



# *The* **Redbridge Newsletter**

*Edited, designed and produced by retired members in  
Redbridge to share with colleagues across London*

**SPRING 2024**



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# Editorial – Spring 2024

When the world around us is descending ever deeper into the chaos of warfare and famine, corruption and scandal, we hope we can offer you some light relief: dreams of messing about in boats realised for Michael and his wife on their narrowboat as they explore canals and rivers and the surrounding countryside, some nostalgia from Henry – how many of us have hesitated before throwing away memorabilia?

## Serious topics

Our contributors haven't neglected more serious topics, and so there are articles on environmental issues, the political scene, political thought and protest from an earlier age, but still relevant. In some ways, protest defines our lifetime – marches, sit-ins and other demonstrations have become less passive as the issues are ignored. Legislation designed to curb dissension,

however, too often creates instead a climate of aggression and suspicion. We saw some evidence of this in Redbridge recently, when a group of parents attempted to intimidate some of our members who were peacefully handing out leaflets. That sort of behaviour is encouraged by the inflammatory comments of politicians and other public figures. News reporting can distort people's thinking and their response to situations and actions.

As former educators, we naturally retain an interest in books and several of the articles make reference to books as sources for research and for further information, and of course we have a new selection – crime this time – from Bob's reading list. There's much more, of course, but read on to find out!

Liz Dolan



*In March, Redbridge Retired Educators met up for a convivial coffee morning at Belgique in Wanstead*

**Please send all contributions, or ideas for contributions, to the Editorial team at - [mike321peters@gmail.com](mailto:mike321peters@gmail.com). Contributions can be in the form of letters or short articles in response to pieces you have read in the Newsletter or longer articles that might interest our readers. Thanks.**



**Ron Oldham shares his experience of a cruise that didn't quite go as planned:**

# Cruising with Covid

March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020. Boris Johnson announces the first corona virus lockdown. Sue, my wife, and I had already locked down two weeks before, especially after our experience on a cruise from 3<sup>rd</sup> January to the 7<sup>th</sup> February 2022 to Central America and the Caribbean.

An itinerary of exotic destinations and warm weather had beckoned. January cruises can be better value than at other times of the year.

## **An older couple prepare to cruise**

As seasoned cruisers, we were careful to safeguard our health. Medical insurance is mandatory to be allowed to travel on board a cruise ship, and we had spent a tedious period of time searching the web sites for the most affordable deal, followed by lengthy telephone conversations, listing our various medical conditions and drugs. Travel insurance for cruises is expensive, prohibitively so for Canada, the USA and the Caribbean. Unlike some of our respectable friends, who can be economical with the truth, we were scrupulously honest. Although our ship had a medical centre with doctors and nurses, a pharmacy, isolation cabins, operating facilities and a padded cell, plus a video link to Southampton Hospital, serious cases are transferred by ambulance at the next port to the local hospital, provided it is of a sufficient standard; or, if at sea, as we had witnessed several times, patients are helicoptered off the ship's deck. An invalidated health policy could be ruinously expensive.

## **Strange occurrences**

As our cruise progressed, we became aware of the increasing number of fellow passengers who were persistently coughing. We also noticed that the theatre company were performing less and less, with gradually fewer artists appearing. The pianists who played at various venues were also mysteriously disappearing, which meant that the promised short classical concerts failed to take place. Artists regularly disembark cruise ships at various ports to be replaced by new performers, but not on this trip. There were also fewer bar and waiting staff working on board.

## **Taking precautions**

Cruise ships are petri dishes for respiratory infections, and we always made sure to wash our hands carefully and to avoid the buffet, which could be very crowded at breakfast time, with guests breathing and sneezing over the food – safer to eat in the restaurants. Incidentally, we also kept clear of the sundecks at the



***Ron Oldham on shore leave***

stern of the ship because, until recently, most cruise ships were fuelled with marine diesel oil - cheaper, but far more polluting, so lowering the air quality towards the back of the ship.

## **The virus strikes**

Air-conditioning systems can adversely affect the nasal passages and throat, so we had booked a forward stern balcony cabin to ensure fresh air could always enter the cabin. Despite these precautions, however, both Sue and I eventually succumbed to whatever bug was sweeping through the ship. On January 27<sup>th</sup> we left Guadeloupe in the Caribbean and retired to bed early. Suddenly I was awakened from a restful sleep by the sound of my wife gasping for air, barely able to whisper, "I can't breathe". Respiratory function gradually regained, Sue spent the night sitting up in bed, afraid to fall asleep.

Early the following morning we repaired to the medical facility, and after agreeing the consultation fee of £90, the middle-aged doctor, after a cursory examination, pronounced that my wife had no respiratory infection, normal blood pressure, and that her unsettling experience was due to acid reflux. He admitted there was a bug infecting passengers on the ship and that he had advised crew and entertainers to



***Our ship had a medical centre with doctors and nurses, a pharmacy, isolation cabins, operating facilities and a padded cell, plus a video link to Southampton Hospital, serious cases are transferred by ambulance at the next port to the local hospital. But still the ship was a floating Petri dish***

avoid contact with the passengers. We decided to monitor Sue's condition by consulting the internet; probably mistakenly, we did not telephone 111 or our own surgery in Wanstead, as her condition seemed to be improving.

#### **Back to shore**

On our last evening at sea, having listened to an amusing, interesting and informative talk by the

Reverend Richard Coles, Sue had another attack of severe breathlessness. Early the next morning, in Southampton, we telephoned our local surgery for an emergency appointment for that afternoon. The doctor, upon examining her, prescribed antibiotics and steroids – later to become a standard treatment for moderate to severe COVID, and within a few days she was feeling better.

**Would you like to share a holiday experience – good or bad? Please let us know.**



# Freedom Walk with Peter Ashan

**November 2023: for those who were there, and for those who were not, Rachel Brittle points up the highlights of a recent Redbridge Retired Educators' social event**

Retired members, friends and educators were lucky to attend a walk and talk with Peter Ashan, who gave us a tour of Forest Gate, Newham, East London. He told us about the various communities that have lived and worked in this diverse, multicultural community, using local landmarks.

We began our walk in Woodgrange Road where we saw a mural entitled 'The Lion of the Punjab', celebrating the first Sikh king, which has been painted on a new building on the original site of a Punjabi business. The British Union of Fascists had their headquarters not far from here and in the 1930s targeted the members of the Jewish community living in the area.

## **Jewish connections**

There are strong Jewish links to this area. 153 Earlham Grove was home to a Jewish lady, Hazel Goldman, who was dedicated to improving the area

through use of art, founding the Free Form Trust which empowered communities to improve their area. Farther down this road was the largest Synagogue ('Schul' in Yiddish) in London, which is no longer there. There is, however, a beautiful and well used community garden, carrying on the philosophy of improving life through art and nature. It is situated next to a modern block of flats and must be an absolute god-send for the families living there to have access to such a lovely outdoor space. Many community events are held there.

## **Musical notes**

As we walked further down Woodgrange Road, Peter told us about the Forest Gate Youth Club which was started to work specifically with the Black community. Tony Lee Fielding supported the club by delivering singing workshops to the youths attending. We had another musical link on Sebert Road where there is a



***Starting the walk at the corner of Woodgrange Road and Sebert Road, near Forest Gate station***





***The display at the back of the stand at Clapton Community Football Club emphasises inclusive values. Their historic ground is next to the Spotted Dog pub in Upton Lane***

blue plaque commemorating a record shop and recording studio in the 1990s, which was instrumental in supporting the grime, jungle underground music scene - De Underground Records. There is also a blue plaque on a nearby road celebrating the Upper Cut club, where Jimi Hendrix allegedly wrote Purple Haze. (This has never been verified but it's nice to think it's true!) There was another club opposite this one, called the Lotus, infamous for being rather rough and several members of the group could attest to this! At the bottom of Woodgrange Road is the Princess Alice, which held the first Rock against Racism gig on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1976.

#### **Further connections**

We also visited Durning Hall, which was host to the East London Gay Liberation front in the 1970s. Forest Gate pride was started here in 2017 and is celebrated every year. The Newham Monitoring group was also based here and recorded racist attacks.

From Woodgrange Road, we walked along Upton Lane to the site of the Spotted Dog pub and Clapton Community Football Club. The land was originally a hunting ground and kennels for Henry 7<sup>th</sup>. It is now the home of the football club, with the pub sadly fallen into a state of disrepair. Clapton FC was the club of Walter Tull, the first Black footballer in the football league. He also served as an officer in World War 1. The club has a strong anti-fascist/ anti-racist background and ethos.

The final part of our walk took us back up towards Forest Gate. This part of the area was home to a large

Roman Catholic Irish community. We admired St Anthony's, a local Catholic club and listed building. It was built by Professor Hughes, a silk merchant, and trade union banners were made here.

Most of the people attending the walk either lived or worked in the area but I think we all learnt something new. It is amazing that such a lot of history is to be found in this small, now rather rundown area. Peter is a lively and interesting speaker!

**If you have any suggestions for social events we can organise, please get in touch.**



***St. Anthony's Catholic Social Club, AKA 'the Red House', is a listed building with a significant history. One of the area's first trade union banners was created here***

## A journey of fitness through the years

# From Couch Potato to Ice Swimmer

**Rachel Brittle tells us how she keeps fit and has overcome several challenges on the way**

I am a particularly active person for my age, or so I have been told! I have not always been like this, and people often ask how I ended up where I am; therefore I have decided to write about how it all started. I was fit in my youth, doing a lot of dance and cycling but things changed when I went to university....

### **Personal background**

I had always been lucky as one of those people who can maintain my weight and eat what I wanted – well, until I gave up smoking just before my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. Gradually my weight crept up until my clothes were not fitting, and so I decided to take action. I joined a gym and began to exercise regularly. I was working in a school at the time, which actively encouraged pupils to keep fit with many clubs, plus a head teacher, Gail Brannan, who was a marathon runner. I began helping out with the clubs at school and took up running. With Gail's encouragement, I joined her running club, Eton Manor AC, and loved it! I was soon training three times a week and racing most weekends. I wasn't particularly fast but enjoyed the company and the chipping away at my times.

### **Adapting**

Sadly, not long after I joined the club, Gail had to give up running due to an arthritic hip and she began cycling to school and swimming in order to maintain fitness. I had a bike, which I bought to use as cross training for my running, but was not doing much with it, and so followed her lead and started to cycle to school too. We ran an after-school bike club for the children and trained as Stage 1 cycle instructors - it was all great fun. We were able to teach the pupils cycling skills and take them on rides in neighbouring parks and woods. They were actively encouraged to cycle to school, and we also had bike parking and hire-bikes for staff, which led to more members of staff cycling.

### **Starting the triathlon**

After a few years, I started to get some niggles, which stopped me running for a few weeks at a time, and so I started to swim in my gym. They held a beginner's triathlon each Summer, so I entered! I could only swim 'head up' breaststroke, the bike was a static one by the pool and then we ran around the park. I did quite a lot of training and on the day was astonished to win my age category! I absolutely loved it. So that



### ***Running with Eton Manor AC***

Summer, I had swimming lessons to learn front crawl and entered the London Triathlon for the following year. That entailed a proper open water swim in a wetsuit and an actual bike ride. I got 'all the gear' and had open water swimming training - quite a shock to the system!

The London tri went well, and I met people training who were in a local triathlon club, and so I joined. The club has a range of abilities and talents, including several world age-group champions and even a member who has competed at Kona, the Triathlon world championship. Everyone's achievements are celebrated and I was awarded the Coach's Athlete of the Year, 2016, for my dedication to training, and was part of a winning relay team at a local triathlon. I absolutely love triathlon and went on to complete Olympic distance triathlons - 1500m swim, 40k bike and 10k run - Ride London, Swim Serpentine, and other combinations of running, cycling and swimming.

### **A new challenge**

I was really looking forward to retirement in 2022, which would enable me to train more, participate in training camps and even race abroad but I was stopped in my tracks by a debilitating knee injury. Absolutely no running or cycling.... I was devastated and had to use



crutches, then a stick, to even walk. Swimming became even more important, and so I attended a one-day workshop to improve my stroke and I really worked on becoming an efficient swimmer. This winter, as over the previous two winters, I decided to carry on open water swimming wearing a wetsuit. But this year I challenged myself to not wear one, just a swim-suit, boots and gloves.

### **Free**

As I was free in the day, I could also swim more often, so started to go to Parliament Hill lido, an unheated pool a short train ride away from me. This really helped me to acclimatise to the cold and I am very proud that, despite not running or cycling, I have had a target and achieved something. I have swum 18,000 meters since 1<sup>st</sup> November 2023 in sub 10-degree water, the coldest being 1.3 degrees ...

### **Friends**

Sport has introduced me to some of my very best friends - the open water swimming community in particular is very welcoming and supportive. It has also had a massive impact on my mental health. The mantra 'Do what you can, when you can' is very important to me. I have had to stop worrying about what I can no longer do but celebrate what I can do, and am happy to say my patience is paying off as my knee is slowly recovering and I have begun to walk Parkrun. I never thought I should be happy to be last but I am just happy to be able to walk three miles!!



***I have swum 18,000 meters since 1<sup>st</sup> November 2023 in sub 10-degree water, the coldest being 1.3 degrees ...***



***Cycling to school is a great way to keep fit***



# The Great Escape Part 1

Retired teacher Mike Wood shares his and his wife's experience of narrow boating through the canals of England.

On retiring, like everyone else, my wife and I received a lump sum 'bonus' payment. We had two, which left us with a problem: do we use this to pay off our mortgage or add what we can to it and try to buy our own narrowboat...

## Starting Out

We had discovered narrow boating some years earlier when our children were younger and had also discovered what a stress buster it was. Over the years we had many hire boat holidays and later bought into a couple of 'syndicate boats', where a group of people would share the cost of running the boat and apportion time on it accordingly. We not only learned much about the 'how' of narrow boating and, indeed, gained the Royal Yachting Association Helmsman Certificate, but also learned to love the otherworldliness of the canals and gain a new understanding of time... we could watch the natural rhythms happen around us as we cruised along at a maximum of four miles an hour...think slow...

So, of course, we bought a boat. She is called 'The Great Escape', is forty-six feet long by about seven feet wide, just big enough for two (as there is only one bed) and is moored in Staffordshire. The people who had commissioned her build had, not long after the finish, run out of money. The boat had been repossessed and put up for sale. She was an almost new boat at a second-hand price, and it was love at first sight.

Our thinking was, that being retired, we were not limited to when, how often, and for how long we could cruise. On our first few trips we were a bit careful, one might say cautious, while learning the ins and outs of our own boat. Not being in any way practical or understanding of engineering, it was at times an uphill learning curve.

## Discovering the canals

We made frequent journeys discovering the Llangollen Canal, including the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, as well as the Macclesfield Canal, The Peak Forest Canal, The Caldon Canal, and many others. These had been the arteries of the industrial revolution over two hundred years ago and were the quickest way to move goods around the country until the railways came along. Those interested in the history of our unique canal system should read *Canals, The Making of a Nation* by Liz McIvor (or watch the accompanying TV series - try YouTube) or, for a lighter read, go for *Water Ways* by Jasper Winn.



**Love at first sight - 'The Great Escape'**

Each canal has its own unique character. Some are quiet and rural, where solitude and nature are to the fore and quiet moorings can be had. Others pass through more industrial, noisy areas where mooring is more 'communal'. The world looks different from canals though. I was brought up in Islington and Hackney but when I travelled through them on the Regents Canal, I recognized very little of it. I was, however, surprised to find my infants school, which overlooked the City Road Basin, still there and still a school.

Canals use locks to go up and down hills but sometimes there is a tunnel to go through. One that we've used a lot is the Harecastle Tunnel on the Trent and Mersey Canal near Middleport. It's one of the longest tunnels on the system.



**'Surprised to find my infants school, which overlooked the City Road Basin, still there and still a school'**

### Locks and lock keepers

To help control the diesel fumes from the boats, a lockkeeper each end closes a door behind you and reopens it at the other end. The tunnel can be daunting and a bit scary. To help alleviate the tunnel's gloom, we put the Beatles into the CD player and sing our way through. On one occasion we were playing 'Revolver' and were blaring out *Got to Get You Into My Life* as we came out of the open door at the exit. As we passed the elderly looking lockkeeper, he shouted out, "I was the drummer!" It transpired that he had been the guitar player in the sixties band 'Cliff Bennett and The Rebel Rousers'. They had had a hit with *Got To Get You Into My Life* and, although a guitar player, he had to replace an errant drummer for the recording session, and so he had been the drummer on the single. I think he had waited years to be able to tell someone that story!

### Joining the narrow boat community

Through a friend, trying to broaden our experience, we were introduced to the Cotswold Canals Cruising Club, an internet group of like-minded narrow boaters who sometimes meet to cruise and plan more adventurous trips with help, assistance, knowledge and friendship. This sounded like fun, so we joined.

Our first trip with them took us to the Anderton Boat lift - a grand Victorian device which can lift narrowboats up and down from the Trent and Mersey canal and onto the River Weaver, which is a wonderful and forgiving river even though the locks are dauntingly large, but operated by lock keepers, unlike the canals where it is 'do it yourself'. We had, up until then, been wary of rivers that have flow and ebb, currents and sandbanks and, occasionally, tides, and seem much more 'alive' than the largely inert canals. The Weaver was where we began to come to terms with this fear.

### Division of labour

My wife has suffered with arthritis for some years and has had both knee joints replaced with metal ones. Walking long distances can often be difficult for her, so she does all the tiller work (steering) and I do all the running around the locks, lifting paddles and opening and closing gates. I have found over the years that it is usually the other way around, with the men standing with the tiller in their hands while the women do the running around. To be fair, some women have expressed a fear of being 'down' in the lock while it is filling, and it can be a bit intimidating...

At the locks, there is usually much chatting. On the canals, everyone wants to chat to you and share their story. You can hear someone's complete life story in the time it takes to empty and fill a lock.



***The Victorian Anderton Boat Lift carries boats up and down between the Trent and Mersey Canal and the River Weaver***

### New friends and experiences

We soon made good friends within the cruising club. Facing and helping each other through adversity creates bonds. Many of the club's members had been boating for years, with much experience to pass on, and were able to help in times of difficulty. We also laughed a hell of a lot and held 'Pimm's o'clock' sessions at the end of each day's boating where gossip, stories, and experiences could be shared.

The next trip with the club meant that we were to be in the first cavalcade of boats to go around the Olympic Park Waterway. That meant bringing the boat down from its mooring in Staffordshire and a trip down the River Thames, coming in at Limehouse Dock. It was a case of kill or cure. This also involved gaining a VHF radio licence. It was worth it all for the cover picture of this edition of the Newsletter.

Soon we were passing Carpenters Lock in the Olympic Park.

And then onto the Regent's canal, past London Zoo to get the boat back to its mooring in Staffordshire.

**Part 2 of this article will appear in the Summer edition of the newsletter.**

**Please share any retirement experiences that might interest our readers.**



# The Love Song of H. Charles Tiller

**'I have measured out my life with Orient programmes'**

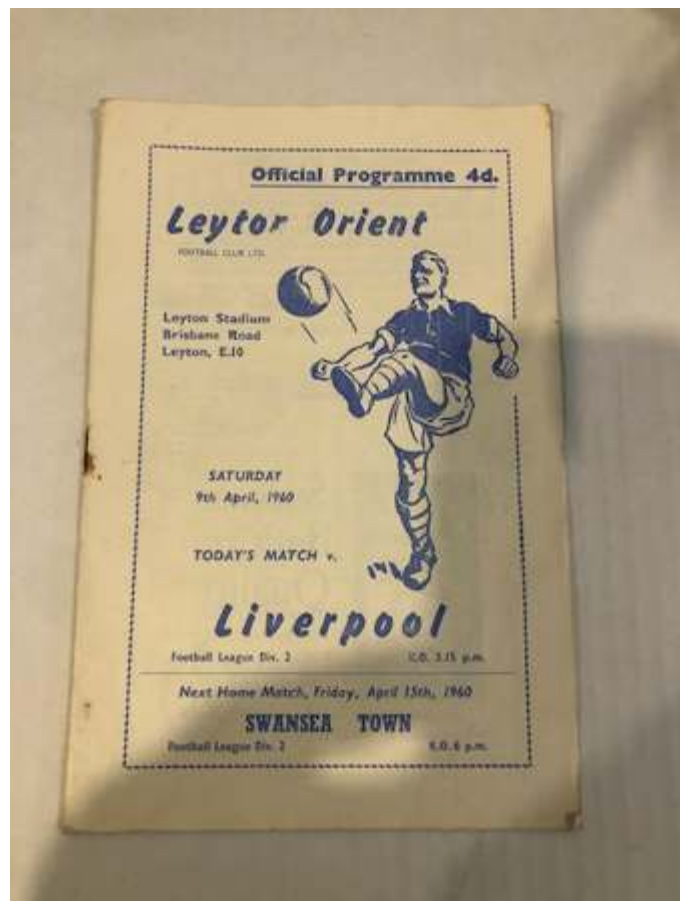
(Absolutely no connection whatsoever with T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: 'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons'!)

## Beginnings

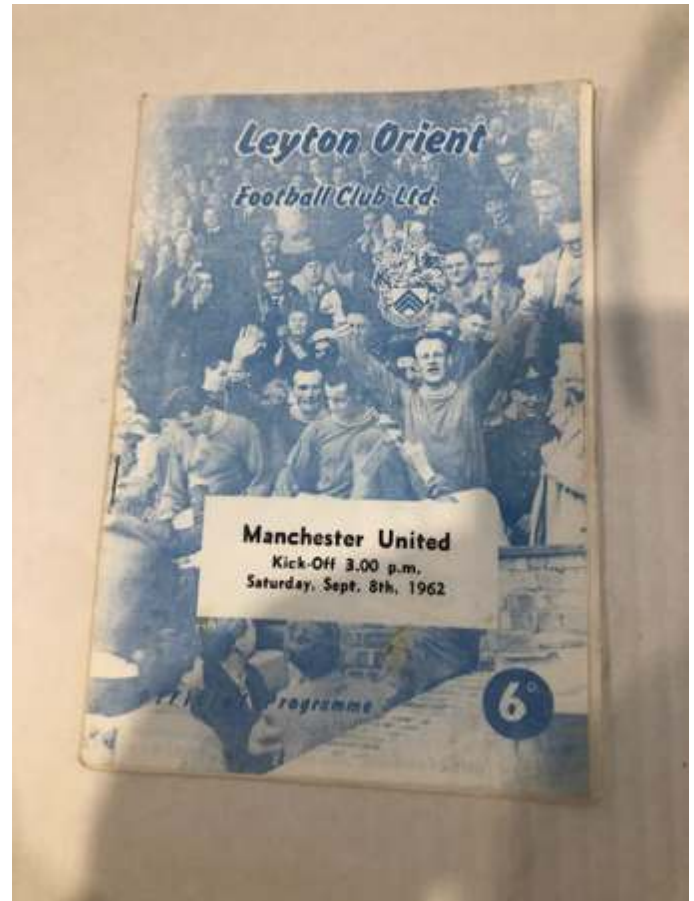
My first ever match at Brisbane Road, the home of Leyton Orient FC, at the age of 9, was in 1960 against a team that some of you may have heard of: Liverpool FC. Terry McDonald and Tommy Johnston scored the goals that day to ensure a resounding 2-0 victory for the O's. And as the old cliché goes: 'Thereafter, I was hooked'.

Over the following 63 years, I obsessively bought the matchday programme and, to put it politely, a rather large collection was accumulated.

As the collection expanded, spatial considerations meant that all programmes (old, new and those in between) had to be reluctantly moved up into the loft, but with the strong belief that one fine day they'd all be brought back down again and bequeathed to a grateful recipient.



***Orient v Liverpool in 1960, the game that was to be the start of a lifelong love affair***



***Little old Leyton Orient actually beat the mighty Manchester United 1 - 0 in 1962***

## An epiphany

I have three daughters who all love the O's, but not Orient programmes. I have no sons. So quite who the inheritor of this collection would be was never obvious. Nonetheless, I continued to accumulate them. And then, quite recently, I had an almost spiritual realisation: with nobody to inherit my collection, it was rather pointless piling up more and more programmes in an extremely dusty loft. (And, moving into my later years, it could well be a case of what goes up might well not come down!)

## Arranging the handover

Thus, the only sensible course of action would be to find a loving new home for my collection. And who better to speak to about this than a certain Mat Roper, the editor of Pandamonium, an Orient fanzine? Mat was, of course, extremely understanding - he offered to take the collection off my hands - with the proceeds

of any sales going towards worthy Orient causes. So, all that remained was for me to get the programmes down from the loft without breaking my neck - no mean feat in itself - and to make a suitable arrangement with Mat for him to collect the programmes in a car of adequate size.

### **Presentation is all**

To help Mat as much as I could (and for my own sense of pride), I decided that the programmes should be presented in the best way possible for The Great Handover. And so special boxes and new, extra-long and strong coloured elastic bands were acquired for the occasion. And on finding a day which was free of all other distractions, I embarked on what no poet could express better than 'an extremely full day's work'.

Numerous journeys had to be made up and down my rickety loft ladder to transfer the programmes to the downstairs lounge. And with the entire floor eventually covered with 63 years' worth of programmes, the major task began. Each season's programmes had originally been bundled together with an elastic band but, with many of them entering their 40s, 50s and 60s, most of these bands had disintegrated, leaving the programmes in a complete state of disarray. And so, the task began of re-sorting the programmes, not only into seasons but also into chronological order within each season, labelling the bundles, securing them with the new elastic bands and placing them into the appropriate decade boxes. (The programmes get considerably thicker and glossier as the years progress!).

### **Task completed, or nearly completed**

Tired, but with a deep sense of satisfaction, my work was eventually completed. I had a lifetime's support of the O's in front of me, all neatly bundled and packaged into several boxes ranging from the 1960s to the 2020s - now in a perfectly presentable state of order to hand over to Mat.

But, to quote from T.S.Eliot again (a brilliant poet but a vicious antisemite, who I had to study for A-level!):

*'Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow.'  
(The Hollow Men)*

And then another realisation came to me: I just couldn't part with my programmes which represented such an important and emotional part of my life and



***Orient reached the semi-final of the FA Cup in 1978, only to lose 3 - 0 to Arsenal***

passion. Not only was there in those boxes a lifetime's support for the club, but also my whole life itself, there on the floor before my very eyes: the 1960s - promotion to Division 1, schooling at Leyton County High for Boys, relegation and the whole teenage thing; the 1970s - champions of Division 3, Liverpool University, work, near promotion to Division 1, marriage and an FA Cup semi-final; the 1980s 3 daughters, 2 relegations and a promotion via the playoffs. And so, it continued into the 1990s and 2000s.

No, those programmes are an integral part of me and just couldn't go. They would be found a new home in a recently cleared, exceptionally spacious filing cabinet in my garage.

And how did Mat react when I broke the news to him? Just as you'd expect from the esteemed editor of Pandamonium: like a perfect gentleman, with a complete understanding of my dilemma - and my solution to it!

**Henry Tiller**

(This article first appeared in Pandamonium, a Leyton Orient fanzine.)

**Read back issues of Retired Educators' Newsletter at  
<https://retiredneu.wordpress.com>**



# 'Smoke gets in your eyes'

## *Reflections on the impact of pollution past and present*

The northern industrial city where I grew up is well-endowed with accessible green spaces: tranquil river valleys and stretches of ancient woodland, a network of landscaped parks established in Victorian times along with the more formal Botanical Gardens – plenty of open ground to be enjoyed by local residents and visitors alike. In my childhood, though, Sheffield was also a city of smoke, and the resultant grime was an integral part of our life.

### **A city of smoke**

For many of my generation, a smoky atmosphere within the home was common and accepted. Family members and visitors smoked, mainly cigarettes, often heavily. In the days before widespread central heating, open coal fires were customary. The solid fuel range had not yet become a luxury status symbol – it was for many a necessity for cooking and heating water, as well as providing warmth.

Outside, our skies were not clear. The view from the surrounding hills was of a thick haze obscuring the buildings and there always seemed to be a slightly smudged gauzy film over things when you went into town, even on a bright day. With a long history of forging knives and scissors in small workshops, Sheffield had become pre-eminently a city of steel production and engineering, making for example coal-cutting machinery and components for aircraft, railways and motor vehicles.

The smoke from domestic chimneys mingled with emissions from the blast furnaces, fuelled by coke, of the industrial steel-making east end, ensuring a constant pall of murky air. Flames from waste gas leapt into the darkness of night from tall slender factory chimneys. The half-open doors of steel mills offered glimpses of a dangerous world of fire, heat and noise.

This smoky, dirty atmosphere had scarcely changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, although car ownership was then nowhere near as widespread as it has become, vehicle exhaust fumes and the particulate residue caused by friction from tyres and brakes were an exacerbating factor. Trains were mostly steam powered and coal fired. The smell of coal and gas lingers in the imagination, a reminder that working collieries once edged the city. Headstocks with their winding gear and slag heaps from spoil were familiar sights.

It was a black, soot-encrusted city – the mellow sandstone revealed in the 1960s with the advent of steam cleaning shattered the youthful illusion that the



**Photo: Public Sector Executive**

Town Hall was built of coal. The still soot-darkened brick of Georgian and Victorian times remains as a stark contrast and many domestic dwellings retain their blackened stone exteriors.

On a windy day, washing on the line would be speckled with smuts. The apples we picked in the garden had a sticky black residue. In winter, the piles of snow left by snow-ploughs at the side of the road were black-edged, melting only slowly into a brown sludge. There were afternoons when the sky outside our classroom windows yellowed and darkened as fog crept in. Fog deadened sound, speech lost resonance, headlights were obscured.

### **A city of contrasts**

“Smoke gets in your eyes” indeed, but smoke gets in your lungs too. The air we breathe carries insidious, unseen attacks on our health – chronic bronchitis and asthma are complicit in shortening lifespans. Endless, long-lasting winter coughs and colds were endemic for school children in the 1950s.

As Victorian manufacturers left behind the meaner streets of factory workers and artisans and, spreading ever outwards towards the countryside, poured their wealth into building large, solid houses of local stone, grand civic monuments and a well-endowed university, it became a city of contrasts. It wasn't a poor city, but many of its inhabitants lived in poverty and substandard or temporary housing. Bomb damage and makeshift

replacements for city centre shops were still very much in evidence. For some of those children still living in insalubrious courts and backstreets, with front doors opening straight off the street, reaching the utopia of trees and parks involved a long trudge for little legs or even a tram ride; open moorland and fields were even less accessible. Instead, their playgrounds were dusty, sooty, often befouled pavements with little sunlight, seldom cleaned: a degree of deprivation not so far from that depicted by, among others, Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell a hundred years earlier.

The clean air measures of the mid to late 50s and the replacement of slum areas over the years by award winning modern flats and social housing should have banished all this but...

#### **Fast forward to 2024...**

...run-down older housing stock has again been allowed to deteriorate to a point where shoddy building practices, hazardous materials and unscrupulous landlords can leave tenants in squalor and overcrowding not of their own making. Britain is not a poor country, yet there are still families living in poverty, there are still children who go hungry and have nowhere to play.

We fill our air with noxious exhaust fumes from motor vehicles and while emissions from chimneys appear now mostly clear, they contain deadly substances and particulate matter. The tall towers of city centre finance can disappear in a summer smog as thoroughly as in the fogs of former times.

#### **Time to take responsibility**

Collectively we really haven't learnt much from the past. Nine-year old Ella Kissi-Debrah is not the only child to succumb to air pollution, but she has the dubious distinction of being the first to have air pollution listed as a major cause on her death certificate. There is now a gradual recognition of the devastating effect on children's growth and general health, but action is too slow to follow. No ULEZ expansion or vehicle scrappage scheme can eliminate poverty, nor remove decades' worth of the dust that still lies on the ground, and much of the polluting traffic has simply relocated to the outer fringes of our cities with consequent deterioration of air quality. We crave escape from the everyday, but we fail to count the cost: smog hovers over the motorways and obscures the sky after every bank holiday traffic jam.

The impact on health and on our beleaguered planet must now be incontrovertible. The spring and summer of the first lockdown in 2020 gave us a glimpse of what life could be like: clear skies, peaceful suburbs, birdsong the only disturbance. Poverty is an issue for governments to resolve, but at an individual level we all bear responsibility for tackling pollution by reducing our consumption of the contributory energy sources and working for a greener, healthier environment that everyone, everywhere can share.

**Liz Dolan**



*Trafalgar Square in the great smog of 1952. By N T Stobbs, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/i>*



# The Plughole Problem, Part 2

**Edward Milner explains why we need better solutions to some of our most important environmental issues**

The Plughole Problem appears in relation to most aspects of climate change and biodiversity crises; you may have recognised it as a regular theme of mine. It's the obsession with new ideas while ignoring the old harmful ones which still go on causing trouble – finding new taps to open while forgetting to stop up the plughole. Publicising a supposed carbon capture scheme while continuing to license new oil drilling as the British Prime Minister made great play with recently.

## **How not to make a real difference**

It is reported that when Warren Buffet was asked at a public meeting in Iowa what Berkshire Hathaway was doing about climate change, he extolled various subsidiary companies' efforts to develop wind energy, without mentioning that one of them, MidAmerican Energy, was continuing to run five (!) local coal-fired power stations and he was strongly resisting calls for them to be retired. Expanding wind energy has little net gain if coal-burning continues. The UK-based Energy Institute

recently reported that while renewables increased 1% on 2021 levels, total greenhouse gas emissions actually increased by 0.8% so, in spite of all the new solar, wind, and tidal projects the result was virtually no improvement in overall GHG emissions. Remind me, have the world's Governments pledged to reduce total emissions? Or is that just conference chatter for some far-off future, say 2050, when present politicians are long gone and my grandchildren will be approaching middle age?

## **Destroying the forests**

The Plughole Problem is far too widespread. I have railed before about planting trees being no substitute for halting the destruction of standing forests. Despite all the initiatives and 'pledges', latest figures from Global Forest Watch show that primary forest loss has continued to increase year on year. Some countries have pledged to reduce rates of forest loss but only in Colombia and more recently in Brazil has deforestation actually been reduced – if any other country has



*The very definition of the 'plughole problem': Coal-fired power stations continue to burn fossil fuels despite renewable energy generation technologies being mainstreamed. Image by Bernd Lauter/Greenpeace*

achieved something similar, I'd love to hear about it. A very few countries actually have a total old-growth logging ban – in Europe, only Norway enforces one. Thailand has had a logging ban for more than a decade (see my film, *Greening of Thailand*), while Kenya is about to abandon its own logging ban due to commercial pressures.

### **Inadequate Remedies**

In the ocean, new marine conservation areas are designated – to enthusiastic publicity – while existing ones hardly function as they should, trashed as they are by unrestricted bottom-trawling. Airlines continue to 'offset' air travel carbon by doing little more than arranging for areas of existing rainforest to be marked out as 'protected'. Privatised water companies in England constantly publicise new 'efficiencies' while failing to control sewage releases and continuing to pay big dividends, enormous salaries to top executives, and bonuses to staff. In other words – business as usual. As David Whyte (*Ecocide*, 2020, Manchester University Press) has pointed out 'we remain obsessed with individual solutions to the most collective of problems' (p 154) and 'changing the financial model' is the only way genuine change will come about.

### **Possible Solutions**

How about levying a 'disposal tax' on the production of single-use plastic at source – providing funds for recycling and cleaning up pollution of plastic waste? This would also discourage its excess production and demand, and would encourage recyclable alternatives such as light wood – as many coffee bars are already preferring. Similarly, shifting the tax regime away from new oil and gas exploration by removing subsidies and tax allowances. Outlawing the felling of all old-growth forests, indeed of all trees above a certain size – and fixing that size for every important tree species? Discouraging the consumption of beef by taxing all meat imported from tropical zones unless stringently proven to be not from deforested land? Refusing palm-oil from deforested land? - in this area, at least, some progress has been gained by the EU's new palm oil regulations – predictably criticised by the Malaysian government but only as a brake on 'free trade'. Pressurizing manufacturers of chainsaws and earthmoving equipment to outlaw their use in protected forest zones and on Indigenous lands?

### **Possible new approach**

I thought there was a fresh approach to plastic in the new report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) rather surprisingly entitled '*Turning off the Tap*' (had they read about the Plughole Problem?). While bending over backwards not to upset the



***Big tree in Laos: (should maximum size for felling each species be agreed/enforced?).***

***Image by Edward Milner/ACACIA Productions***

real culprits – the fossil fuel companies responsible for producing the vast flood of plastic – UNEP proposes, almost as an afterthought, a 'market shift' to encourage the development of plastic alternatives. Promote the use of wood products like paper and cellophane? No – they are interested in more plastic, but 'biodegradable' forms – although they admit the inherent greenwashing component and the yet distant realization of enough biodegradable varieties.

Their elaborate report is extremely detailed, their analysis exhaustive, their proposals admirable – but timid in the extreme. The unspoken assumption seems to be that inventing new technological fixes or coaxing better behaviour from the general public will solve the world's problems. They seem to be operating in that strange world of pledges, international agreements, and spectacular headline statements by politicians, where nothing actually changes but everyone feels better for it. As 'we remain obsessed with individual solutions to the most collective of problems', I suggest that, without decisive regulatory action, corporate behaviour will stay the same, the Plughole Problem will remain, and civilisation will continue to drift down the proverbial drain.

N.B. First published in *Planetary Health Weekly*, a free weekly blog about the health of the planet.

**Do you have a view on how we should approach the climate emergency? If so, please get in touch.**



## Transitional Protection Remedy:

# The McCloud Judgement

**Disclaimer:** I am not a financial advisor. Do not use this article to plan your retirement in any way. Research your own teachers' pension. I would strongly recommend setting up an account on the TPS website. This will show you all your relevant service and documents. It is a good idea to check your pensionable service to see if it is correct. I had errors in my service and, before I retired, I had to ask my school to correct the errors. If you are at all unsure, take advice from a registered financial advisor.

### A brief recap

In 2015, the career average scheme was introduced. Most members of the existing final salary scheme were moved into the new scheme, but members close to their retirement were given transitional protections. Those very close to retirement stayed in the final salary scheme. Tapered members were moved onto the career average scheme at a date that was linked to their age.

The firefighters and the judicial pension schemes challenged the change in the pensions and the McCloud judgement was the result. It was found that the transition protections were discriminatory to younger members of the schemes. This was then extended to apply to all public sector pension schemes.

As a result of the ruling, a rollback of these protections took place in October 2023; ie all pensionable service accrued between April 2015 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 was rolled back to the final salary scheme. All members still active in the scheme as of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 were then moved into the career average scheme. For most teachers affected by the transitional protection remedy, when they retire they will be asked to decide which scheme they want to accrue benefits in (ie final salary or career average) for the period of April 2015 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

### Who is affected

The McCloud judgement only affects you if you were in service before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 and on or after 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015. That includes those who've taken their benefits (pension) since April 2015 and deferred members returning within five years.

### You won't be affected if:

- you joined the Teachers' Pension Scheme on or after 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012
- you retired and took your benefits before 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015

- you have had a break in service of more than 5 years since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012

- you have no pensionable service in the remedy period

If you retired on or after 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015 and before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, you will be contacted and you will be asked to make a choice about which scheme you want your service in the remedy period to be in. Beneficiaries of a member who has died will also get to choose. You will be contacted between December 2023 and August 2024. (From the TPS website as of 24<sup>th</sup> January 2024):

**'If a member is affected by Transitional Protection, we need to clearly demonstrate to them what their options will be at retirement. The easiest way to do this is by creating a PDF of their Benefit Statement detailing the two options as opposed to the current web page. This is the simplest method of providing this to the member and still allows them to access their Benefit Statement whenever they need to'.**

The above means you will know how much each of the two options are worth before you have to make the choice between the final salary scheme and the career average scheme. I plan to take the one that gives me the most money!

Your case may be more complicated if you have flexibilities, and this may mean that it takes longer for the TPS to contact you (Flexibilities are different ways of increasing your pension. (See the TPS website for more information This has do to be done before you have retired)).

As I said at the beginning of this article, please do not use this article as a basis for any decisions. I am not a financial adviser. I am just a retired teacher who this affects. The TPS website has a lot of information about teachers' pensions including loads on the McCloud judgement. The NEU website has a lot of information on teachers' pensions and about pensions for support staff. Read around the subject and, if you are still very confused, take advice from a registered financial adviser. As far as I can see from their website, the NEU does not seem to recommend a particular financial adviser. The NASUWT, according to their website, recommend Wesleyan Financial Services.

*Ctd. page 18*

Ctd from page 17

#### Useful links

<https://www.teacherspensions.co.uk/employers/employer-faqs/transitional-protection.aspx>

<https://www.teacherspensions.co.uk/-/media/documents/member/factsheets/mccloud-member-factsheet/myth-busting-factsheet-v1--member.ashx?rev=df006ec9e17c4b379ce10bbbade0b2ad&hash=19832A0A732EB4FBCDB41A985B5BCCF7&hash=19832A0A732EB4FBCDB41A985B5BCCF7>

<https://neu.org.uk/advice/your-rights-work/pensions/teachers-pension-scheme>

<https://www.naswt.org.uk/advice/pay-pensions/pensions/pensions-england.html>

<https://www.wesleyan.co.uk/pensions-and-retirement/teachers-pension/changes>

Tina Jacobs

If you would like to share your knowledge of or experience with pensions – occupational or State, please get in touch.

## NEU Redbridge News

### Maureen McCarthy updates us on recent issues in the district



#### ***NEU members took strike action at Kantor King Solomon School at the end of the Spring term***

The Spring term has been dominated by three issues:

- The two pay ballots for teaching staff and support staff.
- The issue of Gaza which has become more prominent as a ceasefire has still not been achieved.
- The situation at Kantor King Solomon School where NEU members began a nine-day strike.

Other issues relating to workload, in particular linked with management styles, have also been addressed throughout this period and ballots regarding possible

strike action have been held / will be held in three more schools.

#### **1. The Pay Ballots.**

The indicative ballot for teachers opened on 2<sup>nd</sup> March and will close on 28<sup>th</sup> March. This seeks to determine members' attitudes towards the expected 1-2% pay award predicted for next year. By Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> March, the London turnout was 50%, Redbridge's was 70% by the 26<sup>th</sup>. Data clearly shows the value of



workplace reps with huge differences in numbers voting between schools. Phone-banking has been organised to try to address this problem, with a number of retired members once again being involved.

The support staff consultation ballot opened on 16<sup>th</sup> March (closing 19<sup>th</sup> April). The question regards a demand for an above inflation award of £3000 or 10%, whichever is greater. A number of schools recorded 100% turnout almost immediately, while others lag much further behind.

The problem is that if the teacher ballot doesn't reach the 50% national threshold, the support staff can't proceed. So, as with ballots last year, boroughs like Redbridge need massive turnouts to try to bridge the gap with other geographical areas where low turnouts are anticipated. As with ballots in other professions, a "flattened out" final result could be a negative one, a depressing thought which could, hopefully, become redundant by the time this newsletter is published!

## **2. The Situation in Gaza**

NEU members' organisation of support for Gaza has increased exponentially as the situation has deteriorated so appallingly. Redbridge NEU members have attended most, if not all, the marches held in central London and taken part in other demonstrations, for example in Ilford.

The NEU Whats App has photos of meetings and fundraising activities held in a number of Redbridge schools. In addition, many participated in the Workplace Day of Action on February 9<sup>th</sup>.. The issue in several schools concerned the difference in responses from SLTs, for example regarding the wearing of badges by both pupils and teachers and, in Wanstead High School, the decision to bring in the organisation Solutions Not Sides to speak to students. The school NEU met and carried an emergency motion which was sent to governors. As a result, a decision was made to withdraw the invitation.

## **3. Kantor King Solomon School**

Nine days of strike action began on 19<sup>th</sup> March following the failure of five hours of talks at ACAS, with the headteacher refusing to negotiate with the NEU reps. She arrived in September 2023 and problems started almost immediately with the result that six of

the seven members of SLT have left. The flash point came when an outside consultant was brought in to "observe staff", some for as few as 10 minutes. However, following the observations, 15 members of staff were put on support plans. The NEU is protesting about this misuse of capability procedures, together with excessive workload and lack of consultation.

The situation within the school is becoming toxic. NEU members are being openly criticised, including by some of their own students. The issues within the school itself are not being addressed, especially the increasingly large class sizes due to the number of staff leaving - 12 at Christmas and another 12 this week. Disruption is becoming a problem: having 16% of the school population in detention is an interesting performance indicator, but the headteacher seems determined to focus on confrontation with her staff rather than working with them to address issues, the most important of which is moving the school out of its 'Requires Improvement' status.

Two NEU retired members were harassed while attempting to leaflet parents outside the school, the first time this has been seen in Redbridge, and there have been abusive comments made to members on the picket line; nevertheless, the strike continues. At the time of writing, more talks have been suggested and parents were assured in a Zoom meeting by Venda Premkumar, the District Secretary, that the NEU would welcome discussions with the headteacher. She fielded a number of questions from parents and focused on how the Union had attended all the talks so far, whilst the headteacher and chair of governors were unwilling to negotiate. Comments in newspapers, including the Ilford Recorder, point to a huge gap between the two parties, with the headteacher claiming strikes are an "attempt to mask the poor teaching and lack of professionalism" of some staff. The strikes continue....

**You can see the NEU response on:**

<https://www.redbridgeneu.org/post/neu-press-release-12-03-24>

**Stop Press: 'Strike suspended yesterday following important concessions. The school and LA tested the members strength and solidarity. They passed with flying colours -and hand-painted placards.'** (Whatsapp message Wednesday 27 March)

**Are you in touch with former colleagues who are still working in school? Why not share *Redbridge Retired Educators' Newsletter* with any who may be considering retirement. Or share the link to the website with them:**  
**<http://retiredneu@wordpress.com>**

# The Battle of Cable Street

**What happened and how to find out more about the event. Gary Kenneth Watt looks back at an important event in British political history**

## Background

The Battle of Cable Street, celebrated today as one of the most important events in East London's history, took place in 1936. In the 1930s, fascism was spreading alarmingly across the European continent, with dictators seizing power in Italy, Germany, Spain & Rumania - Mussolini, Hitler, Franco and Antonescu respectively. In the UK, the British Union of Fascists (BUF), also known as the Blackshirts because of their uniforms, under its leader, Oswald Mosley, was increasing in membership. Mosley had adopted Hitler's fanatical antisemitism with the slogan 'PJ' (*Perish Judah*).

Research has since established that Mussolini was funding the BUF, but wanted Mosley to prove to him that they could control the streets; hence their provocative decision to march through the heart of the Jewish East End. This would be the equivalent today of the EDL staging a march through Bradford, Leicester or Southall.

## The Battle of Cable Street

Although sizeable, the Jewish population was simply not sufficient to stop the BUF on their own. Only a mass turnout of protesters from all backgrounds, including a large contingent of mainly Irish South London Dockers, who remembered how impoverished, immigrant Jewish workers had donated their money in support of the great Dockers' Strike in 1889, managed to prevent Mosley's fascists marching through Cable Street.

As a result of this setback at Cable Street, Mussolini withdrew his funding and the influence of the BUF was diminished. However, after WW2, which was fought to defeat fascism, when Mosley used to speak in Hackney at Ridley Road market, he was given protection by the police, who instead attacked the anti-fascist protestors!

## What drama can show us

A good place to start reading about these times is *Chicken Soup With Barley*, the first in *The Wesker Trilogy* (1960), followed by *Roots* and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*. These three plays are still in print and regularly performed. Arnold Wesker draws on his own upbringing to tell the story of the Kahns, a working-class Jewish East End family, and their progressive disillusionment with Stalinism. To commemorate Wesker's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2012, BBC Radio 3 broadcast a performance of *Chicken Soup With Barley*. The opening scene takes place on Sunday, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1936, on the day of the Battle of Cable Street. I have read this play many times,



***A red plaque commemorates the events of 4th October 1936***

but the BBC production was the first performance I'd ever listened to, and the printed words really come to life when spoken aloud. The drama gives a wonderful impression of the heated arguments that often take place in Jewish families. (There is a saying old, but true, that "if you put two Jews in a room together, you end up with three opinions!").

## Other historical sources

One of the sources that Wesker used for the opening scene of *Chicken Soup With Barley* was *Our Flag Stays Red* (1948) by Phil Piratin, who was one of two Communist MPs elected in the East End after the post-war 1945 General Election and was well known to my family then as a prominent local figure. Piratin's account of the Battle of Cable St reads as follows: 'As for the repercussions in Stepney, I find it impossible to describe the reactions of the Stepney people. In Stepney nothing had changed physically. The poor houses, the mean streets, the ill-conditioned workshops were the same, but the people were changed. Their heads seemed to be held higher, and their shoulders were squarer – and the stories they told! Each one was a "hero" – many of them were. The "terror" had





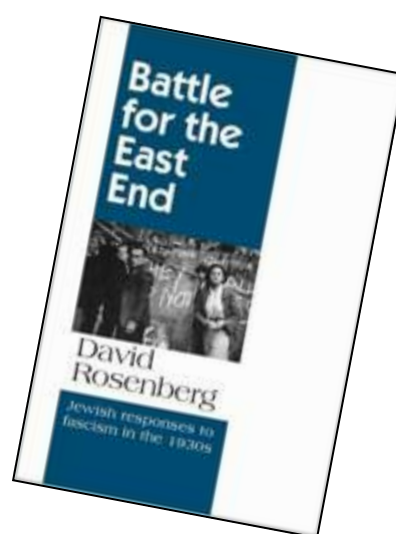
**Part of a mural in Cable street which vividly evokes the event. A local club's anti-racist football strip keeps the message of the day alive**

lost its meaning. The people now knew that fascism could be defeated if they organised themselves to do so.'

Another excellent book is *Out of the Ghetto* by Joe Jacobs (1978). He was blinded in one eye by an accident in his school playground, but later had the immense responsibility of being the Secretary of the Stepney Branch of the Communist Party at the time of the Battle of Cable Street.

Also, highly recommended is the thoroughly researched *Battle for the East End: Jewish Responses to Fascism in the 1930s* by David Rosenberg (2011). David is a teacher, historian and a leading member of the Jewish Socialist Group, who gives guided history tours of the Jewish East End, two of which the Redbridge Retired Teachers' group have attended! The book makes it clear that the official leadership of the Jewish community, the Board of Deputies, Rabbis and 'The Jewish Chronicle' urged people to stay at home and hope that the BUF would go away! However, it was the Communist Party (CP) that organised resistance on the streets. Consequently, many Jewish people joined the CP - some because they believed in its politics but many others because it was the CP that was leading the opposition to the BUF.

There are some excellent publications by The Cable Street Group. Also worth reading is Daniel Sonabend's *We Fight Fascists: The 43 Group and their forgotten Battle for Post-War Britain*. The protestors' rallying cry at Cable Street was *They Shall Not Pass!* which was an adaptation of the challenge of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War - 'No Pasaran!' My very dear father, who was in Cable Street that day, along with many other family members, told me that the dockers' presence was crucial, not least because they were fully prepared to physically confront the



**Highly recommended: David Rosenberg's account of the Battle of Cable Street**

BUF with their bare fists, in return for the solidarity of 1889. And therein lie the lessons to be learnt, as we celebrate The Battle of Cable Street today - that united action by workers on the streets stopped the fascists. The tragedy of Weimar Germany in 1933 was that the refusal of the KPD (Communist Party) and the SPD (Social Democratic Party) to work together, despite their differences, cleared Hitler's road to power.

**So, in the context of the current upsurge in far-right groups across the UK, Europe and elsewhere, what better message for today than: No Pasaran/ They shall not pass!**

**Other books to consult for historical context include:**

*East End Jewish Radicals (1875 – 1914)* by William J. Fishman (1975), the East End Jewish historian

*Oswald Mosley* by Robert Skidelsky (1975) is a very detailed and excellent account of the life of Mosley although, surprisingly, in over 500 pages, only four are devoted to the Battle of Cable Street!

# Infantilisation and pettifogging

## Henry Tiller analyses what lies behind the teacher recruitment crisis

Last year, more than 40,000 teachers, a staggering 9% of the total, left the profession. One in four new teachers leave the profession within three years of qualification and the number of vacant posts increased by 44% between 2021-22. If you were charged with constructing the perfect recipe for the creation of a staffing crisis of school recruitment and retention, you'd be hard pushed to do any better than this current government!

### Funding

So, how have the government managed to acquit themselves so 'well' in creating this crisis in our educational system? Well, the obvious ingredient for their 'success' has been the lack of adequate funding, which has not increased in real terms over a period of 15 years and the 20% real terms decline in teachers' pay since 2010, along with teachers' relative fall in earnings compared to other professions.

### Neo-liberalism in action

Underpinning this crisis has been the promotion of a neo-liberal agenda of competition, privatisation, marketisation and a general hollowing out of the public sector, the ideological basis of, and guiding principle for, education policy over the last 14 years of Tory government. Thus, on one level, neo-liberalism has involved a policy of tightly controlling public expenditure (austerity) to work towards the goals of lower taxation and a smaller state, and this has clearly been a key ingredient in promoting the current dire situation in schools.

The policy has also worked on another level in promoting this crisis. Neo-liberalism, when applied to the educational arena, involves competition between providers of education and, in turn, this competition relies upon a process of quantification and comparison. This has been achieved through league tables and the controversial Ofsted grading system of 'Outstanding', 'Good', 'Requires Improvement' and the dreaded 'Inadequate'. As a result, teachers, along with other public sector workers, have been widely subjected to infantilising and pettifogging management regimes of surveillance and auditing. These have necessitated endless evidence-trails designed to identify the 'winners', to punish the 'losers' and to deny any trust and autonomy to those on the front line. The impact on teachers' morale and willingness to stay in the profession has, quite understandably and predictably, been devastating.

In the educational context, pettifogging refers to the practice of focusing on minor details or rules that do not contribute to the overall learning experience and infantilisation occurs when adult professionals are treated as if they are children, limiting their autonomy and creating a hierarchical and controlling atmosphere. The two work closely together. While it should be emphasised that not all schools resort to such tactics, they are common practice in many schools, particularly in the academies. The surge in casework for Redbridge NEU in recent years provides rather sad proof of this. And a key driver of infantilization and pettifogging is the practice of micromanagement.

### Micromanaging techniques

Excessive micromanagement, the practice of closely scrutinizing and controlling every aspect of a teacher's work, has been a surefire way, along with work overload and cuts in real pay, of maximizing staff demoralization and plans to exit the profession. Teachers will be all too aware of the significant array of oppressive forms that micromanagement can take, which may include: the constant requirement for detailed lesson plans, often extending considerably into the future: constant oversight and policing through lesson observations, 'learning walks' and 'book looks'; strict adherence to procedures and demands for compliance, involving, for example, the structure of lessons; the primacy of a 'consistent message and expectation' in every lesson over teacher personality and individuality; the need to jump through hoops to meet targets, which are often unreasonable and unrealistic, in order to gain pay progression; overuse of the capability procedure; and so the depressing list continues, all of which serve to ensure a system in which teachers and their students are less important than the statistics that their activities generate. And with heads and senior managers the first in line to get the chop from a poor Ofsted rating, everything gets skewed towards ensuring the approval of the outside inspectors.

Recently, in the light of the tragic suicide of headteacher, Ruth Perry, Ofsted has been forced to 'pause' their draconian inspection regime and Daniel Kebede, General Secretary of the NEU, has been able to announce triumphantly that the government will remove the requirement for schools to use performance related pay for teachers ..... both of which suggest that even this ideologically driven, rabidly rightwing Tory government can see that they've pushed things just a little too far!



# An inspirational revolutionary

## Jo Buchanan examines the ideas and life of a woman who fought for a just society

Rosa Luxemburg was a brilliant, original thinker, a socialist revolutionary who has fascinated and inspired many of us for years. Luxemburg defended Marxist orthodoxy, had little time for parliamentary democracy and was convinced of the need for revolution.

### Luxemburg's Distinctive Ideas

She disagreed with Marx in some respects, such as in the understanding as to how revolution would come about. She also disagreed with Lenin's democratic centralism, whereby it was claimed that a group of intellectuals should lead a tight, disciplined structure. She believed this was the route to dictatorship. Many on the left at the time accepted the reformist argument that workers' lives could be transformed within the capitalist system, but Luxemburg argued that it would take a revolution and advocated a general strike, which she was convinced would have a substantial impact and be a strong force for change.

Luxemburg believed that the radicalisation of working people was essential. "The masses are the crucial factor," she wrote, shortly before she died. In 1918, when she was convinced of the successful outcome of revolution in Germany, she stated in her *A Call to the Workers of the World*: "The Revolution in Germany has come! The masses of workers, who for four years were exploited, crushed, and starved, have revolted".

### Solidarity

Luxemburg believed in the power of collective action to challenge the fabric of society. A sufficiently large action would be extraordinarily empowering and workers would see themselves successfully taking a stand against the wealth and privilege of the few. Then she believed there would be a natural progression to a socialist revolution. The impact on working people would be profound: "The most precious, lasting thing in the rapid ebb and flow of the wave is its mental sediment: the intellectual, cultural growth of the proletariat, which proceeds by fits and starts, and which offers an inviolable guarantee of their further irresistible progress in the economic as in the political struggle."

### Struggling against militarism

"War is methodical, organised, gigantic murder". Luxemburg had an unwavering commitment to the campaign against militarism and was imprisoned for almost three and half years between 1914 and 1918



**Rosa Luxemburg**

because of her uncompromising stand. She believed that human beings possess natural, fraternal instincts and that wars are at odds with these. "All war is male," she observed, and, at the end of the 1914-1918 war, writing about the demands of the Spartacus League, a socialist revolutionary group which opposed Germany's role in World War I, she stated: "The capitalists of all nations are the real instigators of the mass murder". At various times she spoke out against militarism for its role in the accumulation of capital and for the furthering of imperialism and the attendant exploitation of other continents and peoples.

In a sensitive and moving letter written from prison in 1917, she describes the treatment of a buffalo by a German soldier which she witnessed during her arrest. She saw this as another expression of militarism and the brutality caused by war. Capire published a translation of the letter in 2022: "Blow upon blow, and blood



***The German Revolution of 1918-19: Armed sailors, soldiers and workers on patrol.***

*Courtesy of pinterest.com*

running from gaping wounds... Poor wretch, I am as powerless, as dumb, as yourself; I am at one with you in my pain, my weakness, and my longing." Today, as wars and armed conflicts still rage all over the world, Luxemburg's analysis of the connections between capitalism, nationalism, militarism and imperialism and her rage against war continue to be of relevance.

#### **Luxemburg as an internationalist**

Luxemburg repeatedly emphasised the importance of socialist internationalism. Here she did not agree with Lenin's theory of self-determination nor the beliefs of the Allies in World War I, as they considered self-determination an important aim. Nationalism is often considered a positive development in that it encompasses the belief in shared values, identity, history and culture. Some see it as a commendable force for pride and unity, but it can lead to the exclusion of and discrimination against minority groups. And soon it can become jingoistic, aggressive and belligerent, associated with a sense of superiority and xenophobia, a willingness to involve the military in defence of a country and commitment to or complicity in war. Luxemburg understood the need to see beyond our borders. In *A Call to the Workers of the World* she appeals to internationalists: "This great task cannot be accomplished by the German proletariat alone; it can only fight and triumph by appealing to the solidarity of the proletarians of the whole world."

#### **Luxemburg the woman**

There are some sources which tell us rather more about Rosa Luxemburg as a person. This has so often been overlooked when the focus has been on her political writing. Some of her letters to her 'comrade

and lover', Leo Jogiches, show her as a woman worrying about money, about making a comfortable home and hospitality. In her prison correspondence, she shows how she maintained her interest in the natural world and maintained an extraordinary level of good spirits: "I am always in a sort of joyful intoxication....I lie here alone and in silence, enveloped in the manifold black wrappings of darkness, tedium, unfreedom, and winter – and yet my heart beats with an immeasurable and incomprehensible inner joy, just as if I were moving in the brilliant sunshine across a flowery meadow. And in the darkness, I smile at life, as if I were the possessor of charm which would enable me to transform all that is evil and tragical into serenity and happiness."

#### **How Rosa Luxemburg died**

Rosa Luxemburg was arrested with Karl Liebknecht, a co-founder of the Spartacus League. They were murdered in Berlin on 15th January 1919 by members of the Free Corps (Freikorps), a group of conservative paramilitaries. Over a century has passed, and yet Rosa Luxemburg's commitment to change, her enduring hope and inspirational writing not only possess intrinsic interest but continue to be relevant to our thinking and actions today. She can still inspire us. Despite being on the receiving end of discrimination for being disabled, a Jew, a refugee and a woman, she remained an uncompromising socialist revolutionary: "Make no excuses and fight to change the world".

**Is there someone who you admire? Please let us know why you think they are important and deserve recognition today.**

Neville Kirk is Emeritus Professor of Social and Labour History at Manchester Metropolitan University. This book is a narrative of political events in Britain from late 2016 to July 2022. The author covers the worsening economic crisis, the post-referendum struggles over Brexit, the general elections of 2017 and 2019, and Scottish politics from the 2014 referendum to May 2021.

He examines how the Conservative, Labour and Scottish Nationalist parties behaved in these years, using a wide range of materials including newspapers, journals, and official publications.

Kirk makes his position clear when he writes at the start, "Some, including the present author, maintain that left-of-centre 'radical Scottishness' in the form of the movement for Scottish independence and its desire to create of [sic] a fairer and more egalitarian society, now constitutes the main challenger and possible alternative to hegemonic Conservatism."

But talk of fairness and equality is cheap. Indeed, reactionaries easily use this kind of language. Hence, Boris Johnson set up the Department for Levelling Up and Theresa May talked of the Conservatives being 'for the many'. Reactionaries can steal liberal rhetoric precisely because it is so commonplace, so flabby.

#### **Author's biases**

Kirk's biases are out in the open. He writes of 'the catastrophe of Brexit' and of 'the failed Scottish referendum of 18 September 2014 ...'. He decries populism, which, as is conventional in pro-EU circles, he always terms 'right-wing populism'.

The SNP has itself proved unable to protect Scotland from the effects of Conservative rule. As SNP member, George Kerevan, pointed out, 500,000 voters deserted the SNP between the 2015 and 2017 general elections. He explained that this was 'because they lost faith in our ability to oppose Tory austerity and deliver a better life in concrete terms'. The rise of support for Labour across Britain shows that Labour, not the SNP, will end Conservative rule.

#### **Predicting the Future**

Kirk makes two big forecasts. The first is that 'Johnson's practice and vision constituted the most obvious and popular way out of UK capitalism's ongoing and most challenging combined crisis of modern times'. He admits that this conclusion 'is no longer valid'.

But he claims that his second forecast, 'that the movement for Scottish independence offers a potentially radical way out of the crisis, still holds for the post-May 2021 period'. He proceeds, 'the SNP fought the May 2021 Scottish elections on the explicit promise

# **A nation in crisis:**

**Division, conflict and capitalism in the United Kingdom, by Neville Kirk, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024**

***Review by Will Podmore***

that, if successful, it would commit to a second referendum during the first half of the new parliament.'

Kirk acknowledges that 'the polls taken since 2014 - almost ninety of them - conclusively showed that there had been little, if any, consistent and significant change in support for an independent Scotland.' Yet, he asserts, 'Sturgeon and her party, alongside the wider independence movement, remain extremely popular and continue to offer their country an independent, fairer and more equal future.'

However, separation would leave Scotland considerably poorer in terms of income per head and trade, as a report from the Centre for Economic Performance concluded. Separation would also make Scotland less influential, not more. The UK has a population of 67 million, including Scotland's 5.5 million. The EU's member states have a total population of 448 million. 5.5 million is 8 per cent of 67 million, and 1.2 per cent of 448 million. How can anyone believe that Scotland would have more power as part of the EU than as part of the UK?

Kirk's second forecast then is no better than his first. Events since he wrote this book, mainly Sturgeon's forced resignation and the SNP's steady self-destruction, have proved him wrong.

#### **Changed Times**

How many people in Scotland would now agree with the author about 'the proven efficiency and competence of SNP governments'? Is Humza Yousaf proving efficient and competent? Has he got the ferries built?

*A Nation in Crisis* is marred by the author's wishful thinking, derived from his biases against British independence and for Scottish separatism. It is an example of reactionary thinking in progressive clothing.

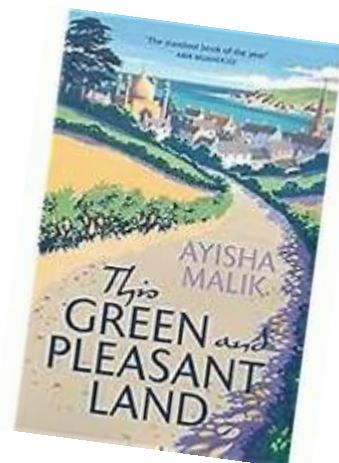
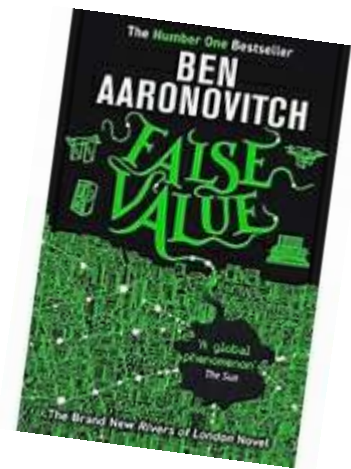
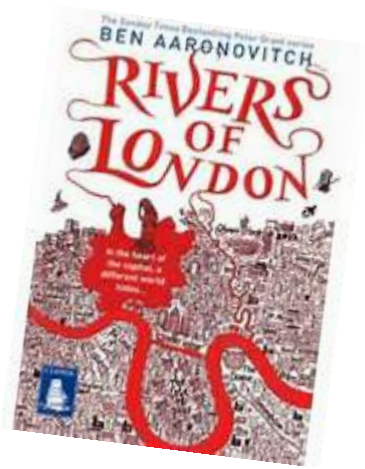
Those wanting a better account of Britain since the 2016 referendum should instead read Tim Shipman's excellent pair of books, *All out war: the full story of how Brexit sank Britain's political class* and *Fall out: a year of political mayhem*.

**The Newsletter is keen to publish reviews of other political and educational books. If you've read one recently, please let us know**



# Book Corner

## A reader's recommendations



Of course, I meant to send this in for the last newsletter but laziness rather than life interfered! My thanks to Bob Archer for reminding me of authors I had forgotten. Although a frequent user of the library, I tend to buy paperbacks to take on holiday (in case I forget them somewhere) and which then go to the charity bookcase we have in Barnes. Pictured are a selection of last summer's reading.

I am a big fan of Ben Aaronovitch's **Rivers of London Series** - stories which mix crime drama with magic and humour but also take you to parts of hidden London and remind you of our lost rivers. A few years back there was a really good exhibition at the Museum of London, Docklands, on London's rivers.

I always look at the books set out by our local librarians and a couple of recommendations would be the award winning '**Half of a Yellow Sun**' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – a novel which takes place during the Biafran War and '**This Green and Pleasant Land**' by Ayisha Malik.

This latter novel is a tale of a culture clash and underlying racism in a quintessential English village. Bilal Hisham, his wife Mariam, and their son have moved from the city and live quiet, contented lives in a country village, involving themselves in village life and activities. However, on her deathbed, Bilal's mother asks him to build a mosque in his village and he is determined to fulfil her dying wish. Outrage sweeps across the village, battle lines are drawn and underlying hostilities come to the fore. It is a tale about the choice between community and identity, faith and friendship, and what happens when Bilal's aunt, Khala Rukhsana, comes to stay, and what eventually brings the community back together. We really are not so very different.

Happy reading.

Janet Clarke (Hounslow)

**Do you have a book or books to recommend? Please let us know.**

# What are YOU reading?

## Bob Archer reviews some recent crime fiction

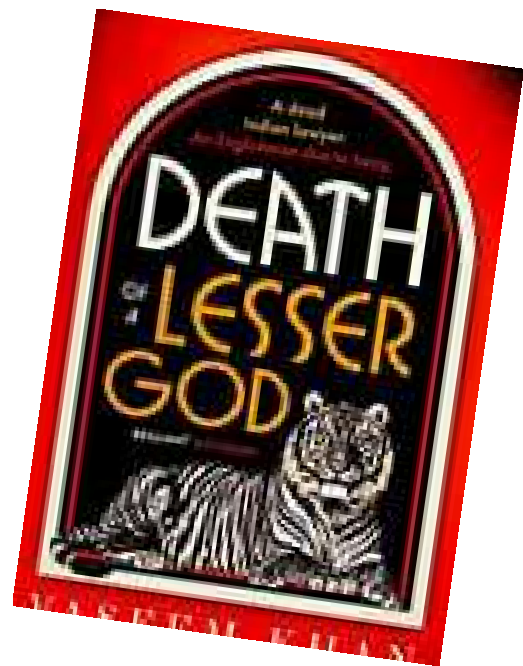
The western rural extremities of Ireland are the location of two gripping crime novels out this Spring.

A son of that soil, **Colin Barrett**, has been praised for his short story collections, *Young Skins* and *Homesickness*. His first novel, *Wild Houses*, is a beautiful, if disturbing, read. A young man who lives alone in the countryside pretty innocently accepts a request from a couple of chancers to stash some gear in his cellar. People are caught up in their criminality, which spirals into violence and late capitalist echoes of Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* and *The Quare Fellow*. The younger generation, peering into the wreckage of their nevertheless older and wiser parents' generation, are imprisoned in the same way in the social wreckage of the Irish version of a "left-behind" community. A terrible beauty is born? Also very moving and extremely funny in a laconic, throwaway fashion.

**Tana French** already has a string of novels under her belt. The blurb says she "grew up in Ireland, Italy, the US and Malawi and trained as an actor at Trinity College Dublin". *The Hunter* is a great, if ever so slightly misleading, title (previous well-received works include *The Trespasser* and *The Searcher*). *The Hunter* is actually a good deal better than that implies. A Chicago cop has had enough of the big city and retired to rural Ireland. He finds a social community with its own rules and customs, its past and perhaps a future. This community reacts when a rogue and runaway son, who has fallen in with some very scary criminals over in England, returns to his family. The whole web of personal and family relationships (which Tana French depicts sensitively and very beautifully) is woken to action.

The various characters and their encounters, confrontations, explanations and recriminations are presented in the beguiling language of the location. Look out for grievous breaches of crime novel etiquette: this novel has two detectives working against each other, for one thing. The actual killer and the moral balance of the ending are unexpected. I do not want to give too much away, but there are a lot of interesting outcomes. Reading the many conversations and encounters between the people of the area, I was reminded of some of the very best novels about rural life. This is a community with its own way of doing things and is very conscious of its own agency.

East London has become a home and reference point for a number of British born writers of Asian origin



who have taken on the detective novel and turned the genre into a window into their community and its firm roots both in the sub-continent and in the UK. **Ajay Choudhury's** *The Detective* follows his earlier, *The Waiter*, in mapping the career of detective Kamil Rahman. His anxiety about acceptance into British society is an abiding undertone in these books. Rahman sometimes follows instincts, which rub up his police superiors in the wrong way, but ends up with puzzles decoded and villains collared. We eagerly await more of this!

**Vaseem Khan** was born in east London and worked in India for ten years. It has been an absolute delight to follow his growing mastery of the crime genre and his work and vocation as author. His invention of a crime-solving elephant working with a sidelined police detective was a slightly unexpected but hugely readable trope. The later series of historical crime novels set in post-independence Bombay delves into all sorts of aspects of Indian society: its colonial past and the still open wounds between Indians and the British, its political tensions, and above all gender relations which impact the hero of the series, woman police-detective Persis Wadia. *Murder at Malabar House* is now followed by *Death of a Lesser God*, which digs deep into the political shenanigans of the newly independent state's rulers.

**If you have a book of any genre to recommend, please do get in touch.**