

The *Redbridge Newsletter*

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

SUMMER 2024



Mike Woods continues the report on 'The Great Escape' on page 9

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Hope and change

By the time you read this, the election will have been fought, won or lost, and the fate of the country for the next five years decided. As I write, across the Channel the French are in the middle of an election which is indicating a sharp movement towards the far right. Across the Atlantic the voice of democracy is under threat and the rule of law openly flouted. At home, things appear to be moving in the other direction and the prospect of change must surely give us hope.

Over recent years we have seen the gradual erosion of the services my generation grew up to take for granted. There has come to be a widespread feeling that hope has leached out of our lives, that the safety nets and the opportunities are no longer there. Any incoming government must seek to change the existing political, economic and social scene, sometimes more, sometimes less. But this time, above all, it must also try to instil hope: hope that the immediate future will be a time of opening up opportunity, improving the ability of the state and the economy to create a better existence. To be effective in the long term, that opportunity needs to be directed towards children and families, health and education, and a green economy - towards the future of our world.

To me that seems self-evident. Without a healthy, educated workforce, the nation cannot prosper. Without serious attempts to reduce attacks on the environment, there will be no world. Economic policy has to find the money to put the necessary resources, both human and material, into the provision of appropriate services, working towards the eradication of poverty among the least advantaged and ensuring climate issues are tackled.

The NEU's Manifesto for Education, with its determination to lift children out of poverty and into well-resourced schools, is a good starting point. There should also be a Manifesto for Health and Social Care, and a realistic approach to benefits and pensions. These



NEU members at Hatton Special School express solidarity with colleagues on strike at King Solomon High School

are prerequisites for creating a society that puts the welfare of individual people before financial gain. We can only hope for a regime with more humanity and compassion.

Pie in the sky? Time will tell.

Protest and rebellion have always been present in British life, from the barons at Runnymede who gave us Magna Carta and the basis of present day constitutional and judicial systems, and the East Anglian peasants, whose march on London marked a surge of popular revolt that is echoed today by climate protesters, to the Chartist and the formation of trade unions to protect the rights and working conditions of their members through the withdrawal of labour when appropriate. In this issue we feature some snapshots of protests past and present and our contributors write about the things that are worth fighting for.

Liz Dolan

The editorial team is always interested in new ideas for articles or responses to articles in the Newsletter. They can be of any length and in any form, personal or political, serious or light-hearted. Please send contributions to mike321peters@gmail.com

Please send all contributions, or ideas for contributions, to the Editorial team at - 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. We also love to see and use your photos. Thanks.

NEU Redbridge News

Maureen McCarthy updates us on recent issues in the district

This term has seen an unfortunate, though predictable, increase in attempts by management in some - but not all - schools to increase the burden on staff, either via changes to workload or putting pressure on teachers by resorting to support plans/capability procedures. Why is this?

I'm sure everyone has their own opinions but here are two suggestions:

- the schools where more pressure is being exerted seem to be those with new headteachers. Is this the 'flexing muscles syndrome'?
- the increasing pressures relating to funding, which have seen increased class sizes, and pressure to 'double-up' on responsibilities, particularly in primary schools, without being given the requisite TLRs.

The Strike at Kantor King Solomon School

This strike was mentioned in the last issue. Here is a postscript as the strike was suspended just before the Newsletter was published. The result of three days of strike action was an agreement to limit learning walks and observations to no more than one per half-term. Also, and this had been the catalyst for strike action, the threat of capability procedures via the use of 'informal' support plans, was removed. (The new headteacher had put 15 members of staff on support plans shortly after arriving at the school). In addition, a

commitment was made to meet regularly with the NEU group and ensure consultation before any changes are implemented.

The result above has been seen as a real success story which, hopefully, will encourage other groups to support their colleagues if similar situations arise.

Strike action at Little Heath and Hatton Schools

These are the two largest special schools in Redbridge, and both have been hit by the increased demand for places, together with serious funding problems. Both are full, if not over capacity, with even more students expected from September. This has, inevitably, had an impact on pupil: teacher ratios and classroom space with, again, inevitable concerns about health and safety issues due to the complex nature of the needs of the students.

The Authority decided to solve the problem by buying the buildings previously housed by Park School for Girls which closed recently. Is this suitable? It's in central Ilford where houses have been joined together to make hotels or, in several cases, prep schools. This proposal has met with criticism. The key issues would seem to be structural, regarding the nature of the buildings and whether they would be appropriate for the proposed cohort, especially in view of the absence of space in general.



Educators from Redbridge and Newham meet up outside Stratford station on their way to a march in central London



As this issue of the Newsletter went to press, NEU members at Hatton and Little Heath special schools were still in dispute with the local authority and planning another day of strike action before the end of the summer term. We read on the Redbridge NEU WhatsApp group that some concessions have been gained but 'the Local Authority has failed to sign any agreements to date.' Above: The picket line at Hatton special School

Redbridge have now decided to postpone the project for a year but has still so far failed to address the issues of funding and increased numbers of students.

So far, Hatton has had four days of strike action which remains ongoing. Strong union reps in both schools have motivated members, as can be seen in the numbers of pickets each day.

Care for Calais

This has been an organisation long supported by Redbridge schools and activists, with Simon Shaw, the rep from Woodbridge School, being a prominent presence on marches, with his Care for Calais Stall, and on visits to Calais. In June, a number of colleagues from

Redbridge provided collection points for contributions and a delegation went across to Calais..

The weeks before the end of the school year will see more meetings with management, notably disciplinaries, that will keep busy the reps and retired teachers involved in casework.

Hopefully, we will see a more collaborative, less hostile relationship between staff and management in September. One has to remain optimistic and the one positive this year has been the increase in new, young, motivated reps. Long may it continue.

Maureen McCarthy

Please get in touch if you are aware of an educational issue in Redbridge.

Retired we may be, but we retain a keen interest in what younger teachers think about the profession, their work, their union and everything else. Please share your views with us!

A Walk to Remember

Bill Harrison on what we found out about the Sidney Street Siege on one day in June.



Redbridge Retired Educators hear about the planned raid on H.S.Harris jeweller's shop in Houndsditch on the very spot where it was attempted

Before the Siege

The Siege of Sidney Street, one of the most dramatic events of twentieth century London, took place on 3rd January 1911 in the heart of the city's mainly Jewish East End.

Police had pursued two Latvian anarchist revolutionaries {Fritz Svaars and William Sokoloff} following an attempted robbery at H.S.Harris, a jewellery shop on Houndsditch where three police officers had been murdered.

George Gardstein, who played a leading role in planning the robbery, was badly hurt. His fellow anarchists set out to return the injured Gardstein to his rented room in Gold Street but only got him as far as Grove Street. Both streets are now demolished. Svaars and Sokoloff left Gardstein at Grove Street where he died, but the two anarchists were subsequently tracked down to 100 Sidney Street.

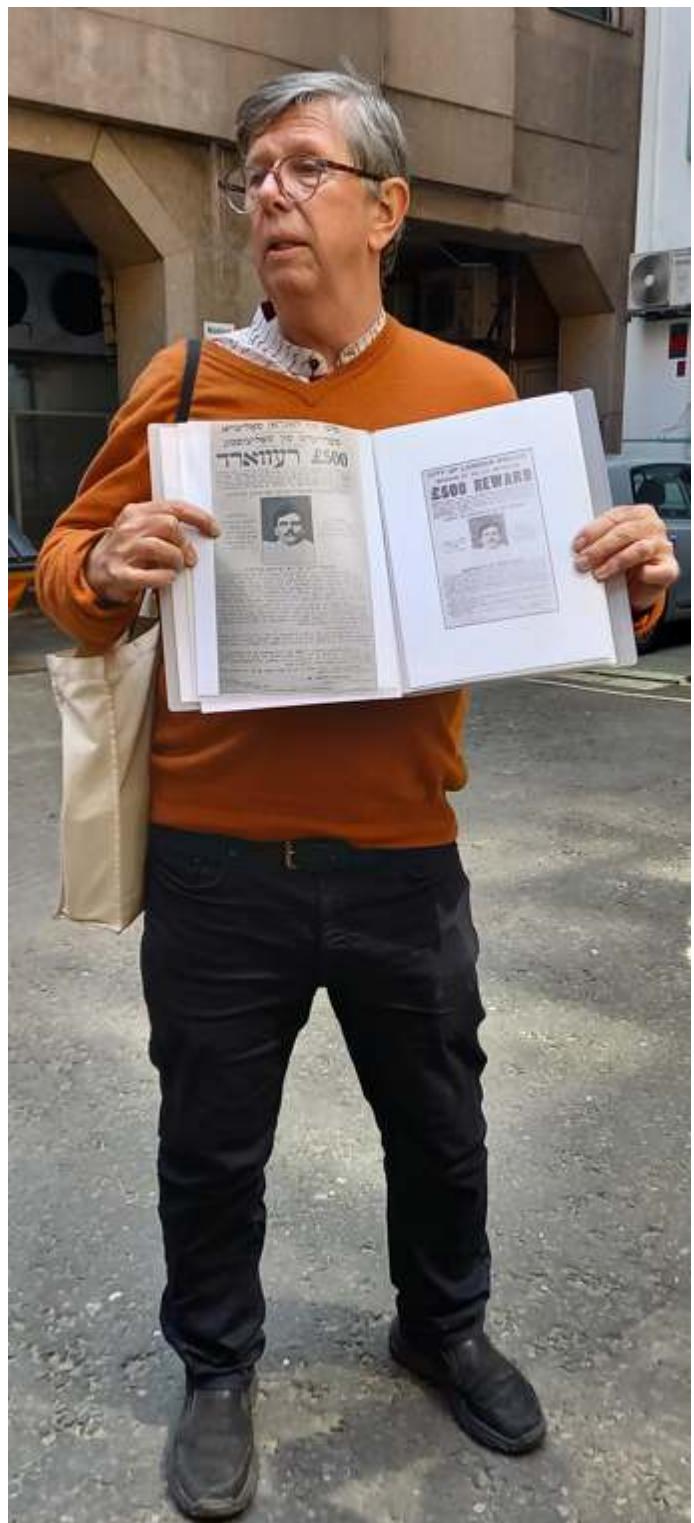
Under siege

Once they had been discovered a six-hour gunfight ensued.

The building caught fire, destroying the besieged house. Winston Churchill, then Home Secretary in the Liberal Government, ordered that the fire "should not be extinguished ". During the siege Maxim guns and Royal Horse Artillery were deployed for the first-time on London streets, although not actually used.

Bringing history alive

On 6th June this year, a group of nine retired Redbridge teachers set out on a walk through the East End, guided by historian and journalist Andrew Whitehead, an excellent communicator, who has recently written a book describing the events outlined above. We followed the route the injured Gardstein was carried from Houndsditch via Petticoat Lane (Wentworth Street) to Grove Street, where he died. His companions were then



tracked down to Sidney Street, where the Siege took place. The bodies of both the Latvian anarchists were found in the burnt-out ruins of 100 Sidney Street. One of them had been shot, the other had died in the fire.

Then and now

Most of the East End has changed greatly since 1911, though a few contemporary buildings survive, such as in Settles Street. Some new Council buildings have names referring to the events.

The Siege of Sidney Street was a nationwide sensation and set off fierce debates on issues that are still relevant, including immigration, political extremism and law enforcement.

Andrew Whitehead's book is called, *A Devilish Kind of Courage* and is published by Reaktion, price £15.

It has been widely praised – see below - and would certainly satisfy the curiosity of anyone who couldn't make the June Walk.

On the back cover of the book are 4 brief reviews which provide a good flavour of what's inside. One such review is from Rachel Lichtenstein, author of *On Brick Lane*. She describes the book as follows: 'A vivid and authoritative account of a stand-out event in the always turbulent history of London's East End. This book is an accomplished piece of historical research and a story wonderfully well told – combing police archives, trial records, Yiddish-language anarchist papers and even the memoirs of a notorious East End criminal.'

Above: Andrew Whitehead provided 'a vivid and authoritative account of a stand-out event in the always turbulent history of London's East End'

Above left: A plaque shows that, despite unease on the part of the local council, a housing association has firmly acknowledged Sidney Street's association with its particular place in history

We always welcome suggestions of activities that might be of interest to London retired teachers. Please forward your ideas to the Editorial team via Mike321Peters@gmail.com.

'Back to my Roots'

Recording a lost community, by Margaret Drummond

Anyone working in East London schools will have noticed the influx of families from countries in the former Soviet Bloc, especially since 2004 when the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were admitted. In fact London now houses the largest ethnic Lithuanian population outside Lithuania, the majority living in the eastern boroughs. However these are not brand new communities. We - and I write now as someone born in the UK of Lithuanian (and Dutch) heritage- have been here a long time, but before the fall of the Berlin Wall we were so few in number that you probably hardly knew we were here.

Background

When I retired from teaching I decided to learn and write about my background. My Lithuanian dad came to the UK to work in a mine in 1948 as part of the European Volunteer Workers Scheme, and met my mum, a Dutch nurse, who had come to work in the newly formed NHS.

There was already a small established Lithuanian community in Bethnal Green where my parents married at St Casimir's, the church founded by those early migrants in 1901. Most of those families- we used to call them the "old Lithuanians" emigrated from the former Russian Empire before World War 1, some, rumour had it, unintentionally getting off the boat because they thought they were already in America.



St. Casimir's Church

Later my dad's generation arrived- mostly single men who had never planned to live or work in the UK.

By the time I was growing up in the 60s we had become a tiny, invisible group. Lithuania had completely disappeared from the map. People would ask us if we were Russian- big mistake – or Polish (historians will understand that that could upset people too!) There were just 4,000 Lithuanians in the whole country, 1,000 in London, and most of us knew each other. The priest lived above the church in Bethnal Green, the community bought a country house in Hampshire where we all gathered at Whitsun and there was a social club opposite Victoria Park (now an artist's studio.)

There were dance groups and language lessons- London University even ran an 'O Level' exam in Lithuanian. There was a weekly newspaper printed in Lithuanian House, a large stucco building in Notting Hill Gate, purchased at a time when the area was unfashionable, and for those unwilling to become British citizens- because the 1940/50 group were all stateless refugees- there was the legation in West London where the chargé d'affaires continued to issue passports from an independent Lithuania (recognised only by the USA and the Vatican!)

Unusual

I always knew that my family origins were fairly unusual but it was in the 90s when the next wave of migrants started to appear that I began to realise that my dad's generation were unique and lost. They didn't belong anywhere. The new migrants were young. Most of them had grown up in cities following the programme of land collectivisation and they had been educated in a much maligned Soviet system which had marked them nonetheless. They had very little in common with people like my dad and his friends. What was even sadder was the realisation of those exiled after the War that the images they had venerated so carefully of 'their Lithuania' were not always accurate or current, and so I started to write about this. It seemed important to record this information before it was lost.

I have written various pieces about my Lithuanian origins and they have appeared in blogs such as 'Deep Baltic,' '24 Days of a Baltic Christmas' and 'Barbed Wire Fever.' At one point I had my own (now defunct) blog 'Balt in the Box Room.' Last year I entered a piece in a



The old migration: By 1914, there were about 7,000 Lithuanians working in Scotland. The ones shown here were clearly working in coal mines. Photo by SCAN (Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network)

competition sponsored by Hachette and was thrilled to hear that I was a prize winner. It is now published by JKP, a subsidiary of Hachette in a volume containing essays by various authors of different backgrounds Roots and Rebellion | Jessica Kingsley Publishers - UK (jkp.com)

Identity

The stories are ones of searching for identity, belonging and rebellion. My own story is about the parcels we sent to Lithuania and the ones we received back. In Soviet times people had so little and so, with considerable difficulty, we would send parcels with fabric and medical items. In return my grandparents, living in their wooden farmhouse on the collective farm on land that once had been theirs, sent apples from the orchard that they had planted when my dad was born, all carefully dried by my grandmother, threaded on twine and hung in the window recess – a real labour of love, all so that my dad could have a taste of home.

Changed

How things have changed! The day the man at the post office counter refused to accept a parcel addressed to my grandparents 'because there is no such place' has long gone but remains vivid in my

memory. This year marks the 35th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Baltic Chain of Freedom when, like so many of their compatriots, my relatives joined the long line of peaceful protestors lining the road through Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania demanding independence from the Soviet regime.

Of course my dad and his friends are no longer here, their lives in exile are over and almost forgotten but it is important that someone records these episodes in history and I am grateful to the publishers of this volume who have allowed me to do this.

Engaging

All the pieces in the book are engaging and show the challenges and choices confronting their authors. The essays vary in style and detail and the contributors are from all kinds of communities – many you will recognise from years of teaching in London.

They are young, old and in between, some first, some second generation migrants from every corner of the UK but the themes of the essays have one thing in common.

Any act of resistance, or defiance, however small, can and will lead to positive change.

The Great Escape, Part 2

Mike Wood, a retired teacher, continues his article about his and his wife's experience of narrow-boating through the canals of England.

Speeding

We found that we were beginning to enjoy rivers where, with plenty of water beneath the boat, you can 'open her up' and get a good speed. When going with a tide, as we were in a later year, down the River Severn to the River Avon and the Stratford Festival, one can go really quite fast. On rivers like the Thames, stopping or turning when you are travelling with the tide can be quite scary and more than slightly dangerous. I still feel that crossing the fast-flowing River Thames to enter Limehouse Dock is one of the scariest things I've done so far...

Our first real tussle with estuaries was going to the Lancaster Canal, which involves crossing the Ribble Estuary. A hard charge is required at full revs against the tide with the Irish Sea behind you for about an hour, until a sharp left turn into a tiny, slightly shallow canal and under a bridge, which can only be passed during a very limited time until the tide turns.

Navigating the Locks

After passing through a long, thin, twisty, narrow canal, we found ourselves having to go backwards up a triple chamber lock. As one of the other boaters said, 'It's all part of the fun!' The Lancaster Canal was very beautiful and would have been more so if the M6 hadn't been built across it, denying access to the Lake District. It is quite short because of this and there are no locks. Within a day or two we got word that the canal accessing the Estuary had emptied itself and would need major repair. We would be trapped there for about three months. Luckily, we knew someone in Lancaster whose boat was trapped on the other side of the stoppage and borrowed their home mooring. We also passed the time at Glasson Docks and took a trip to Morecombe Bay. And even ventured on the Settle to Carlisle steam train.

Our next trip out across The Wash would involve another trip up the River Trent and across the Fossdyke



Navigating the locks

to the small town of Boston, followed by six miles out to sea before entering the Fenlands of Cambridge and the River Ouse. We were, to say the least, nervous.

Sea and Seals

Halfway across, the tide goes out and the boats have to rest on a revealed sandbank, annoying a lot of formerly sleeping seals. I had to jump off the front of the boat with an anchor and plant it in the sand. We sat waiting for the tide to turn. A few of the other boat crews walked their dogs and one crew member had a blow-up palm tree and sat drinking Pimms.

Fenlands

Soon the tide began to turn and we made our way over rather rough sea to the flat and hot fenlands of Cambridge, which were a total and wonderful revelation to me. We spent the long and very hot summer cruising the Middle Levels and the Rivers Ouse, the Great Ouse and Nene and attending the Bedford River Festival before escaping dropping water levels and heading back to our mooring. There were many other expeditions including a week in Liverpool Docks (the picture below was taken at about three in the morning) and a trip down the Manchester Ship Canal (very smelly and no naked lights allowed!).



... and even ventured onto the Settle-Carlisle line

Some annoying cows

We also travelled as far up the River Thames towards its source as it is navigable and discovered a different river to the one I know as an East Londoner and the infamous boat eating cows of Lechlade. They ate our flags, nibbled the mooring ropes and once, after going out for a meal, we found that one of them had unzipped our forward canopy and dragged a camping chair halfway across the field!



3 a.m. On the Manchester Ship Canal



The Black Sabbath tribute band at the Gas Street Basin Bridge in Birmingham, as 'fans and Goths' celebrated the re-naming of the adjacent bridge

Birmingham and heavy metal

We also undertook the Birmingham Canals Network tour or BCN for short. It is true that there are more canals in Birmingham than in Venice. That means there are also a lot of locks, including the infamous 'Wolverhampton Twenty One', a continuous flight that is a heavy day in any one's estimation. Synchronicity being what it is, we arrived at Gas Street Basin as the bridge over it was being renamed after the Birmingham Heavy Metal band 'Black Sabbath'. The place was full of fans and 'Goths'. Much black leather and long hair. Toni Lommi, the lead guitarist, was there for the proceedings and a tribute band played in the canal junction round-about.

Maintaining the boat

There are regular maintenance jobs needed to keep the canal boat sea-worthy of course. Every three or four years, it has to be taken out of the water where the, now worn out, protective paint has to be pressure washed off and a new layer painted on. It also gives one a chance to check up on the prop and rudder and the general health of the hull. Luckily where we moor has a dry dock we can use. 'Blacking', as it's called, takes about a week and can be hard work which, as we get older is becoming more difficult. Indeed, now that my wife and I are entering our seventies, we can see a time when we may not be physically able to do this anymore and will need to pay others to get this done.

Reflections after fourteen years

We have had about fourteen years of narrow boating now and, hopefully, there will be many more. We both feel very lucky to have been able to have had



The infamous boat-eating cows of Lechlade

these experiences, which I feel have helped prolong our life. It has kept us physically fit with much walking, pulling, turning and pushing. Often one does more than one thought one was able to. It has shown us a Britain that we didn't know existed from an unusual viewpoint and enriched our cultural and historical knowledge. It has given us a second life and a freedom we hadn't felt before. It is said that a happy retirement has three things: something to do; somebody to love; and something to look forward to. Our years narrow-boating have given us all of these and more.

Our boat is called 'The Great Escape' and it's done what it said on the tin...

If you'd like to share an engrossing retirement activity, please get in touch.

Boxing? Vot kinda job is that for a Jewish boy?

Gary Kenneth Watt shares his knowledge of and family connections to the history of boxing

I'm not an aggressive or violent person, nor have I ever been to a boxing match in my life, but I do take a great interest in boxing. And that's because my father boxed to a good standard as an amateur welterweight. I don't know why my dad decided to take up boxing at the Cambridge Heath & Bethnal Green Boys' Club. Perhaps it was because, in the 1930s, Jewish boys literally had to take care of themselves in the face of prevalent bullying at school and on the streets, where they might be confronted by members of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF).

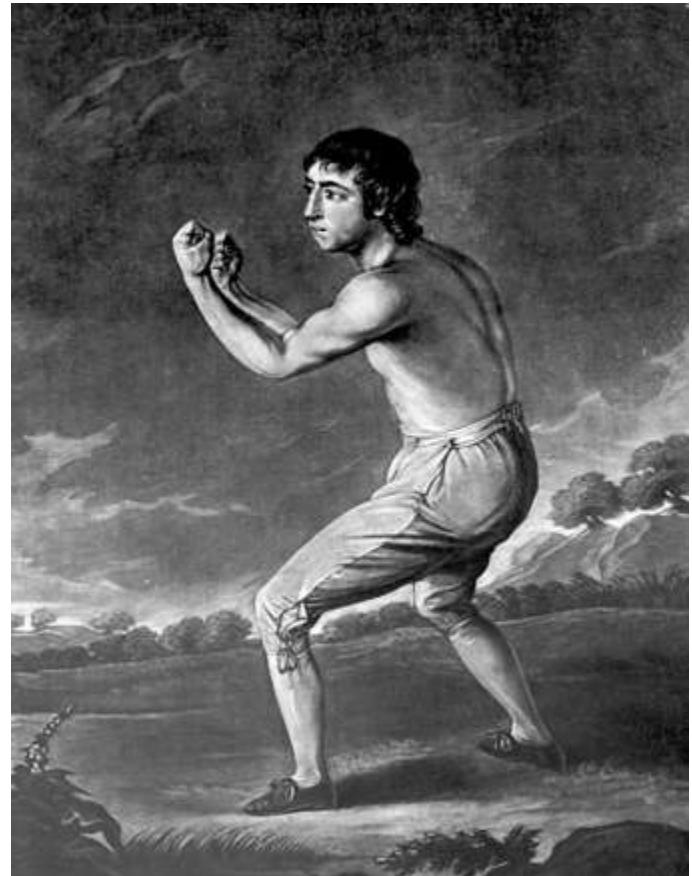
Mendoza

My favourite museum is the V & A Museum of Childhood in Cambridge Heath Road, which I have visited several times over the years, including an outing with my ESOL students. Above one door in a short row of terraced houses opposite, close to Bethnal Green Station, is a blue plaque which commemorates the house where Daniel Mendoza, the famous Jewish boxer, once lived in the eighteenth century. According to Theo Zeno, writing in the 'Washington Post', he "changed the sport by approaching it with a scientific mindset and pioneering defensive techniques, in the face of antisemitism".

After beating Mendoza in their first bout, Richard Humphries, his opponent, wrote in correspondence: "I have done the Jew. . . " Although Humphries also won their second contest, Mendoza won the third and fourth of their fights. Humphries' words reminded me of the provocative statement of Alan Minter before his World Middleweight Championship contest against Marvin Hagler, the challenger, at Wembley Arena in September 1980: "I've no intention of losing my title to a black man". The savage beating which Hagler inflicted on Minter in retribution, stopping him within three rounds of brutal punishment, was certainly a form of poetic justice.

A Bit of History

In Mendoza's days, fights were organised clandestinely in the countryside, rather like 'raves' in our own times. The followers of boxing, both working class and gentry alike, were called '*the fancy*', from which the

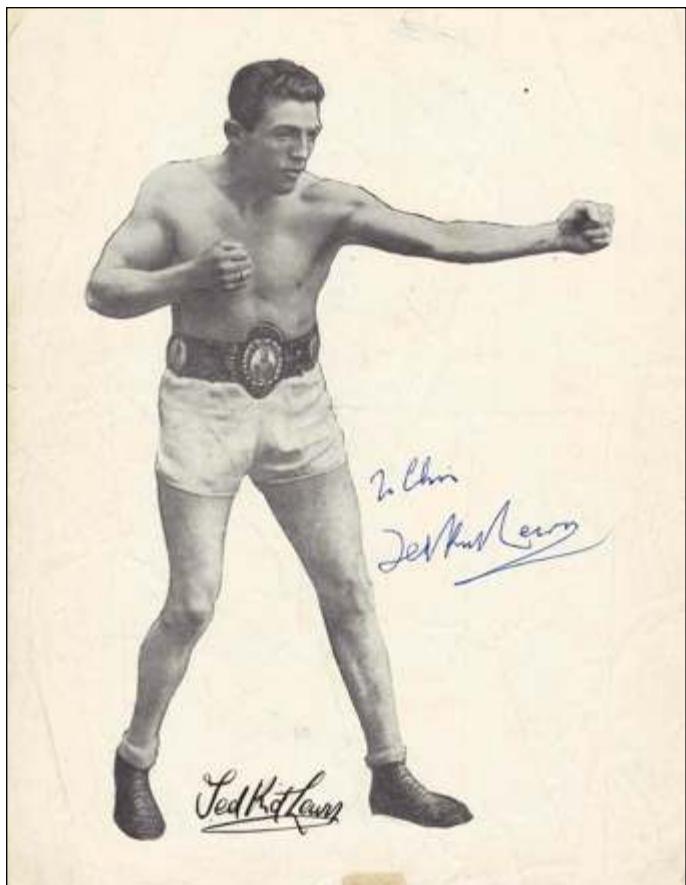


Daniel Mendoza, the famous Jewish boxer of the 18th century

word '*fans*' derives. These events of the bare-knuckle, pre-Marquis of Queensbury rules era, were immortalised by William Hazlitt in his famous essay 'The Fight'. Many other great writers have been fascinated by boxing: e.g. George Bernard Shaw, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ernest Hemingway, Joyce Carol Oates and both Byron and Norman Mailer sparred in the ring.

Family Connections

There is a second blue heritage plaque, in honour of another East London Jewish boxer, above the flat near Cable Street where his family lived in the 1930s. Judah Bergman, better known in the ring as Jack 'Kid' Berg, held the World Light-Welterweight title in the 1930s. He was called '*the Whitechapel Windmill*' for his aggressive, all-action style. He would never tell his father that he was going to the gym, as he was an orthodox Jew



Ted 'Kid' Lewis

who didn't approve of boxing. My stepmother was a good friend of Marie, one of Jack's sisters, a lovely lady who lived into her 90s. She always carried in her handbag a video of the popular tv show '*This is Your Life*', hosted by the genial Eamon Andrews, which recounted Jack's life story and in which Marie briefly appeared. She remembered going to the States, with other family members, to see her brother beat the talented Cuban, Kid Chocolate. It was a lengthy sea crossing in those bygone days.

When Jack 'Kid' Berg fought Harry Mizler (born Hyman Barnett) at the Royal Albert Hall in 1934, the loyalties of Jewish boxing fans were divided between both their respective heroes. My parents knew Harry quite well because he regularly helped out serving on his family's market stall. Everyone was amused by the way that Harry always called his parents *Mummy* and *"Daddy*, so incongruous was this with his formidable persona in the ring! Marie told us that, before the fight, Jack's mother asked him not to hurt Harry in the ring! Mizler started well, winning the opening two rounds. However, Berg began to take control of the fight and stopped Mizler in the tenth round.

Boxing and Politics

Ted 'Kid' Lewis (born Gershon Mendeloff) was another famous East London Jewish boxer who became

world welterweight champion and an international celebrity. When he retired in the early '30s after over 300 fights, he became attracted to Oswald Mosley's movement. In his political naivety, he acted as a bodyguard and stood as a BUF candidate in St. George's, Whitechapel. However, when Mosley adopted Hitler's fanatical antisemitism, Lewis soon realised the error of his ways. He bade farewell to the far-right by punching Mosley to the ground and knocking out four of his supporters! One boxing journalist accurately wrote that you could always tell the latest wave of immigrants to the USA by studying the surnames in the boxing programmes of the time. AJ Liebling, another great boxing journalist, who was also Jewish, wrote for '*The New Yorker*' magazine in the 1940s & 50s. As a boy in the 30s, he used to go with his father to watch Benny Leonard (born Benjamin Leiner) fight at Madison Square Gardens. Benny was the undefeated World Lightweight Champion and was the greatest Jewish boxer of all time.

Muhammad Ali

Finally, I would like to deviate slightly from the theme of Jewish boxers and pundits and focus on one of the many black champions, another racially oppressed group, who have graced the sport I simply couldn't write an article on boxing without paying homage to Muhammad Ali, my all-time favourite sportsman or woman, memorably described by Mrs Coretta Clay, his aunt, as 'The alpha and the omega'.

Norman Mailer wrote the finest book about sport that I've ever read, *The Fight*. The book is his eye-witness account of the World Heavyweight Championship bout between George Foreman & Muhammad Ali in Zaire in 1975 - *The Rumble in the Jungle*, *the most memorable sporting event that I've witnessed during my lifetime*. Before Ali regained his title, no boxing expert or commentator gave him any chance whatsoever of beating the destructive Foreman. The promoters had an ambulance waiting outside the arena, ready to take Ali to hospital!

I've always immensely admired Ali for his principled stance, giving up the World Heavyweight Crown rather than fight in Vietnam. In just six words, he uttered the most memorable statement by any sportsman or woman in history - *No Vietnamese ever called me Nigger*. Yet perhaps Ali's finest achievement was in calling upon every ounce of his remaining strength, whilst suffering from Parkinson's Disease, when he lit the Olympic flame in Atlanta before the 1996 Games, the ultimate recognition from the US Government of '*The Greatest*', both inside and outside the ring.

Do get in touch if you have a family link with the worlds of sport or show business.

They called it peace:

***Worlds of Imperial Violence, by Lauren Benton,
Princeton University Press, 2024***

Lauren Benton, the Barton M. Biggs Professor of History at Yale University, has written an outstanding work, which shows how empires cause a state of permanent war across the globe. These empires have sought to justify their wars with the ritual claim that their 'limited' violence prevents catastrophic violence.

Part I, 'A World of Plunder', outlines the imperial regime of plunder in early European overseas conquests and in the militarised garrisons that advanced European power. This world of plunder is, as Benton acknowledges, still the world in which we live.

Part II, 'A World of Armed Peace', covers 1750 to 1900. The phrase 'armed peace' does not accurately describe what Benton rightly calls a 'regime of violence'. This world of warring empires is a world of plunder. So where is the difference between her two worlds?

Empire and Violence

According to Benton, starting in the 15th century, capitalist states raided and took hostages in global wars on the pretext that the victim societies needed 'protecting' and 'policing'. Still today, apologists for empire try to blame wars on the 'pre-modern' nature of the victim societies. Truces and cease-fires were key elements of conquest. The rulers used truce violations as opportunities to launch reprisal wars of cataclysmic violence.

The claim to be maintaining order - what the British Empire called the 'King's peace' - was used to justify violent oppression, as is today's 'rules-based international order'. Empires brought not order but the perpetual violence of the enslavement of millions, built on a permanent state of war between enslaved men and women and their enslavers.

Investment and war advanced hand in hand. Empires' apologists used talk of protection (humanitarian intervention) as cover for new modes of imperial violence that enforced capitalist investment across borders.

The legal logic of protection, Benton argues, let the empires move from limited interventions to violent land grabs, to the dispossession and exile of indigenous peoples, to labour trafficking on a vast scale, even to campaigns of extermination. The empires called these wars limited; their victims experienced all-out war. Empires called even their horrific campaigns of exter-



Prof. Lauren Benton

mination, like the killing of all Aboriginal Tasmanians, temporary and necessary.

Defence as a pretext for aggression

The wars against native peoples in the Western territories of the 19th-century USA, the serial frontier wars of Southern Africa, the continual settler violence against Aboriginal communities in New South Wales and Tasmania, the violent expansion into indigenous lands by South American republics, the relentless push by Russia into Central Asia, and French advances into Northern Africa and Indochina, all started with Europeans claiming to be defending their subjects, and escalated into advancing imperial interests, under the name of imposing civilisation and order.

The philosopher Jeremy Bentham rightly said, Benton reminds us, that European governments should pursue peace by giving up their colonies. But he recog-



First Nation People of Australia suffered massacre, degradation, displacement, imprisonment in chains and starvation

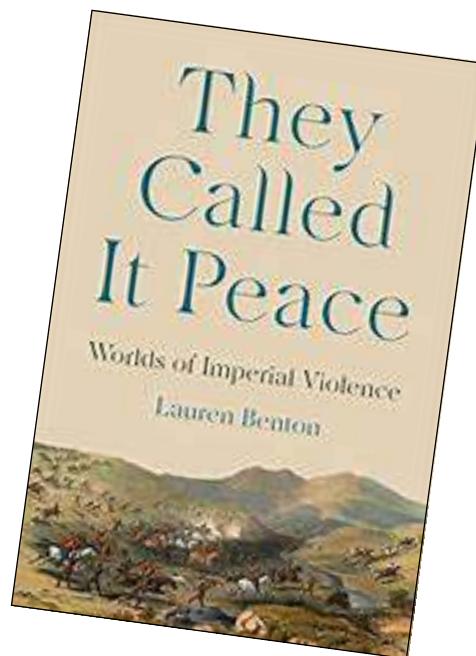
nised that governments representing the interests of the tiny minority ruling class always claim that their interests are the interests of the nation.

The idea that declaring reasons for war (*jus ad bellum*) and laws for regulating conduct of war (*jus in bello*) would prevent wars has clearly not worked. Imperial wars brought not the promised peace but more wars. Empires still deploy elastic discourses of self-defence and reprisal to justify their violence, from Bush's 'war on terror' to Putin's 'special military operation' to Netanyahu's assault on Palestine. Every war is justified now as helping to prevent World War III, when every war in fact brings us closer to World War III.

Final Words

Professor Benton concludes, 'The only sure way to prevent war crimes as an effect of small wars, it seems, is not to start them at all. ... The history I have told at least exposes the myth that law worked to contain violence. ... As in the protest chants against the Vietnam War that I still remember, history tells us to say no to war, at any scale.' This is excellent advice to those of us living under states still wedded to violent war. Yet nations attacked by these brutal empires have every right to wage wars of national liberation to win their freedom.

Will Podmore



Perhaps you have read a book that might interest others and would be prepared to review it. Please get in touch if this is so

Book Corner I

Janet Clarke introduces us to a few of her recent favourite reads – just in time for Summer

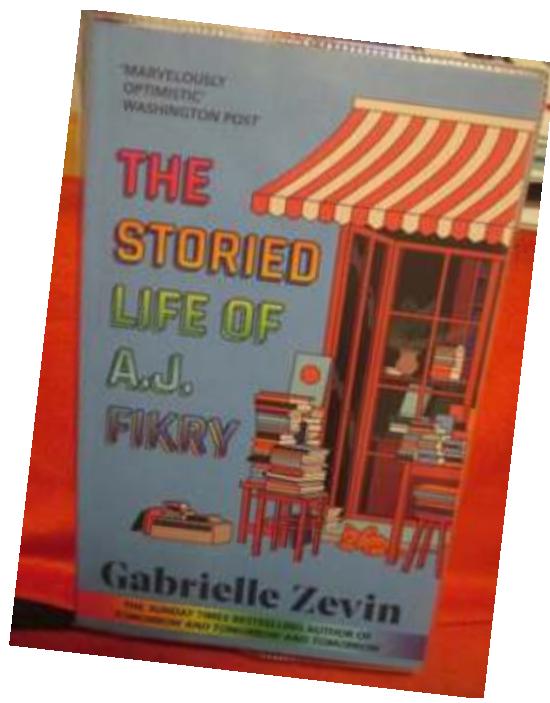
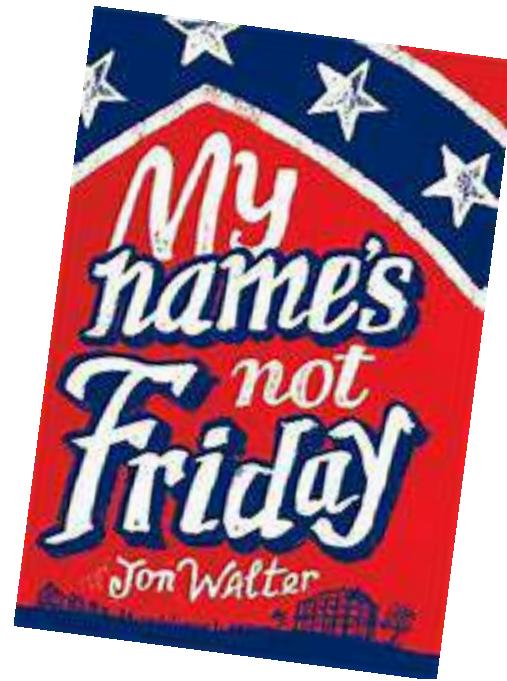
Probably the best known author of 'Scandi Noir' is Arnaldur Indridason, closely followed by Yrsa Sigurdardottir. But the latest discovery for my library is Eva Bjorg Aegisdottir (winner of the CWA John Creasey New Blood Dagger Award). In *Night Shadows*, detective Elma and her colleagues in the small town of Akranes are called out to a house fire where a young man is found dead. They soon discover the fire is arson and they become involved in a perplexing case involving multiple suspects.

I found it a real page turner with various plot twists. An author to watch out for from a country (Iceland) with apparently more writers per head of population than any other. (Guinness Book of Records, 2013)

I always check to see what the librarians have picked and two of their latest selections were: *My Name's not Friday* by Jon Walter and *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry* by Gabrielle Zevin.

Although Jon Walter writes young adult fiction, this is a book for everyone. Set against the backdrop of the American Civil War, it is told from the point of view of twelve year old Samuel. Samuel is a well behaved, educated black boy living in a religious orphanage in the North. Always looking out for his younger brother, Joshua, and taking the punishment for his pranks, he finally discovers his ultimate punishment is being sold into slavery. He is re-named Friday as that is the day he is taken to market. There, he is bought by a white boy (Gerald) of his own age and from a 'progressive' plantation. There is a friendship of sorts between Gerald and Samuel. Gerald only wants a friend and a playmate and you feel the sadness of both when Gerald says to him "you lied to me". Samuel has pretended that Gerald has taught him to read. The book is full of characters that we come to invest in and, although dealing with the brutality and darkness of slavery, it is full of community, endurance and hope.

The *Storied Life of A.J. Fikry* by Gabrielle Zevin was another page turner. A.J is the grumpy owner of Island Books. He has recently lost his beloved wife and a prized rare first edition has been stolen from the shop. One day he finds two-year old Maya sitting on the bookshop floor, with a note attached asking the owner to look after her. Their lives are changed forever. During the course of her growing up, we find out Maya's real story



and what happened to the book but whether A.J ever does, we can't be sure, nor whether Maya does either. Again, as well as a story about A.J and Maya, it is a story of family, community and characters we can invest in.

I make no apologies for also reading Richard Osman. We all need something light and cheerful to read occasionally!

Book Corner II

Bob Archer recommends three novels to put on your summer reading list

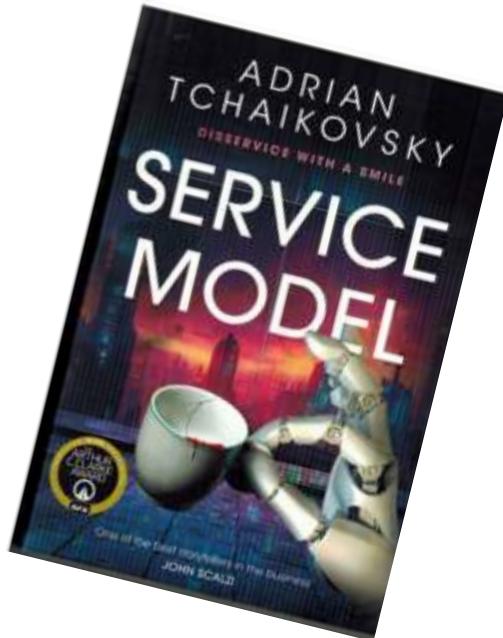
Watch out for Liz Moore's *The God of the Woods*. This crime novel is set physically around the Adirondack mountains in upstate New York, socially in the friction-laden relationship between poor and super-rich in the USA, and in time from the 1950s to the 1970s. The story unfolds in the eyes and minds of the – mainly female – characters who serve as contrapuntal points of view. The time-frame shifts backwards and forwards as the story is revealed. The architecture of this narrative is quite amazing. Most amazing of all is the author's ability to bring the whole sprawling narrative to a sense of an ending.

The narrative covers a lot of social shifts – also in gender relations – which individual characters embody. The women characters are economically but impressively explored. The dynamics of power relationships are evident, but increasingly challenged and subverted. The various forms this challenge takes are laid out there for the reader to appreciate.

A big read in every sense!

Andrew O'Hagan's *Caledonian Road* is a big novel, a "state of the nation" piece, exploring the social structure and lived reality of GB 2024. The nature and drawbacks of celebrity culture in an age of mass entertainment and social media play out in a deeply unequal society where old aristocracy jostle with drug dealing inner city young hoods, people-trafficked illegal immigrants (highly exploited) and a kind of intellectual hoodlum who can hack anything online. How reminiscent of the 18th Century world of *The Rake's Progress* and *The Beggars' Opera*!

The main character is Campbell Flynn "52 – art historian and celebrity academic". His downfall is the key dramatic nodal point of the novel. An apparently innocent ploy to boost his next book turns sour when the new moral arbiters of Tik Tok, X and the rest scent a whiff of subterfuge. The justice they inflict is swift and merciless. In any case, Campbell Flynn is – like most of us – no paragon of perfection, as we see in his awful treatment of his (also pretty awful) tenant in the basement of his nice house in North London (social geography is a big deal in this novel). The scenes where this 'celebrity academic' falls out with his woke female university faculty colleagues are bleakly funny. It turns



out that the public intellectual icon has his Achilles heel, while his sometimes po-faced antagonists have redeeming features.

At the bottom of the social pile, illegal migrant workers scratch a living under the thumb of gangster people-traffickers. Real, terrible, events are referenced and reflected in the fabric of this huge novel.

My first encounter with the work of Adrian Tchaikovsky is the fascinating and dystopian *Service Model*, (tagline: *Disservice With a Smile*). I hope not to give away too much of the plot, but the world Tchaikovsky describes is one where the computers and robots actually have taken over. The bitter humour arises from the fact that the machines actually display all the weaknesses, narrow vision, hierarchic scrambling for domination, dissembling and self-seeking treachery as the human society which appears to have collapsed entirely. The story unfolds in the voice and through the eyes of an actual robot until a malfunction renders it jobless, and it sets out on a voyage of discovery. Tchaikovsky suggests in the end that an alliance between humans and machines is possible. The structure of the story opens up opportunities to critique human failings as seen in the workings of the various machines which have been put in charge of whole aspects of life, so much so that only pockets of human outlaws remain in the desolation of a post-catastrophe world.

Election special: The farewell speech of former Conservative MP Timothy Upshott-Croakley, as reported by Henry Tiller

In a devastating night for the Tories, Timothy Upshott-Croakley, Conservative MP for the past 18 years for the formerly safe Tory seat of Snobish South, was ousted by the Lib Dem candidate, who managed to overturn a majority of 21,249. Here is the full text of Upshott-Croakley's farewell speech at the declaration of the constituency result.

'It has been my very great honour and pleasure to serve the people of Snobish South for the past 18 years. Like all my fellow Conservative MPs, I have always strived to give of my very best and so it is with considerable sadness and regret that I am now forced to leave you. This is the outcome of a democratic process, which I obviously must accept, but I would like to remind the electorate of the significant achievements of my government over the past 14 years. And, if I'm honest, I'm surprised that this is even necessary.

The need for forgiveness

My government had variously been described as "chaotic", "shambolic", "the worst in living memory" and a "total failure". But just how justified were these criticisms? Ok, I hold my hands up and admit that there had been a few hiccups and indiscretions here and there such as Partygate, Bettinggate, Tractorgate, Barnard Castle, bullying, lies aplenty, Windrush, Grenfell, overflowing prisons, extensive levelling down instead of up, lucrative PPE contracts handed out to our friends and record amounts of raw excrement discharged into our rivers and seas by our privatised water companies.

But, at the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero counsels forgiveness: "the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance". And forgiveness of our few minor misdemeanours is, I believe, what you, the electorate, should have granted us.

Success, not failure

Why so? Well, in our own terms, we were actually **remarkably successful, not a failure**. And that's because we had faithfully discharged the neo-liberal agenda of the great Austrian economists Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, first adopted in 1979 by the greatest woman of all time, Margaret Thatcher.

Quite simply, we had done what we had set out to do and so why, oh why didn't you, the electorate, appreciate this?

Just to remind everyone, this was our agenda: to bring about unfettered capitalism with "market forces" ruling the roost and profit seeking at the heart of economic activity; to lower the tax burden, especially on the rich and corporations; to create greater inequality by shifting income, wealth and power upwards from the less well-off to the better-off, and from labour to capital; to bring greater "flexibility" to labour markets through reducing the power of trade unions and allowing employers greater freedom in hiring and firingand we had indeed achieved all this through privatisation, deregulation, outsourcing and marketisation of public services, an austerity programme to hollow out the public sector and reduce welfare benefits, anti-union legislation and a tax regime which cut upper rates of income tax, lowered corporation tax and taxed capital gains more favourably than earned income.

Moreover, we had effectively managed to implement our enlightened agenda across much of the economy, including education, health care, social care and housing, with the utilities and railways being run by efficient private monopolies; and, lest we should be held to ransom by an unpatriotic trade union movement, we did our best to put the militants in their place, with about 2 million workers now more flexibly and efficiently employed through the gig economy. What a shame that you, the electorate, were unable to appreciate this startling achievement and monumental success!

Two examples of success

Let me remind you all of just 2 of our many successes.

A sure sign that market forces are playing a greater role in the economy, with an accompanying increase in economic efficiency, and the dead hand of government intervention and provision diminished, is the degree of inequality. And surely there could be no complaints here. In 2010, the wealthiest 1% held 15% of total wealth, which increased to 18% by 2020, while the share of wealth owned by the bottom 50% decreased

from 10% to 9% over the same period; the number of foodbanks increased from 56 in 2010 to around 2500 by 2022; and, currently, there are nearly 4 million people in the UK living in a state of destitution, including about 1 million children. So, this illustrates well the phenomenal success of our market-based policies to provide incentives to our wealth creators. And I'm sorry, but if those at the bottom of the pile want to whinge about their lot, they should be sharply reminded of the "trickle-down" effect of a greater accumulation of wealth and income at the top end eventually trickling back down to those at the bottom end, making everyone better off.

And then there's the NHS. Agreed, this does pose something of a problem. Apart from it being vehemently opposed by us at its inception in 1948, the NHS presents a serious ideological dilemma for us believers in the free-market model of capitalism. The fundamental issue for us is that an essential service in the UK is paid for out of general taxation and is free at the point of contact according to individual need. This represents the very antithesis of our free-market ideology and is a dangerous socialist concept which clearly needs to be nipped in the bud, lest it should spread. So, great credit should have been given to us for our ongoing attempts to fully privatise the NHS. If only you, the electorate, would have had the foresight to have given us another 5 years, we could well have finished the job.

So where did it all go wrong for us?

Thankfully, Keir Starmer didn't go anywhere near providing an effective, easy-to-understand, structural analysis of the possible drawbacks of neo-liberalism. So, many thanks to him. He certainly didn't say anything to harm our cause.

The short-sightedness of the financial markets in being spooked by the inspired, albeit unfunded, tax cuts of Liz Truss certainly didn't help us. But they simply failed to appreciate the genius of a woman, thoroughly schooled by the daddy of "free market" think tanks, the Institute of Economic Affairs, and who is, without doubt, one of the most devout disciples of our faith. All she wanted to do was to get the economy growing again by helping some hard- pushed millionaires/billionaires with a few extra bob in their pockets. What on earth could be more reasonable than that?

Finally, it was essential that the electorate was not confused and misled into thinking that its problems had got anything to do with our policies. It had to be made quite clear that foreigners are the root cause of all our problems. Unfortunately, it was difficult to blame the European foreigners/EU again. That left the desperate foreigners often fleeing terror, torture and war in a

range of non-European countries, who were arriving in small boats, admittedly, as a very small proportion of total immigration, to take the blame. Who can doubt that they represent a grave threat to our great nation? But did we make this clear enough?

Well, it has to be said that we made a jolly good attempt, notwithstanding our namby-pamby failure to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights. The "hostile environment", initiated by Theresa May, was a commendable start and the Rwanda policy of our great leader, Rishi Sunak, certainly contained much heartlessness and nastiness. But was it nasty enough? Unfortunately, when it comes to being xenophobically anti- immigration, the Reform Party, with its tantalising closeness to such shining beacons of the far-right as the BNP and the National Front, were just that bit more credible than us for a sizeable proportion of voters.

Not "goodbye" but "au revoir"

So, let's just hope that, after 45 years of constructing this brave new, profit-before-people world, with a little help from New Labour on the way, for all our sakes, Keir Starmer won't be so foolhardy as to try to dismantle it. His strict adherence to our fiscal rules certainly gives me some confidence for the future.

I hope to serve you all again one sunny day and to continue our quest for a better world.'



'A devout disciple' Liz Truss. Photo: Mirror Co UK

The Great Post Office Horizon Scandal

Ex post office clerk Gary Kenneth Watt examines the Post Office Scandal and highlights the injustices that occurred. Gary went on to serve as Union of Communication Workers (UCW) full-time Area Rep

'Somebody must have made a false accusation against Joseph K, for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong',

Franz Kafka, 'The Trial'.

'You may think it could never happen to you – or someone you love. This . . . shows that you would be wrong. It happened to me', Seema Misra, innocent imprisoned sub postmistress.

Throughout 2024, news headlines have been dominated by 'the greatest miscarriage of justice in British legal history' - the story of hundreds of innocent sub-postmasters, who were wrongly accused of theft owing to discrepancies caused by the faulty Horizon accounting system, and their twenty-year campaign for justice.

TV Drama

Most people were vaguely aware that innocent individuals had been wrongly prosecuted by the Post Office (PO). In the first week of 2024, ITV broadcast 'Mr Bates vs. the Post Office', a powerful drama-documentary in four episodes. Its monumental impact lies in its portrayal of the real, concrete suffering experienced by individual victims and their families. The actors and production team were so impassioned that they strove to do their utmost to bring this truly shocking story and the campaign for justice into the homes of the public.

Horizon also impacted on staff working in Crown Offices which, unlike franchises or sub offices, are directly managed by the PO on behalf of the government, the principal stakeholder. In fact, the first employee to be wrongly imprisoned had been working in a Crown Office in South London.

The view from the counter

I worked as a PO counter clerk from March 1975 until I retired in August 2015. In April 2010, I became a full-time Communication Workers' Union (CWU) Area Rep in N & NW London. In 2011, I represented an individual who was dismissed for alleged fraud on the foreign currency till in a Crown Office. I was absolutely convinced of our member's innocence but I and senior CWU reps couldn't refute the Horizon-based evidence produced by the PO. At that time, we were completely unaware of the systemic failures since revealed.

Reporting the facts

Under pressure from MPs on all sides, the government were forced into establishing a full Parliamentary

enquiry, chaired by Sir Wyn Williams, a retired High Court judge, with full judicial powers. Delayed by Covid for over two years, this process is nearing its final stages. Amongst its findings are that:

- Horizon, an error prone computer system, poorly designed by Fujitsu, was nevertheless introduced into 11,500 UK post offices from 1999 onwards.

- At an early stage, the PO board knew about several faults in Horizon and that Fujitsu could, without the sub postmasters' knowledge, secretly alter branch accounts via hidden and remote access to counter terminals.

- The PO forced postmasters to make good non-existent 'discrepancies' from their personal finances and prosecuted and imprisoned several others.

- Individuals and their families lost their life savings, homes, and reputations; were imprisoned with criminal records; and were driven to depression, alcoholism, ill health, divorce & unemployment. Tragically, four victims committed suicide.

- Sub-postmasters interviewed by PO Investigation Branch Officers were told that their branch was the only one in the UK experiencing these losses and were deliberately misled.

- In court, Against the Justice for Sub-Postmasters Alliance (JFSA), the PO withheld and tried to 'shred' vital evidence, and deliberately used every legal tactic to prolong proceedings to bankrupt the JFSA funds.

- The overall context is that:

- 1) The Business target of transforming PO Counters from heavy loss making into profitability took precedence over every other consideration.

- 2) Disclosure of Horizon liabilities would have jeopardised both the Coalition government's proposals to privatisate Royal Mail & keeping the Counters' Business under government ownership.

- A government nominated civil servant regularly attended PO board meetings and Labour, Coalition and Tory governments were in power from 2000 to the present.

- No government minister, PO or Fujitsu manager has been held to account for their decisions or negligence.

Scarcely a day passes without ever more shocking facts coming to light. This is illustrated by the latest



The magnitude of their achievement cannot be exaggerated. Picture LBC

revelations from recently discovered documents, dating from 2017, showing that the PO proceeded with prosecutions, despite knowing that the Horizon system was faulty and error prone. So, any article is likely to get rapidly overtaken by events!

Legal Redress

Forty-seven sub postmasters have had their convictions overturned by the Court of Appeal. The magnitude of their achievement cannot be exaggerated. These legal processes are not only extremely complicated, but expenses in court also run into millions of pounds. The JFSA spoke truth to power: they took on and shamed the PO, a powerful national institution, who are supported by the political influence and finances of the government.

The PO reached an out of court settlement of £58 million with the JFSA and the 555 innocent sacked sub-postmasters. However, most of this sum has been exhausted by costs incurred in refuting the legal challenges brought by the PO. Additionally, the PO is now re-assessing some 900+ cases where employees have been dismissed for accounting errors which had come to light through the Horizon system.

In my opinion, the following actions must be taken immediately: 1) all dismissals and convictions arising from Horizon should be made null & void; and 2) adequate compensation should be paid in full without delay. However, the PO, as a business, simply doesn't have sufficient financial resources available to fund a compensation scheme on such a scale. A further Parliamentary Early Day Motion called upon the government, as the principal stakeholder with ultimate responsibility for the PO, to fund an agreed scheme. Their latest 'final offer' of £66K per individual has been firmly rejected by the JFSA as wholly inadequate.

Nick Wallis, an investigative journalist, has devoted ten years of his life to forensically investigating this scandal and campaigning for justice. He comments succinctly on the Horizon scandal: Horizon 'was operated in an environment where flawed and incompetent people were able to destroy people's lives without a shred of accountability'.

Some key questions

And this begs the question: which individual(s) were responsible for implementing these wrong decisions? Furthermore, what roles did Fujitsu and the government play in these procedures? Although the government has stated that it has 'an arms' length' role because the PO Board manages its affairs, surely successive ministers were kept informed and consulted about the serious issues surrounding Horizon? Police are deploying 80 detectives to investigate potential offences of perjury & perverting the course of justice by PO & Fujitsu executives. Where there is a case to answer, appropriate action must be taken. The shaming of Paula Vennells, CEO, into relinquishing her CBE is simply the first step towards restitution. It is the very least that the victims deserve for their dignity, courage and perseverance.

For further information, the best place to start is the Private Eye Podcast, Episode 49. Richard Brooks and Nick Wallis reveal the extraordinary twenty-year scandal that has been dogging the Post Office <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/going-postal/id973958702?i=1000464598901>

This is as comprehensive an introduction to the events as you will find anywhere, all within 30 minutes.

If you, or someone you know, has been caught up in a scandal or a case of mis-justice, please let us know

The inevitability of scientific fact

Edward Milner writes about the failure of governments and businesses to properly address key environmental issues

Neither the Biodiversity Crisis nor Climate Change are hoaxes or the result of some left-wing conspiracy, whatever the absurdist wing of certain political parties would have you believe. They both need to be taken very seriously indeed. Ignoring the science is a road to disaster, especially when it is based on wilful ignorance. Nature is implacable, however inconvenient this may be. Just look at that early [English king called Canute](#) who famously discovered this when he tried to turn back the rising tide.

Why the failure to solve existential problems?

I think the problem humanity has in dealing (or not dealing) with these existential problems is that none of the three dominant groups in contemporary society – politicians, businessmen/women and administrators – are well equipped to contribute. Very few of the influential members of these groups have any scientific training, and not only tend to see scientific fact as an optional consideration when determining policy, but also seem particularly susceptible to nonsensical theories which contradict known and tested scientific fact.

Why is this? Politicians (as opposed to statesmen) are primarily concerned with power -- getting it, holding on to it and wielding it – far too frequently exclusively for their own benefit. Scientific advisors tend to have little influence; unpopular advice of any political colour is rarely tolerated. Those leaders of business, in this late-capitalist world, pursuing growth and maximising profits, seem frequently unconcerned about the damage they cause - either upstream or downstream from their operations. Administrators are all too readily driven by bureaucratic rules within whichever political system they are functioning – and far too frequently fail even in this area. Once again, inconvenient scientific findings tend to be ignored and unpopular research budgets cut.

Few individuals in these three groups seem at all concerned with leaving the planet a better place, or even following the medical maxim, 'do no harm'; the disturbances to both climate and environment that scientists have identified are apparently regarded as of secondary importance. There are some voices in the global media raising questions, but holding power to account seems mostly to have gone out of fashion, partly due to the aggressive hounding - even assassina-



Dust storm in Brazil. The tipping point in the Amazon basin may already have been reached

tion - of critical journalists by political regimes across the world.

Irresponsible business leaders and politicians

The accelerating changes in the global climate have been caused substantially by burning fossil fuels, something promoted by business leaders and the politicians they have bankrolled. Why? Because both groups benefited from maintaining the status quo, and fossil fuels were amazing until suddenly...they weren't. Recent findings show that the oil industry was well-aware of the dangers decades ago but chose to ignore them and suppress their own research information. The subterfuge had no effect on Nature of course; it just means that correcting our errors is going to be more difficult, if possible at all, after certain planetary [boundaries are breached](#) and the climate continues to change.

The scale of the issue

Deforestation of the world's tropical forests continues unabated, in spite of evidence of longtime and wide-ranging effects, which will cost far more to fix the longer reforms are delayed. The vast Amazon Forest has been decimated by a combination of misguided (and often illegal) business enterprises and an inadequate regulatory framework. Warnings by scientists about damage to the biodiversity and the water/nutrient cycles have been ignored. Drought is now widespread not only in the Amazon basin but further south in the agricultural zones of South America as far as the pampas of Argentina. A [new report](#) in the scientific journal 'Nature' suggests that, for much of the Amazon Basin, a tipping point may already have been



River Wye in UK declared virtually dead due to chicken waste. Photo Fred Dot Greenpeace.co

reached and some changes are irreversible. Data assembled by the Resilience Institute in Stockholm suggest that other planetary tipping points are being approached and may well have already been breached.

Excuses, promises and lies

The need to change a lot of the ways humanity behaves on our one and only Earth are well understood, but obstruction and resistance from all three dominant groups is making it difficult to feel optimistic about the future. While 'pledges' and targets for the remote future proliferate, serious planning and action to achieve some of the relevant objectives are rarely seen. Far more often are excuses to explain why some of these pledges can't be met, or cost too much and must be delayed. Why is it that proposed actions seem always to be reduced, rather than increased? I look forward to the day when I hear a politician say that he/she has not been ambitious enough, and that he/she is now working towards bigger goals, as opposed to cutting back. While just a few corporate leaders are adopting sustainable policies, far more are seen to be engaged in greenwashing, while at the same time planning more growth.

In a [new report](#), the Center for Climate Integrity, has revealed that companies in the plastics industry have known for decades that 'recycling was not a viable plastic waste solution' but have continued to this day to promote it as a genuine solution. 'The companies have lied' says Richard Wiles, one of the authors. This is another example of a failure of business leadership and regulation. Why is it that administrators are constantly trying to justify the inadequacies of regulation by finding and bribing or lobbying for loopholes?

In spite of regulations, most watercourses in the global north (and many in the global south) are disgracefully polluted by industrial waste, agricultural runoff and, frequently, untreated sewage, in spite of appropriate and well-meaning regulations. The River



A huge ecological disaster in Poland in 2022 led to the Odra River petition to force the hand of the Polish government

Wye in England has been declared virtually dead due almost entirely to illegal dumping of nitrogen-rich waste from chicken farms, yet the UK Environment Agency far from ensuring compliance seems only engaged in finding excuses and exceptions - almost anything to avoid actually applying the regulations, in case big business is inconvenienced.

How to make a difference

When the inevitable results of the implacability of Nature ever gets recognised, what are urgently needed are practical ideas that can gain political backing in our increasingly fractious world – and there are some. One is the proposed [Extended Producer Responsibility \(EPR\)](#) which will be implemented in the UK from 2025. 'EPR is a policy tool which requires producers to be responsible for the full net cost of managing packaging they place on the UK market at the end of its life'. This legislative instrument is the result of a waste strategy published in 2018, and so the timescale of seven years can hardly be called rapid. It is perhaps unsurprising that only now, very late in the process, has industry fully engaged with the need to replace [unnecessary plastic packaging](#) with biodegradable alternatives such as wood and fibre. The key innovation I think is getting industry to accept its responsibility – in an age where the assertion of rights seems to take precedence over assuming responsibilities, this would be a major step forward. Perhaps the negotiators attempting to develop the international plastics treaty could learn from this initiative? But always keep in mind the experience of King Canute – whether or not he actually believed he could stop the tide was not the point. What was shown, even in the tenth century, was that trying to ignore Nature was a non-starter, and so began a more realistic approach to living on planet Earth.

Do you have a suggestion about the way we can mitigate the effects of climate change or the reduction in biodiversity? If so, please get in touch.

What does gender equality look like?

Retired headteacher Betty Hales draws on her personal experience to explore the issue of sexism



Women ... can only achieve equality when the whole infrastructure of society has the care and nurturing of children as its priority

Society needs children, otherwise the human race won't survive. Women, whether they become mothers or not, can only achieve equality when the whole infrastructure of society has the care and nurturing of children as its priority. We should all be paid properly for looking after children and other dependents, and free 24 hour/7 day a week workplace childcare should be universally available.

We shouldn't need to state our gender, age, etc on application forms or official documents. We do not need to be labelled. We will never be able to achieve gender equality until we have a society free from all prejudice where we are all treated with dignity as human beings, whatever our sex or sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or disability.

How much progress?

As a young teenager sixty years ago, I was part of a generation that naively believed that it could and would change the world in all sorts of ways, including



Betty Hales

achieving gender equality. So how far have we progressed? On the positive side we now have the Equal Rights Act and generally people are aware of the need for equality. Gay marriage is legal, something that would have been thought impossible when I was growing up. The popular opinion is that we have achieved a lot, but is this really the case? Attitudes still need to change. For example, we can never achieve

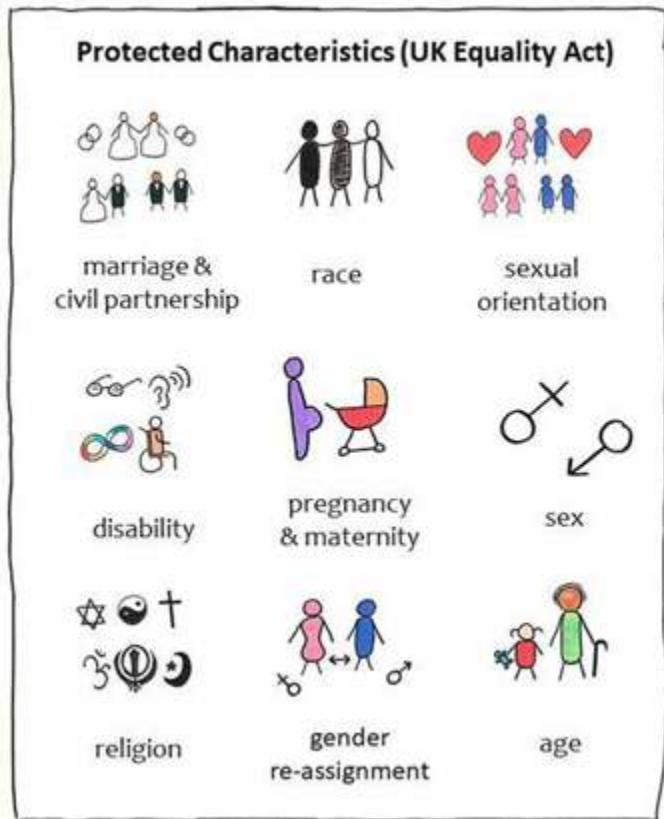


Image: emilybrysonelt.com

equality while a proportion of the population feel entitled to treat women, or any other disadvantaged group, appallingly.

Laura Bates, in her book, 'Everyday Sexism' describes how she tackled the myth that women in the western world had achieved equality and 'everything is fine now'. In 2013 she started a website where women could upload their stories of bad experiences of sexism. She was expecting that 100 or so women might contribute but within two months there were 1000 entries from all over the world. By 2015 there were 100,000 entries. Some of these stories were predictable and some totally horrific.

Sexism in the Sixties

When I was growing up, daily sexism was generally accepted as normal. Being 'wolf-whistled' if you passed any group of workmen, being 'touched-up' as you boarded a crowded bus, these were rites of passage into womanhood for a young girl in the 1960's. Comedians, always men, had racist, sexist and homophobic jokes as their 'bread and butter'. These were considered as 'harmless' by most people. Remember the 'mother-in-law' and the 'English, Irish and Scotsman' jokes?

Sexism in education and at the workplace

I went to a progressive co-ed grammar school where I excelled at maths and physics, yet engineering was never suggested as a possible career. Girls were

expected to become teachers, nurses or secretaries. At 18, I didn't have the confidence to go to university despite passing four A-levels. Instead, I managed to get a job as the first female trainee computer programmer at Thorn Electrical Industries in Enfield. Computers were in their infancy and a 64K machine took up the whole floor above the light bulb factory. This should have been a fantastic opportunity but, in reality, I spent most of my time punching holes in computer cards, using binary code. Men were not allowed in the all-female punch-room. Their presence might excite the girls too much and they would make mistakes punching the vital payroll data onto reels of paper tape. A bit of a throw-back to the Victorian notion that women were all prone to hysteria. So, the male programmers would get me to go and punch a card for them if their programme needed amending. I also came in useful for collecting the coffee and bacon rolls from the canteen. Neither I, nor the men I worked with, realised that I was being exploited. As a female, I knew that I would have to get a degree if I was to have any credibility.

Sexism in the Nineties

When my daughter was at secondary school in the 1990's, things were no better - in fact the Thatcher years and popular TV had probably made things worse. (Remember 'Page 3' in The Sun and the sexist sketches on 'The Benny Hill show'!) She gained a place as an apprentice electrician and excelled at college but couldn't cope with the relentless lewd and sexist comments and inappropriate physical touching. After a few months, she switched to nursing and continues to suffer from the low pay and status that endures in stereotypical women's work.

Sexism today

My granddaughter is now 19 and has had to survive her teenage years surrounded by examples of sexism that are potentially even far more damaging because of the internet and social media. For today's generation of young women, a seemingly harmless photo WhatsApped to a boyfriend can never be erased and can result in a lifetime of being seen as a whore or a slut.

The whole 'Trans' debate, where some feminist groups want to protect spaces for women and set themselves against those who were born male but yearn for female identity, is very sad. The aim of all of us should be to achieve a more equal society in general, where there is mutual respect for everyone because they are human, and it truly doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman or prefer to be known as neither.

If you have experienced sexism, in whatever form or context, we would very much like to hear from you.

London's green spaces and how beavers are making a come-back

Jo Buchanan reminds us of the value of London's open spaces and introduces us to a great example of rewilding in the capital

There are many studies which show that being outside and experiencing nature can improve our lives in a number of ways. The benefits of being outdoors have been endorsed recently by [the Royal College of Psychiatrists](#). We are often subjected to sensory overload and the natural world can help us relax. These spells of relaxation can improve our thinking and reasoning capabilities and other aspects of our lives. Whether we are walking in nature or doing more strenuous exercise, or even if we are still and appreciating the views and breathing cleaner air, being outside can contribute to our physical fitness and well-being. It can reduce our

anxiety and help us if we have problems with our mental health. It can lead to improved sleep.

The world today

Our attention recently may have been focussed on the general election. Our media has certainly been prioritising it. And the controversies around the November election in the United States are frequently discussed. We have also been recoiling in horror at the violence in the Middle East and remain aware of other wars and armed conflicts, such as those in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DCR) and Myanmar. And we worry about the problems in this country, the



A great place to be outside, exercise, breathe cleaner air and probably promote mental health, but no beavers yet on Wanstead Flats

poverty and inequality, the decline in our public services, the cost of living and the effects of climate change the world over. But there are ways of finding respite from the world's troubles, and one of these is recognising and celebrating the fact that, despite the traffic congestion, the pollution, the aircraft noise and general hurry and stress, we live in a green city with so much wildlife around us.

London's outdoor spaces

We have thousands of parks, community gardens, greens spaces, rivers and canals. We have 15,000 species sharing London with us, 8 million trees and numerous protected habitats. Our city is nearly 50% green and blue space. In 2019 London became the world's first [National Park City](#).

[The London Wildlife Trust](#), which has many volunteers and 36 nature reserves in London, encourages and protects our wildlife. [The Ramblers Association](#) promotes walking all over the country and has at times focussed on London and other cities because the possibilities for walkers can be overlooked.

There are walks all over the capital which often avoid busy areas and traffic and focus mainly on parks, rivers and nature reserves. There are many walking routes in some of our huge green spaces, such as Epping Forest, Richmond Park and Hampstead Heath. There are two particularly attractive circular routes around London - the 150 mile [London Loop](#) and the 78 mile [Capital Ring](#). These can both be broken up into manageable sections. They are fascinating and reveal an astonishing number of verdant areas in, and on the fringes of, London as well as a huge variety of landscapes, land uses and views, all accessible by public transport.

Beavers

A particularly exciting development for London and for nature lovers has been the re-introduction of beavers to our capital city. Beavers are known for having had a major impact on Britain's waterways in the past, creating river systems and wetlands and therefore benefiting biodiversity and different forms of wildlife. They also slow down the flow of water, which helps prevent flooding, and their activity has the effect of filtering water, which enhances its quality. But 400 years ago, beavers were hunted to extinction.

Paradise Fields

There are several sites where beavers have been introduced in England, Scotland and Wales and now they appear to be thriving in London. One of the London sites where they have been living since October 2023, due to a Rewild London Fund project (Bringing Beavers Back to Ealing) and the London Wildlife Trust, is Paradise Fields in Greenford. The original beavers have made



Re-introduction of beavers has been a particularly exciting development for London

themselves at home and seem to be happy in their new lives. There are five new dams and canals for transporting logs, some of the surrounding trees have been cut back and the mud dredged to create large pools, where the beavers can dive to avoid predators.

It is now possible to book visits and guided tours to Paradise Fields. One of those involved in the Ealing Beaver Project is ecologist, [Nadya Mirochnichenko](#), who commented recently: "They are creating more of a wetland area as compared to a more drier area. And that has a lot of benefits for different species, including pond life, birds, insects, bats, newts and frogs. So, there are a lot of biodiversity benefits that the beavers can bring."

The hope is that the area will become a flourishing wetland, and it appears that the beavers have already made an impressive start. Kingfishers have been seen here for the first time. Volunteers attached to the project are particularly excited at the moment, as it is thought that the beavers may be starting to raise their young. The Mayor's Rewild London fund has provided a substantial amount to the development of the 'Bringing Beavers Back to Ealing' initiative and had also, by the end of 2023, allocated £2.3 million to various projects across the capital. This has led to the creation or restoration of about 350 hectares of wildlife habitat (the size of almost 315 football pitches).

A Green city

It is easy to forget how green our city is but in every area of London greenery is usually not far away. If we can make use of the green spaces not far from us, we will undoubtedly benefit and hopefully find it easier to cope with the demands, pressures and anxieties of living in London in the 2020s.

Please let us know if you have a favourite green space in London and what you enjoy about it.

Education in Namibia

A Letter to the State

Thirty years ago, white minority rule and the apartheid system were dismantled in South Africa. At the same time, the former South African protectorate in Namibia became an independent nation. Since then, Namibia has been ruled by South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) governments, which have become a by-word for corruption and incompetence.

The letter, reproduced here about the problems affecting education in Namibia was produced recently by parents and educators disturbed by the evident shortcomings in the sector.

Bob Archer is an International Solidarity Officer of Redbridge District NEU, and for some years represented NUT/NEU on the International Affairs Committee of the London and South-Eastern Region of the TUC (TUC-LESE). He suggested that we should publicise this appeal in the Retired Educators' Newsletter.

EDUCATIONAL CRISIS COMMITTEE OF NAMIBIA
'Join us in our struggle for a future for our children
P.O. Box 71140, Khomasdal
jacobusiosob@gmail.com ernestgille00@gmail.com
Erf 4479 Cr Dodge Avenue & Kroon Street,
Khomasdal

31 MAY 2024

The Director of Education;
The Honourable Minister of Education;
The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education,
Science, ICT and Youth Development.

We are a group of parents, educationalists (including retired and unemployed teachers and specialists) engineers, students, and concerned persons. We constituted ourselves as the Educational Crisis Committee of Namibia.

The gradual persistent and catastrophic degradation of the Namibian education system has been evident over a number of years, each year starting with media headlines of startling school failure rates at senior secondary level resulting into low and questionable tertiary pass rates. The low pass rate of the University of Science and Technology (NUST) is of serious concern.

The scale of the crisis is evident from the following extracts:

- An extract of the findings of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Science, Information and Communication Technology;

- an extract from a 2007 World Bank report;
- the report of the Crisis Committee from national sources;
- Various media reports.

Standing Committee on education, science, information and communication technology, and youth development:

'Some high school pupils struggle to read and write [National, News, Top Story 2](#) | Published: 15 February 2024 | Last Updated: 16 February 2024 | Written by Donald Matthys

"... alcohol and drug abuse red-flagged at schools

A new report by a parliamentary standing committee has pinpointed the chief factor behind the high failure rate of grades 11 and 12 pupils in the 2022 academic year: the automatic progression of students to the next grade without learning basic competencies like reading and writing."

World Bank Report 2009:

"School enrolment has improved, but quality of education remains low

Following independence, Namibia put great emphasis on increasing access to education and training and is currently one of the biggest spenders on this sector in Africa (about 9 percent of GDP in 2002/03) (World Bank 2007e). Net primary school enrolment was 76% as of 2006, higher than the Sub-Saharan African average

of 70 percent. Gross secondary enrolment has increased substantially, from 45% in 1991 to 57% in 2006. And at 5.8% in 2006, gross tertiary enrolment is higher than the Sub-Saharan African average of 5.2%. Nonetheless, it is widely acknowledged that general education is ineffective and the quality extremely low (World Bank 2007e). Namibia ranks lowest among its peers in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in student performance on reading and mathematics.

Although the adult literacy rate is relatively high (85% as of 2001), a 2003 World Bank assessment showed that a large proportion of adults who completed primary- and even secondary-education are functionally illiterate (World Bank 2007c). Access to basic education, notwithstanding qualitative issues, has become more equitable. Distances to primary school are 7.1 kilometres for non-poor households and 11.5 kilometres for poor households (World Bank 2007e)."

The Education Crisis Committee resolved to mobilize Namibian society around the restitution and improvement of a functional educational system using our national resources. The Committee is to be spearheaded by a competent body of teachers, while the involvement, participation and guidance of state authorities controlling the educational system (and answerable

to society) will be actively pursued. We have a large body of competent retired and unemployed teachers who can play a crucial role in the restoration of a workable educational system.

We resolve to enlist the involvement of bodies such as the Namibia Scientific Society and our formidable body of academics and specialists in such fields as geography, Namibian water resources (terranean and subterranean), biology and astronomy in the review of our educational system.

We request the Parliament and the Executive to take hands with us to redeem our educational system.

We therefore urgently request an audience with the relevant Parliamentary Standing Committees in order to discuss and deliberate on the above-mentioned issues.

Kindly accept the assurances of our highest regard.
Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hewat Beukes". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a stylized 'H' and 'B'.

On behalf of
Hewat Beukes