentative drunk out into the road. The public houses were shut only for about five hours in the night.

At the corner of White Horse Lane and Mile End Road stood the Lycett Chapel, a rather large building afterwards used as a warehouse and demolished in 1971. Around 1894 the interior was completely gutted by fire but the walls were left standing. We were all evacuated to neighbouring houses on the opposite side of the road, but not before I was shocked and terrified when the flames burst through the tall stained glass windows. Our shop was only two doors away, and the firemen had to play their hoses on to our carpenter's shop and the stack of timber, to prevent the spread of the conflagration. Also adjoining the Chapel was Spills & Co., makers of tarpaulins and oilskins, and other highly combustible goods which was another hazard for the firemen.

The fire brigade was "modern" having a steam pump and brass funnel, and drawn by a pair of good class horses provided by Charles Webster of Whitechapel, a famous firm. There were no warning bells except the stentorian voices of the firemen themselves; the engine swaying from side to side and the galloping horses were a wonderful sight. Fires were frequent; Durells timber yard, a vast area by the Regent's Canal, was gutted completely, twice in my boyhood.

Mile End Road, June 1899. Stepney Green station now stands on the site of the weather-boarded building.

The escape ladder had to be pushed along in the upright position; there was no conveyance as is the case today. It was a precarious operation, the long heavy ladder, swaying from side to side, and almost beyond the capacity of the one fireman, but he had plenty of volunteers in the shape of any man passing by, and crowds of kids, myself included.

As for the buses, the London General Omnibus Co. used a pair of horses and the driver was perched up on the "dickey", high up, well wrapped up and strapped in. The bus was open topped, and the seats were provided with oil skin aprons for wet weather, but they were usually on the floor being walked on. They started from the "Royal Hotel" at the corner of Burdett Road and ran to Shepherds Bush in West London. The bus stables (not garages as now) were in Bow Common Lane. There were also several "pirate" buses, as any two men could hire one and ply where they liked. It was no uncommon thing that, having taken our fares, we could be politely told "all off" because, say we were proceeding westward, the conductor spotted a bus load of passengers anxious to travel east, and that was that. We had no claim, indeed so far as my memory goes we had no tickets either, but that playful era did not last long.

The mail coach too, was an institution familiar to us all. It left St. Martins Le Grand, the main Post Office in London, en route for Colchester, passing

without fail at exactly 10 o'clock p.m. the top of White Horse Lane; we could see the sorting going on. The driver perched up on high, and the man blowing a fanfare. One could set one's watch by this, as it never failed 10 o'clock precisely. Four spanking horses and a great pace too.

A long line of hay carts from all over Essex concentrated on, and constituted the Whitechapel Hay Market. They stood in parallel lines from Whitechapel Church to Gardiner's Corner, and when the homeward trek was started the drivers were usually asleep in the wagons and horses quite unguided took them safely home.

The trams (horse drawn) started from Stratford and ran to Aldgate. There was something comfortable and cosy about those old "juggernauts"; there was no hurry, if you were in a hurry, you just got off and walked. The driver sat on a stool enveloped in oil skins or rugs to suit the current weather. In his mouth a horn whistle was continually in use as the horse and carts found the going easier on the "lines". When a cart broke down it certainly caused pandemonium. The tram had to be got off the line and around the wreck; a rare job it was too, the tram wheels being so small and having to run over cobbles. Usually horses, driver and conductor, and a score of idlers pushed and shoved and swore, that was part of life and accepted; no one asked for a bonus or payment, but it was not unknown for the odd tot or two to be distributed to the volunteers, anonymously.

After the overhead wire, and before the middle or conductor system, a method was adopted known as "studs". They were set about two yards apart between the rails, and the tram picked up sufficient current to get it to the next one. Unfortunately, the iron horse shoes of the horse also picked up the current with disasterous results. It was a common sight to see great big horses performing a sort of tango or "two step", so that was that, out went the "studs".

At the tram terminus at Stratford Church, and of course the stables, there was a pub called the "King of Prussia". When the 1914 War broke out, there was a great outcry about this obnoxious name, and it had to be altered to "King Edward VII", and it still is.

Around 1898 a start was made on the new extension of the District Railway from Whitechapel to Bow Road, and the whole job was done by Navvy with pick and shovel - no bulldozers then. It was a sight to see - long line of wagons of the "Tumbril" type, waiting to be loaded and away to the tip - "Beer and Brawn" then.

Between Mile End Gate and the famous music hall known as the "Paragon" there was the area known as "The Waste". On here was an open market, with itinerant traders of all types, - baked chestnut barrow, hot baked potatoes, the toffee maker, the old clothes man, the negro sword swallower, "jellied eels", cheap jack crockery, the whole lot was just one confusion, illuminated at night by countless flaring "Naphtha" lamps which frequently

conked out, and released a cloud of paraffin vapour over all and sundry. In one spot were rolls of sheet lead belonging to the builders merchant shop. I often wonder how long sheet lead would lay safe without protection on that spot today. The same stretch of pavement contained also the ancient almshouses of Trinity House, the Great Assembly Hall, and the ancient weatherboarded hostelry "The Vine Tavern", the only pub in the Mile End Road, which was literally true, - it was actually in the road, isolated and alone. It disappeared just prior to the Sidney Street Battle.

I was one of the crowd who saw this famous fiasco. I remember the soldiers lying prone in the roadway, taking pot-shots,the battery of artillery in the road outside Smiths Paint Factory on the corner, and Winston Churchill bobbing in and out of that gateway. The guns (artillery) were silver unlimbered. Sidney Street was the aftermath of murder in Houndsditch. A policeman had heard a strange hissing noise on the premises of a jeweller: it turned out to be the first acetylene torch used in crime. This constable and several others were shot dead, and the miscreants took refuge in the block of flats in Sidney Street.

I saw the pageantry and procession of the visit of Queen Victoria to the People's Palace, we had a fine view of this cavalcade from the front windows of our house, that was in 1897. It was a wonderful institution, then a place of learning and culture, a beautiful winter garden, and yet, inconceivable as it may sound, it housed a circus, a huge marquee on the space in front of that majestic building. I have a vivid picture in my mind of that spectacle. A lady dressed in immaculate male evening suit, complete with top hat and a silver cane, dancing on the back of a lovely piebald horse, as it galloped round and round that magic circle. Also a large swimming bath where incidentally we kids were taught to swim from school. Our instructor used to begin the lesson with the ominous words - you will swim or else, and we did.

Mr. Brennan, a great athlete and a real gentleman, was in charge of the famous gymnasium. I was a pupil in his class (1904),and had the idea to learn boxing. One instructor was Dick Burge the notorious boxer and owner of the Blackfriars Ring, the acme of sporting clubs at that time. We were lined up and fitted with boxing gloves, and one at a time faced Dick Burge who not only looked like, but could punch like a bull. I remember standing in front of him and adopting the usual pugalistic stance and he suggested I try a left hook. I don't know what happened to the left hook but Dick Burge with the gentleness of a hospital nurse was giving me a glass of water, and telling me I was not at all bad, the understatement of all time.

An annual event which caused great excitment was the Fairlop Boat. A fully rigged fishing-smack, was mounted on a lorry, and pulled by four horses. The real crew were wearing their oilskins, water boots and a red woollen hat with a bobble on the top and a tassle down the back. This "cruised" from Shadwell to the Fairlop pub and back, and collections were made for charity and probably for the odd barrel or two for the express use of the crew who, at the end of the "voyage" showed traces of having "spliced the main brace".

The Vine Tavern, on Mile End Waste near the corner of Cambridge Heath Road. It was demolished in 1903.

In the '90's Sir Thomas Lipton's *Shamrock*, and the American *Columbia* competed for the America Cup, in the famous yacht race. This took place annually for four or five years, but *Shamrock* never won it at all. The Paragon music hall had an arrangement outside, with a green light for *Shamrock* and red for *Columbia*, and as the race progressed the lights were moved forward or back according to their position. Messages from the race were registered by ocean telegraph as wireless was not known or certainly was not in operation. And the people, kids as well, would cheer when the green was ahead, and moan when vice versa.

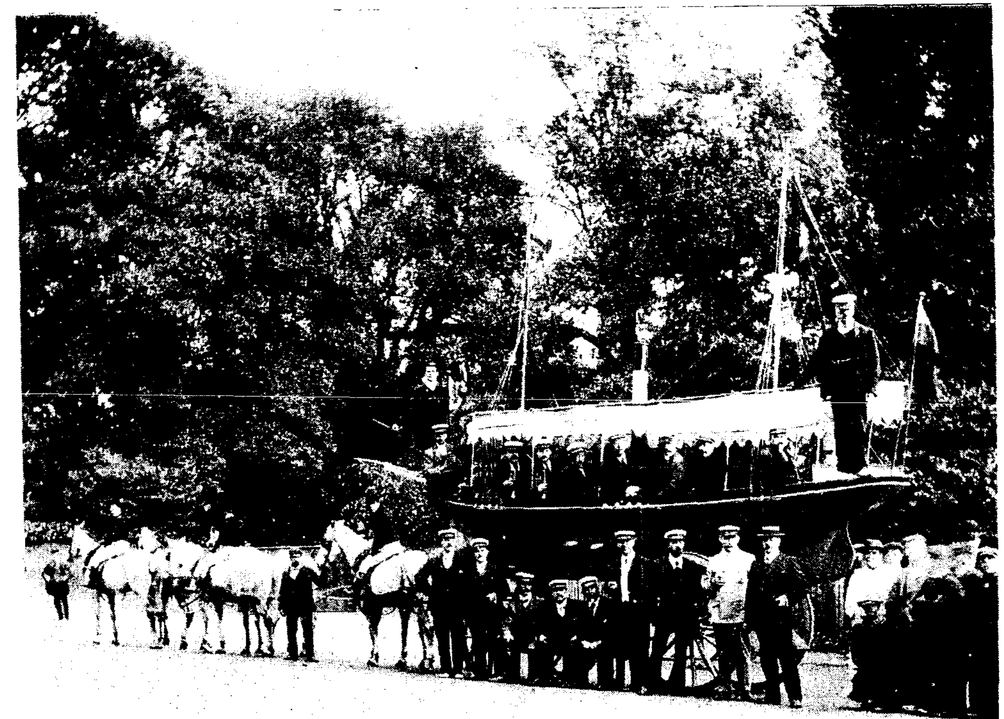
The Pavilion Theatre in the Whitechapel Road staged some great drama and plays. The principal resident artists were Ashley Page and Marion Denvel, I recall "Jack Tar" a wonderful play about the Navy, and of course the immortal "Tommy Atkins". The transformation scenes of the pantomimes were out of this world. The aroma of cigar smoke, and oranges have never failed to take me back to my boyhood and Xmas pantomimes. Then there was "The Wonderland" in the Whitechapel Road the home of a great music hall artist, Bessie Wentworth, and later the venue of boxing (shades of Pedler Palmer and "Kid" Berg).

We were blessed with indulgent parents especially our Dad, who, although engrossed in his rapidly expanding business, saw to it that we were in on

everything that was going forward. We were in the first traffic (in the family "Waggonette") that went through the new Blackwall Tunnel, when it was opened in 1897, and in the first train that ran from Bow Road to Whitechapel, on the new extension of the District Railway at the turn of the century.

Early in 1901 my father's business was expanded, and we moved round into Mile End Road, into premises and space with six cottages, carpenter's shop and extensive stables and stores. I left school in December of that year, and after a month's freedom started work at eight bob a week. Store Keeper, runner of errands, stable boy, clerk, painter - indeed just a "dogs-body" in Dad's business, but for all this I still contrived to keep pigeons, and a goat and an air gun and a dog. The old Dad was a tolerant employer, but I certainly earned my eight bob a week - or did I? Reckon I earned it if only for getting up to let the men in at 6.30 in the mornings. In 1904, I was articled to a very large joinery works to extend my training, I already had a fair grip of the carpenters job in our own joiners shop under the watchful eye, and the vitriolic tongue of my grand-father - a joiner of the old school, and anyway, I was a full blown joiner by 1911.

The 'Fairlop Boat' at Barkingside, Ilford in 1900.



"HOPPING DOWN IN KENT"

Ellen Kemp

For many East-Enders hop-picking was, until mechanisation, a traditional September break away from the town. Originally the work provided on the farms was as arduous as any of the picker's usual jobs; but in healthier and more enjoyable surroundings, it provided a form of holiday and added variety to their hard working lives. Here Mrs Kemp, a docker's daughter from Wapping, recalls her visits to Whitbread's Bell Farm in Paddock Wood around 1930, when she was a young girl.

When we go down hopping,
Hopping down in Kent . . . . .

It's the evening before departure, everyone is in early, the only time no one is allowed out until after tea. Everyone has their copper alight - it is the one night of the year when everyone has a bath, and hair washed in soft soap. We go to bed breathless with excitement thinking but not daring to say how silly to send us to bed when everyone knows you won't go asleep.

So it is a bit of shock when in the pitch dark a light comes on and a hand roughly shakes you 'Get up it's late, you'll miss the train'. We stumble out of bed, grope for our clothes, usually ending up with everything on back to front or upside down. Mum got steaming hot mugs of cocoa ready and thick slices of bread, after which a wet flannel is wiped across our faces as we stand in line, heads drooping with sleep on the one in front's shoulder.

It is 3 am in the morning and at 4 am we troop out in the square where the men have placed our tea chests just outside the flat; we sit on our tea chests, cold and miserable, there is no excitement now. The men troop off to collect the barrows from the market which had been ordered previously. The horse and carts turn up amid jeers from us poor ones which I must admit come from jealousy.

They load up our barrows, loaded with the complete essentials the family needs for the next three weeks, pots, pans, candles, bedding, buckets, brooms, plates, mugs, cutlery and clothing, for when we arrive at the farm we are provided with the bare hut. The smallest of the family is perched dangerously on the top. With the rest helping to push the barrow, we set off to London Bridge Station.

Dad and brothers who are at work see us off at the station and they come down to us hopping at weekends. At the station we get into the mile-long queue. All the older ones have been provided with coats, hand-me-downs from the dads and uncles; under the coat goes a small brother or sister to dodge paying the half-fare, the little ones being threatened with thick ears etc. if they let out one peep. then we all shuffle slowly forward. Getting past the guard is easy, there is such a crush and yelling and swearing going on - he just stands back and lets them get on with it.

It's the guard on the train we have to watch but we have that organized as well. The little ones are bundled on top of the luggage racks and under the

Hop picking at Paddock Wood, September 1932.

seats covered with every kind of clothing imaginable, that is, when my sister who is posted permanently out in the corridor throughout the whole journey, gives us the word the guard is on his rounds. With such shrill good-byes to our men folk we set off, now, we are fully awake. The yells of wonder echo throughout the train when we see our first field or cow with cries of 'Let's see, Let's see' from the little ones who can't see out of the window.

We arrive at our destination amid the cheers and yelling of the mothers, each trying in vain to keep hers together grabbing the eldest back to help unload their belongings on to the platform. Gradually we all are miraculously together outside the station where stood a long row of horses and carts. We got on our allotted cart and set off for the field that was surrounded by lines of hop huts and cook houses. Each hut on our field had an upstairs as well, two bare rooms, one down and the other reached by a ladder. The cook house was an open space surrounded by three walls, a ditch was dug along the far side with hooks hanging above; on these we put our kettle, so it was perched above the ditch in which we lit our fires. All our pots had to have handles to be able to put the pots on the hooks to cook our dinners which of course were always stews, meat puddings etc. and always a hock of bacon and pease pudding for Sunday followed by Spotted Dog.

Arriving at the hop huts, first we all had to rush out and get as many bundles of faggots as we could carry; these were our beds and fuel for the fires. On arrival there were huge stacks of these but near the finish of hopping they got very scarce, then we had to use for cooking what was our beds at the start of hopping. When the faggots were laid in rows and on top of each other they took up most of the hut, just leaving a narrow gap as you came in the door; on top of the faggots we had mattress covers stuffed with straw and pillow cases, and we all slept top and bottom. When dads, brothers, uncles came, and especially when they fetched their friends as well, it was quite usual at weekends to sleep ten at each end of the bed, upstairs as well as down. God help the person who wanted to get up in the night.

Funny thing we could never make out why everyone's Mum and Dad went out for a walk before turning in. It always puzzled us kids as they never did at home.

The first day was spent in visiting each other's huts to see the finery. The bedside table was an upturned tea chest covered with a tablecloth for the clock and candle. A bit of mat for the side of the bed completed the furnishing - it did not matter if you had no mats at home, the same mat was saved year after year. The other tea chests were put in the cook house upturned. They were our table and chairs for dinner, but father's stool when he came week-ends and mother's all the week was a wooden chair with no back and legs cut down; it went to and fro with us every day to the hop-field.

Every morning at 6 am a man came around in a horse and cart ringing a big bell shouting 'All out - All out' and throwing a bundle of faggots outside each hut. It was the eldest's job to get out fast to collect the bundle, otherwise it could disappear and the luckless one would get a wallop. If we had to keep using our emergency supply we would be sleeping on floor boards.

We all troop out to the cook house for a wipe with the face flannel, a mug of tea and a slice of bread. Now we have finished our morning ablutions and breakfasted, we start loading up the pram, primus stove, bread, marge, tea, sugar, milk, mugs, can of water and the baby lost somewhere among these. They always start on the field furthest away; sometimes we had a three-mile walk, but we loved it - hopping in and out of ditches, leaning on farm gates, daring the bulls to chase us, until one fell over and from the screams you would think the bull had really got her; nine times out of ten they were cows, but we did not know the difference.

Arriving at the hop-field - if you did not turn out, the farmer put you off the farm bag and baggage - we were given our alloted bin which had a number on, and you kept to the one bin all the time. A man came round during the day at different intervals to measure the hops; and the amount was put into a book containing your name and bin number. The larger families had two bins. They were all placed in a line across the top of the field and when the whistle blew, you started to pull the bines down. You must pick hops clean, so it was the young one's job to get into the bin and throw away any stray leaves. Those first lot of hops in the morning would drown us with cold wet dew as the bines were pulled down.

Round a camp fire at Paddock Wood, 1935.

It was still barely daylight, and your fingers would be painful and blue with cold. Tempers frayed, because the wet dew made the hops so heavy, they would sink down into the basket, which held exactly one bushel. Everyone tried to get on the right side of the measurer to get a good measure, but sometimes slanging matches arose when it was thought he was pressing the hops down too hard in the basket.

Six bushels for one shilling was a lot of hard graft. When you were sent to a field, where the hops were tiny like marbles, then it would be everyone out on strike. A meeting was called with the farmer, who was just like a headmaster at school, you only saw him when there was trouble and when he paid wages. After much bickering, we always won, because he knew we only came out on strike when we had good reason; so for the specified field, the price would be brought down to five bushels a shilling. In the years I went hop-picking the prices never differed.

I never knew so many children to get so much slapping as we got down hopping, because we wanted to run off and play - but we all had to stay and help. If you were too small to stand, you got some in your lap sitting on the wet which you put into a bucket. The one who did the most got an extra slice of bread. And yet not one would miss hopping for the world. We breathed and lived for hopping all the year round, we loved it.

You all stopped only when the whistle blew for breaks, lunch etc. If you worked in the morning, in the afternoon the youngest could go and play. This was the time we liked. A man would come round with a big tray suspended by a strap around his neck selling sweets, then up would go the cry 'The Lolly man's here! Oh Mum, go on Mum!' jumping up and down in front of the bins. 'Go on Mum I'll pick lots of hops'. When it was clear we were not getting any, our 'Oh go on Mum' would turn to screams and wailing until we got a box around the ears. Then when the Lolly man had gone and all hope was lost, we would tear off to find some kid that was lucky, to try and cadge a lick from their lollipop.

Then the ice-cream man would arrive and the whole process would start all over again. The gypsies would arrive with their lavender and clothes pegs. The Indian ringing his bell with candy floss. The muffin man in his top hat with his bell ringing. The butcher yelling from his lorry at the top of the field, who was joined by the baker, milkman and the grocery cart. All the kids tearing from one to the other like lunatics in case they could pinch something.

As the day wore on someone would start singing and in no time at all everyone joined in, songs such as 'When I leave the World Behind', 'Bird in a Gilded Cage'. The babies were by now dropping off to sleep. Then at 4.30 pm the whistle would blow, with the yell echoing all around the hop-field 'Pull no more bines'. You must not leave a bine half picked so you finish what you have and you are done for the day. Some women just before the end would pull down an extra bine which her neighbour would strongly object to and sometimes to our delight a fight would break out. Competition was very fierce, you would think that some families gave birth to children just to pick hops. Jealousy of a person that picked more hops than you would lead to such remarks as 'Look at that greedy cow - hasn't she got enough kids! Never leaves her old man alone that one!'

But mostly in the field there was singing and laughter. 'Got the bridal suite ready Kate? - the old man'll be here tonight'. 'Yes, Liz the curtains are up and me drawers are down!' The curtains were a must at hop-picking, you were looked down on if you did not put curtains up along the hut to screen the beds. The remarks 'Fancy that Mrs So and So got no curtains.' 'She hasn't?' 'Keep away from her then!' It was a sign of prestige; it did not matter if you hadn't a coat but your best curtains were always draped around the bed hung with string and tied to nails.

We would all start the trek back to the hop-huts, Mum pushing the pram, the eldest helping the toddlers, all worn out after a long day. Mum would get the fire lit, get a stew on to boil, heat up kettles of water, and wash us all down standing stark naked in the cook house. Then she would go in and make the beds. By then dinner was ready; after we had finished the youngest was put straight to bed and the older ones would go off to play.

After the washing up was done, groups of women would gather together in someone's cook house to put their feet up and have a yarn about the Good Old Days or their old man as they called their husbands and have a good cup of tea, all taking turns to provide the milk, tea, sugar. At 8.30 pm all the children were called into bed and by 9.30 nothing would be seen except little flickers of dying out fires glimmering in the moonlight.

Everyone came to life on Friday night, for that was the time when the dads and big brothers were coming. The whole field took on a gay and happy atmosphere. Dads who might knock their wives and children about all the year were not the monsters they were at home, but loving dads whose kids could do no wrong, whose wives were their sweethearts, and who could always be touched for a halfpenny. The older ones were allowed to take a younger one to the station to meet Dad after dinner. There were squeals of delight with a big mad rush when we spotted him. We all got a big hug which we never got at home and then we all had turns riding on Dad's shoulders all the way back to the hop-huts. Mum would be there ready with Dad's and my big brother's dinner, after which we all trooped off to the Bell Inn. Us children would play out in the car park. As we never saw cars in those days, we called it the square. Just before closing Dad would buy each of us a great big halfpenny biscuit, another thing we never got at home.

Every Saturday morning all the men came with us to the hop-field so we would get a lot of hops picked that morning. Mum stayed at the hop-hut with the younger children to get a big meat pudding ready which we had when the pub closed. Hop-picking finished at 12 am on Saturday for the week-end. Then the women would meet the men at the pub while all of us kids played outside.

Sunday dinnertime was the best time when coaches came from all over the country on a day's outing. We would yell out 'Throw out your Mouldies', and out the windows they would throw pennies and halfpennies. Us kids would emerge from the scramble with cut lips and black eyes, but clutching our pennies which we always gave to Mother, who shared them among all of us. Maybe a bag of sweets were given to us or if we did well a halfpenny each.

My sister who looks as though butter would not melt in her mouth always stayed in the background, never saying very much. One day she squeezed two big tears in her eyes, took off her coat and hid it under a bench, (there was a very cold wind blowing at the time) crept into the coach looking at the people all woe-be-gone with big tears in her eyes shivering in her thin cotton dress, until one lady said 'Oh look at that poor little mite'. So everyone in the coach had a private collection for her and she came out grinning all over her face with eight shillings and two pence. She gave it all to Mum, who was so overcome (it was as much as she got off Dad every week if she was lucky), she forgot to slap her but hugged her instead. From then on my sister started big business every Sunday down hopping. She never failed, but it was kept strictly in the family in case any other kids cashed in.

We had one lady in a hut near to us, who was not what we called 'one of us'. She came from another part of Kent; she would not allow her children to play with us and always went to the hop field dressed in better clothes than our Mums had for Sunday best, weddings and funerals, and she always wore a

big flowered hat. We all nick-named her the Duchess and when she walked past any of the other women they would sweep off their man's cap with a long hat pin in and give her an exaggerated low curtsy. She was deeply resented but no one could pick a row with her because she would not answer back and could look right through a person as though she did not exist. We could not pick on her children as they were too tiny.

We had a narrow stream running along the back of our hut, a thick hedge ran along the side of it and we made an opening in the hedge near the toilets where we could get through to the other field by placing a plank across the narrow stream. One day the children took the plank away and threw bundles of straw on the water and looking at it you just thought it was part of the field. Along came the Duchess to the toilet and one little child called to her 'Don't go in there Missus, there's a mess all over the floor'. 'There's some lavatories in that field there, that's all lovely, and clean'.

The rest of us were hiding behind the hut then we all rushed out laughing as the poor woman screamed, she was standing in the stream with water up to her knees and her lovely flowered hat all knocked askew over part of her face. When she saw us all killing ourselves laughing the language that came forth was worse than our fathers';women started to gather round at all the commotion and they joined in too. One woman went up to her 'Come on ducks, give us yer hand', then another shouted 'I've got a lovely fire going in my cook house, come and dry yourself out'. In just that minute the Duchess was one of us and she was all right after that. Always said it was the kids, bless 'em, that brought her down to earth.

Years later my aunt told us that the lady had lost her husband in the Great War. A friend of his came to see her on off after the war was over. Then one time feeling very lonely she was crying when this chap arrived on a visit; he tried to comfort her and they got carried away. She ended up having twins and never laid eyes on him since as he was happily married. She suffered very badly at the hands of her neighbours, in fact she had to move to a part of Kent where she was unknown. Now her money was running out and all she had was the clothes on her back; she was desperate - that is why she came hop-picking. Her attitude to us was because she was afraid of giving herself away that her children had no father. She was quite right, we do tend to be very nosey about strangers.

We never did come back from hopping with much money, after all it was a holiday as well. You were paid when the season finished but every Saturday there was a line of women waiting at the farm house to get what we called a sub from the farmer. There was always a big celebration at the Bell Inn over the week-end when the men folk arrived.

The last weekend of hopping we lit a bonfire from all the faggots that people had left over. All the men would whip around and buy crates of beer, then we would all be dancing and singing on the common until the early hours of the morning. Hop-picking was over for another year. 'Roll on next year'.

BOOK REVIEWS

Medieval London Suburbs : Dr. Kevin Mc Donnell (Phillimore, 1978,£4.95)

The Archaeology of Tower Hamlets : Graham Black (Inner London Archaeological Unit, 1977, 35p. Obtainable from Tower Hamlets Libraries).

The history of East London has, for a century or more, held the fascination of local historians as more evidence of its past has gradually come to light. Indeed there is no shortage of literature on the subject generally. There are, however, a number of gaps in our knowledge of its early history which remain unfilled. Dr. McDonnell has, by considerable research and painstaking effort, succeeded in closing some of these gaps and narrowing others.

For example, the author has given considerable time and space to the development of the industries in the Lea Valley with new information to show how important the Lea was in the early growth of London itself

To gather together so much information (and the notes are extensive) necessarily involves a tendency for the presentation to be somewhat piecemeal, though the author has contrived to weld together his material with a remarkable degree of success. The book gives us a good insight into the location and employment of labour, but something perhaps on the markets and diversionary activities in the later Middle Ages might have been a welcome inclusion.

The differences between the development of the East and West London suburbs are considerable, as the book mentions, and some might consider the title to be rather misleading as only East London is covered. The number of printing errors gives the impression that the production was somewhat hurried, which is unfortunate in a work of this high standard.

However, I would not be without this book. It is a scholarly work full of carefully selected information which will be invaluable not only to the student of mediaeval local history but to all who have acquired an interest by living or working in this interesting and exciting part of London.

Graham Black has written an absorbing little booklet which makes no claim to scholarship, having been designed for the man in the street. He has managed to move from the prehistoric era to the 16th century in fourteen pages with sufficient success to maintain the interest of the reader.

The author is an archaeologist and one might have hoped that, in keeping with its title, this aspect of the history of Tower Hamlets would have predominated throughout. In the latter part of the booklet, however, which deals with the post-Saxon period, the presentation is more that of a historian with a framework on which much has already been written.

However, this inexpensive little booklet should make considerable appeal to local people, both young and old, and awaken interest in this fascinating Borough.

A.H. French

The Green: a history of the heart of Bethnal Green and the legend of the Blind Beggar: A. J. Robinson & D. H. B. Chesshyre (Tower Hamlets Libraries, £1).

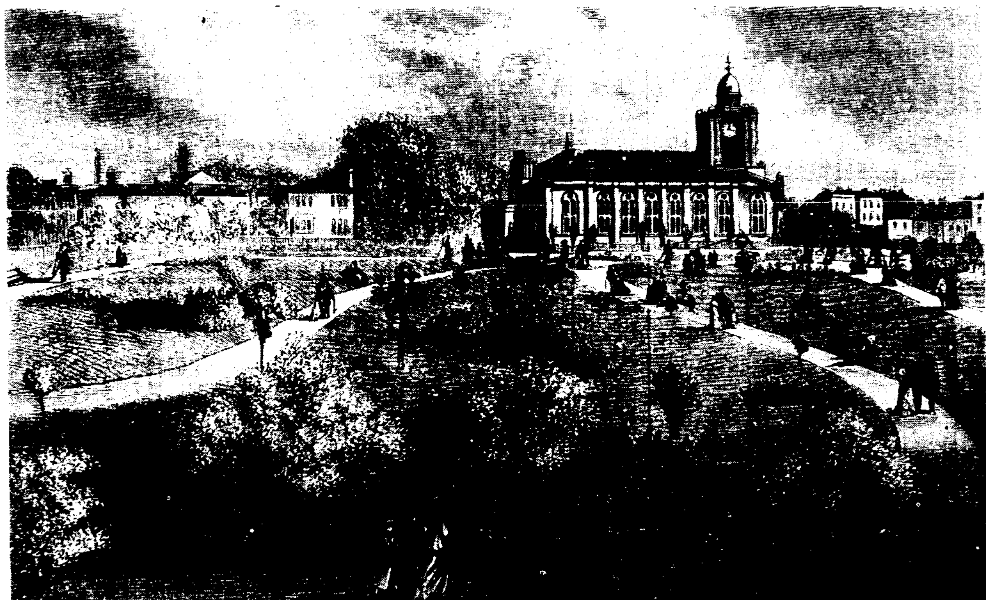
'The Green' in the title refers to Bethnal Green, and the authors deal mainly with the part of the parish that surrounds the Green itself. Though only 40 large-size pages in length, the book contains an interesting text, as well as over 30 illustrations, including prints, photographs, maps and documents, and for its price is probably the best publishing bargain to appear in 1978.

The first part of the book deals with the history of the Green from its origin as a rural hamlet down to the present. Of particular interest are the affairs of the Trustees of the Poor's Land during the last 300 years. It was these trustees who ensured that the Green would not be developed for housing, and a public building like St. John's Church was only accepted with reluctance. How this, and other buildings on and surrounding the Green came into existence is told in a manner that throws light on how the area developed into a metropolitan suburb.

The second part looks at the various versions of the legend of the Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green, and tries to get to any possible truth that might underlie them. The authors favour the 15th century as the most likely setting for the story, thus shedding the romantic associations with Henry de Montfort. A pity, as I liked the associations, but worse is to come. As someone who, for more than ten years, has presented Bessie as a model of virtue to East London schoolchildren, how am I to cope with the likelihood 'that Bessie was a 15th century prostitute' (p.36). Is there nothing left to believe in?

Colm Kerrigan

St. John's Church, Bethnal Green and Bethnal Green Gardens. (From *The Pictorial World* 12 June 1875).



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Henderson, Nigel	Photographs of Bethnal Green 1949 - 1952. Nottingham: Midland Group, 1978.
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Moss, Harry and Merion, Carolyn	Down and around Leman Street. Tower Hamlets Arts Committee Cheviot House, Commercial Road, E.1.) 1977. (History Trail)
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E.B. Nurse
A.J. Wait