

# The Hackney Terrier



HACKNEY ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

No.64 WINTER 2003



Disaster on  
Amhurst Road!

Collapse in 1862  
and Fire in 2003

Also: News, Events  
and Publications





# News

## Staff and Volunteers

Volunteer Elizabeth Green joined the staff on 5 January 2004, taking up post as Peter Kent's job share partner. Peter will work Monday, Tuesdays and alternative Wednesdays, while Elizabeth will work the other Wednesday, Thursdays and Fridays.

Carole Stewart is the new Assistant Director for Cultural Services, within Hackney's Community and Leisure, taking up post on 1 October 2003. Cultural Services includes parks, sport, libraries, museums - and archives.

Thanks and congratulations to Joan Potter and Betty Gough, who between them have completed the photocopying of the drainage indexes held at Hackney's offices on Reading Lane. This mammoth task has been an essential precursor to the transfer of the historic drainage records for Shoreditch (c1870-1965) and Stoke Newington (1900-65), which should go ahead in the February 2004 closure period.

## Service monitoring

In line with other Hackney Council services, we have been asked to produce data on ethnic composition of users on a quarterly basis. To meet this target, we will take one week in each quarter, and for that period ask users to complete a simple form. Given that user time is precious, we will try to ensure that the form can be completed quickly. Forms will be anonymous.

## Funding bids

We have been successful in two grant applications to the London Museums, Archives and Libraries group. One award has provided training for Jacqueline Bradshaw Price, the con-

servator, to carry out a preservation audit. This selective process will enable us to produce data on our likely conservation requirements for the future. The other award meets the cost of a disability access audit at the Archives Department. Victoria Waddington Associates, the successful consultants, will carry out the audit of premises and procedures and provide training to staff in January 2004. Recommendations on any changes to the current premises will be taken forward, funding permitting.

## Projects

HAD is now one of two test areas in the pilot Community Access to Archives project (CAAP) - a National Archives funded precursor to *Linking Arms*, a wider Heritage Lottery Fund bid which will seek to create a digital gateway to on-line archive resources held in repositories and by community groups. As part of the one year CAAP project, the project staff will undertake mapping of community groups and initiatives in Hackney. Museum staff will be drawn into the project meetings to bring their wider experience of work in this area to bear. It may now be possible to link in the Outreach workers programme with the latter stages of CAAP. This makes HAD's participation in the wider Linking Arms bid more likely, with the possibility of using the pilot project work as match in kind.

Tudor Hackney still has some technical assessment issues picked by the New Opportunities Fund to resolve. However the National Archives statistics show it received 63,000 hits and 3000 visits in October 2003 alone. This compares with the Hackney Archives part of the Council's site which gets around 50,000 hits and 10,000 visits per year.

## Premises

Hackney Archives Department is now in the course of preparing a brief for a



feasibility study to look at two core options for future premises - a move to the Technology and Learning Centre, or staying put on the present site, but making use of the ground floor and other areas of the building. This essential piece of work will cost both options and inform a proposed Heritage Lottery Fund bid to help fund the selected scheme. Friends will be asked to give their views on their preferences.

In a small but vital change to the present premises, the former microfilm room has been converted into an office, to allow staff a space to work away from the searchroom. The displaced microfilm readers have been moved to the searchroom, with the loss of one reader space. The move was essential, given the addition of the two Webcat project staff.

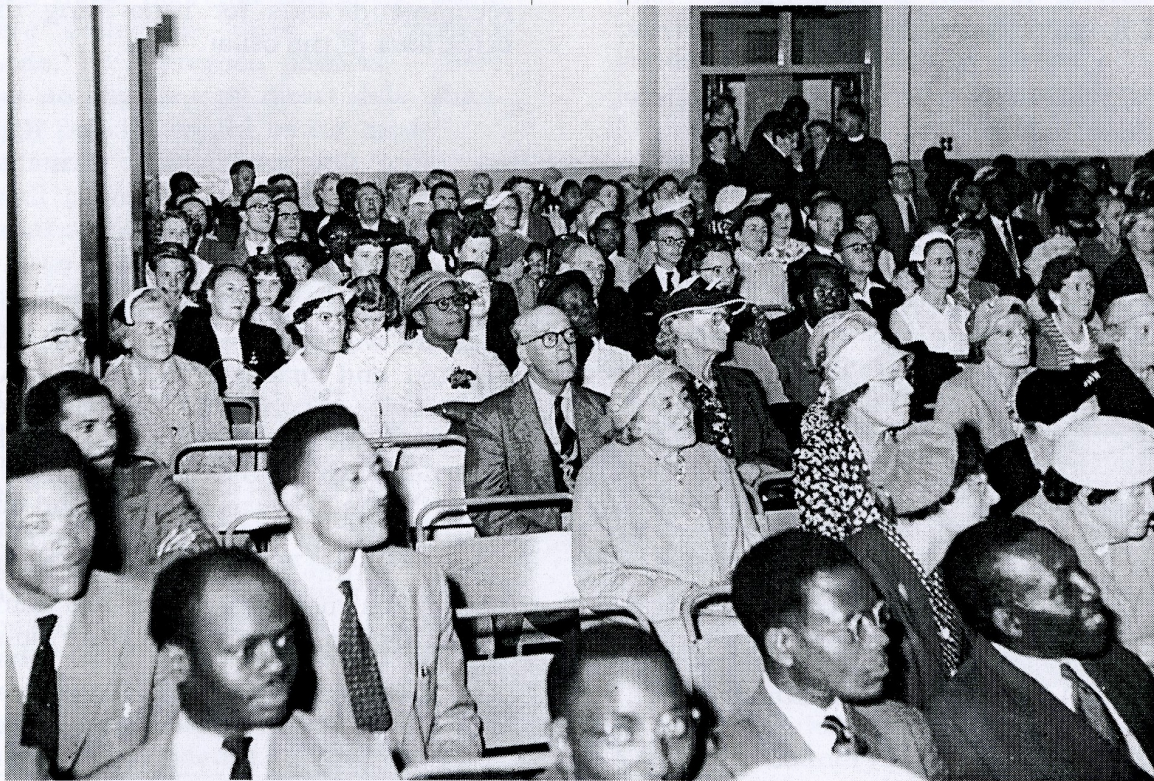
### **Acquisition and listing**

Do you recognise yourself or anyone else in this photograph taken from the collection of photographs about Dalston Methodist Mission, it was taken at the farewell service in 1968?

Other recent acquisitions have included the records of Hackney Community Health Council, just prior to the closure of the HCHC as part of a national programme in the health service.

The opening between Christmas and New Year for the first time for many years enabled the two professional archivists to conduct simultaneous listing and the records include:

- ◆ British Rail's archives, which include documents on the Bishopsgate Goods yard fire of 1964 (D/B/BRI)
- ◆ A collection of albums and scrapbooks from a Methodist minister, which includes photographic records for the Harbour Light church in Goldsmiths Row and (the already mentioned) Dalston Methodist Mission from c1950-68 (D/F/SKI)
- ◆ A selection of purchased documents which includes builders estimates and other property management bills for property in Homerton for the period 1739-41 (M4635/1).





## **Stocktaking closure**

A reminder to all that we will be closed for the annual stocktaking from 16-27 February 2004. Planned work includes the transfer and listing of drainage records, searchroom painting and work at our Stoke Newington outstore. Normal service will be resumed on Tuesday 2 March 2004

## **New Faces: Elizabeth Green**

"I qualified as an archivist in South Africa and worked for a few years at a national reference library in Cape Town. After coming to this country I worked as an information officer in the electricity industry for about 10 years.

Being made redundant led me to return to my archives roots and I started volunteering at Hackney Archives as well as the London Metropolitan Archives and the School of Oriental and African Studies. I live in Hackney and have always been interested in local history and so am excited by the opportunity of being part of the Hackney Archives team."

## **Library Accessions**

New accessions to the library collections include:

Sarah Burton. *A Double Life: A Biography of Charles and Mary Lamb*. London, 2003.

This is a new biography of Charles and Mary Lamb, the brother and sister partnership who wrote *Tales from Shakespeare* and spent part of their lives living together in Hackney. Sarah Burton looks at their life together at the centre of the Romantic Movement and yet marked by tragedy and depression.

Guy Grannum. *Tracing your West Indian Ancestors. Second Edition*. PRO, London, 2002.

This improved edition of the Public Record Office's Reader Guide to tracing West Indian ancestors describes those classes of records held at the National Archives which hold information of interest to those trying to trace West Indian ancestors. It covers records looking at life cycles, migration, land and property and military service.

Bryan Magee. *Clouds of Glory: A Hoxton Childhood*. London, 2003.

The story of one boy's experiences growing up in Hoxton before the Second World War while it was still one of London's most notorious slum areas. At this time Hoxton Street was known as the roughest street in Britain and a centre for marketing stolen goods, the pickpocket trade and home to a razor gang that terrorised racecourses across southern England.

MOLAS. *The West Cellar, Sutton House, 2-4 Homerton High Street - A structural recording report*. March 2003.

The report discusses the archaeological and historical background of the building and the west cellar and includes recommendations for renovating the brick floor of the cellar.

## **Obituary**

### **Alfred Root**

Readers will recall episodes from the spirited and resourceful life of A. J. Root, twice a contributor to 'Hackney History'. Mr Root died peacefully in Bournemouth on 3 December, after a short illness. He was 90. We send our condolences to his family, and look forward in due course to the publication of his memoirs, which are being edited by his nephew, Professor John Spiers.



## Features

### Ken Neale's A Hackney Notebook (5)

#### 'ANY OLD IRON?' doorstep marketing in Hackney in the 1920s and 1930s.

Nowadays the express delivery services which flourish through the Internet and vastly expanded mail order services have virtually driven out traditional doorstep selling. However in its day this was a distinctive part of working class life and often formed a welcome break in the otherwise mundane daily round. All kinds of goods and services were offered at the door by itinerant agents from a wide variety of enterprises.

In my boyhood in Hackney, the dismal streets echoed to the cries of street collectors and vendors, and the eager and vociferous presence of hopeful and sometimes insistent roundsmen. Less evident, but no less eager as their income was based on commissions were those doorstep salesmen. Some were collecting 'dues' for ordered goods, or insurance policies - there was no payment by direct debit then. Such policies would be for modest sums of insurance and very small premiums, but the accumulation of small premiums from a large number of clients could and did support the local insurance agents.

Our local insurance agent in Lower Clapton was Mr Parks, popularly known as 'Parky' of the Pearl. In those days he and his ilk made their rounds on bicycles equipped with panniers and a basket on the handlebars to house the essential 'tools' of the trade. It all provided a kind of travelling office with record books, stationery pens and pencils, correspondence and adver-

tising material. The agents were usually people of some modest education, good character and knowledgeable in matters concerning the ups and downs of family life. As they were regular and reliable visitors they could become valued friends and counsellors and provide informal social support.

Others of the collecting kind might be calling for regular subscriptions or dues on behalf of savings groups or 'clubs', which could then pay out for Christmas, the annual outing or the proverbial rainy day. There were also similar modest financial arrangements to enable to meet the cost of medical treatment or other health expenses, for there was no National Health service then.

Other 'door steppers' sold, collected, or delivered. Products on sale included household 'knick-knacks' of doubtful quality, ice cream (Walls or Eldorado) cat and dog meat sold on wooden skewers providing a canine or feline kebab. Or occasionally there might a small group of gypsies, invariably women and children, selling lavender or hand wooden pegs for the clothes line. There were a host of service providers - knife and tool sharpeners, window cleaners, chimney sweeps, odd job men or travelling commercial li-



A uniformed delivery rider of W. Connell & Co, Lea Valley Laundry poses on his tricycle in front of 17 Upper Clapton Road. (c.1931). Photo courtesy of Mr J.Noble.



braries. Among the most exciting were the knife sharpeners who rode specially adapted bicycles with the sharpening gear mounted at the front, operated by pedalling. Sweeping was a much dirtier task than it is now that suction cleaners are used - and we all stood in the street watching for the brush to emerge from the chimney pot, greeting it with a burst of applause.

Part of the idiom of the age were the 'rag and bone' men who canvassed the streets with open trucks, often horse drawn at that time. They were collecting and buying for very small sums discarded furniture, old metal artefacts, newspapers and textiles. In fact, as far as I remember, anything but bones! They were the forerunners of the re-cycling services now operated by local authorities or under commercial franchises. They had a rather picaresque image that was part of the street scene in pre-war Hackney. (1)

Then there were the deliveries, part of selling and collecting. They were largely for goods that supermarkets supply today, and included milk, bread, coal and newspapers, some of which still survive as delivered services today.

Some of those who called are still with us today - religious groups and political activists at election times. But in the pre-war period there were also travelling beggars, school truancy inspectors and Queens Nurses on their once familiar bicycles. There were policemen on patrol, though if the popular perception is correct, more frequently then than now.

The Man from the Pearl, the 'pussy' butchers, the men from the club and the School Board, all touched our lives in one way or another. And men they were - almost without exception except for gypsy women and 'Bible' folk. Was this emancipation or social necessity? In putting together these recollections, it became apparent to me just how extensive and diverse all this doorstep

activity was. Virtually unstructured, sometime operating within well established routines, sometimes seemingly spontaneous, it was an authentic and large part of Hackney's pre-war street life. There would have been less interest, and more difficulty without the sharp rap on the door knocker and the cry of 'Any Old Iron?'

(1) There was a man with a hand cart collecting old iron from South Hackney in the late 1980s, perhaps a last survivor of the breed (DLM).

### **Disaster at Amhurst Road - The Gibbon's Fire**

Residents were shocked and saddened by the Amhurst Road fire that destroyed Gibbons Furniture store on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2003. At about three o'clock in the morning the fire brigade were called to the fire and despite there being more than sixty fire-fighters in the attempt to save the building, it burnt to the ground. However the buildings either side, recently refurbished, were saved, although the District Bar (formerly the Earl Amhurst PH) is in poor condition. Local people were evacuated from their homes and the road and nearby railway station were closed to most of the week while the area was made safe.

Many Hackney people have happy memories of the store and the Gibbons family; widely known for their good customer service and for selling furniture, prams and toys at bargain prices. The store closed and the buildings were sold in 2002 after 104 years of trading and at the time of the fire the buildings were for sale again. The poor condition of the buildings, with shop fronts with surviving Edwardian and 1930's features, were a concern to conservationists. When, within weeks, a second fire gutted the old stable buildings at the back, those prone to conspiracy theories had plenty of food for thought!





Amhurst Road in the 1960's and in 2003



That wasn't the first time buildings on the site came to an unfortunate end. The cover image shows the collapse of three new houses on Amhurst Road near the North London Railway viaduct in February 1862. These houses built by Mr Amos were being plastered and finished inside when they collapsed trapping the workmen inside. Three men were found to have died and the survivors were taken to the German Hospital for treatment

### Reopening the Empire

After its closure in May 2001 the Hackney Empire re-opens this month with a screening of the Buster Keaton

silent film 'The General' and wide variety of other shows.

Designed by Frank Matcham and opened in 1901 the Hackney Empire belonged to the Sir Oswald Stoll's theatre group. Stoll believed in family entertainment and tried to exclude suggestive acts from his theatres, which led to a lifelong ban on the appearance of local music hall star, Marie Lloyd. As well as being a theatre and music hall the Empire showed films from 1910.

However in 1956 it closed and was acquired by AVT to become the country's first commercial television studios producing programmes such as Take Your Pick and Oh Boy! It was sold again in the 1960's and bought by Mecca Ltd for use as a bingo hall.

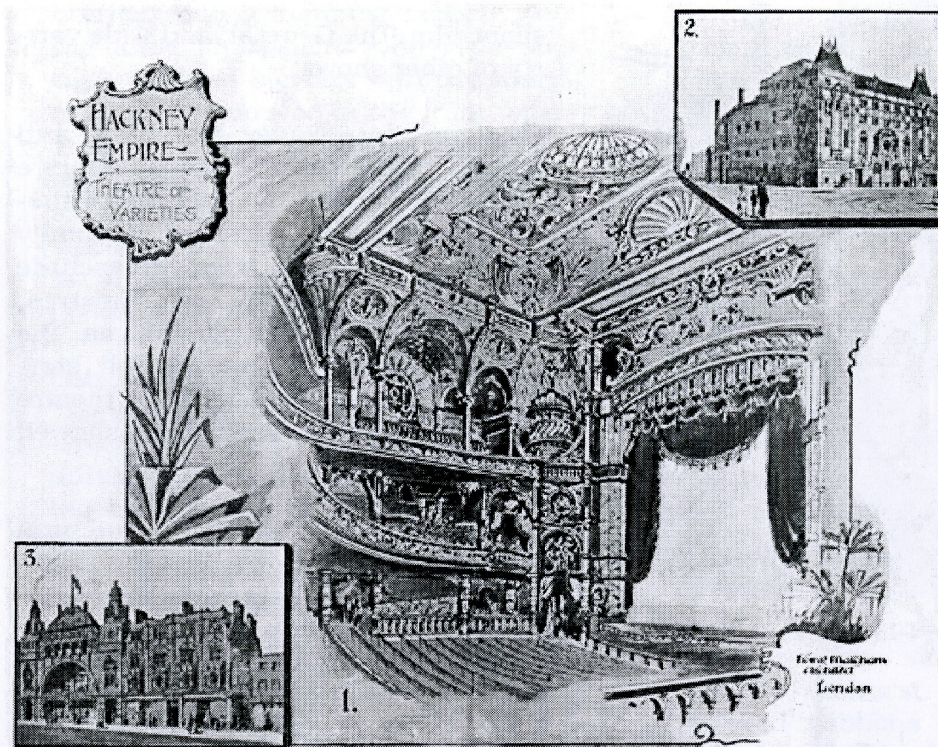
In 1979 Mecca removed the pediment and flanking terracotta domes, but the resulting enquiry and public pressure



The Empire in 1964

resulted in them being restored. At this time Mecca conveyed the Empire to a preservation trust and it re-opened on its 86<sup>th</sup> birthday 9<sup>th</sup> December 1986. The domes, pediment and missing statute of Euterpe were restored in 1988 and the Empire was once again a successful local theatre hosting many comedy stars throughout the 1980's and 1990's.





1. Interior of Empire. 2. Elevation to The Grove. 3. Elevation to Mare Street (showing Steps and Plaza stairs)

Three impressions of the proposed Hackney Empire by the architect Frank Matcham in 1900.

In 2001 it was closed for the million pound restoration and improvement programme. This has now been finished and the auditorium restored and re-gilded. The public bars and reception areas have been enlarged and refurbished.



The Hackney Empire just after reopening, February 2003. To the left is the new Marie Lloyd Theatre bar, replacing the Samuel Pepys public house.

In the background, behind the statue of Euterpe is the new fly tower enabling impressive scene changes and technical effects. There is also a new complex of dressing rooms and facilities for the musicians and artists performing at the theatre; in recent years the lack of such facilities was a drawback for the Empire, unable to attract shows from the West End. See whats on at [www.hackneyempire.co.uk](http://www.hackneyempire.co.uk)

### Credits & Contacts

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