

# Hackney History

VOLUME NINE

*digging Hoxton  
poor law  
a working men's club  
fakes and furniture  
war savings*

MCM

# HackneyHistory

## *In this issue -*

- the archaeology of medieval Hoxton
- the early years of a working men's club
- workhouse administration a century ago
- Hoxton furniture and Hoxton fakery
- an enterprising Homerton family between the wars
- how the people of Stoke Newington bought a Lancaster bomber

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# HACKNEY *History*

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## *volume nine*

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*The front cover is based on the design by William McMillan R.A.  
for the 'Wings for Victory' presentation trophy and aircraft log books  
(see pages 46-47)*

## UNDER HOXTON: EXCAVATIONS AT NUTTALL STREET

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*Kieron Tyler*

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### *Introduction*

Hoxton is old. But how old? According to studies by place-name experts the word Hoxton has a Saxon origin. But hardly anything in modern Hoxton suggests great antiquity. The earliest standing buildings in the area are 237 Hoxton Street and 32 Hoxton Square, both dating from the early 18th century.

The place name Hoxton appears in the Domesday book of 1086. So, clearly, there was some sort of settlement in the area, with cultural activity centred around agriculture, from at least the 11th century. Even though archaeology is the only way that the nature of medieval day-to-day activities could be defined, fieldwork in the area has - with two exceptions - uncovered nothing ancient.

The most important of these exceptions is the site of St Leonard's Hospital, along Nuttall Street, where physical remains dating from the 13th to 15th centuries were recorded. This article describes the finds at the site, and sets them in the context of Hoxton's history.

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*For technical expressions used in this article, please refer to the glossary on page 9.*

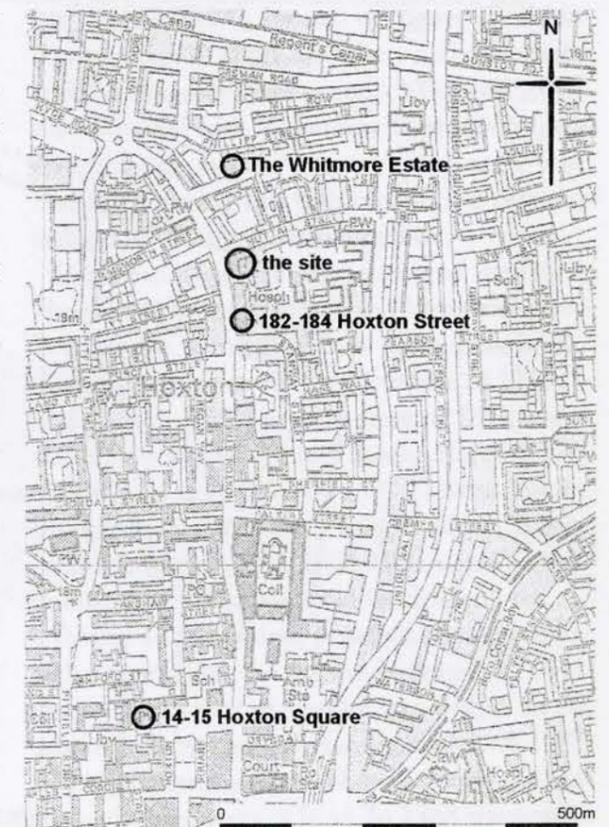


Figure 1: location of Hoxton excavation sites

**Circumstances of the excavation**

In April 1993 the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) undertook a field evaluation at St Leonard's Hospital, Nuttall Street, Hackney (figure 1). The work was supervised by Nicholas J. Elsdén. The Ordnance Survey National Grid Reference for the site is 533289 183426 and the site code was SLH93. The records from the fieldwork are held by the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre under this code, and may be consulted by appointment.

The site was within an Archaeological Priority Area as defined by the local planning authority, Hackney borough council. It centred around the medieval settlement at Hoxton, known to exist from the historic record but elusive in terms of any material, physical evidence. A planning application had been approved for the demolition of redundant buildings at the north-west corner of the site, and their replacement with a nursing home, health-care facilities and housing association accommodation. The planning

permission included a condition which required an archaeological investigation of the site prior to development. The fieldwork was funded by the City and Hackney Health Authority.

The evaluation produced evidence for occupation dated to the late 12th to 13th centuries. These were the first-ever physical remains found for medieval Hoxton, so excavation (also supervised by Elsdén) followed the evaluation, between 22 November and 13 December 1993. The trenches are located on figure 2. The remains were threatened with disturbance or destruction by works associated with the proposed redevelopment.

**Archaeological and historical background**

The first mention of Hoxton occurs in the Domesday book of 1086, where Hochestone is described as a rural area, having 'land for three ploughs and there are seven villagers who hold this land, 16 cottagers. This manor lay and lies in...the church of St Paul'.<sup>1</sup> It is generally believed

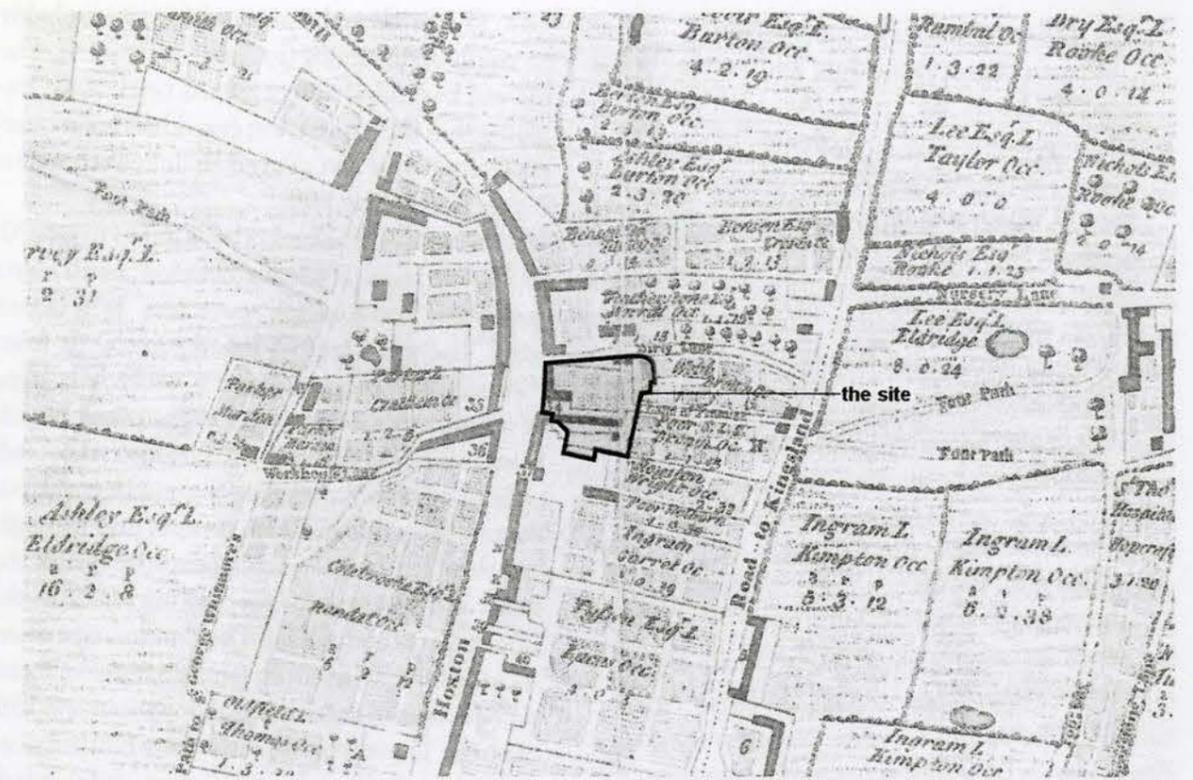


Figure 3: detail from Chassereau's map of Shoreditch, 1745, highlighting the excavation site

that the name Hoxton has a Saxon origin, deriving from tun (an enclosure, village or manor) and a person's name, perhaps Hocg.<sup>2</sup> Archaeological work in the vicinity has produced no Saxon finds and, with two exceptions (this site and another, noted below), no physical evidence for medieval activity. This does not necessarily mean there was no activity in the period: the evidence may have been removed by excavation in the 17th century or later. Fieldwork at 14-15 Hoxton Square (site code HXT01, located on figure 1), 650 metres south-west of the site, observed truncated geological gravels overlain by 17th century soils. It was concluded that quarrying had taken place. This type of sequence was also observed at about 70 metres north of the site at the Whitmore Estate (site code NUL00, located on figure 1), between Nuttall and Phillip Streets. With Hoxton as a ready source of raw materials for post-medieval building works, the rarity of the medieval finds described here is clear.

Beyond this site, the only other archaeological evidence for medieval activity in Hoxton has come from fieldwork at 182-184 Hoxton Street

(site code HXN93, located on figure 2), about 75 metres south of the site, where a circular chalk and flint-lined well was recorded. The lining had been repaired with red bricks of a pre-1666 (pre-Great Fire) type. Although the well was backfilled during the 19th century, its original lining appeared to be late medieval.

Little evidence for the nature of medieval Hoxton exists in the published historic record. Beyond the mention in the Domesday book, Hoxton appears as Hocston in a fine of 1220/1 and as Hoggston in an indenture of 1351, when the manor was leased to Thomas Harewold by Sir John de la Aspale. By 1384 Hoxton was in the hands of Sir John Philpot, whose family held the manor until 1634.<sup>3</sup> But none of this demonstrates what went on in Hoxton.

By the Tudor period, however, there is some indication of how the site was exploited. In 1545 the southern part of the site was within an estate owned by Richard Harong, which in 1557 included a messuage, two barns, a stable, a garden and three acres of land. In 1568 the northern part of the site was in the hands of Lady Katherine Dormer and formed part of a three

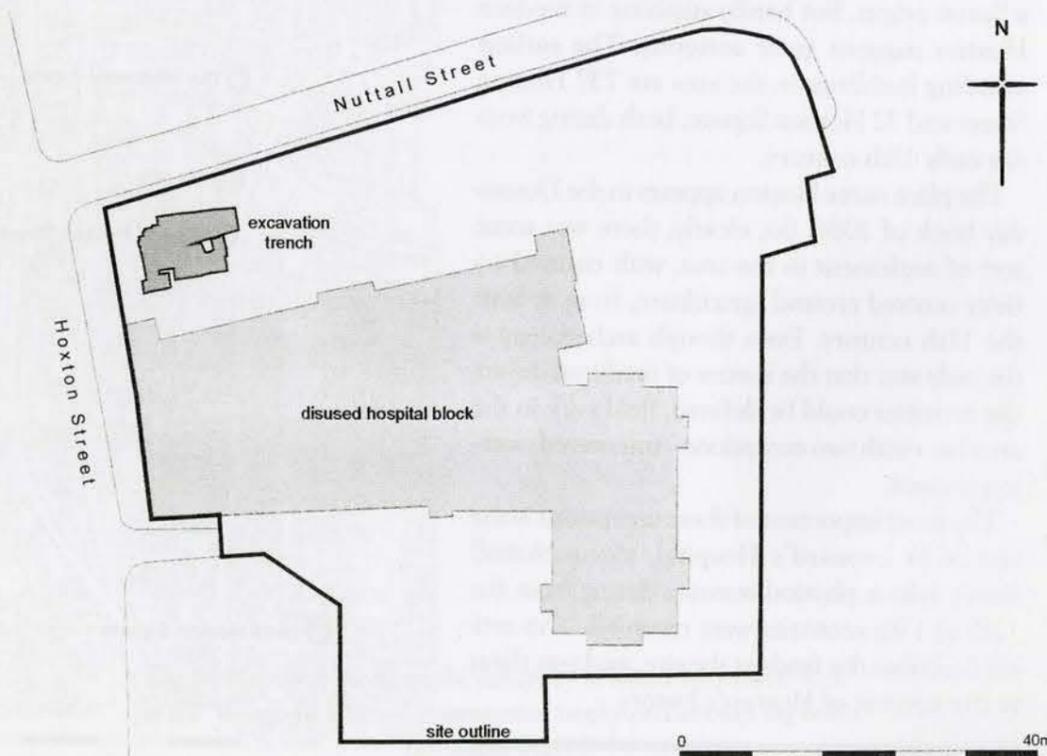


Figure 2: location of the excavation trenches

acre plot containing three messuages.<sup>4</sup>

Hoxton began expanding and became more densely built up from the 17th century. Chassereau's map of 1745 (figure 3) shows buildings along the Hoxton Street frontage of the site, behind which was open land to the east, with modern Nuttall Street depicted as Dirty Lane. What is now a footpath leading east off Hoxton Street, around the southern side of the site, was known as the Land of Promise. By the 19th century Hoxton had lost its rural character. By the 20th century anything medieval had long-since vanished.

### The excavation

The site sequence is presented here as a chronological narrative divided where appropriate by archaeological 'period' and land-use entities ('open areas'). These entities are unique to the site.

#### Period 1: the earliest activity at the site:

##### quarry pit, backfilled by c.1270-1350

The natural geology consisted of gravels overlain by a truncated layer of brickearth, which survived to levels of up to 18.14 metres above

OD. The brickearth was cut by a pit, probably the result of quarrying (located on figure 4). The pit was backfilled with a mixed brickearth, implying that the underlying gravel had been quarried and any excavated brickearth then redeposited as backfill.

Pottery from this backfill was dated to c.1270-1350. The range of fabrics included South Herts greywares, London-type wares and Mill Green ware. The greywares included rim sherds from thirteen different cooking pots, which bore signs of use such as sooting and heavy burning. Sherds from two bowls and one jug were also recovered.

South Herts greywares were made at various centres from the mid-12th century and throughout the 13th century, and constitute one of the main coarsewares used for cooking vessels in the London area at this date. The London-type wares included fragments from jugs in a range of forms and decorative styles made throughout the 13th century. These include early French-influenced styles (north French and Rouen style), made during the first half of the century, and the more developed highly decorated style, dated to the mid to late 13th century.

There were also sherds covered with a white slip and sparse glaze, probably from flared or tulip-necked baluster jugs made from the mid-13th and well into the 14th century. Fragments of Mill Green ware jugs were also recovered. This fabric is first found in London in contexts dated c.1270.

A small quantity of animal bone from the backfill included primary butchery waste (heads and feet) and domestic waste (long bone fragments and pelvis) from cattle and sheep/goat. Part of a dog carcass was also found, limited to the feet and tail.

#### Period 2: Open areas 2, 3 and 4, levelling and three ovens, c.1270-1350

##### Open area 2, c.1270-1350

The backfilled pit observed in period 1 was sealed by open area 2, a dump of burnt clay fragments. By analogy with later deposits, these fragments probably represented debris from the

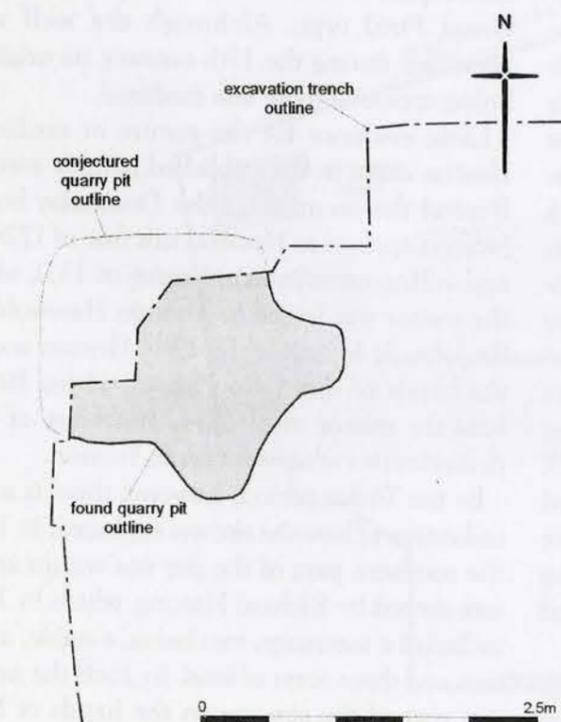


Figure 4: location of the conjectured quarry pit

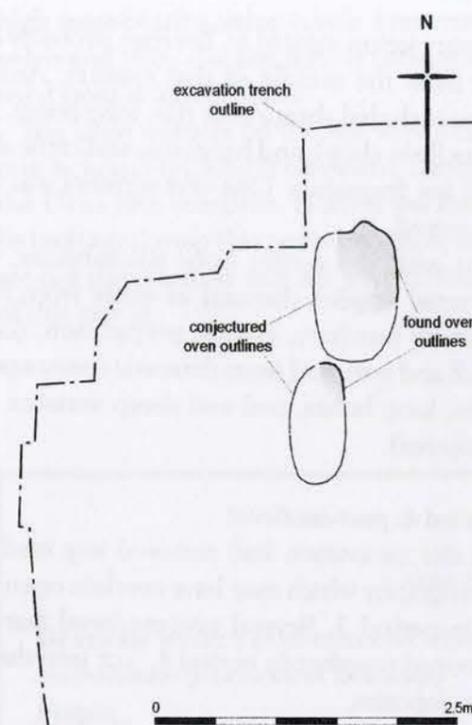


Figure 5: the ovens built on open area 3

demolition of an oven with a clay-lined superstructure. The dump included three sherds of pottery, dated to c.1200-1300 by the presence of South Herts greywares, London wares and part of a rouletted north French-style jug with vertical white slip stripes. This style is dated to c.1200-50, but as the dump overlay the backfilled quarry pit - dated to c.1270-1350 - open area 2 has been assigned a date range of c.1270-1350.

##### Open Area 3: two ovens, c.1270-1350

Open area 2 was levelled with open area 3, a layer of brickearth, deposited in preparation for the next phase of activity. Once again, the features were dated to c.1270-1350 by the presence of South Herts greywares and London-type wares in the levelling layer. The rim of a flint-tempered bowl with a socketed handle in South Herts greyware was found. London-type ware forms included jugs and part of a probable curfew or fire-cover with a broad thumb-impressed strap handle.

Cooking pots and jugs in Kingston-type wares were also found. This ware first reached London from c.1230-50 and continued in produc-

tion throughout the 14th century, becoming less common during the second half of the century. An unusual find was a small sherd from a brown-slipped Siegburg stoneware drinking jug. This fabric was introduced to London c.1300, although the slipped version is never common.

Apart from pottery, the open area 3 brickearth layer also included fragments of sheep/goat rib and scapula, probably the remains of meals. Environmental samples included charred grain and waterlogged seeds. The cereal grains were free-threshing bread wheat, rye and barley. The remaining material consisted of seeds belonging to elder, blackberry/raspberry, and one seed each of fat hen and dock.<sup>5</sup>

Constructed on open area 3 were two ovens (figure 5). The northern oven was 0.70 metres north-south by 0.50 metres east-west - the east-west measurement was incomplete. The southern oven was cut away on all but its north-east corner and measured at least 0.60 metres north-south by 0.20 metres east-west. The remains of the ovens were identified by oval patches of heavily burnt brickearth, within which were concentric rings of stake-holes, representing the base of the framework for a clay-lined superstructure.

##### Open area 4: oven, c.1280-1350

Following the demolition of the ovens constructed on open area 3, another levelling layer (open area 4) was deposited. One oven constructed on open area 4 survived (figure 6). Although part of the northern extent of the oven had been truncated, an original size of 1.25 metres north-south by 0.85 metres east-west was discernable.

The pottery from the open area 4 brickearth levelling layer was generally in the range of fabrics and forms seen in the earlier, open area 3 levelling in period 2 - South Herts greyware cooking pots and sooted bowls; London-type ware jugs and Kingston-type ware cooking pots and sooted bowls. Also present was one sherd from a French-import Saintonge polychrome jug, a ware present in London from c.1280. Bone from the levelling layer included a fragment of sheep/goat mandible, probably discarded after primary

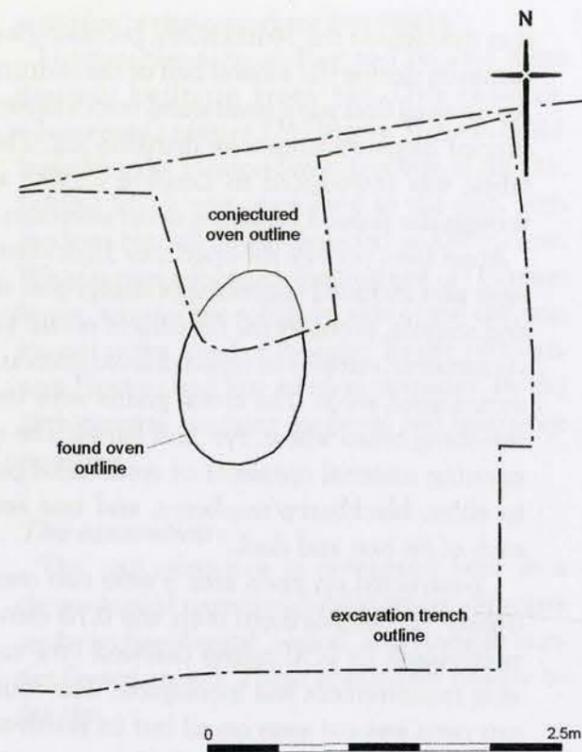


Figure 6: the ovens built on open area 4

butchery of a carcass rather than as meal refuse.

Again, the oven consisted of an oval patch of scorching within which was a ring of stakes. Adjacent were two dumps of burnt clay fragments - probably the remains of the lining, which would have been periodically replaced.

**Period 3: open area 5, levelling, c.1380-1450**

The end of the activity involving the ovens was marked by a further brickearth levelling layer, open area 5, observed across the whole excavation area. This was dated to c.1380-1450.

Pottery from open area 5 included a range of fabrics dated to the end of the 14th and early 15th centuries, including Cheam whiteware, Dutch red earthenware, late-medieval Hertfordshire glazed ware and coarse Border ware. The Cheam whiteware includes part of a cooking pot and the rim of a miniature barrel-shaped jug. The coarse Border ware (the commonest pottery used in London during the period) included bowls, jugs, a large pitcher and a cooking pot with bifid rim or internal lid seating, a feature first found in contexts dating to c.1380.

Also recovered from open area 5 was a 15th-

century jetton minted in Tournai, probably dating from the middle of that century. Animal bone included sheep/goat ribs, long bones, vertebra (loin chop), and humerus, and cattle skull and jaw fragments. One cod vertebra was also recovered.

As with the earlier bone assemblages, this material implies disposal of waste from both primary butchery, carcass preparation, (cattle skull and jaw), and from domestic consumption (ribs, long bones, cod and sheep vertebra and humerus).

**Period 4: post-medieval**

Later excavation had removed any medieval stratigraphy which may have overlain open area 5 in period 3. Several post-medieval features, grouped together in period 4, cut into the earlier deposits.

These included intercutting rubbish pits, dated to 1550-1600 by pottery from their backfills, which included Tudor brown ware cauldrons, pipkins, pitchers, jugs, jars and - a more unusual form - part of a mammiform costrel or portable flask. Other fabrics included Raeren stoneware, mugs and drinking jugs, imported into England from c.1480-1550, a cup and drinking jug in early 16th century Border ware fabric and one sherd from a Beauvais green-glazed drinking jug. Animal bone from the rubbish pit included cattle mandible, ribs, humerus, pelvis and tibia. The mandible showed butchery marks indicating that the head may have been processed to remove the cheek meat and tongue. The mandible tooth wear indicates that the animal was at least 4-5 years old at death and had therefore fulfilled a primary function prior to slaughter, perhaps traction or dairying, rather than being reared specifically for beef production.

One sub-adult fallow deer<sup>6</sup> metacarpal (hand) was recovered. This bone bore shallow knife cuts, implying that the animal may have been skinned. A complete adult chicken femur (upper hind limb) was also recovered. This assemblage is, like the medieval material, a mixture of primary butchery waste (cattle mandible and fallow deer metacarpal), and disposal of bone elements of

high meat-bearing value (cattle humerus, ribs, pelvis and tibia; chicken femur) presumably derived from domestic waste.

The latest features on the site were a cess pit, post hole and brick-built basement, dating from the 17th - 19th centuries. Hoxton was known to be built up during this period, so these features are not discussed, as they are beyond the scope of this article.

**Conclusions**

The archaeological work at St Leonard's Hospital has confirmed the historic record by showing that Hoxton did experience some cultural activity during the medieval period. While the farming described in the Domesday book of 1086 may have left no evidence, the late 14th and 15th centuries left features, in the form of a quarry pit and three ovens.

These small ovens were probably domestic: the pottery from the excavated sequence was domes-

**GLOSSARY**

*Colours refer to the fabric of a vessel.*

**Beauvais ware:** a post-medieval white earthenware produced at Beauvais, France

**Cheam whiteware:** a late-medieval earthenware produced in Cheam, Surrey

**coarse Border ware:** a late-medieval white earthenware produced at several sites on the Surrey/Hampshire borders

**Dutch red earthenware:** a red earthenware imported into England from the 14th century

**Hertfordshire glazed ware:** a medieval white earthenware commonly found in Hertfordshire

**femur:** upper hind limb

**free-threshing:** of a domesticated variety of crop, in which the husk round the seed comes off during threshing

**humerus:** upper forelimb

**jetton:** copper-alloy trading token, widely used as coinage in late 13th century England

**Kingston-type ware:** a medieval white earthenware in the style of wares produced at Kingston, Surrey

**London-type ware:** a medieval red earthenware commonly found in London

**metacarpal:** hand or forefoot

**Mill Green ware:** a medieval red earthenware produced at Mill Green, Essex

**OD:** Ordnance Datum, i.e. mean sea level at Newlyn, Cornwall

**Raeren stoneware:** a grey stoneware produced in the Rhineland and imported into England from the 15th century

**Saintonge ware:** a white earthenware produced at Saintonge, south-west France, imported into England from the 13th century

**scapula:** shoulder blade

**Siegburg stoneware:** a white earthenware produced in the Rhineland and imported into England throughout the medieval period

**South Herts greyware:** a coarse grey unglazed earthenware commonly found in south Hertfordshire and North London

**stratigraphy:** the arrangement of layers of archaeological material

**tibia:** lower hind-limb

**Tudor brown ware:** an early post-medieval (1480-1600) red earthenware produced in the London region

tic in composition, cooking or kitchen wares and serving/tablewares. The proportion of jugs, including decorated examples, is relatively high, suggesting the occupants of the site did not come from the poorest levels of society.

The ovens appear to have been situated in the open - no building remains survived in their proximity - and could have been located behind or between properties which fronted onto the medieval precursor of Hoxton Street.

Similar dumps of burnt clay or daub fragments have been found on other excavations and interpreted as the remains of wattle and daub ovens or kilns. Excavation of a moated house at Wintringham, Huntingdonshire, has produced dumps of *in situ* burnt daub, within the bake-houses and kitchens. The first phase of the kitchens at Wintringham, dated to the 12th century, consisted of an outside cooking area, possibly covered by a lean to shelter of hurdles. These were interpreted as the remains of both bread ovens and kilns for drying and steeping grain.<sup>6</sup> In the case of this site, the environmental remains from open area 3 included charred grains of bread wheat, rye and barley, indicating that these were bread ovens. The presence of elder and blackberry or raspberry seeds implies that other foods were occasionally processed in the area.

While this excavation has provided a unique snapshot of the day-to-day life of the area, future work must build upon this picture, gradually adding to our understanding of medieval Hoxton.

#### Acknowledgements

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#### Notes

1. J. Morris (ed.) *Domesday Book: Middlesex* (1975) 128a.
2. J.E.B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The place-names of Middlesex, apart from the City of London* (1942), 50.
3. Survey of London, VIII, *The Parish of St Leonard Shoreditch* (1922), 40-1, 79.
4. *ib.* 65-7.
5. The botanical remains referred to in this paragraph are, respectively, of *Triticum aestivum*, *Secale cereale*, *Hordeum sativum*; *Sambucus nigra*, *Rubus fruticosus/idaeus*, *Chenopodium album* and *Rumex* (species).
6. *Dama dama*.
7. G. Beresford, 'Excavation of a moated house at Wintringham in Huntingdonshire', *Archaeological Journal* 134 (1977), 194-286.

## THE BOROUGH OF HACKNEY WORKING MEN'S CLUB: THE EARLY YEARS

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*Barry Burke*

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#### *A long tradition*

It is often forgotten that working men's clubs are part of a tradition of mutual improvement societies that goes back to the beginning of the 18th century. The mutual improvement society was a venture in co-operative education, the aim being to 'develop the verbal and intellectual skills of people who had never been encouraged to speak or think'.<sup>1</sup> The tradition included Jacobin clubs, Owenite schools, Chartist reading rooms, workmen's libraries, co-operative discussion groups, musical groups, dramatic societies and a whole host of other groups that relied on working class initiative. There are countless examples of workers on a local scale getting together to form groups in order to help each other educate themselves. Those who could read helped those who could not. They were a mixture of mutual-ity and self-help.

However, the clubs also sprang from the middle class effort to educate the working class through mechanics' institutes, adult schools and public libraries, much of this being to avoid unrest and channel working class educational endeavours into 'safe' areas.

Throughout the country, there were numerous examples of working class educational activities that were reliant on local private initiatives. They can be seen as part of the tradition within adult education which takes in middle class attempts to assimilate the working class within the new capitalist society. However, this is far too simplistic. It was true that in many cases their founding and early development would come under the term 'social engineering', and the efforts of the wealthy patrons and supporters were efforts in social control. Richard Price has described the clubs as 'the largest and most successful of all the efforts through which Victorian England set out to ensure an assimilated and acquiescent proletariat'.<sup>2</sup> However, the reality was that the clubs proved to be a battleground between two sets of competing values. Many of them can be seen as part of those attempts by the working class and radical movement to create institutions independent of any other class, to promote both their own interests and also to foster a qualitatively different kind of society.

Many of their members saw them as efforts towards mutuality and association rather than as a means of assimilation. One such club was the Borough of Hackney Workingmen's Club.

The Club first opened its doors, at 27 Haggerston Road, in 1874, some 12 years after the commencement of the Club and Institute Union, the organisation which did so much to foster the founding, growth and development of the club movement. The success of the CIU stemmed mainly from the fact that it was able to get a number of wealthy benefactors on board who would finance the setting up of clubs up and down the country. The theory was that they would set the club up, get it running smoothly and then, over a period of time, move into the background and let it stand on its own feet. The reality was that in the more rural areas, particularly in the Home Counties, many of the early clubs were set up by local squirearchy or employers, who could withdraw their financial help at a moment's notice (and often did just that). Most areas of London, particularly those where working men and their families tended to live, were bereft of a local gentry, and patronage was out of the question. It remained for the men to organise things for themselves.

This was not something the working men of Hackney were unused to. They were already prominent in the movement for parliamentary reform in the 1860s, as well as not being slow in combining around other issues. There were seven different branches of the Reform League active in Hackney in 1867, and five branches of the First International in 1872/3.<sup>3</sup> The Borough of Hackney Club, in fact, evolved from a branch of the Reform League.<sup>4</sup>

### Self-sufficiency

What actually happened was that a few men, dissatisfied with the way they were served at local public houses, got together and asked themselves what they should do about it. They wanted somewhere to meet together, have a few good quality beers and discuss matters of the day. They decided that the only way they could do this was to start their own club in their own premises. Over nine months, in order to raise the money,

together they collected a small amount each. They also asked themselves the question 'If we start a club, how can it be successful?' and came up with the answer that if they were to draw men from the public house, they would have to provide all the things furnished by the pub, but under better conditions for a working man's pocket.<sup>5</sup> 'They took a roomy old 18th-century house that had been at one time a vicarage, and by the aid of a friendly brewer, who supplied them with liquor, enlarged and altered it and invited membership... membership rapidly poured in, and soon numbered over a thousand, besides crowds of visitors on entertainment nights'.<sup>6</sup> As a result, a good income came to the club and, by 1877, one of its members, Robert Bolding, could inform a conference of metropolitan club delegates that 'from a small beginning it has grown into an Institution of 1,200 members, and is too small for its present requirements ... and while they sell beer, yet they are useful for purposes higher than mere drinking'. He was also disparaging of those clubs which relied on patronage to keep them going, and felt that where clubs were started for working men rather than by working men, they often did not succeed.<sup>7</sup>

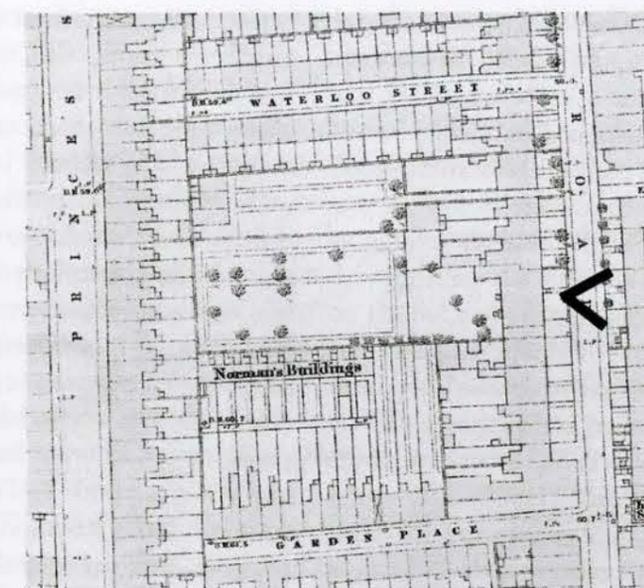
### Lowe, the leader

The leading figure in the club for its first ten years was undoubtedly James Lowe. Lowe was described as 'a pleasant cheery person' who worked for the local School Board and became the club's first president in 1874. He held this post until his death in 1884. Frederick Rogers knew him very well, and maintained that

the hold Lowe had over the club he kept to the day of his death, and I have always regarded it as one of the most remarkable things in my experience. He was a man with a good fund of general information, but was not in any large sense an educated man. He was not a great orator; he was a moderately good speaker, and that was all. But the men loved him, and it was because of his eminently loveable disposition.

Rogers wrote about his 'frank geniality' and that he

knew his own limitations and never presumed on his position, [he] devoted himself absolutely to the well-being of the



The Club premises (to the south of the present Pamela House) as shown on the 1870 Ordnance Survey map

club and its ideals, and in his interpretation of them was only just a little ahead of his followers.<sup>8</sup>

In January 1876, the club members presented a testimonial to him for his work for them. It was presented in the large club hall which was 'crowded with hundreds of its members who throughout enthusiastically applauded'. A gold watch and chain with a suitable inscription was handed to him and Richard Gaston, a founder member, prefaced the presentation with a prologue which he had composed and which 'was exceedingly well delivered'.<sup>9</sup>

Lowe's popularity increased with time. Rogers remembered that his funeral (at Abney Park, in February 1884) was

one of the sights of East London. The club buried him, and gave him what was called 'an excellent funeral', as well as making provision for his widow; but it was not the funeral pageant that was striking, but the endless crowds of people who turned out and lined the streets to see the body pass to its last resting place. A great statesman, with years of national service behind him, never received truer devotion or more sincere sorrow than did this simple workman, whose only claim to it was honest service, done straightforwardly and loyally, and who never looked for any recognition and was happy in the pleasure he found in his work'.<sup>10</sup>

For many years Lowe's memory

was kept green in the Borough of Hackney Club by the custom of wearing violets by the members on the anniversary of his death, and by calling the day 'violet day'. ... the idea was

borrowed from Primrose day and the custom of wearing primroses in memory of Lord Beaconsfield.<sup>11</sup>

### The Club, day to day

Before the club reached the four-figure mark for its membership, Lowe wrote a letter to the Hackney Gazette giving a good description of the club and its working.

We have spacious premises with ground in the rear, and we number 500; these 500 men ... while they take their glass of ale etc, have made up their minds to do without the public house, and our rules will not allow us to elect a publican as a member. We have a comfortable Reading Room, well supplied with newspapers and magazines, a small but valuable library, which we shall augment and make a special feature of the Club. We have bagatelle and other games, chess draughts, cards, etc. We have just bought a piano, and we hold two concerts weekly. We also have weekly discussions and lectures on political and social questions. We are forming a Co-operative Store, also several classes for elocution, singing etc. A Mutual Loan Society is just starting for 1875. I venture to think we will soon number 1,000 members; we are increasing so rapidly, and the influence of this Club will most assuredly be seen in our parochial and political contests. One word more as to the refreshment question. Experience shows that men do not drink anything like the quantity in their Clubs as they do at public houses (our temperance friends should foster the Club movement) and as there are large profits, we are enabled with our subscriptions (6d [3p] monthly) to pay our way without asking for outside aid.<sup>12</sup>

The club went from strength to strength. By the following year, Lowe could report to the annual conference of the CIU that 812 members had paid subscriptions for the summer quarter. The reason was that they had a large

hall where discussions were held every week, and because they had a 'capital' garden for summer evenings. He maintained that amusement was what was chiefly wanted, and although shorter hours of work should enable men to study more, 'the strain on the mind in modern work was greater than formerly, so that recreation was now more needed than before'. However, they also had a lecture every Sunday evening, which attracted 'great numbers'. He made the point that there were strict rules against drunkenness, and some had been expelled under these rules. A large Co-operative Society had grown out of the club, as well as a Labour Loan Society and a Provident Society. There was a dramatic class, and an entertainment every month. 'All this in two years, without any help from outsiders. This result would have been impossible, but from the profits from the sale of beer'.<sup>13</sup>

Membership of the club reflected the dominant trades of the area. Tailors, shoemakers, woodworkers and cabinet makers made up the vast majority of the membership, although it attracted unskilled labourers as well as skilled mechanics. Many of the members worked from home-based workshops and it was reported that 'tailors and shoemakers, who are in their own houses all day, are very glad of a change in the evening, and therefore, more readily resort to a Club than others'.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Drama, lectures and politics**

The three things that made the Borough of Hackney Club outstanding in this period were its 'entertainments', its lecture programme and its political work.

Entertainments often took the form of dramatic presentations. These formed a major part of the club's activities and were hugely successful. The elocution and drama class performed their first play in August 1875 in aid of the club's library fund. The *Workmen's Club Journal* announced that the performance would commence at eight precisely, with 'the Laughable Farce, in one act, entitled - 'A THUMPING LEGACY'. To be followed by Mr H. J. Byron's Comedy in three Acts, of '£100,000'.<sup>15</sup> The

performance was a great success and led to the members forming the Criterion Dramatic Society. The Society continued, popular and successful for over ten years, eventually performing more than 150 plays.<sup>16</sup>

The driving force behind these performances was Richard Gaston, who was passionate about the theatre, particularly Shakespeare, but also had a very profound sense of humour, which he was to use for the benefit of the club movement for many years to come.

In July 1876, we find him giving 'a carefully prepared collection of humorous readings and anecdotes ... entitled 'Wit and Humour [which] were excellently rendered, partly by reading, and partly from memory, and were greatly enjoyed.' Gaston introduced the performance with a brief talk as to what constituted wit and humour 'and their influence on mankind'.<sup>17</sup>

Eight months later, in March 1877, Gaston gave a lecture at the club on 'The origin of the Drama, Actors, Acting etc'. He gave a history of drama from the mystery plays to Shakespeare followed by anecdotes of famous actors, past and present and concluded with a defence of 'the Stage as an instructor'.<sup>18</sup>

Around the same time, he sent a letter to the editor of the *Workmen's Club Journal* informing him of his services as a lecturer on the following subjects:

Thomas Hood - poet and humorist  
Wit and Humour!  
Charles Dickens - his life and writings  
Origins of the Drama - actors, acting etc  
American Humour  
A Gossip about doctors, lawyers and actors  
Town and Country or Here and There  
And others.

Each lecture would last about an hour and a half, in two parts.<sup>19</sup>

Gaston's endeavours were to prove very fruitful. The Criterion Dramatic Society became very popular throughout metropolitan clubland, putting on performances at various locations for clubs that were in financial difficulties. The group also spawned a number of offshoots, the most prominent being the Rover Comedy Com-

pany, which performed on average two nights a week in the middle 1880s.<sup>20</sup>

Music played a big part in the life of the clubs. Many prided themselves on their brass bands or their drum and fife bands. The Borough of Hackney Club produced the Excelsior Minstrels, as well as a string band, both playing at the early drama presentations. In addition, there was a brass band that performed regularly in Victoria Park on Sunday afternoons. This band was also to be seen leading the members in a number of demonstrations during the period, in addition to acting as a magnet to attract members of the public.

In February 1877, the Club made a visit to their fellow club members in Walthamstow. The *Walthamstow and Leyton Guardian* reported that

No less than 350 ... marched into Walthamstow with their brass band and gigantic banners flying, on which were inscriptions expressing the advanced political opinions known to distinguish the men of Hackney.<sup>21</sup>

Having large grounds gave the club an opportunity to have outdoor entertainments. On a balmy Monday evening, in September 1876, the club held a 'soiree' or evening party. The report sent in to the *Workmen's Club Journal* relates how

several hundred men and women, children and babies had a delightful evenings entertainment provided for them in the hall and other rooms of the Club House, and in the spacious grounds attached to it. In the latter, were two large marquees for tea, music and dancing, while the flower beds were illuminated by Chinese lanterns; and the splendid lime light ever and anon lent enchantment to the scene.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Adult education**

However, the Borough of Hackney Club was not just a social club. It was also a vehicle for adult education. The club arranged a programme of regular lectures for members on a whole range of topics.

On Sunday evening 21st November 1875, William Randal Cremer, who was later to become Radical Liberal MP for Haggerston, spoke on the working conditions of agricultural labourers. The following Sunday, Richard Gaston spoke on 'The Life and Writings of Charles Dickens' ably assisted by Mr Ashton who recited

the trial scene from *Pickwick Papers*.<sup>23</sup> During the next month, a talk was given by Mr A. Pike on 'Home Colonisation', advocating the cultivation of uncultivated and waste lands to make the country self-sufficient in food. This was followed by Rear Admiral Maxse speaking against Women's Suffrage and 'although he was welcomed and got generous applause there was opposition'.<sup>24</sup> The final lecture before Christmas was given by Thomas Mottershead, who spoke on 'The Abuse of our Educational Endowments'. He pointed out

how endowments had been left centuries ago to educate the poor of London which were now lying dormant in City Livery Companies. These bequests were now worth many times the original amount but many of the companies were either ignoring them or paying out the original amount only. e.g. the Drapers Company have £26 pa whereas the correct amount should now be something like £1000.<sup>25</sup>

Later lectures included one by Hodgson Pratt, a leading light in the CIU, and was entitled 'Some experiences of Life in Bengal'. The club reported to the *Workmen's Club Journal* that

the lecturer gave a lucid sketch of the history and geography of India and graphically described the various sects, castes, customs and its beautiful scenery... The lecture was enlivened with quaint bits of humorous description and was illustrated with a large map and some pictures boldly designed. The lecturer feelingly alluded to the present famine in India and hoped his remarks would induce his audience to take some interest in India and its 190 million inhabitants, of fellow subjects who he hoped would in time be attached to this country by links of love instead of by the sword. The lecture was listened to attentively by a crowded audience - including many members' wives - and the applause at the close was loud and prolonged.<sup>26</sup>

A few weeks after this, we read that 'On the 14th inst., we had Mr J. B. Leno on 'Caxton and Kimburton'. The first part was 'an eloquent discourse' on William Caxton and his contribution to progress. The second was an entertainment on village life and agriculture 'given in Mr Leno's unrivalled style in the Kimburton dialect'.<sup>27</sup>

Not content with regular Sunday lectures, the club inaugurated a series of 'Special Wednesday Evening Lectures' a few years later. Lowe informed the CIU, who included this in their Annual Report for 1880/81. He reported that

these special lectures were delivered 'to large audiences'.

Mr May, of the Royal Polytechnic, gave two, illustrated by the oxy-hydrogen lamp. Dr Hardwicke, coroner for Middlesex, also gave us an excellent lecture descriptive of his Continental travels, and showed the audience the cheapest way of spending their holidays. John James Jones Esq., member of the London School Board, gave a lecture on 'Personal Recollections of the Franco-German War' with dissolving views. J. Birch Esq., of Dalston, lectured on 'The Birth, Life, and Death of a Piece of Chalk', with chemical experiments. This capital lecture was much appreciated. Thomas Gardner, Esq., of Homerton, delivered a lecture, entitled 'Glacial Action, Past and Present', with dissolving views. Mr Gardner gave an account of his own travels in Switzerland and elsewhere, and stated that his illustrations were taken on the spot. We have several lectures still in hand.<sup>28</sup>

Topics for the lectures at the club were varied, and this mirrored the intellectual appetite of many of the members. They were extremely catholic in their tastes, and seemed to be happy soaking up whatever the speaker offered. This did not mean that they constituted a passive audience by any means. Dialogue and discussion were often at a high level.

One of the speakers to visit the club, this time for a Sunday morning lecture, was William Morris, who was at the height of his political involvement as a revolutionary socialist. In his diary entry for 30th March 1887 he remarked that

On Sunday I gave my 'Monopoly' at the Borough of Hackney Club ... it is a big club numbering 1,600 members... the meeting was a full one, and I suppose I must say attentive; but the coming and going all the time, the pie-boy and the pot-boy was rather trying to my nerves; the audience was civil and inclined to agree...<sup>29</sup>

Morris was not the only one to be put off by the environment in which the Hackney men listened to invited speakers. Frederick Rogers recalled that

the first lecture I listened to at a club was at the Borough of Hackney, and the lecturer was an eminent physician whose name I have forgotten, but it was on a much-worked subject in those days - 'Physiology in Everyday Life'. It was my first experience of popular scientific lecturing, and the lecturer had to the full the popular gift of putting his statements in clear and simple language. In those days, science and religion - the clergy and the scientific teachers - were deadly foes, and it was full of sly drives at the clergy, chiefly those of the Church of England, which were highly appreciated by the audience. Speaking of the effect

of overcrowded rooms and bad atmosphere, he referred to the habit of sleeping in church. 'If you want to alter that' said the lecturer, 'my advice is, shorten the sermon and ventilate the church'. Not many, probably, of those listening to him ever ran any risk of the ills that might come from badly ventilated churches, but the atmosphere of that lecture hall, with every second man smoking cheap tobacco, was simply murderous.<sup>30</sup>

It seems that club members were interested in almost anything. They were passionate about what was going on in the world, and how it affected their own way of life. They were highly political, and active in most of the progressive causes of the day. Their politics were essentially radical, republican and secularist (the 'advanced political opinions' mentioned by the Walthamstow reporter). The club has been described as 'the most prominent of the Radical Clubs'<sup>31</sup> and was present at all the major demonstrations and rallies that took place in the period. The '70s and '80s witnessed numerous campaigns on a whole host of issues: the extension of democracy, Ireland, imperialism, land reform and various other social problems arising from the economic depression.

#### *International concerns*

The club premises were used for political rallies from the beginning. In August 1876, a crowded public meeting was held in the grounds of the club 'to protest against the action of Her Majesty's Government with regard to the atrocious barbarities of the Turks in Bulgaria'. James Lowe took the chair, and messages were read out from Mr Gladstone and Earl Russell. Several resolutions 'were carried with acclamation', and Victor Hugo's 'thrilling appeal to Europe' was also read out.<sup>32</sup> The outcome of this meeting and of subsequent meetings was the formation of the Eastern Question Association which campaigned against the Disraeli government's policy of dragging Britain into a war on the side of the Turks.

This concern was not the only example of the club's internationalist outlook. The aftermath of the Paris Commune of 1871 was still apparent, and Frederick Ruhl, the club's librarian, wrote a letter of protest to the editor of the CIU's journal complaining that the Communard lead-

ers had been described as 'thieves, drunkards and blackguards' in a story being serialised. He made it clear that he believed the great majority were 'inspired with principles, which they believed to be for the common good ... Peace be to their ashes!'<sup>33</sup>

Quite early on in the life of the club, 'a crowded audience of members and their female relatives' listened to a talk by Magee Pratt in the large hall on 'European Armaments and Civilization'. In place of brute force to settle differences he suggested arbitration, 'though he would prefer a system of laws regulating nations as would prevent disputes'. He was listened to with 'rapt attention and received quite an ovation at the close'.<sup>34</sup>

The following year, members listened to two lectures given by John Noble, the first on 'The Eastern Question' and the second on 'Our War Debt'. On both occasions, it was reported that there was a large attendance.<sup>35</sup>

#### *An active decade*

In October 1877, the club announced that its Political Council, 'with a view to encourage the members to take an interest in politics' had made arrangements for a course of lectures; the first of which would be given by Thomas Mottershead of the Labour Representation League.<sup>36</sup> This was the beginning of a decade of intense political activity.

In the 1880s, the club was very active, alongside socialists and Irish Nationalists, in the struggles against coercion in Ireland and for free speech in England. It had a strong influence on those around it and a number of offshoots grew from it. As a result the club became known to many clubmen in the area as 'Mother'. In June 1884, the club took the lead in founding the Hackney Radical Federation, a federation of clubs in the immediate area whose purpose was to campaign on political issues. It comprised six clubs: the Borough of Hackney, Commonwealth, Hackney Radical, United Radical, Gladstone Radical and Bright Radical.<sup>37</sup>

The period witnessed a whole succession of demonstrations and rallies, many involving the

police, quite frequently with cuts and bruises being sustained by the demonstrators. One of the most famous of these, in 1885, was in Dod Street, Limehouse. The street had been regularly used by socialists and radicals as a place to hold open air meetings. However, the police were constantly arresting speakers and breaking up the meetings. A demonstration was called, in defence of free speech, and the crowd in Dod Street made it too difficult for the police to do anything about it. The following Sunday,

the police gave way. A procession was organised from Stepney Green: Radical Clubs, the SDF and the Socialist League, with bands and banners all came to Dod Street, Limehouse. Never had an East End Street been so famous. The crowd was so great that it filled the entire street and overflowed into Burdett Road.<sup>38</sup>

The following year, 1886, the club was represented on a demonstration in Trafalgar Square in support of the unemployed. Rioting broke out and arrests were made, but the major outcome was the banning of all meetings in the square. In 1887, another demonstration was called, this time specifically to defy this ban. Called by the Radical Clubs in London,

between 80,000 and 100,000 people with bands and banners marched on the square from all quarters and were prevented from occupying it only by a tremendous display of force - 4,000 police on duty in or around the square smashed up the contingents as they approached ... Later a detachment of Grenadier Guards, with ammunition and fixed bayonets, followed by two squadrons of Life Guards were brought to the square ... The struggle went on far into the evening, and among the many injured three later died.<sup>39</sup>

The day became known as 'Bloody Sunday', and although it ended in a defeat for the clubs, it acted as a catalyst in politicising a lot of working people. The campaign continued until in 1892 the government were forced to climb down, and readmit speakers to the square.

The political influence of the Borough of Hackney Club remained strong well into the 1890s. At a demonstration calling for the legal eight hour day, in 1891, the club's contingent marched behind one of their veteran members named Pike who, the report maintained had 'braved the battle and policeman's truncheon in all the notable demonstrations during the past

half century'.<sup>40</sup> In 1892 band and banner again were out locally in support of a strike by local shoemakers.<sup>41</sup>

The club continued to have a political presence within the borough throughout the decade, active at election times and continuing to campaign for labour representation on local bodies; but the period of intense activity was, on the whole, over. The heady days had gone.

The Borough of Hackney Workingmen's Club and Institute had a significant influence in the area over a number of years. One of Charles Booth's informants claimed that it was 'a far more important influence' in the borough than any religious body.<sup>42</sup> Its members witnessed many great events, helped to mould and form many people who were prominent in Hackney politics, gave an impetus to and helped to develop the artistic skills of many a budding performer and above all was a major player in the life of the community as an educational body. It embodied all the qualities of mutuality and association that we associate with 'the common good'.

#### Notes

1. J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* (2001), 58.
2. R. Price, 'The Working Men's Club Movement and Victorian Social Reform Ideology', *Victorian Studies*, December 1971, 147.
3. B. Burke, and K. Worpole, *Hackney Propaganda: Working Class Club Life and Politics in Hackney 1870-1900* (1980), 7, 9.
4. J. Davis, 'Radical clubs and London politics, 1870-1900' in D. Feldman and G. Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis London: histories and representations since 1800* (1989), 105.
5. CIU Annual Report 1877, 8.
6. F. Rogers, *Labour, Life and Literature* (1913), 67. The vicarage has not been identified; a boot maker was in occupation c.1872.
7. *Workmen's Club Journal* 3 March 1877.

8. Rogers, 68. Frederick Rogers was a self-taught East London bookbinder, who became a regular lecturer at the East London clubs.
9. *Workmen's Club Journal* 8 January 1876.
10. Rogers, 69.
11. ib. 70.
12. *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* 6 January 1875.
13. *Workmen's Club Journal* 22 July 1876.
14. CIU Annual Report 1878, 23.
15. *Workmen's Club Journal* 21 August 1875.
16. T. G. Ashplant, 'London Working Men's Clubs, 1875-1914' in E. and S. Yeo (eds.), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590-1914: explorations in the history of labour and leisure* (1981), 242.
17. *Workmen's Club Journal* 1 July 1876.
18. ib. 14 April 1877.
19. ib. 21 April 1877.
20. Ashplant, 244.
21. *Workmen's Club Journal* 17 February 1877.
22. ib. 9 September 1876.
23. ib. 27 November 1875.
24. ib. 11 and 18 December 1875.
25. ib. 25 December 1875.
26. ib. 8 September 1877.
27. ib. 20 October 1877. The whereabouts of 'Kimburton', if it existed, is unknown. At another club, Leno is recorded as having given a talk of the same title in a 'Buckinghamshire accent'.
28. CIU Annual Report, 1881.
29. 'William Morris' Socialist Diary' in *History Workshop Journal* 13 (1982), 45.
30. Rogers, 68/69.
31. Ashplant, 261.
32. *Workmen's Club Journal* 2 September 1876.
33. ib. 7 July 1877.
34. ib. 27 November 1875.
35. ib. 16 December 1876.
36. ib. 13 October 1877.
37. J. Taylor, *From Self-Help to Glamour: the Working Man's Club, 1860-1972* (1972), 52.
38. H. W. Lee, and E. Archbold, *Social Democracy in Britain* (1935), 101.
39. A. L. Morton and G. Tate, *The British Labour Movement 1770-1920* (1956), 175.
40. *Club and Institute Journal* 9 May 1891. A campaign for a ten hour limit on the working day, in 1847, was followed by the 'Nine Hours Movement' in the 1850s. In the 1890s the subsequent campaign for an eight-hour limit was taken up by the Second International.
41. Taylor, 50.
42. ib. 45/46.

## THE POOR LAW IN HACKNEY A CENTURY AGO

*Dick Hunter*

#### Introduction

This article examines indoor poor relief in the 1890s, when its purpose as deterrence was loosening. The focus is on Hackney workhouse and the adjoining infirmary, two institutions managed by Hackney Board of Guardians. Sources used include Local Government Board (LGB) Inspectors' reports, correspondence between the LGB and Hackney Board of Guardians, and the minutes of guardians' meetings. Particular attention is given to the relationship between these central and local boards, a relationship that was sometimes uneasy, as the LGB attempted to assert its authority on local guardians.

#### The poor and the system

The system for poor relief had been set up by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, with a central Poor Law Commission, and a structure of unions of parishes in England and Wales run by boards of guardians elected triennially by local landowners and ratepayers. The Local Government Board Act 1871 replaced the Commission with a central government department responsible for poor relief and public health. In 1899 there were some 821,096 paupers in England and Wales out of an estimated total population of 31.4 million; paupers thus representing 2.6 per cent of the population. 230,915 were

in receipt of indoor relief, 590,323 of outdoor relief. London unions spent a much higher proportion of their resources on indoor relief than many outside the capital.<sup>1</sup>

#### Overcrowding

An issue of contention between the LGB and local guardians was the quality of provision for the sick. Nicholas Herbert, an Assistant Inspector for the LGB, inspected the Hackney infirmary on a number of occasions. In 1893 he reported inadequate accommodation for the sick, and unsatisfactory female wards. He visited in 1895 and again in 1897, finding the Medical Superintendent on leave due to illness. 'The Guardians may now be willing...to give him the necessary assistance', wrote an exasperated Herbert. There were only two medical officers (dealing with cases arising from the workhouse too), who were also confronted by a large number of acute and accident cases due to the absence of a local general hospital.<sup>2</sup>

Herbert's visits gave him a detailed insight into conditions in the infirmary, and the extent to which the guardians were addressing its problems. In 1894 he found 249 male patients, despite certified accommodation for 196; that is 27 per cent overcrowding, a problem also experienced on female wards. There were manage-

ment problems, with no trained matron or superintendent nurse. Wards 5, 22 and 23 shared one lavatory for 30 patients, the lunatic ward was inadequate, and ventilators from the isolation ward adjoined the stable yard. Moreover there were no temperature records for the female wards, and Herbert feared the impact of winter cold on inmates.

The Government was clearly unhappy at the guardians' response to some of these criticisms:

The Local Government Board regrets the Guardians have deferred appointing an additional Assistant Medical Officer and an Assistant Matron...until the proposed additional Infirmary Pavilion is erected...the Board are incurring a grave responsibility in postponing the appointments of the Officers...<sup>4</sup>

W. A. Finch, architect, of 76 Finsbury Pavement, had drawn up a complete scheme for rebuilding the Infirmary as early as 1892. However, implementation was slow, with new blocks and pavilions built piecemeal, over the next 20 years, on existing and adjoining land.

Overcrowding was a feature of the workhouse too. When Herbert visited in 1897 he found 674 males (despite bed spaces for 540) comprising 115 able-bodied men, 499 old men and 60 boys. Amongst females there were 27 able-bodied women, 536 old women and 51 girls.<sup>5</sup>

**Definition and sub-division**

Classification of the poor remained a key feature of poor law administration. Indeed it was intensified, as illustrated by a letter from Hugh Owen, secretary to the LGB, to boards of guardians:

Guardians are directed...to further subdivide any of these classes with reference to the moral character or behaviour, or to the previous habits of the inmates...<sup>6</sup>

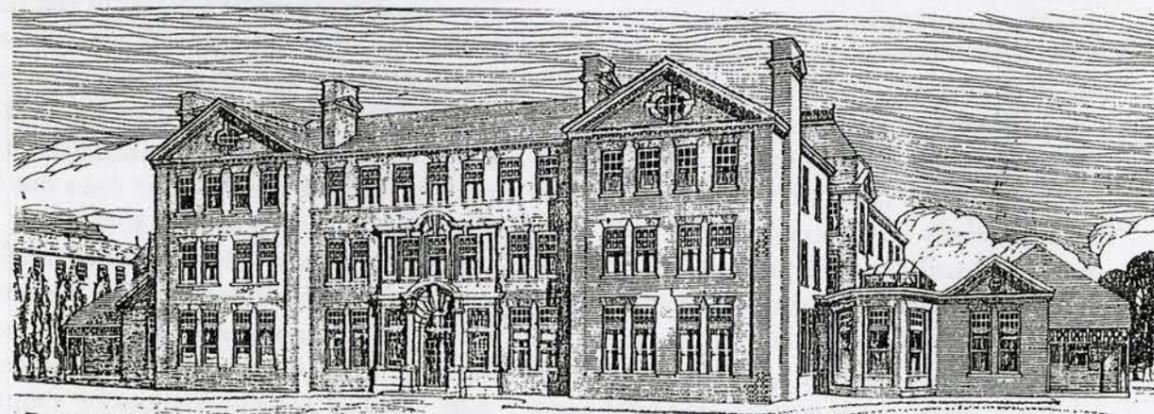
However, there was difficulty in defining the able-bodied. In 1880 inspectors had shown that many unions defined them as those not confined to bed. Many had handicaps that made them difficult to employ, such as deafness, lack of height, lameness, partial sight or chronic bronchitis.

This lack of clarity by the authorities - and disagreement over who was an appropriate recipient for indoor relief - led to occasional challenges by inmates. In 1896 John Thomas Wimble, aged 38 - naval pensioner 10669 -wrote to the LGB after being ordered to leave the workhouse:

As a consequence I walked about destitute for 2 days. As the action of the Guardians in this matter is clearly illegal I beg to bring this matter before your notice with a view to the practice of ordering poor people to wander about without food being discontinued.<sup>7</sup>

The guardians claimed they had sent Wimble to Hadleigh Farm Colony. He had left it, and was subsequently admitted to the workhouse. He was discharged as he was able-bodied, re-admitted, and discharged again. After considering the evidence the Board admonished Hackney Union:

...although Guardians clearly possess the power of discharging a man from the Workhouse, should they think fit to do so,...they would not be justified in adopting this course unless they had satisfied themselves that the able-bodied person is not destitute or has been offered work and declined it.<sup>8</sup>



HACKNEY INFIRMARY - NEW ADMINISTRATIVE BLOCK - HIGH STREET, HORNBYTON - N.E. - W. A. FINCH - ARCHITECT - 1903.

Finch's elevation for the 1903 administration block, designed as the centrepiece of an extensive building scheme



The stoneyard at the casual ward, early 20th century

**Vagrants**

When Herbert inspected Hackney casual wards in October 1892 he found all the male cells occupied. In the previous month, 45 men and seven women had been refused admission due to full wards. For those admitted there were tasks: two hundredweight of stone to be broken, or one pound of unbeaten oakum (two pounds of beaten) to be picked, for those staying one night. For those staying longer the task was seven hundredweight of stone, or four pounds of unbeaten oakum.

Everard Wyvill, a journalist posing as a pauper in 1909, recorded his efforts to break a half ton of granite:

I smote with all my strength... I made no impression whatever. Similarly with pounding the stone: ...blisters made an appearance, and these, breaking, the chafings gave way to blood... Other men were affected in much the same way.<sup>10</sup>

Oakum-picking is described by Mary Higgs, secretary of the Ladies Committee of Oldham

Workhouse, who also disguised herself as a pauper:

A number of old ropes, some of them tarred, some knotted, are cut into lengths; you have to twist and unravel them inch by inch... After two hours I had perhaps done a quarter of a pound, and my fingers were getting sore, while the pile before me seemed to diminish little.<sup>11</sup>

However the LGB was unable to enforce the task quota, as inmates were not always suited to the work, due to age, lack of strength or incapacity; and there was variation between unions as to the size of broken stone required. The LGB desire to secure common practice merely resulted in discussion with unions, suggesting a limit to LGB influence in some circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

**The 'test workhouse'**

Hackney Union was aware of inadequate casual ward accommodation and purchased a site on Gainsborough Road in 1893. A large 'test workhouse' - one designed to deter the able-bodied

ied from seeking relief - was planned. Only the three-story, T-shaped casual ward block was built (1898-1904), providing room for 62 men, and 44 women and children:

On the ground floor were separate male and female entrance lobbies, reception wards and bathrooms, attendants' rooms and an office. In a rear wing, twenty-two double sleeping and working cells opened off a central corridor. The upper floors housed accommodation for attendants, stores, workrooms and more cells, including some double cells for women and children.<sup>13</sup>

### *The paupers' diet*

Diet was an aspect of infirmary and workhouse life where the LGB was highly prescriptive. Diets were prepared for different classes of inmate, and local unions were expected to follow these to the letter. The motivation was in part a concern for the health of inmates, as well as a desire to minimise waste, highlighted by a LGB survey of meat and bread waste in London union infirmaries, which revealed great waste in Hackney.

Dietaries provided for different standards of nutritive requirements according to seven classes: able-bodied men and women, aged and infirm men and women, and children nine to sixteen, five to nine, and two to five. Forms were prepared by the LGB for the preparation of many foods including broth, oatmeal porridge, and potato pie. The dietary for breakfast in 1896 shows able-bodied men allocated six ounces of bread and one and a half pints of oatmeal porridge. Able-bodied women had five ounces, and one pint. For the aged, infirm and imbeciles there was five ounces of bread for men (four ounces for women), half an ounce of margarine and one pint of cocoa.<sup>14</sup>

The LGB wanted to see ingredient tables and 'meat in the different foods...should be specified whether with or without bone and that skim milk (sic) and skim cheese (if given) be so specified.' When Hackney sought approval for altering the formula for the preparation of tea and cocoa for children over five, the LGB judged there would, as a result, be a considerable deficiency in the milk allowance and, thus, nutritional value. Sanction was refused.<sup>15</sup>

Alternative meals, and any difference between winter and summer dietary, had also to be speci-

fied by unions. LGB interest, however, went beyond formulas, and sometimes aimed to ensure that meals were a pleasurable experience. For example, Dr Downes, their Inspector, reported on the Hackney workhouse school diet:

I drew attention to the (Visiting) Committee as to the unsatisfactory way in which the children's dinner was served. It consisted of beef, bread and potatoes all of good quality but cold or nearly so before the children were able to eat the food... due first to carving the food in the kitchen..., to the service of the food before the children come into the hall, and thirdly to the long musical function and tediously prolonged grace which was gone through. The Committee promised attention to the matter.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst guardians were empowered to fix the amount and nature of the food, in practice local discretion was severely limited. For example, when the workhouse master reported a large number of inmates refusing to eat fish dinners, the union decided to replace them with boiled bacon. LGB consent was sought, but not given, pending a review of dietaries.<sup>17</sup>

The LGB was vigilant in ensuring that diet classification was maintained. On 16 April 1895 its assistant secretary wrote to Hackney Poor Law Union concerning a list of inmates receiving an extra labour diet:

...with the exception perhaps of those inmates who are designated 'foul washers' the workhouse in no case fulfills conditions contemplated in Circular 15 April 1868. Diet is intended for able-bodied or infirm doing work involving physical exertion, or is irksome or disagreeable. It should be given exceptionally. The Local Government Board would not assent to include in the proposed amended Dietary Tables of one for inmates engaged in extra labour.<sup>18</sup>

The rationale for the Board's position is revealed by Dr Downes in 1893:

...any allowance for extra diet merely as an inducement to work, or as a reward for labour, is greatly to be deprecated. Experience has shown that allowances of this kind are productive of mischievous consequences and... should rarely if ever be necessary.<sup>19</sup>

### *School-age children*

The poor law imperative to maintain different classes of inmate, thereby preventing the less desirable from influencing others, presented a problem for management in relation to children. Pressure on accommodation in 1897 resulted in extra beds placed in wards, and men



*The casual ward in Gainsborough Road, photographed in 1935*

sleeping in dormitories intended for boys only. Herbert, inspecting provision on 16 March, noted there was no means of separating children from adult inmates, and that there was a need for more suitable accommodation for children, of whom there were 77 of school age in the workhouse.<sup>20</sup>

This was not a new problem, as four years earlier Herbert had made a similar point. In 1896 the guardians considered setting up children's cottages to remove children from the workhouse, and subsequently agreed to LGB conditions regarding purchase of houses for children, adjacent to the superintendent's house in Sydney (now Kenworthy) Road.

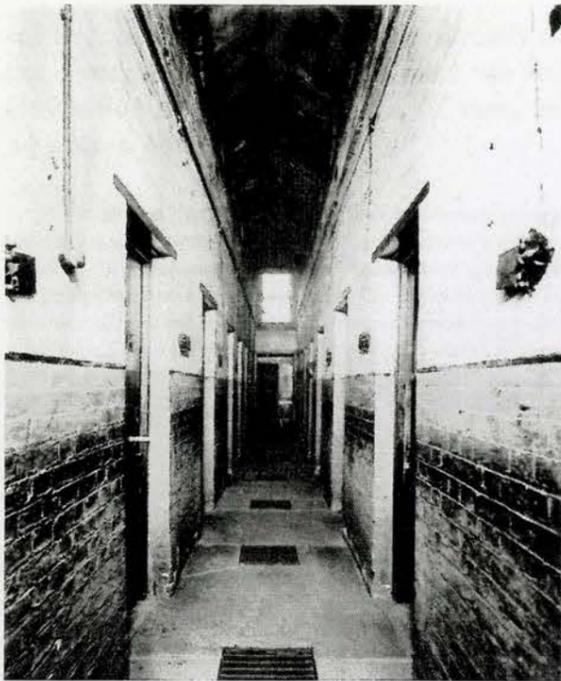
From 1894, the guardians had sent children to the London School Board school in Sydney Road. Infectious diseases at the workhouse led to intermissions in attendance, though this diminished when cottage homes opened on the workhouse site. Children from these went to school on their own; those from the workhouse were taken by aged paupers. Workhouse staff noted a great improvement in children's manners and behaviour on attending the Board

school. Teachers, however, objected to the presence of children of the 'ins and outs' - the term applied to those using the workhouse sporadically, often reflecting seasonal employment patterns. Nonetheless, by April 1897, 45 of the 77 school age children at the workhouse were attending the Board school, thereby integrating with children from the neighbourhood, a trend accelerated by debate arising from the Poor Law Schools Report of 1896.<sup>21</sup>

The needs of children were pressed by national campaigners such as Louisa Twining and Florence Davenport-Hill;<sup>22</sup> and the LGB wrote to the local Board to establish the position of individual children. For example, Hackney guardians were asked in 1895 about Emily B. Farley, whose emigration to Canada had been authorised by the LGB in 1892. Was she actually sent there? If so, her address was required, a condition for the LGB approving emigration of orphan and deserted pauper children.<sup>23</sup>

### *'Aged and deserving poor'*

In 1892 there were 205,045 persons aged 65 or over in receipt of outdoor relief in England



Interior of the casual ward

and Wales, with a further 63,352 receiving indoor relief.<sup>24</sup> By the mid 1890s there was political pressure to reconsider classification of the aged and infirm. In 1896 Hugh Owen, secretary to the LGB, wrote to all boards of guardians:

Those persons whose circumstances have compelled them to enter the workhouse, but who are known to be of good conduct and to have previously led moral and respectable lives, should be separated from those whose habits of speech or for other reasons are likely to cause them discomfort.<sup>25</sup>

Owen recommended these inmates of each sex have a separate day-room. There should be special facilities for friends to visit, and more freedom to leave the workhouse during the day, when dress should not be distinctive or conspicuous. They should be able to attend their own church on Sundays; and consideration should be given to replacing dormitories with separate cubicles.<sup>26</sup> The Hackney board referred Owen's letter to its building and workhouse committees, the latter noting the subject was already receiving consideration. A muted response.<sup>27</sup>

Occasional challenges to classifications proved a problem for the Guardians. For example, when the workhouse committee recommended inmates engaged in 'useful work' be allowed half

an ounce of tobacco each week, their response was lukewarm. They decided the privilege should only be extended to those over 60, then referred the matter for further consideration.<sup>28</sup>

In 1899 the Government accepted the recommendation of the Select Committee on Cottage Homes that separate accommodation be provided for the 'aged and deserving' poor, but failed to provide funds to implement the recommendation. For some workhouses - there were 170 with less than 50 inmates - this required new buildings, involving unpopular costs for ratepayers. Generally, the smaller the union the less likely it was to have special provision for any particular class of pauper, except perhaps children. And those responsible for poor law administration in England and Wales were frequently forced to defend its cost: £10 million in 1899, including two million pounds on maintaining the poor law estate, principally workhouses and infirmaries, but also schools and farm colonies.<sup>29</sup>

As an alternative, guardians were urged by the LGB to grant adequate out-relief to enable the aged poor to live decently without resort to the workhouse. For those remaining in the workhouse

guardians should form a special class of inmates of 65 years and upwards (who) by reason of their moral character or behaviour or previous habits...are sufficiently deserving to be members of the class.<sup>30</sup>

These should enjoy additional privileges, including a locker; though this would be open to inspection. Supply of tobacco, dry tea and sugar should be compulsory. There should be more space available to them, which could be provided, if necessary, by moving children to cottage and scattered homes, or by boarding-out and emigration.<sup>31</sup>

This process gained further momentum with the appointment of a Select Committee on the Aged and Deserving Poor ('ADP') in 1898

to consider and report on the best means of improving the condition of the ADP, and of providing for those of them who are helpless and infirm; and to inquire whether any of the Bills dealing with Old Age Pensions, and submitted to Parliament during the present session, can with advantage be adopted, with or without amendment.<sup>32</sup>

Guardians were asked whether they would favour altering the poor law for those over 65 'deserting without immoral or unworthy conduct on their part'. Would they favour either being given authority to construct and maintain special infirmaries or old age homes for the aged poor of good character; or paying for the board of such aged persons (with their consent) in voluntary institutions or private families?

The Association of Poor Law Authorities replied that a system of old age pensions be established, whilst individual boards of guardians gave a variety of responses. Hackney, along with many, failed to reply.

The Select Committee took evidence from a wide range of individuals and organisations including trades unions and friendly societies, and from William Knolly, Chief Inspector and Assistant Secretary to the LGB. Knolly, a career civil servant embedded in poor law administration, advocated grafting assessment and allocation of pensions onto the existing poor law structure, an extension of outdoor relief (though few unions allowed enough for the aged to live comfortably at home). He recommended local guardians form committees to receive applications from the aged and deserving poor, such as

a 65 year old man who hadn't received relief from the poor rates for himself or his family through any fault of his own, and if he had led a reasonably respectable and thrifty life then he should be considered deserving.

Knolly admitted his definition was vague, and that guardians would enjoy wide discretion under his proposal. However, he felt their local knowledge would prove useful and, where this was insufficient, for example in urban areas, local charities could assist in assessing claimants. A central government grant for poor law administration, including pensions, was his preferred funding mechanism: guardian pension committees would not be tempted to maximise numbers on the pensions list in order to relieve the rates, and (he might have added) there would be a cap on the number of approved pension claims.

Nonetheless, Knolly saw a need for workhouse or infirmary for those with no home, noting that an increasing number of unions were acting on

sustained LGB advice in treating the aged and deserving poor as first class inmates with privileges. His examples included Brownlow Hill workhouse, Liverpool, where

...a series of small rooms [are] set apart for the accommodation of well behaved old women whose conduct in the workhouse is known to matron as satisfactory. There are 14 small rooms, each containing three old women. Two larger rooms contain five each, and an adjoining ward contains 17. Occupants of all these wards have privileges: dry tea and other groceries served out to them weekly, and they can prepare evening meals in their own time... Each room has a fireplace.

Knolly was attracted by a uniform system amongst unions, a long standing LGB aspiration. For example, he sought to secure compulsory classification of the aged and deserving poor within workhouses, and was frustrated when guardians wanted authority to exercise discretion; for example, Fulham guardians who sought to diet their aged inmates by character, a request refused by the LGB as there were existing dietaries for the aged and deserving poor.<sup>33</sup>

After hearing much evidence, and partly persuaded by the Danish system, the Select Committee concluded that it was practicable to create a system of old age pensions for the United Kingdom.

### Conclusion

This article has explored the relationship between Hackney guardians and the Local Government Board in a period of change in poor law administration. It has illustrated how the Board sought to influence the attitudes and actions of the guardians, but has also underlined the limits to that influence.

Progress was slow in some respects - for example, there were less than one thousand aged poor housed in new homes in England and Wales by 1908 - yet the pace of change accelerated, with increasing recognition that poverty was less to do with moral delinquency, and more about low wages, irregular work and large families. Old age pensions were introduced in 1908, and national insurance in 1911, 'beginning the break-up of the Poor Law by removing large parts of the problems of old age, sickness and unemployment from its clutches'.<sup>34</sup>

Further research might investigate the nature and extent of poverty in Hackney - which Hackney Board of Guardians were responsible for attempting to ameliorate - in the late Victorian period. This will be aided by access to the Charles Booth archive, a unique source comprising poverty maps and survey notebooks, which include interviews with W. L. Beurle, vice chairman of the Hackney guardians, along with senior staff such as the clerk to the guardians, and workhouse master, in 1897-98.<sup>35</sup>

#### Notes

1. Parliamentary Papers (PP), Poor Law 30: Sessions 1898-1900: Report of Select Committee on the Adult and Deserving Poor, 1899: evidence of William Knolly.
2. PRO MH/12 7193.
3. LMA HA/BG/177/26 (LGB correspondence with Hackney Union).
4. ib. 29 November 1895.
5. PRO MH/12 7193 16 March 1897.
6. LMA HA/BG/177/26 29 January 1895.
7. LMA HA/BG/177/27.
8. ib. 11 June 1896.
9. PRO MH/32 101.
10. quoted in J. Jacobs 'Drastic Measures for Sturdy Loafers': Brighton Guardians and the able-bodied men in the workhouse 1909-14', in *Sussex Archeological Collections* 128 (1990), 225-242.
11. ib.
12. PRO MH/32 101.

13. A test workhouse was 'a workhouse with a harsh regime, usually involving long hours of solitary, tedious labour, to deter the able bodied from seeking relief': K. Morrison, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor Law Buildings in England* (1899).
14. LMA HA/BG/127/27.
15. ib. 16 May 1895.
16. PRO MH/12 /7193 13 March 1897.
17. LMA HA/BG/067 30 January 1895.
18. LMA HA/BG/177/26.
19. ib. 8 July 1895, enclosing memorandum from Dr Downes, 'Suggestions for the preparation of Workhouse Diets', October 1893.
20. PRO MH/12/7193.
21. PRO MH/32/101.
22. *The Times*, 11 August 1900, 10e (letter from Louisa Twining); 16 August 1900, 6c (letter from Florence Davenport-Hill).
23. LMA HA/BG/177/26 3 October 1895.
24. PP (see note 1 above), 371-91 (TUP pagination).
25. H. Owen, letter to Boards of Guardians 31 July 1896.
26. ib.
27. LMA HA/BG/177/27.
28. LMA HA/BG/70.
29. PP, see note 1.
30. letter from S. B. Provis, LGB secretary, to Guardians, 4 August 1900.
31. ib.
32. PP, see note 1.
33. ib.
34. F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain 1830-1900*, 1988.
35. For a guide to the Booth archive see S. Donnelly, 'Mapping London's Rich and Poor' in *Ancestors*, August/September 2002. See also [www.lse.ac.uk/booth](http://www.lse.ac.uk/booth).

## FRETS, FAKES AND FIBREBOARD: the last years of furniture-making in Hoxton

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*Jack Whitehead*

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#### *A web of small workshops*

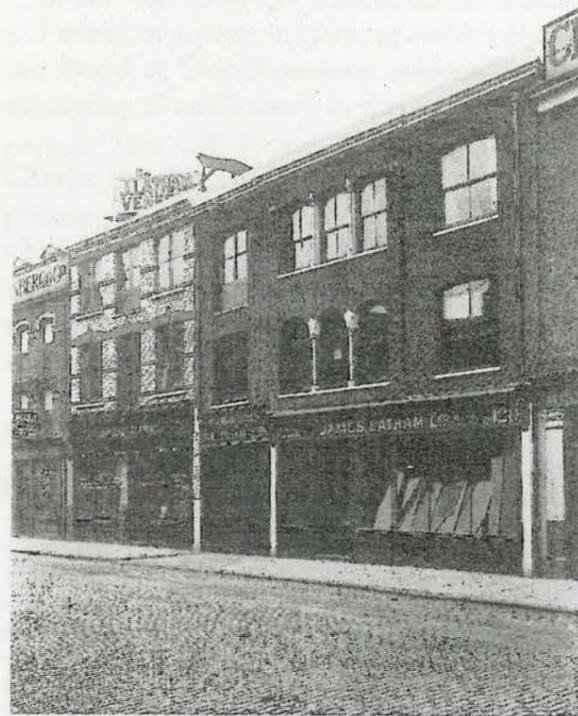
In the 1930s I was a student at Shoreditch Training College, in Pitfield Street, Hoxton. (After the Second World War the college became part of Brunel College and moved to Egham, far away from its first roots.) We were training to become general teachers with special interests in woodwork, metalwork and the arts. It was natural therefore for the college to start in the very centre of the woodworking district of London.

For years Hoxton Square and Curtain Road had made furniture for all the big companies. Heal's, Maples, and other firms which had started in the Soho area, had their own workshops, but most bought in large quantities of furniture made in dozens of small workshops. Many of these were clustered in Hoxton. The trade was an extraordinary complex of larger and smaller firms, supported by a web of individual craftsmen working in single rooms and converted church galleries. In a street of ordinary houses there could be half a dozen craftsmen working in basements and

front rooms, each producing specialist items, or carrying out a particular process. An interlocking ants' nest of large and small producers.

In Buttesland Street, in the same street as the college, one could stand on the pavement outside and watch a wood-turner in a sub-basement, his head level with one's feet, the floor covered in shavings, a rack of turning tools in front of him and the fiftieth table leg of the day spinning on the lathe. His skill and speed were a delight to watch.

Round the corner, in Bache's Street, was a small factory in a two-storey house. Four heavy woodworking benches, two to a room, with a never-ending series of pieces of furniture passing through. Never a complete piece to be seen; small batch production. Parts of six bookcases; four tables; three sideboards, as the orders came in from the shops. By the 1930s the Art Deco designs were popular, jazzy and veneered in light colours on the new blockboard and thick plywood, but much was still built, as it had been in Ed-



Latham's, veneer merchants, 120-1 Curtain Road

wardian times, in solid timber, with hand-cut dovetails.

In one factory on Hoxton Square a lady's knee-hole dressing table happened to be standing by the front entrance. It was kidney-shaped, beautifully veneered in figured birch, and would have been at home in Mayfair. As we were talking the manager casually took out the two drawers and fitted them in upside down. Not only did the drawers fit upside down, but they could be swapped with each other and still fit upside down. This standard of hand craftsmanship is almost unbelievable. No wonder this particular piece was quietly on show.

It stood on a floor consisting of sawdust. The original floor had collapsed under the weight of the machines, so that they stood on clay and shavings. In these conditions, top class furniture was made.

Work rooms were so cramped, and the air so full of dust, that women had to French-polish the furniture on the pavement outside. French polish from large bowls was almost thrown on the wood and spread rapidly with a 'rabbit's foot' of folded cloth and cotton wool, to produce a high shining surface. In Italy, Stradivarius waited

for the correct season of the year before laying on thin layers of varnish and allowing each coat to dry over weeks. His violins hung from the olive trees like exotic fruit, slowly ripening in the sun. Time and the seasons did not wait for the Hoxton polishers. In the open air, with the trams rattling past, the polish was spread thick as butter to give a surprisingly lustrous finish.

In the next street to this factory was a wood carver with a wife and two children and the top floor let to two lodgers. The back room was a carving shop overlooking a garden full of rabbit hutches. His wife fed the household on rabbits, which were bedded out in wood chips, so that when one lifted up a rabbit, its fur was speckled red with mahogany shavings. For a few pence each day the greengrocer supplied boxes of broken vegetables for the rabbits, and yet another small economic circle had been formed.

Sacks of sawn and partly-worked timber were delivered to the house to be carved as barometer cases, feet for tables, or any of a dozen other parts for standard pieces of furniture. The carver, with his rack of gouges and chisels in front of him, rapidly carved his familiar shapes, cutting so confidently and cleanly that the finished work needed no more than a burnishing with a handful of shavings to be ready for the polisher.

In the shop windows in Old Street and Curtain Road were distorted bundles of wood veneer, paper thin and cockled in every direction. Here were the fancy veneers cut from the crotches of furniture trees, or the irregular burr growths which spoil the outlines of trees but yield such beautiful grain. Their irregularity destroys all strength, so that if they are handled roughly they collapse into fragments, but wetted and glued to a stable wooden base and the irregularities smoothed out, all their marvellous grain is revealed.

**A factory in a garden**

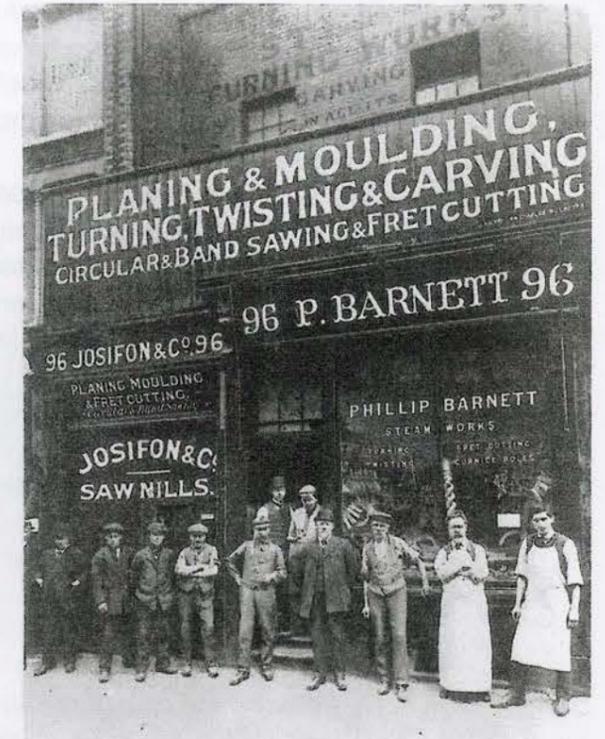
Nearby, two brothers worked together in a small factory built in what had once been the garden, behind a small three-storey house. To reach them one walked through the tunnel-back entry and into a dark building. All along the tunnel-sides were newly delivered pieces of timber

marked out for sawing, and sacks of finished work ready for collection. Inside, in the midst of an orderly confusion, were the two machines on which all this activity depended.

One brother, silent and reserved, owned a large fret-sawing machine which stood seven feet tall in one corner. During several years I never drew more than a nod from him. The second brother, completely different - short, chatty, full of self-confidence and bonhomie - ran the business.

He owned a French spindle machine which could cut wooden mouldings to any section. A steel table about a metre square had a vertical spindle in the centre which turned at a phenomenal speed. The spindle had a vertical slot and a strong clamping-bolt at the top. Pieces of steel, filed to the desired shape, were bolted securely in the slot with the required moulding shape protruding. When a piece of wood was run along the spindle, the projecting tool cut away the shape in a shower of shavings. All kinds of mouldings could be cut, but the pie-crust edgings to occasional tables were typical.

The process of manufacture was a routine which was repeated time and again. A cabinet-maker received an order for a dozen occasional tables with pie-crust edges, on turned central columns and tripod feet. The pie-crust was to stand up all round the table as a decorative safety edge. It would be sawn to intricate curves from short lengths of wood, moulded, and then glued to the table tops. The cabinet-maker would start the process and be in control, making and assembling the tables in batches, but much of the work was sub-contracted out. To start, the cabi-



Philip Barnett and staff, 96 Curtain Road

net maker opened out four pieces of burr veneer, cut them together and glued them to a thin wooden board to make a table-top. On his wall hung bundles of zinc templates of many shapes. He selected the sweeping curves for a section of pie-crust edge, and marked it out time after time on a thin mahogany board, so close together that at some places there was only just room for the saw to run. Profit and loss depended on the miserly use of his timber.

The mahogany board would arrive, ready marked out, at the tunnel-entrance to the saw mill. The silent brother sawed it into pieces and his brother moulded the inside edge of each piece. Put in a sack and left outside, the edges were collected silently by a young lad and taken back to the cabinet-maker, who glued the pieces round his veneered table tops and returned them to the saw mill. The fret saw cut round the outside edge of the table which was then spindled to a smooth curve.

At the same time, the turner had shaped a dozen central pillars and the carver had shaped and carved the splay feet for the tripod stands. Here there were no bold 18th century ball and claw feet, cut out of expensive, thick timber.

COMMERCIAL SAW MILLS.  
ESTABLISHED 1869.

**P. BARNETT,**

General Turner, Twister . . .  
Architectural and Art Carver . . .  
Cornice Piece Manufacturer. . .

96, Curtain Road, Shoreditch,

WOOD LETTERS cut to any size. LONDON, E.C.  
FRET WORK in all its Branches.  
ESTIMATES submitted Free. The Trade and Country Dealers supplied.

These were delicate feet skimmed out of thin boards, and cut to save every inch. When carved, the sack of frets was returned to the cabinet maker, who put all the pieces together and probably polished the tables too.

This was typical small-scale batch production, where nobody owned more than one machine; workshops were converted rooms in old houses, and the capital outlay on each batch of furniture was minimal. Nobody had capital for more, because master and man existed from Friday to Friday. It was an interlocking fabric of work which gave each person a chance to use his specialist ability and make a living. It implied great personal skill, reliability so that others were not kept waiting, low rents and perpetual insecurity.

Many of these Curtain Road reproductions have now acquired a rich patina and a specious history which can fool some collectors. Sapele mahogany is called Cuban, and cheap tables go for high prices. They were not made as fakes, merely had it thrust on them, but some pieces were created behind closed doors and these doors had seven locks.

### Faking

Behind the world of reproduction furniture was a more mysterious world, revealed only by nods and winks. Going past an ordinary-looking house with grimy curtains, a cabinet maker said,

"There's a man who believes in seven locks."  
"Seven locks?"

"You'll never get your nose in there. He keeps his work to himself and makes for special customers."

Another man told me of secret processes of 'ageing' furniture, straining chair joints and producing artificial wear by rubbing handfuls of chains across; bleaching and darkening; burying pieces in compost heaps, or storing them for six months in worm-infested barns. "A few woodworm holes put up the price nicely." Many of the people who made the furniture lived in Hoxton and believed in seven locks.

In the 1920s there was a famous case involving forged woodwork. In *The Gentle Art of Faking Furniture*, Herbert Cescinsky describes how he ap-

peared as prosecution witness and holds up to ridicule the sublime self confidence of a judge not fit to adjudicate at a jumble sale. An American customer, a Mr Schrager, had purchased, in good faith, panelling said to have come from Royston Hall, in Hertfordshire, furniture which had never even heard of the 18th century. He had paid £1,972 for a magnificent room of oak panelling. (Multiply that by 50 and the room would have cost £100,000 at today's prices.) Not only was it faked, but there never had been such a place as Royston Hall. At Royston there had been no more than a barn, yet it supplied America with authenticated furniture for years.<sup>1</sup> It was calculated that in the 1920s, more 'genuine' 18th century furniture was supplied to America by British auction houses and dealers than was made in the whole of the 18th century.

A few pieces of panelling, of doubtful age, found in an old dairy at Royston, had expanded themselves into the complete panelling and doors of a very large room. In the Referees' Court, before Sir Edward Pollock, the actual maker was put in the witness box and the drawings from which he had worked were produced in court. Yet in his judgment, Sir Edward said "The only point about it was, was it Elizabethan? Undoubtedly it was Elizabethan and undoubtedly it was a most beautiful thing." He said it was Elizabethan although the man who had made it had been in the witness box in front of him.

Cescinsky also recalled that six complete rooms of panelling came out of a yeoman's cottage in the Midlands, so small that not even the smallest of the six would have fitted into the largest room in the cottage.

The borderline between legitimate reproduction furniture, made openly for the market, and the world of fakes, was unclear. Some pieces sold in the great auction houses were genuine pieces, untouched and clean. Some were plain, country pieces which had been enhanced with extra carving, or with planted-on fretted decoration. Marriages had been arranged between the top of one piece of furniture and the base of another. Wooden tea-trays had grown legs to become occasional tables, while large chests of draw-



Hoxton Square, 1921

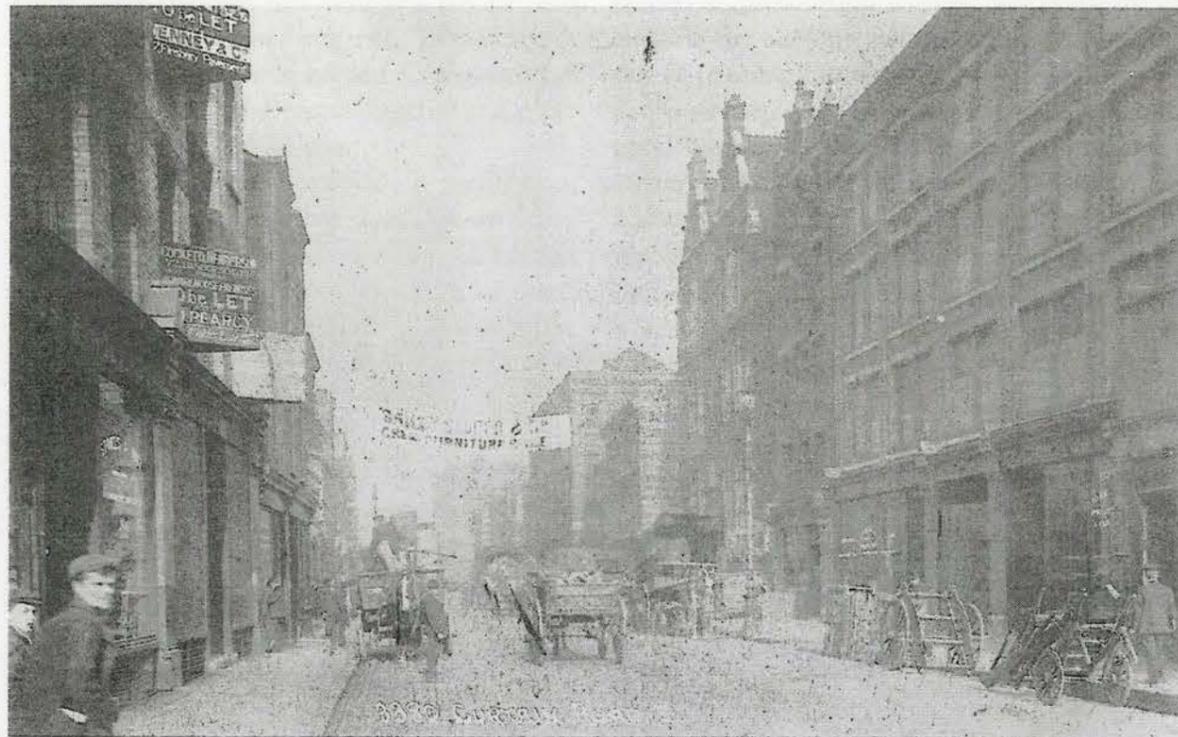
ers had been shrunk into smaller ones which would fit more comfortably into a modern flat, and so become more valuable.

The quality varied wildly. Blatant fakes, stained with ink and scuffed with wire wool to suggest use, and still showing traces of the ripple-marks of modern machine planing, stood next to pieces of high quality craftsmanship which could be detected only by experts who knew their timbers, and the dates when each variety of mahogany arrived in England. It was a world in which one needed two sets of eyes and a closed wallet. The pleasure was to stand back and watch the tall stories weave and twist in the air above as the dealers lied to each other. Nothing was as it seemed. Hoxton was a centre for this illegal trade, and some houses were mysterious, with no known owners and a clandestine, secret life. If you wanted a flint arrow head, when they were fashionable, in the 1880s, you went to Stoke Newington, where they were made, with a bradawl, from genuine local flints.<sup>2</sup> If you had an American buyer in the 1920s, you ferreted round in Curtain Road. There was even a phrase: 'a Curtain Road antique'.

As students, we had no money, so there was no point in imposing on us. Nobody spoke to us directly, but sometimes people were indiscreet, saying more than they had intended. Two students who had artistic ability earned good money painting tin trays. Plain stamped metal trays, no more elaborate than baking tins, were painted in batches, each man painting round the other so that the process became a production line. Because it was done so rapidly, there was a sweep and vitality to the final result, simple and direct, that would have been lost had each tray been painted separately. Then the boss disappeared with the trays into his inner room. When they next appeared the trays had aged a hundred years. How it was done they never learnt. Trade secrets were trade secrets. There was a story of another man who had signed the pledge never to drink, not because of any religious or moral qualms, but in case he became drunk and gave away the sole secret by which he earned his living.

### After the war

During World War 2 the furniture district of



Curtain Road in 1920

Hoxton was devastated by bombs. Timber yards blazed readily. As they were bombed, the larger woodworking companies moved to new factory sites outside London to build Mosquitoes and other aircraft. Small operators were called up for military service, and the complicated webs of small batch production were broken. One of the wartime catch phrases was "You can't get the wood". Small batch production faded away.

At the end of the War there were still local timber yards, but soon they began to close. Most had large saws for reducing trees to boards. A few had veneer-cutting knives. Huge blades which could slice a trunk into forty veneers an inch, or peel off a continuous layer from a tree trunk like drawing toilet paper from a roll. What use were they in 1945? Hardly any timber was being imported. What did come in was low-grade softwood which, ten years before, would have been used for packing-cases. There were no fancy hardwoods. No crotches of mahogany trees to be made into the glorious flowered veneers we now see only in stately homes. No fancy burrs. What use were the veneer knives?

The timber yard lands were far too valuable for housing to be set aside for drying timber, or

for obsolete veneer cutters. One yard would hold a housing estate. Plot the timber yards on a 1939 map and you will find housing today.

By the time of the 1987 hurricane, when Hampstead Heath was littered with fallen trees, there were no local saws to cut up the timber. A mountain of broken timber accumulated on the car park, to stand for months as a dangerous playground. In the end it was sold to be made, in Wales, into yet more faceless chip board.

#### Fibreboard

The first I heard of this change was in 1958. Travelling home in a railway train, I had the following exchange with a bewildered furniture salesman:

"I can't make head or tail of it. It's not like any furniture you ever saw. More like shop fittings. Large flat surfaces and pieces of glass. It's the sort of thing you would find as a fish counter. There are wide sheets of material with a hard, shiny surface. You don't polish it. You wipe it clean with a wet rag. And inside, it's just wood shavings."

"Wood shavings?"

"You wouldn't believe it. It's just sawdust made solid and hard with a glue and on both sides is a hard skin. A shiny surface with a walnut, or maple, or teak wood pattern on it."

"Pattern?"

"It's not a veneer - not real wood - it's paper with a printed wood-pattern printed on it and a thick polish on top. The pattern is repeated every few feet. It doesn't even feel like wood. It feels more like glass."

"How is it jointed?"

"There are no joints. You can't cut joints in Shredded Wheat. Dovetail joints and mortises have gone out of the window. New furniture will be just a set of boards pegged together. There'll be no place for any respectable cabinet-maker any longer."

With those words, he pronounced the end of a craft. In future the vast majority of furniture would be made from an artificial material and the grain of individual boards, cut from individual trees, each piece different from its neighbour, the subject of hundreds of years of craft tradition handed down from generation to generation, would become a lost art. From that time on, cabinet making would be practised by a few specialists for the very rich, or as a minor hobby for amateurs.

Timber is different from other materials. It is alive, not inert. Lay a wide board on the ground, and, by morning, the edges will have curled upwards. Turn it over and the water in the wood will sink and stretch the lower side. Up will go the edges and the board will curl the other way. Water does not sink through steel or glass. They are stable, while wood is alive. Always moving. When the timbers of the old London Bridge were salvaged they were cut into boards, a beautiful silver grey in colour. Within a few days they had warped like new wood. Always on the move: the art of the cabinet maker, developed over centuries, has been to control this movement.

A year or so later an Australian engineer, over here to extend his experience, was working in a factory making hardboard. He told me how proud he was to make such a useful product out of broken branches, sawdust and other waste wood products. He was supplying a real need.

Good timber was unobtainable. He exulted in the stability, its uniformity, its reliability.

When I said, "Boredom", he took it as a facetious remark and went on to explain how he cut moving sheets of hardboard into panels with square edges, by cutting the flowing river at an angle. His pleasure was in the engineering. Aesthetics had no place in his world.

And he was right. There was no wood. He was supplying a need. Lebus, a huge woodworking factory in Tottenham, was once so large that it had its own railway lines for the delivery of timber, but after the war was reduced to making furniture from old bomb-boxes. These boxes, like those I had last seen on Italian airfields during the War, were being brought back to factories which had made them, cut up and re-glued into furniture timber - a very expensive and time-consuming process. There was no profit in that, yet it was all they could do in the face of the wood shortage. Soon Lebus, designed for another age, closed.

It was in this atmosphere that hardboards and fibre boards sprung into use, and the traditional furniture industry was killed.

#### Notes

1. H. Cescinsky, *The Gentle Art of Faking Furniture* (1931), 55, 73, 153.
2. G. Worthington Smith, *Man: the Primeval Savage* (1894); J. Whitehead, *The Growth of Stoke Newington* (1983); K. Sugden and K. Tyler, *Under Hackney: the archaeological story* (2002).

## JIM WARREN, STREET SWEEPER EXTRAORDINAIRE

*A. J. Root*

### *A working life*

I have written about my life during the 1930s in the last issue of *Hackney History*. In this article I would like to say something about my mother's family, the Warrens, and how they lived. And especially about her brother Jim Warren, who was on the Hackney Council all his life. He was an extraordinary man. He lived for many years at 70 Ballance Road, in Homerton, in the borough of Hackney.<sup>1</sup>

Jim was in the first war.<sup>2</sup> He wasn't a labourer in the Labour Corps. He was a batman, which gave him a bit of status, you see. After the war, his son Len says Carrie his mother told him, Jim decided to go into service. He was married. He had an appointment to go to see a Lord or a Lady, according to Len, for a job of some sort. I don't know what. Unfortunately - that's luck or fate - he had a terrible tooth-ache. Len says it came on suddenly, as it does. And 'is face swelled up so much he just couldn't go. He was in terrible pain. You couldn't get much done about it in those days. So he just didn't go. He just became a worker, on the Council. He was never a clerical worker. He was a street sweeper.

Jim worked for the Hackney Borough Council for 43 years. He was a street cleaner. They

gave him a watch when he retired - which his grandson has got now. He worked for the Council for 30 shillings a week as a manual labourer. And he was eventually a foreman street cleanser. At one point he was even described as a library assistant! That's the occupation given on his son James's birth certificate in October 1915, when they were living at 6 Sedgwick Street, Homerton. I don't know how that came about!

Amazing bloke, Jim. By 1920, when his daughter Rose was born, he's described as a 'labourer, Hackney Borough Council; (ex-Army)'. At the end of his working life he was an attendant in the toilets on Clapton Common. Spotless. He had it so clean you could eat your dinner off 'em! On his death certificate it says 'retired street cleanser'. That's what he was. For forty years he did that. He was the public convenience attendant, part-time, at the pond at Upper Clapton Road, when he retired. And he kept that beautifully clean. He used to sweep it and wash it, and it was like a really posh grand hotel. He wouldn't let you in until it was clean, and he kept it that way too. Impeccable.

But he had his own side-line all the years he was working for the Council. This was his second-hand furniture business.<sup>3</sup> He somehow com-

*Jim Warren, streetsweeper*

bined it with his Council job. I loved him. He was a good man. He was a character all his own.

Well, he was a proper working-class man, Jim was. Always wore a cap. Never wore anything else but a cap. Well, 'course they all wore a cap in those days. I mean, if you wore a trilby, you were a grade up. And, 'course, the uncanny part of it was when you saw a man with a trilby you automatically respected him more than what you did with a man with a cap, though you didn't know the reason why you did it. It's quite strange, really. They all used to touch their forelock. They all did when the foreman used to come round. Jim used to say "yes, sir", "no sir," touch his cap. All that kind of thing. All that went on. And the under-dog *was* the under-dog. And 'e 'ad to do it for respect. If not, you'd get one round the legs with a walking cane. They nearly all carried 'em - like the Army - they nearly all carried walking canes. With a silver knob on the top of it. And they used to give you one with it!

### *Costermongers and horse-dealers*

The Warrens were total tinkers. Probably originally gypsies. Alan, the son of Jim's first son - also a Jim - believes that the family has Romany origins. He says he had heard that in the family. Len too says that the family on his Father's side has quite a history. That the family comes from gypsies. The Warrens. Gypsy stock. Romany stock. He doesn't know any more about it. And I don't know whether that could be or not.



*Jim Warren and family*

Most of them costermongers and street-sellers, as well as greengrocers. Some were horse-dealers. And, some of them, probably, horse-thieves, too! We don't know where they came from originally. But at the end of the 19th century they were all in Hackney, and in Homerton.

My Uncle Jim was Mum's favourite brother. Jim wasn't a drinker like all of the other Warrens - including his brothers Albert, Bert, and Wal. They were all greengrocers. They all got on together, without a doubt. But Jim was a totally different man to 'em. Jim never 'ad a temper. 'E didn't do greengrocery or anything like that. Jim and Mum were very similar people. He was her closest brother. She used to go over to Jim's, not every week but very regularly when he was older. For her, as a girl, she was treated as a brother - that's the trouble - she 'ad to do everything they did. But Jim was a totally different person. He was strictly tee-total. He never went in a pub. He never drunk anything. Totally different from the other Warrens. Jim was totally different to all of 'em, the Warrens. They all liked their beer.

He was the smallest one of the lot, Jim. When he was grown he was only five foot eight or nine. Only about eight or nine stone. Jim's first job was when he was five or six years old, selling peanuts outside the Hackney Empire. He used to have a basket hanging round his neck. The only stall that they had was outside the Hackney Empire Friday night and Saturday, when my mother met Charlie Chaplin and 'is brother Sid, when 'e was nothing. Charlie Chaplin and his brother Sid were a double act, but they were nothing. They had no star billing or nothing like that. They both went to America, but Sid never reached the heights of his brother. He wasn't a comedian.<sup>4</sup>

As I've said, my Mum sold fruit there, too, to Sid and Charlie Chaplin when they were unknowns, from a stall outside the Hackney Empire. Saturday nights only. She sold fruit outside to Charlie Chaplin himself as he went in. He and his brother Sid Chaplin. They were only small time then, you know. She told me that. They had a barrow outside the Hackney Empire, which was a music hall. It's still there today.

They had a pitch there. The billiard hall was next to it. Only a narrow pavement. They had boxes with fruit in it, right outside, in the gutter, where the horses went by. It's still there, the Empire. It's a television centre. He used to call her Kate and she used to call him Charlie. He was nobody. They were on the halls. They weren't anybody then, in those days. They actually were born over the other side of the river, the other end of Poplar, the road going up to Greenwich.

**'The business thing'**

Jim had first of all a shed, in which he kept second-hand furniture. It was down under the railway arches near Sidney Street, Homerton.<sup>5</sup> Do you know, I never knew Jim had a furniture shop until after the war. He used to open up after he left work, and he had to pack it all away again when he closed. This was in the summer of 1922 or '23. He used to buy a house of furniture, empty it all out. He had the shed, and then he shut it and opened a shop in Seven Sisters Road, Tottenham. Down the hill where the Stamford Hill Bakeries used to be. Then he had a shop, or two shops, selling second-hand furniture. It was a long way for him to go. My cousin Len says it wasn't much of a shop. He had a big-

ger one lower down there after the first one. But I don't remember it, only the one in Stoke Newington High Street.

All this went on while he was still working for the Council. I don't know how he did it! But he bloody well did it for years! They had a quota for street cleaning, and a foreman used to come round and check. But his son Len says he used to put his broom behind a shop, and go off buying furniture at auctions. Actually, too, I think it was a cause of the problems in his marriage with Carrie. He and Carrie rowed. She was quite an educated, refined woman. Len says Jim actually met Carrie in Sidney Street, in 1910, where there was the siege. Churchill went down there, with the armed police. There was a huge crowd. Carrie was knocked over, and he lifted her up and said "You are a beautiful woman". That's how they met. But they used to fight a lot. He'd finish work and he wouldn't go home. So she never knew what time he would come home to his food. He used to go out and buy furniture. He didn't go to pubs, not like the Warrens. He made a bit of money from the furniture.

Len says that the war finished Jim's furniture business. He says that nobody wanted to buy fur-



*Jim and Carrie*

Superior at the convent next to it, full of nuns. He had some decent furniture, too. Chairs from High Wycombe. They could make a good chest of drawers, too, for 5 shillings and sell for ten shillings.

When my wife Val and I first got married [in January 1939] we lived in Springdale Road, Stoke Newington. We didn't have any money. We couldn't afford much. We went into a second-hand furniture shop in Stoke Newington High Street, and bought a table. We had to carry it home ourselves. It was a few shops past the Yiddisher butcher, the one who used to do the lovely boiled beef sandwiches for 10d. Worford [Walford] Road was the next turning. And then there was the furniture-shop. The sandwiches were thick. We used to buy half a one for 5d., and me and Alf Hackett (my brother-in-law) or my friend Joe Moss used to buy half a one and share it.

Well, we bought the table. And when we went back, Jim was there. "What are you doing here?" he said. "You're Kate's boy Alf." "What are you doing here?" I said. "It's my shop!" he said. "Bloody 'ell, I bought a table 'ere", I said. "Well, you've got a good eye for it!" "It was thirty shillings! If I'd known it was you I'd 'ave got it for three and six!" "No you wouldn't", he said. "It would have been thirty five shillings!"

**The bird market**

Len says Jim used to buy and sell anything. He used to sell chickens too. Len says that one day they got 40 hens, to sell to Johnson's Coffee Shop at the corner of Sun Street, Homerton.<sup>6</sup> They bought the fowls home, two per sack, on the handle bars and cross-bars of their bikes. Lashed to the handle-bars. It was too much to ride. They had to walk. When they got home it was getting dark. They had to put the perches up in the little coal shed in the garden, and put them to roost for the night.

There's another story, according to Len. Apparently, Jim's brother Albert had come to Jim in Homerton to buy a turkey for Christmas one year. And he took the goose back to Tottenham on an open-top bus, and he had it under his arm. The goose got away, and flew off from the top of the bus!



*Jim Warren and dog*

niture in the war. But all the Warrens had that business thing. It definitely come from old Granie [Louisa] Warren, the business thing - every one of them was a dealer. She ran the greengrocery at 85 Homerton High Street after her husband (Alfred Warren, a lather in the building business) died at only 49, in April 1903. Grandma ran the greengrocery, for years and years. She lived on until 1939, at 516 Old Ford Road, dying at 83. She was blind for her last 20 years, but she still ran the shop with a rod of iron.

They could all sell, the Warrens. But nearly all of the sons drunk their money away. But not Jim. You'd look at Jim and you'd never know what he was capable of. It all comes from the Warrens. He used to buy a lot of furniture from auctions. I don't know how Jim managed it and kept his job with the Council for 40 years. He was a road sweeper. He used to leave home at six in the morning. And he sold furniture to good customers. One was the Matron, called Shotley, at Hackney Hospital, another was the Mother

They sold the chickens in Club Row in Shoreditch, adjacent to Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road, on Sunday mornings, too. Len says his Dad took him to Club Row every Sunday. On the bus. Club Row was the animal market. There were cats, dogs, birds, ferrets, any of it. It was nearer to Shoreditch than Petticoat Lane, which was opposite Liverpool Street station. Club Row was down Columbia Road, Bethnal Green, right the way from High Street Kingsland, and it came out by Shoreditch Church in Hackney Road. There were stalls. 'Cos people stood beside the road. And they bought the animals out of sacks and boxes. They bought from sacks. Chickens, ferrets, wild birds, tame birds, thrushes, you know.

Jim used to trap birds, with his brother. In a trap cage, you know. Outside their bedroom window. They used to get up early, when it got light, when the birds came down. And Jim would put a call-bird in a trap cage. The door was on the top of this little wire cage. The call bird was underneath in a tiny box, singing. Now, if you put a hen in you get a cock, which they wanted really. 'Cos they wanted hen birds in the sacks. As the bird came to the calling bird it knocked the door. It was like a mouse-trap affair, with some seed on it. And the bird sat on it, which sprung it. It was much more clever than a mouse-trap, which could take your finger off. They used to sit there watching. It was interesting. Len says it was like trapping the tigers! He tells me it was illegal then to put any more than maybe three chickens in a sack. As he says, if you had more than that it would be criminal. They would die. They had to put a piece of board in the bottom of a big hessian sack. They could stand up.

When they went to Club Row they carried them on the bus. Everybody carried wild life on the bus. Len says they put the chickens under the stairs, or took them on top. Open top. I don't know where Jim did it all from, where the chickens came from. He was such a character.

#### *Making a go of it*

When 70 Ballance Road got bombed, half the road was blown away, and Jim's house was badly



*Kate Root, the author's mother, at Ballance Road*

damaged.<sup>6</sup> Len was out on patrol, and Jim and Carrie were in the Anderson shelter in the garden. Corrugated iron.

The house was rented, of course. It was a very small house. To get to the upstairs there was a side door in the kitchen. The door was on the wall. It was one of those very small houses. A wooden staircase built into the house. No rails or anything like that. Two up, two down. Every room was about ten by ten or twelve by twelve. It was a complete terrace, a row of terrace houses. I tell you what, the garden was ten by ten too. Small. And it was full of Jim's shed, and other bits and pieces.

Jim's house is still standing I think. They did pull a lot of houses down and put up sky-scrapers. And they've 'ad to pull *them* all down. But with the bombing, Jim and Len bought a house and moved out to Forest Hill which is the other side of Epping Forest.<sup>8</sup> They bought that between them. He died there. It was a different class of house from Ballance Road. It was quite a nice

house. Len got a mortgage on it

Jim was a real character! Though I never found it out until the bomb dropped, in the war, in Northwold Road. The doodle-bug that blew up 152 Northwold Road, the coffee shop we had then. That's when I found out that Jim was such a character.

I was standing on the corner about three or four nights afterwards. By meself. I 'ad to do something. I 'ad to find out what to do. I owed all this money to H. L. Hackett, the father of my sister's husband, who'd lent me the money to start my first business. And also I hadn't got any money. And I stood on the corner there.

And then Jim pulled up on a bike. He was in charge of the toilets, the convenience, in Upper Clapton Road, on the right 'and side, further up. He had just finished at eight o'clock at night and shut it up. They reckoned he'd got too old keep on sweeping the roads and they put him in there.

Coming down he saw me on the corner, and he came over and he said, "Don't you recognise me?" I said, "Yes. Uncle Jim." He said, "What are you doing 'ere?" I said, "Well, I 'ad the bomb." He said, "Did you 'ave that that was blown up?" I said, "Yes." "Oh," he said, "I didn't know that" I remember 'im saying, "What a strange world!" He said, "I didn't know that. I 'eard all about this one, that blew up and killed all this lot." He said, "where was you?" I said, "Fortunately, we were in Harringay. We would have slept there at the shop that night. But for some reason we didn't." And he said, "So what you going to do?" I said, "Well," I said, "I'm thinking. I've got to do something, 'cos I owe such a lot of money".

And I was looking at the corner shop, which was a grocer's shop. Half of it had been destroyed. The baker's next to it had been destroyed completely. And then next to it was this bloody great shop, which was the funeral shop. The roof had been blown off. And the whole front of it was blown out. And I stood there looking at it. I hadn't registered with the War Damage Commission. So, I didn't know what would happen

. And he said, "So what are you looking for?" I said, "Well, I don't know," I said, "but between you and me, Uncle Jim...", I said. He said "don't

call me Uncle." I remember to this day, "Don't call me Uncle. Call me Jim." I said, "I owe somebody five hundred and fifty pound."

"Bloody 'ell!", he said. "Do you?" I said, "Yes", he said, "So what are you looking at?" I said, "Well, I 'ad a coffee shop there." He said, "Well, it ain't there no longer!" I said, "No. But I'm thinking of looking at one of these shops!" "Well", he said, "there's nothing left of 'em". I said, "No. But there is this shop."

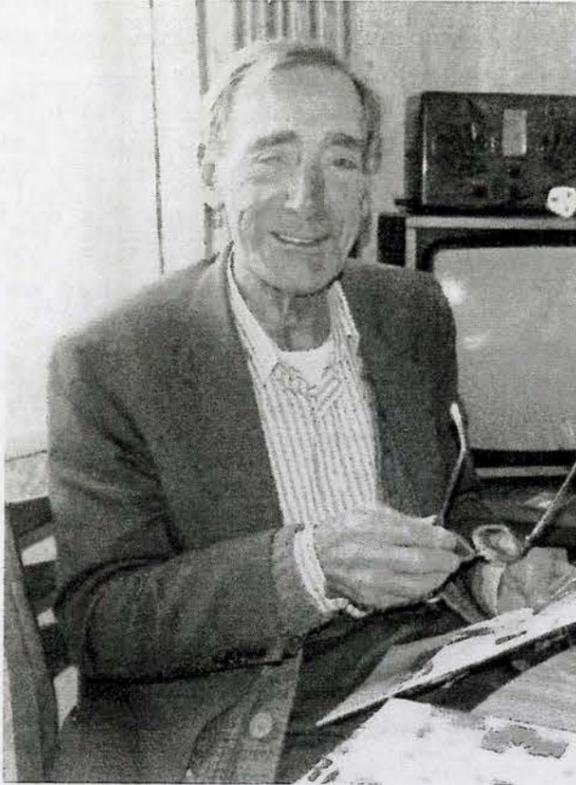
I didn't know it was a funeral shop, you see. I said, "there is this shop." "Oh, bloody 'ell," 'e said, "that's the funeral shop." I said, "is it?" "Yes", he said. "Sinclairs. The funerals." "Oh God", I said. I said, "well, anyway, they're not here now, are they." He said, "No."

So he said, "well, you know what to do, don't you?" This is when he first taught me something. "Go down to the Town Hall. Find out who pays the rates. Then you'll have the owner. You get the rate-payer, you'll get the owner. Usually, the rate-payer owns the place. Or if 'e doesn't, he will tell you who the owner is. That's what to do. That's the first thing you'll 'ave to do, to see if you can do something". He said, "now, if you do do something. And you do get somewhere," he said, "I know one or two people on the Council." Been there all these years, you see.

I said, "Well, we'll 'ave to 'ave a front put in." He said, "No. They won't do that. They won't. You can't buy glass for love nor money. You can't buy timber for love nor money. You've got to 'ave a licence to get it." He said, "But I know somebody in the Council who might 'elp, put some sort of front in for you." That's how it happened. And, 'course, 'e started. He said, "I'll come up and we'll do it."

He said, "What we'll 'ave to do," 'e said, "you know," 'e said, "if you can get it" - the wood. 'Cos, there's no good of doing it before-'and," 'e said, "we'll 'ave to go round all the building sites of a night, when it's dark, nick all the timber, and bring it back, and we'll 'ave to make the stuff."

This is bombed houses. Oh, it's looting. 'Course it is. The penalty? Oh, gawd knows; about ten years in prison I think. It was looting, yes. We went and did it. We didn't have a barrow. It was



*Alfred Root, the author*

Jim and me. We carried it all what we wanted. Put it all in a bag. Sorted it all up. He knew the bloke in Brown Brothers in Hackney - builder's merchants. They were in the other side of Mare Street, opposite Well Street.

"I'll get all the nuts and screws and everything," 'e said, "Don't you worry about that." He said, "I know the bloke in there". So, you know, being on the Council all those years, a road sweeper, he knew everybody. Well, we got stuff that was just lying around, no use to anybody. Just to keep going. No profiteering, or anything like that. And we got the shop back together, and made a go of it.

#### **Afterword**

Jim's oldest daughter, Rose, was a clever girl. She went on a scholarship to Lady Eleanor Holles School, in Mare Street, Stoke Newington.<sup>9</sup> It wasn't just an ordinary school. But she had to be taken away at 14 to earn some money - they all did. Now, she would have been supported. But she became a cardboard box maker.

Jim's eldest son, Jim, was a GPO van driver. Len was the Rowney's rep. - the artist's paint firm who had their headquarters in the borough. Rose, who was a secretary, married the carpenter and boat-builder, Alf Witham, who worked for the RNLI. Elsie, who was a religious maniac, was a secretary, I think at Selfridge's.

Len's still alive, down in Abingdon with his wife, Iris. He's just been 80. I saw them both recently, at my nephew's wedding (when I was best man) in January. But all the others are gone now. Jim's son, also Jim, had a son who has two of his own DIY shops, one in Bethnal Green and one in Romford. So the Warren business ability goes on. But it was Jim who was the real character amongst the lot of 'em. Unbelievable!

#### **Notes**

1. James William Warren, born 7 May 1890, at 14 Brooksby's Walk, Homerton; died 5 November 1973, Plaistow Hospital, Newham. He married Caroline Amelia With ("Carrie") at St. Leonard's Parish Church, Shoreditch, on 3 August 1913.
2. J.W. Warren served as a Private Second Class and as a Batman in the First World War. He enlisted on 7 November 1916, serving first in the Royal Flying Corps, which became the Royal Air Force, and in the Devon Regiment and the Labour Corps. He transferred to the RAF reserve on his demobilisation on 9 March 1919. He enlisted originally at Chingford and was demobbed at Blandford in Dorset. He received the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. His regimental number was 146669.
3. Second-hand furniture fetched good prices in the later part of the Second World War. In 1939 when war broke out stocks of timber were substantial. But many furniture-makers fought in the war, or were allocated to war work. Two days after the war broke out the Ministry of Supply imposed timber control regulations under the defence of the Realm Acts. By July 1940 all timber supplies to the furniture industry ceased. See Pat Kirkham, Rodney Mace, and Julia Porter, *Furnishing The World: The East London Furniture Trade, 1830-1980* (1987), 27.
4. Sidney Chaplin and Charlie Chaplin were originally a music hall 'turn', the sons of a minor music hall star who died of drink aged 37.
5. In the original interview, Mr Root says "Jim's first furniture shed was in Sidney Street, where there was the Siege". This appears to be a confusion of Sidney (or Sydney) Road, Homerton, with Sidney Street, Stepney, where the siege took place in January 1911, and where Jim and Carrie met.
6. These premises and their location have not been identified.
7. Ballance Road was bombed on a number of occasions in 1940 and 1941. Jennifer Golden, *Hackney at War* (1995), 122-127, lists those bombing incidents for which records exist.
8. The author appears to mean Forest Gate.
9. Correctly: Mare Street, Hackney.

## 'WINGS FOR VICTORY': STOKE NEWINGTON'S LANCASTER

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*Peter Kent*

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#### **Prologue**

On 26 March 1943, Ernest Bedford, Borough Treasurer of Stoke Newington, was honoured by his mayor and colleagues for diligence and application to his duties. Such endorsement was justified and perhaps not unexpected, as Bedford had held his senior position since 1926. Rather surprisingly however, Bedford was not honoured for his work in the Borough Treasury but for his unstinting effort in the voluntary position of Hon. Secretary of the local War Savings Committee.

The meeting addressed the success of the borough's 'Wings for Victory' savings campaign in support of the Royal Air Force (RAF), its effect on aircraft production and on the overall war effort.<sup>1</sup> An overview of the campaign to date was given, this information being set into context by the figures relating to past war savings campaigns such as 'Warship Week' and 'War Weapons Week'. The mayor, Councillor A. M. Gordon,<sup>2</sup> expressed 'the profound admiration' of the committee for the 'excellent arrangements' made by the voluntary efforts of Bedford and his treasury team 'which contributed largely to the success of the campaigns'.<sup>3</sup>

That Bedford had diligence and an organising

flair is clear. But the overall success of Stoke Newington's 'Wings for Victory' campaign relied not only on Bedford but on many other organisers, of varying social backgrounds. Its success also required the direct and enthusiastic support of the people of Stoke Newington. What started as a proposal by Bedford in the staid atmosphere of a committee room would lead eventually to a life or death struggle in the war-torn skies over Nazi-occupied Europe.

#### **'War savings'**

Some analysis of the structure of the national 'Wings' savings campaign and its operation must be attempted if its eventual success is to be understood.

In modern terms, the 1943 campaign consisted of the marketing of a concept and a product. The concept was the potential saver's belief in Britain's ultimate victory in the war against Germany. If this was accepted, it was easy to see the benefits of saving, or donating, towards the war effort. A range of adaptable financial products was offered, suited to individual investors, or groups, from all social and financial backgrounds. Products in-

cluded a £1 saving certificate with stamps, a 3 per cent. saving bond payable in instalments and a 2.5 per cent. national war bond for those wanting a shorter investment period. The lowest level of currency was the humble savings stamp, accumulated to buy any of the other products.<sup>4</sup> They were often bought during the designated savings weeks, and many were donated during 'Wings' week to local RAF representatives so that they could be stuck onto the casing of a bomb bound for Germany.

**The national picture**

Popular support for the 'Wings' campaign by the people of Stoke Newington was in no small measure secured by the efficacy of the administrative and public relations structure proffered by the central National Savings Committee. In principle, this committee reported directly to HM Treasury but was semi-autonomous in its operation. Its remit included the supervision of over 1,400 local savings committees spread across Britain. This local savings structure was sub-divided into over 304,000 individual savings groups, with about 16 million individual subscribers.<sup>5</sup>

By 1943 the committee had built up a body of experience in fund-raising, largely derived from the successes and failures of earlier campaigns such as 'War Weapons Week' of 1940. By the start of the 'Wings for Victory' campaign in March 1943 it had honed its skills into an art form that modern public relation companies would envy. From the start, the 1943 marketing campaign targeted the individual small investor or group. Lord Kindersley, President of the national committee, stressed the importance of the individual investor, stating that the committee's main aim for 1943 was to be the recruitment of 'an average of two more members for every group, every month.' He went on to describe the 'Wings' campaign as a 'special occasion giving a great opportunity for increasing the membership and subscriptions of existing groups and of adding still further to their number'.<sup>6</sup>

From its inception the campaign was not designed to be dry and pecuniary, but to be about people, exploring the complicated and developing 'relationship' between the public and the RAF, the seeds of which had been sown during the dif-



Ernest Bedford

icult days of the Battle of Britain. In an article published in the spring of 1943, the emotional connection between savers and the 'heroes' of the RAF is made clear. The 'Wings' campaign was described as a 'chance to signalise (sic) our attitude to our airmen'. It continued 'Let us remember this, however tremendous be the total sum raised, the figure itself counts not one tittle towards paying the debt that we owe'.<sup>7</sup> This perceived relationship of trust, naturally engendered between defenders and the defended, was used effectively by the National Savings Committee to sell its 1943 'Wings For Victory' campaign to the British people.

**Local groups**

If the war savings message was being effectively communicated on an emotional basis, an appropriate and adaptable administrative structure was essential to ensure a successful take up of the campaign in the localities.

**'Wings for Victory'**

Local savings groups were given full flexibility in their operation. A group could consist of the residents of one street, members of a church or a school, or an ordering of individual savers brought together under the administrative 'umbrella' of a nominated secretary or treasurer. Each group would report to the local war savings committee, usually organised around the voluntary efforts of local authority officials, as in Stoke Newington.

The National Savings Committee gave local groups full autonomy to select their own savings and purchase targets. This proved the real spark of organisational genius which ensured the popularity of the 'Wings' campaign at grass roots level. Each group, liaising with its local authority sub-committee, could decide whether they would buy an aircraft, an engine, a wing or a wheel, or some smaller item of equipment for the war effort. Small savings groups could thus cut their cloth to suit their purse, but still feel entirely involved in the patriotic duty of supporting the RAF. The local war savings committee had an overall target imposed from above, usually expressed in terms of aircraft number and type. Local treasurers such as Ernest Bedford would have acted as facilitators, ensuring that contributions remained on target, and that the overall aim of buying aircraft was achieved.

**Targets**

Posters were sent to the localities depicting aircraft available for purchase, ranging from the glamorous Supermarine Spitfire and De Havilland Mosquito to more pedestrian training aircraft such as the Miles Magister.<sup>8</sup> The costs for equipment ranged from £30 for an aircrew survival dinghy to £300 for complex aircraft instruments (see text box, above right). On a more ambitious level, local war savings committees could opt to buy a Supermarine Spitfire for £5000, a twin engined aircraft such as the De Havilland Mosquito for £20,000 or a Lancaster bomber for £40,000. On reaching their target each savings group were promised a 'certificate of honour' from the Secretary of State for Air. At the end of the war it was envisaged that each successful region or locality would receive a bound 'log book' containing the operational details of their own sponsored aircraft.<sup>9</sup> These logs were made to a standard de-

**'War savings' equipment targets**

Four-engined flying boat (e.g. Short Sunderland)	£50,000
Four-engined bomber (e.g. Avro Lancaster)	£40,000
Two-engined bomber (e.g. Bristol Blenheim)	£20,000
Single-engined fighter (e.g. Hawker Typhoon)	£5,000
Defensive gun turret	£500
Aircraft instruments	£120 - £300
Bomb sight	£60
Browning machine gun	£45
Crew survival dinghy	£30
Individual dinghy	£8

sign, with an air trophy motif on the cover (see cover) and the achievements of the local savings committee listed on the first page (see page 46). The logs were to be presented to the local authority for 'preservation in some suitable public building'.<sup>10</sup>

The National Savings Committee contacted all local committees in the dying days of October 1942, informing them that the official 'Wings for Victory' campaign period would run between 5 March and 3 July 1943. The Stoke Newington week was set for 6 to 13 March, the provisional savings target being placed at £400,000.<sup>11</sup> This optimistic figure, if achieved, would add approximately eight Avro Lancaster bombers and no less than 16 Spitfires to the RAF's operational inventory. The success or failure of the venture would rest squarely on the shoulders of the people of Stoke Newington.

**'Wings For Victory' week**

The 'Wings' campaign was ushered in by a series of articles and adverts in local newspapers, and by fixing posters throughout the borough. Events were outlined, and the aims and targets of the campaign made clear.<sup>12</sup>

The opening ceremony was held at Stoke Newington Town Hall on Saturday 6 March, where the mayor, Councillor Gordon, reviewed

a military march-past comprising all three services, taking in Stoke Newington, Hackney and Shoreditch. The public assembly hall also served as a dedicated fund-raising post, with exhibitions in support of the campaign.<sup>13</sup> On the day, a second procession was introduced, led by a Canadian pipe band and less martial in character, having representatives from ARP, civil defence and local voluntary organisations. Sir George Jones, Member of Parliament for Stoke Newington, opened the exhibition at the assembly hall, where the ceremony was supported by a strong public turnout. Jones emphasised the 'special relationship' between the people and the RAF, and the developing intensive bombing campaign against Germany and the German people.<sup>14</sup> He was unambiguous in drawing a connection between the area bombing campaign and the evils of Nazism as supported by the German populace, stating "It was time that the German people were taught that war did not pay." He continued, "The best way this lesson could be brought home was by the RAF." Interestingly, he drew a direct connection between the heavy German raids on Stoke Newington a few years previously and the current RAF bombing offensive, placing the appeal for funding securely in terms of retribution for past wrongs.<sup>15</sup>

Admission to the assembly rooms was by purchase of a 6d savings stamp, giving full access to the exhibits, which included a revolving bomber gun turret and a working bomb release system (beloved of visiting young boys).<sup>16</sup> The 'Wings for Victory' drive was placed within its local context by a display of photographs, showing the young men and women of Stoke Newington who had already volunteered for the RAF and Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). On Thursday 10th the assembly rooms also provided the venue for a visit by representatives of the armed services of the Commonwealth, United States, Czechoslovakia and Free France. This august gathering, labelled by the press 'The United Nations', was treated to an address on aviation-related subjects by high ranking allied officers, before being shown the delights of the exhibition by a delegation led by Mayor Gordon and Borough Treasurer Ernest Bedford.<sup>17</sup> At the close of play on 'United Nations

Day' the mayor was pleased to announce that the people of Stoke Newington had already raised £220,343 towards the borough target of £400,000.<sup>18</sup>

Use of the assembly rooms as a fund-raising venue continued for the rest of the week. A cinema was set up, showing newsreels highlighting RAF operations. The Borough Engineer's Office set up a display of salvage and the many uses to which it was put. Books dealing with aircraft, flying, maintenance and construction were supplied by the public library in Stoke Newington Church Street.<sup>19</sup> Boys from the 296 (Stoke Newington) Squadron, Air Training Corps, proudly displayed aircraft models made for air recognition purposes. Hungry visitors could make for the kitchens, which were hosting cookery demonstrations by the Ministry of Food. On Friday 12th the Metropolitan Police 'N' Division male-voice choir gave a well-received concert, leaving Saturday free for last minute fund-raising and the final tally of donations and purchases that would push the borough towards its target.

By the middle of 'Wings' week it was evident that the individual savings groups of Stoke Newington were doing well, and many had pulled out all the stops. Sadly, no official record of individual savers exists, but the activities of some groups were outlined in the press. The men of the 9th County of London Battalion, Home Guard, led the way by raising £54,000. The ARP wardens of Stoke Newington also performed magnificently, raising over £39,000 by selling stamps and bonds and by collecting donations at the 14 ARP posts across the borough.<sup>20</sup> Smaller groups were also pitching in. The employees of Simpson's factory in Stoke Newington High Street raised money by arranging daily lunchtime concerts and lectures in their works canteen. A target of £1,000 was adopted, described as being 'ambitious' for such a small factory with few employees.<sup>21</sup> The sum of £1,214.16s was eventually raised by the workers, who staged a concert: this culminated in a patriotic rendition of Elgar and Benson's 'Land of Hope and Glory'.<sup>22</sup> The Kynaston savings group of Stoke Newington, illustrative of the more modest, but equally essential contributions of the smaller groups, had aimed



*An unidentified 103 Squadron Avro Lancaster with crew, at Elsham Wolds, late summer 1943*

for the sum of £16, to buy two survival dinghies for pilots of single-engined fighters, but raised £36 5s 6d in support of the war effort.<sup>23</sup> The schoolchildren of the borough had also been busy, with pupils of St Mary's School in Lordship Road being singled out for their achievement in raising £1,263 6s 6d.<sup>24</sup> At first glance it seems odd that schoolchildren could raise so much money. Their methods will have included contributions from parents and local people in the environs of the school, and hiring hall space for concerts and whist drives. Local men and women already serving were used by the fund-raisers to support the drive and act as examples, often visiting the schools in question. Although none of the local papers indicate the fund-raising methods used at St Mary's, the National Savings Committee were in contact with schools at a national level, advising and encouraging them in their campaigns.<sup>25</sup>

The 'Wings for Victory' fund-raising campaign for Stoke Newington ended on the evening of Saturday 13 March. For the people of the borough it was a triumph. Over £459,124 was raised against the target of £400,000.<sup>26</sup> This figure, al-

ready impressive, is made more so by the fact that Stoke Newington had concurrently raised £136,000 towards the cost of replacing HMS Ibis, the borough-sponsored ship, sunk by enemy action on 10 November 1942.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Choosing a Lancaster*

Little evidence remains of the administrative and personal decision-making processes that led to Stoke Newington's adoption of the Avro Lancaster as the bomber of choice for its 'Wings' fund-raising drive. The report of the Stoke Newington Local Savings Sub-Committee to the Emergency Committee of 29th March 1943 simply states that eight Lancaster four-engined bombers and 16 single-engined Spitfire fighters would be bought if the borough reached its target. It seems likely that Bedford, as Borough Treasurer and Honorary Secretary of the local savings committee, steered committee members to a decision based on income expectations, aircraft cost and operational effectiveness. The technical support for this decision will have come from the Air Ministry via the National Savings Committee.

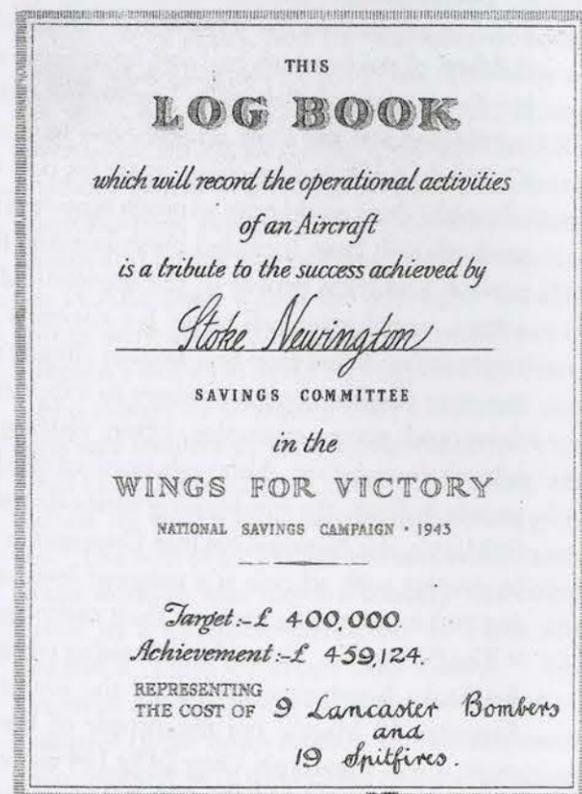
With the hindsight of 60 years, the decision may seem obvious even to those of a less aeronautical bent. We have all been steeped in the derring-do of Richard Todd's portrayal of Wing Commander Guy Gibson in the film *The Dam Busters*<sup>28</sup> and perhaps marveled at the sight of an Avro Lancaster over-flying admiring crowds at a summer airshow. For many, the Avro Lancaster has come to epitomise the resilience of Bomber Command in its grim struggle against the formidable land and air defences of Nazi Germany. The Lancaster is now held up by many as one of the 'greats' of British aircraft design, but in March 1943 the true potential of the aircraft was only just becoming evident.<sup>29</sup>

The development of the Lancaster from the unsuccessful twin-engined Avro Manchester was not initially welcomed by many at the Ministry of Aircraft Production.<sup>30</sup> Arguably, the aircraft's continued development was based on the fact that it about 70 per cent of its components were consistent with those of the earlier Manchester, and therefore manufacturing lines did not need re-tooling at such a critical point in the war. As with all new aircraft, teething problems were evident and many modifications were carried out during 1941. It became evident that the aircraft's greatest strength lay in its basic design, which enabled upgrades and modifications to be carried out swiftly, often in the field. This meant that, under the gruelling conditions of operational flying, this aircraft type would have a high serviceability record, ensuring faster turnaround times and thus giving a greater offensive capability.

The marriage of the excellent Lancaster design with the proven reliability of the Rolls Royce Merlin engine ensured its success as a true 'pilot's aircraft'.<sup>31</sup>

After the aircraft were introduced into squadron service in late 1941, engineers at A. V. Roe & Co. Ltd. became increasingly concerned by the number of them being returned to their factories with problems of wing-tip 'skin' wrinkling.<sup>32</sup> Exhaustive tests were carried out, until it was discovered that pilots were actually manoeuvring the 36,900 lb. aircraft like a single engined fighter, such was the confidence in which this aircraft was held by its pilots.<sup>33</sup>

The Avro Lancaster was revealed to the British public in a blaze of publicity following the gallant but doomed Augsburg raid of 17 April 1942. As the spring of 1942 turned to summer, more Lancaster aircraft were coming off the production lines, and re-equipped squadrons began to distinguish themselves in combat, not for their losses, as at Augsburg, but for their successes in hitting targets and returning safely. Public imagination was certainly stimulated by tales of Lancaster daylight precision raids on industrial targets, such as the Schneider/Le Creusot raid of 17 October 1942, but it was the 'bread and butter' night raids against the German heartland that proved the worth of the aircraft, especially when its performance was compared to other Bomber Command aircraft operating at the time.<sup>34</sup> By the time of the 'Wings' campaign in Stoke Newington, the Lancaster was a proven aircraft that had a recognisable potential for continued development. Any technical advice given by the Ministry of Aircraft Production (MAP), or the Air Ministry to the National Savings Committee, will have been based on the operational performance of the aircraft, its ease of production and its ability to carry increasingly heavy bomb loads. It was within these



parameters that Bedford and the Stoke Newington local savings committee made their choice of aircraft.

#### *Stoke Newington's Lancaster*

Having received the funds collected by Stoke Newington, MAP allocated eight Lancaster service production numbers to the borough, with information being passed to Ernest Bedford. Sadly, however, only one presentation logbook survives at Hackney Archives Department. Through this, we can now follow the operational life of this one Lancaster.

Equipped with United States licence-built Packard Merlin engines (which gave better fuel consumption than the British equivalent), this Lancaster Mark III was built by A. V. Roe & Co Ltd, at the massive new production facility at Chadderton in Lancashire, during the summer of 1943. Forming part of the eighth production batch of 600 aircraft, the Stoke Newington Lancaster was allocated the service number ND905.<sup>35</sup> Meticulously built and consisting of over 50,000 parts, the aircraft was assembled, using half a million separate manufacturing processes, by the skilled and dedicated factory workers of Chadderton. Following completion, ND905 was sent to Avro's sister factory at Newton Heath in Manchester for finishing, flight-testing and handover to the RAF.

#### *ND905 at War*

Lying some nine miles from Hull, on the Lincolnshire side of the Humber, Elsham Wolds was a flat desolate expanse of pastureland until, between the winter of 1939 and the summer of 1941, it was developed as a permanent RAF airfield. Although boasting one main and two subsidiary hard runways, and domestic accommodation for 2068 RAF and 493 WAAF personnel, Elsham was still a flat and desolate place in the hard winter of 1943.<sup>36</sup> With lowering skies and a chill wind blowing, few would have noticed or remarked upon the arrival of Lancaster ND905, as these aircraft had been serving with the resident 103 Squadron since November 1942.<sup>37</sup> Despite the unpredictable December weather, the ever-diligent ground crews had their work cut out over the fes-

tive period to prepare the Stoke Newington Lancaster for her first operational sortie.

Having been allocated the squadron/aircraft code PM\*B, the aircraft was tested and tweaked by the skilled riggers, fitters and armourers of Elsham. The seven-man crew assigned to the aircraft test-flew her on morning flights of up to two hours.<sup>38</sup> The Stoke Newington presentation log book is reticent about individual crew details, listing only the start-up crew and the final sortie crew. It is important to point out that although the RAF attempted to keep crews together during a tour, many circumstances would intervene to change the crew line-up on a mission to mission basis. Crew members could be posted to other squadrons or to operational conversion and training units. Crew members could become tour-expired or ill, or even judged to have 'LMF' ('lack of moral fibre'), that most damning of RAF terms to describe perceived cowardice in the face of the enemy.<sup>39</sup> In the final instance, of course, crew members could be killed or taken prisoner during the hazardous night-time operations over Europe.

ND905 was slated to take part in operational sorties in support of the continuing 'Battle for Berlin'.<sup>40</sup> It was hoped, perhaps optimistically, by Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris and many at Bomber Command HQ, that the concentrated RAF area bombing campaign would overwhelm the defences of the German capital causing a collapse of morale and political will, thus ending the war in Europe.<sup>41</sup>

The atmosphere inside a squadron canteen could often be misleading. Many of the men slated to fly would be loudly talking or joking around, others would be more withdrawn as if steeling themselves for the difficult mission ahead. The crews would know that a 'Goodwood' signal had been received (meaning that an all-out effort was required) but they still did not know their target location. All would be revealed at the briefing, and so in the interim they tried to enjoy their standard 'ops breakfast' (a jealously guarded privilege of crews slated to fly an operational mission) of bacon and eggs.

Once in the briefing room the crew would sit facing a blacked-out map of Europe awaiting the arrival of the 'platform party' who would then



The Lancaster's base at Elsham Wolds

take a roll call, introduce the mission and cover operational details such as navigation and meteorology. The mission target would be revealed, causing whoops of delight if it was a 'milk run' to a nearby French target, or an audible intake of breath if the target was far into Germany, and heavily defended. For the first operational sortie of ND905 on the night of 1/2 January 1944, the target was Berlin; and this could not have been well received by her crew.

The moment of truth came when the crew of ND905 entered their aircraft by the entry door on the starboard rear of the fuselage. All members would be encumbered by equipment, which could include heavy woollens, sheepskin Irvin jackets, thermal suits, oxygen masks, 'Mae West' life jackets, flying helmets and many other essential items.<sup>42</sup> The aircraft captain, navigator, flight engineer, bomb-aimer and wireless operator needing to pull themselves over the three foot main spar of the aircraft in order to access their individual crew positions. Rear turret and mid-upper position were more easily accessible. Following standard flight checks and engine starts, ND905 taxied to her allotted runway position. A green Aldis lamp flashed from the control van and the throttles to the four Merlins were opened. Keeping the Lancaster on the runway for as long as possible, Pilot Officer Hart would have finally pulled back on the control column forcing the heavily-laden aircraft into the air. With her main gear retracted, ND905 was on her way.<sup>43</sup>

As part of a force of 421 Lancasters, each aircraft flew its own pre-selected timed tracks and

altitudes to the target area. On her first mission, ND905 was laden with a typical 'Berlin' warload, comprising one 4,000 lb. HC (high capacity) bomb, 48 incendiaries weighing 30 lb., and more than 700 smaller incendiaries.<sup>44</sup> This was no load for precision bombing, as it was hoped that the 4,000 lb. bomb would fracture gas lines, enabling the incendiaries to create a conflagration.<sup>45</sup>

The presentation log is fairly understated in its description of the raid, with ND905 encountering 'heavy flak, moderate in barrage form' between 17,000 and 21,000 feet with lighter flak bursting at about 17,000 feet. Rather ominously, German fighters were encountered which fired rocket projectiles at the incoming RAF force. ND905 bombed on the Path Finder Force (PFF) sky markers, explosive flares which indicated the target below, and returned safely to base. Only four RAF aircraft were shot down over the target area, although a further 24 Lancasters were lost on the way home.<sup>46</sup> Hampered by cloud cover and the deteriorating accuracy of PFF target marking, this Berlin raid was not a spectacular success, but for ND905 and its crew it marked a baptism of fire.

Other raids followed, with ND905 bombing Berlin on a further five occasions between the nights of 2/3rd January and 15/16 January 1944. Attacking Brunswick on the night of 13 January 1944, the crew of ND905 found themselves under determined attack by a strong force of Luftwaffe fighters, some firing rocket projectiles. An attack by a Luftwaffe Focke-Wulf FW 190 single engine fighter nearly put paid to the crew of ND905 and the aspirations of the people of Stoke Newington. The Lancaster's mid-upper gunner managed to hit the diminutive German aircraft at the last moment, causing it to break away from its attack. The target list seemed endless, with Magdeburg, Berlin, Leipzig, Augsburg, Frankfurt and Schweinfurt all being bombed in the brief period of three months. Through all of this, ND905 brought her crew home, avoiding, for a time, the grim mathematics of death, the result of which was so evident in the messes, billets and pubs of Bomber Command.<sup>47</sup>

Following a raid on Essen on the night of 26/27 March 1944, the crew were stood down for a well earned rest. Such leave periods often involved

a visit home or a chance to live a 'normal' life in daylight. Pubs would be frequented and the company of women sought. Spontaneous squadron parties would develop, often resulting in the enthusiastic playing of mess games and the nursing of post-celebratory hangovers. For the crews of Bomber Command there was a feeling that the worst had been passed, that the Luftwaffe was finally being ground down, and that the end of the war was almost in sight.<sup>48</sup>

Bomber Command HQ at High Wycombe even began to allocate French targets to its crews, in support of the proposed Allied invasion of Europe. Between 9 April and 3 May 1944, Lancaster ND905 operated against French targets: railway marshalling yards, road intersections and enemy vehicle parks being singled out. Some raids continued against German industrial targets in an attempt to disguise the shift in bombing policy away from Germany and towards Normandy. The crew of ND905 adapted magnificently to the changing and evolving tactics, despite the fact that they had been trained for night operations and steeped in the received wisdom of area bombing prevalent throughout Bomber Command at this time. Many crews enthusiastically supported this change in policy because the targets in France were military; German targets affected civilians in the cities. French targets were also safer and well within range of RAF and US Eighth Air Force fighter escorts. Sadly, any such complacency would in this case have been misplaced.

The night of 3/4 May 1944 saw a force of 346 Lancaster and 14 Mosquito aircraft of Bomber Command set out for a 'milk run' French target at Mailly-le-Camp. The location was identified as a Wehrmacht tank park and camp and little enemy resistance was foreseen. ND905 under Squadron Leader Swanston formed part of the fourteen aircraft force from 103 Squadron that were detailed for this raid. Weather conditions were good and the run in to target was uneventful and almost relaxed. The raid started smoothly with initial target-marking being accurate.<sup>49</sup>

Confusion set in when the voice of the 'Main Force Controller', a tactical manager of the attack, failed to carry to the crews of the waiting main bomber force, who would not attack until

given permission to do so. This permission was eventually given, but the initial hesitation proved deadly, allowing German night fighters to be vectored in force to the environs of the target area. The Lancasters of No. 1 Group were mauled savagely, and 28 aircraft were lost. Lancaster ND905 was one of them, all her crew being killed.<sup>50</sup> A sad loss, on a day of sad losses, that amounted to one of the most costly raids of the war.<sup>51</sup>

#### A homecoming of sorts

In May 1945, true to its word, the Air Ministry presented the people of Stoke Newington with a commemorative log book outlining the life and death of ND905. The log - nothing can be traced of the other seven, or the Lancasters which they represented - was initially held in the reference section of Stoke Newington Library. In 1975 it was transferred into the safekeeping of Hackney Archives Department, where it remains, a small but poignant tribute to the people of Stoke Newington, the factory workers of Chadderton and the brave crews of Bomber Command.

#### Notes

- HAD SN/EMER/4 (Report of Local Savings Subcommittee to the Emergency Committee, 29 March 1943).
- Archibald Macdonald Gordon, mayor 1923-24, 1934 and 1941-45.
- HAD SN/EMER/4.
- Ib, p.28 and Imperial War Museum (IWM) 'War Savings', Vol. 3, #3, 11.
- IWM War Savings (589.1), Vol. 3, #10, 8.
- IWM War Savings (589.1), Vol. 3, #10, 9.
- IWM War Savings (589.1), Vol. 3, #11, 3.
- Owen Thetford, *Aircraft of the Royal Air Force Since 1918* (1988).
- HAD SN/Z/9. The document is not an aircraft log book in the official sense, being compiled by the Air Ministry in a more readable format for general consumption. It can be described as a cross between an individual aircraft log and a squadron operational record book but gives a useful overview of operations within the constraints of wartime censorship.
- HAD SN/Z/9; IWM War Savings (589.1) Vol 3, #11, 12/13.
- HAD SN/EMER/4.
- Hackney Gazette* 3 February 1943.
- Stoke Newington and Hackney Observer* 27 February 1943.
- Hackney Gazette* 8 March 1943.
- It is likely that Jones had in mind October 13 1940, when over 173 people lost their lives sheltering from an air raid in the basement at Coronation Avenue. See A. P. Hyde, *The Blitz - Then and Now*, (1987-1990); J. Golden, *Hackney at War* (1995).
- Hackney Gazette* 8 March 1943.

17. *Hackney Gazette* 12 March 1943. The term 'United Nations' was used extensively in British newsreels of the time and had none of its later connotations. See IWM Film and Video Archive WPN film series.
18. *Ib.*
19. HAD SN/EMER/8 (Emergency Committee, Libraries Maternity and Child Welfare Sub-Committee, 17 March 1943), item 7/3.
20. *Stoke Newington and Hackney Observer* 20 March 1943.
21. *Ib.*
22. See IWM, War Savings (589.1) Vol. 3 #11, 7 for an overview of the success of the war savings campaigns in industry.
23. *Hackney Gazette* 19 March 1943.
24. *Stoke Newington and Hackney Observer* 20 March 1943.
25. See IWM War Savings (589.1) Vol. 4, #1, 3 for an overview of 'Wings' fundraising activities in schools.
26. *Hackney Gazette* 15 March 1943.
27. *Conway's Fighting Ships* (1997), 57.
28. Walton Films (1955), director Michael Anderson.
29. The Avro Lancaster had been in RAF service since Christmas Eve 1941. The Lancaster became operational on 3 March 1942.
30. K. Delve, *Avro Lancaster* (1999), 2, 12/13 and P. Jacobs, *The Lancaster Story* (2002), 2, 25-29.
31. H. Holmes, *Avro Lancaster, The Definitive Record* (2001), 1, 9ff.
32. The Lancaster's wingspan had been increased to 102' from the Manchester's original span of 90' 1", and it was here that the Avro engineers initially looked for structural faults.
33. K. Delve, *Avro Lancaster* (1999), 1, 21ff.
34. See M Hastings, *Bomber Command* (1995), 155.
35. H. Holmes, *Avro Lancaster, The Definitive Record* (2001), 49-57. Service allocation numbers were carried by all RAF aircraft with Lancasters usually having the number stenciled in red, just aft of the mid-upper defensive turret on the fuselage sides. 'ND905' would be carried by the Stoke Newington Lancaster for the whole of her operational life.
36. R. A. Freeman, *Bases of Bomber Command - Then and Now* (2001) 31ff.; G. B. Innes, *British Airfield Buildings - The Expansion and Inter-War Periods* (2000).
37. Forming part of No. 1 Group, Bomber Command, the squadron arrived at Elsham Wolds in July 1941, being equipped at the time with Vickers Wellington twin engined bombers. By October 1942 the squadron had converted to Lancasters and it was with this aircraft type that the squadron became famous throughout Bomber Command for achieving the highest number of operational sorties and by suffering its highest operational losses.
38. J. Falconer, *Bomber Command Handbook 1939-1945* (1998) 7, 125ff.
39. M. Hastings, *Bomber Command* (1995), 213-222.
40. M. Middlebrook and C. Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries - An Operational Reference Book*, (2000), 446-488. Described as the greatest test of the war for Bomber Command, the Battle for Berlin raged between 18/19 November 1943 and 31 March 1944.
41. *Ib.*
42. J Falconer, *Bomber Command Handbook 1939-1945*, (1998), 142ff.
43. *Ib.* 125ff
44. HAD SN/Z/9.
45. Fire and not high explosive was deemed to produce the most devastating results during the 'area campaign', with its most effective examples being the firestorms of Hamburg (July/August 1943), Darmstadt (September 1944) and Dresden (February 1945).
46. HAD SN/Z/9. Also: M. Middlebrook and C. Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries - An Operational Reference Book* (2000) 462ff.
47. See D. Smith and K. Ellis, *Aeronautical Pubs and Inns of Britain* (1996).
48. M. Hastings, *Bomber Command* (1995), 279ff .
49. HAD SN/Z/9. Also M Middlebrook and C Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries - An Operational Reference Book* (2000), 505ff.
50. HAD SN/Z/9. Apart from Swanston, the final crew of ND905 are listed as Sgt. D. A. Hadden, Flying Officer E. J. Dane, Sgt. G. F. Casey, Warrant Officer R. H. Boyd, Flight Sgt. J. C. Smith and Sgt. H Rankin.
51. Including the subsidiary raid on Montdidier Airfield, 50 Bomber Command aircraft were lost out of a total of 598 sorties, an alarming loss rate of 8.3 per cent.

### Contributors to this issue

Barry Burke, Dick Hunter and A. J. Root (who was once again interviewed by Professor John Spiers) have all contributed to earlier volumes of *Hackney History*.

Peter Kent, now IT manager at Hackney Archives Department, previously served as a curator at the Film and Video and Photographic Archives of the Imperial War Museum.

Kieron Tyler is a senior archaeologist with the Museum of London Archaeology Service, and co-author (with Keith Sugden) of *Under Hackney: the archaeological story* (2002).

Among Jack Whitehead's many publications are *The Growth of Stoke Newington* (1983), *The Growth of Marylebone and Paddington* (1989), *The Growth of Muswell Hill* (1995) and *The Growth of Camden Town* (1999).

### Acknowledgements

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### ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS VOLUME

HAD Hackney Archives Department  
 IWM Imperial War Museum  
 LMA London Metropolitan Archives  
 PRO The National Archives  
 (formerly the Public Record Office)

Publications cited are published in London unless otherwise indicated.

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*Two mysterious gardens*  
*Tyssens - Lords of Hackney*  
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*Quakers in Stoke Newington*  
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