The Redbridge Newsletter

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

Autumn 2024

Last October, Redbridge retired educators old and new got together for a convivial morning of coffee, cake and gossip at Wanstead's Belgique cafe. See report inside on page 28.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Liz Dolan reflects on some current concerns and themes

Editorial Notes for Winter 2024

The Newsletter has come a long way since its first tentative inception and now the articles you contribute cover an ever-widening range of topics as well as continuing to monitor local issues. Just as our circulation has expanded to encompass the whole of the Greater London area, so it would be good to feel that the same could happen to our coverage of `local` issues. We need to hear about what is happening throughout the area. For example, those of our readers who live in inner London can see families moving away because of unsustainable housing costs, leading to declining rolls, schools under threat of closure and teacher shortages. Development of the transport network increasingly integrates some of the more distant parts of the outer boroughs. Will this lead to more urban creep?

London matters

London, the city where we all have at some time lived or worked is a city of contrasts, between boroughs and within them. Whether you love it or loathe it (and plenty take the first opportunity to escape), it's a place that gets under your skin. London is constantly renewing itself, yet never completely erases the past. Similarly, its inhabitants have over the centuries come from all points of the compass – and they keep coming - bringing with them a multitude of differences and experiences that filter their way into the lives of those who came before – and enriching us all immeasurably.

A recent walk led by David Rosenberg highlighted the Jewish centuries-old history of immigration, expulsion, and re-immigration at a number of significant periods in London's history, documenting the importance of this to many aspects of the commercial and financial workings of the capital. Other immigrants have brought with them their own particular characteristics and transformed some of the traditional communities, making London their city too. Please write about your experience of London!

The value of fiction

A particular pleasure, for me at any rate, is seeing how the `Book Corner' has taken off – with Bob Archer's regular spot, and others sending in reviews reflecting varied interests and experiences. A number of these reviews are of books that open new worlds. There's a fascination in reading about other places, other cultures and ways of living. Fiction-writing documents history, brings other societies into life, gives an insight into how people live. It can be seen as a way of sorting out some of the confusions of family history and identity and moulding what might seem alien into something that begins to feel familiar and intelligible to those who have not experienced it at first hand. Historical fiction has long done this – and gathers an enthusiastic audience particularly when re-worked for the small screen, as witness the immense popularity of Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy. Those who write about current situations have a more complex but equally rewarding task: to offer a narrative that feels authentic.

The promise (or not) of a new government

Change, and a hunger for change, is all around us and we live in a time of considerable upheaval. Our last issue went to press before the British election result, when any comments were speculation and an expression of hope. How far any of that hope will turn into reality is still anyone's guess. First signs are not unequivocally positive!

What will actually happen to education under Labour? Money is pledged for buildings, particularly schools and units within schools for SEND pupils, but will pay, conditions, sickness and maternity policies, pension entitlement etc be funded sufficiently to reflect need or increase recruitment? University fees are set to increase – how will that benefit students, already encumbered with lifelong debt, and how will it ensure that the quality and variety of courses and teaching remain at an acceptable level? The emphasis does not seem to be on improving staff morale or pupil and student well-being.

What about the NHS? Wes Streeting has got off to a flying start in denigrating all that already exists, and now introduces the red-herring of league tables … Has nothing been learned from the fiasco that is Ofsted and the reliance on constant testing? And who are they for? When league tables were introduced in schools, the idea was that this would inform parental choice; but who in an emergency or when seriously ill has the choice **not** to attend their local hospital however good or bad it is? Will it help doctor and nurse recruitment, will it see patients miraculously recover faster? Let us know what you think.

The Newsletter is always keen to receive contributions from our readers on a wide range of topics, whether they be personal or political, serious or humorous, factual or imagined. Contributions in the form of letters or short notes in response to Newsletter articles, are also very welcome. Please send submissions or questions to the Editorial team at mike321peters@gmail.com.

Maureen McCarthy reports on local district news

NEU Redbridge news

Updates since the last newsletter:

1. Hatton School: agreement was reached just before the end of the summer term, so the strikes were suspended. 18 of the members' 20 demands were met, including a reduction in the number of pupils being sent to the new site, a response to health and safety concerns expressed by staff. This exemplified collective action at its most effective.

2. Little Heath School: the second of the special schools where strike action started last term. Agreement wasn't reached, so the transfer of sixth form pupils to a primary school site, where building works to accommodate the new cohort's needs hadn't been completed, was targeted for 9th September. NEU members went on strike for the following two days. The controversy reached the press, with several parents supporting the strikers, especially regarding the fact that the non-working lifts meant that vulnerable children had to access three floors using the stairs. Also, the lack of a specialised hygiene room, and the retention of (obviously) small primary toilets for sixth form students and their carers, were significant concerns. Comment from the LEA? "Excellent facilities and high-quality equipment". Agreement was finally reached a month later after a total of five days' strike action. SLT has agreed to meet weekly with union reps until building works are completed. And this dialogue wasn't initiated when the original decision to set up the separate 6th form was made because .. .?

3. Two other issues: Three Redbridge NEU reps have been involved in issues of concern to many members:

a) Policies regarding maternity and pregnancy rights. Sylvain Savier has been active in trying to disseminate NEU information, including the example of Woodbridge High School`s policies, to members via reps.

b) Worries about AI and its obvious potential for use in education. This is becoming an issue of concern among members, especially regarding its possible use, including, for example, the need to balance the danger of removing qualified teachers with the possibilities of its potential regarding reducing workload. Time for a union-led discussion?

4.Action against the far-right: Samantha Patel, rep from Cranbrook School, chaired the Redbridge Community Action Group, which aims to organise a response to the riots in the summer. A Stand–Up to Racism group was set up in September, supported by Redbridge NEU, while a number of members (with the Redbridge NEU banner) attended the demonstration against Tommy Robinson and his supporters on October 26th.

5. Issues in schools. Predominantly issues have concerned workload and management-creep, including, in one school, removing breaks from the directed time budget; in another insisting on compulsory lunch

Redbridge Community Action Group (left) joined with Redbridge NEU to establish a Stand Up To Racism group in the borough

Redbridge NEU joined the national 'Stop Tommy Robinson' march in London on 26 October

duties. Several schools, including primary schools, such as Woodlands, have, supported by branch officials, collectivised, and achieved progress without having to resort to strike action.

Examples: Woodlands gained three days of childcare leave (previously 0) as well as permission to work from home during PPA time. Several schools have achieved improvements regarding workload, from managements agreeing to adhere to the rarely used cover rule to more willingness by SLTs to actually engage in discussions regarding directed time. I suspect (and hope) that, as knowledge of these successes is publicised, more progress will be made.

6. Performance-Related Pay: One major battle taken on by district officers this term was opposing the decision made by many Redbridge headteachers to follow LEA advice to retain Performance Related Pay (PRP). This, despite the fact that the government has removed the obligation on schools to follow this policy.

That such a strong Labour- controlled council as Redbridge (November 2024: 54 Labour councillors; 5 Conservative; 3 Independent) should choose to do this is extraordinary, especially when compared to Waltham Forest, our neighbouring Council, which has abolished PRP and instituted automatic pay progression.

In response, district officials wrote formally to the LEA, a letter signed by 61 reps. The good news is that on November 5th Redbridge LEA confirmed that PRP will be removed from the Redbridge Pay Policy for 2024/25.

Hopefully, this will now rectify the situation colleagues have been forced into, with SLTs attempting to block movement to UPS, citing the now obsolete two year wait rule which makes teachers jump through hoops to provide "evidence", when progression should be automatic.

However, the fact that PRP is in next year's policy could obviously have a negative impact on some colleagues whose applications have already been rejected, in spite of government advice. However, the LEA's decision can be seen as a success for collective action by officers and reps.

More issues will no doubt arise perhaps from the implications of the Budget, one certainly being the exodus of teachers from Redbridge schools. Increasing class sizes and lack of teachers in specific subjects will inevitably have an impact.

It`s possible I suspect that more Heads of Department will be ordered to devise plans to "minimise the impact on students who don't have a teacher", as has already happened in one Redbridge school. Watch this space.

If you are in possession or come across any news about what`s happening to education in Redbridge, please let us know

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The NEU and Pensions policy

Have your say!

The policies of the National Education Union are decided democratically by the NEU members elected as delegates to the Annual Conference each Easter. Motions for discussion at Conference are submitted initially by meetings of the local branches of the Union. That process starts in the autumn term of any given year.

In order to fit adequate discussion in the limited time of Conference, branches are asked early in the spring term to look at all the motions submitted by all the local branches and 'prioritise' them, that is, to identify the motions which they think are most important. Then an elected committee of members will try to accommodate the key issues in the final conference agenda. After that, the National President of the union will have the daunting but vital task of making sure all the key issues get debated properly by Conference.

This year, a number of retired members active in the retired members' National Organising Forum (NOF for short) are encouraging local branches of the union to adopt the draft motion on pensions printed below. We Redbridge Retired Educators hope there will be a widespread discussion of this motion and that this will be reflected in the group of delegates that our local NEU branch sends to Conference next Easter.

Bob Archer

The draft motion

Conference considers that pensions are deferred salary and any attack on pension provisions should be strongly opposed.

Conference instructs the Executive to campaign:

1) *to defend the Teachers` Pension Scheme in all educational establishments and oppose any attempts by bodies like United Learning Trust to leave the scheme;*
2) *to encourage all those becoming educators to join and retain membership of the Teachers` Pension Scheme;*
3) *for all independent sector members to remain in the scheme or be entitled to join the scheme without detriment to existing salaries and entitlements;*
4) *against any attempt to introduce fire and rehire or other measures to deny access to the Scheme;*
5) *to ensure that the Triple Lock for the State Pension is maintained;*
6) *in support of the WASPI campaign working to gain justice for women whose retirement age was changed by government without consultation;*
7) *for the restoration of the Winter Fuel allowance.*

Conference believes that the Local Government Pensions Scheme (LGPS), whose membership includes support staff, should base its investments on ethical principles adopted by the NEU and that the Union should work with other unions in the scheme to achieve these goals.
Furthermore, Conference calls on the Executive to seek NEU representation on all appropriate national bodies and on Local Council Pension Boards and to take any action necessary to defend the pensions of members in the LGPS.
Conference reaffirms its commitment to encourage all members who retire to retain their membership of the Union and be recognised as 'members who have retired' not 'retired members'.

Please get in touch if you have any views on the above or any other current educational issue

The threats and challenges facing us today and tomorrow

Future Imperfect

Jane Shallice writes about her anxieties concerning the impact of climate change and AI

There are some dates which you have lodged in your brain. The date of your birth, the year your father died, and for those of a certain age, the year Kennedy was shot. Today, however, there are future dates which have become seared into our minds because they carry a warning. The one we all know is 2050 when, if there is more than 1.5C increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the world rapidly goes downhill, even though it already appears to be moving remarkably fast along that trajectory.

The Climate Crisis across the World

2024 is a year already estimated to be `the hottest` on record despite the fact that we have not yet reached December 31st. Huge wildfires in North America, day-time temperatures making urban life impossible in parts of India and Pakistan, ice sheets and glaciers continuing to melt, horrendous floods in Bangladesh and suddenly in Spain their annual rainfall falling in eight hours, the result of global warming increasing the capacity for the atmosphere to hold greater quantities of water vapour. With the election of the most powerful politician in the world, who has no inclination to even genuflect towards the suggestion that there may be a linkage between increasing carbon dioxide and these climatic phenomenon, we may feel that things are not going our way - the way of rationality and a belief that scientific evidence is key to human development and life itself.

Living with 2050 firmly entrenched in my brain since the Paris Agreement signed in 2013, I am shocked to realise that, despite countries nodding to maintaining current carbon dioxide levels, there are increasing quantities of oil, gas and coal contracts being agreed. If they are activated, no oil, gas or coal company would be investing huge amounts to have a limited future; therefore, these deals will be exploited and future production will be designed for forty or fifty years ahead, far beyond 2050. They would not be investing phenomenal sums to have stranded assets.

From Magic to Catastrophe

This is not really news to anyone, as it is evident that the 1.5 limit on carbon emissions will be breached, if it hasn`t been already. So, COP continues as if there is a will to act, and if not the will, then there will be the magical mitigations - carbon capture or some projected geo engineering of the atmosphere assumed to act like a fire-guard against the sun. And each year we will witness increasing hurricanes and tornadoes, ferocious storms and floods, Pacific islands being ravaged by rising sea levels, Arctic melt waters and fires. The impact of course is on the poorest and the least powerful. And further tipping points will be reached which cannot be mitigated, such as the failure of the Atlantic circulation bringing the Gulf Stream to warm the European landmass or the removal of the Amazon carbon sink.

AI Anxieties Today

Last March my `living` with 2050 was suddenly given another perspective when the date 2035 suddenly hit me. Geoff Hinton, one of the original creators of AI, announced that he was leaving Google to which he had sold his Deep Mind project ten years previously. He had always thought developments around AI would be advancing steadily and it would be in about a hundred years that intelligent computers could be contesting human control. He realised that the rate of developments is increasing rapidly in a way which has shocked him and that his concerns about AI would have to be faced within ten years. In March 2023 he spoke out publicly, demanding that the most stringent controls are placed on AI, especially on its military applications - applications which no government has agreed to control.

In October this year, Hinton was awarded the Nobel prize for physics, which he will receive in December. His Nobel address will be a crucial read, particularly when Musk who, in March 2023, was calling for a six-month moratorium on AI developments, is now shoulder to shoulder with Trump. Grim news for those concerned about climate warming and AI.

Please contact us if you would like to respond to Jane`s article or to write your own about a key issue of our time.

Rachel Brittle looks back on a British Council Teacher Exchange

UK to Pakistan 2012

Background

In 2012 I was working as an EAL teacher at a primary school in Redbridge, London. We had a twin school in Rawalpindi, Pakistan and were lucky enough to receive funding to make teacher exchange visits. I was given the opportunity to host a teacher from Grammar School Rawalpindi in the summer of 2012 and then I travelled to Pakistan in October of that year to stay with her family and visit the three school sites of their school.

UK

In the summer of 2012 Sitwat Yusufzai, Deputy Head Teacher of Grammar School Rawalpindi visited the UK. She was invited to stay with a Pakistani member of staff who lived close by to our school. Sitwat had the opportunity to watch lessons in our primary school. She was particularly interested in the younger pupils and the wide variety of learning experiences they had, as she was primarily a secondary school teacher. Sitwat commented on the way we taught phonics, reading and writing as this was quite different to the way it was taught at their school.

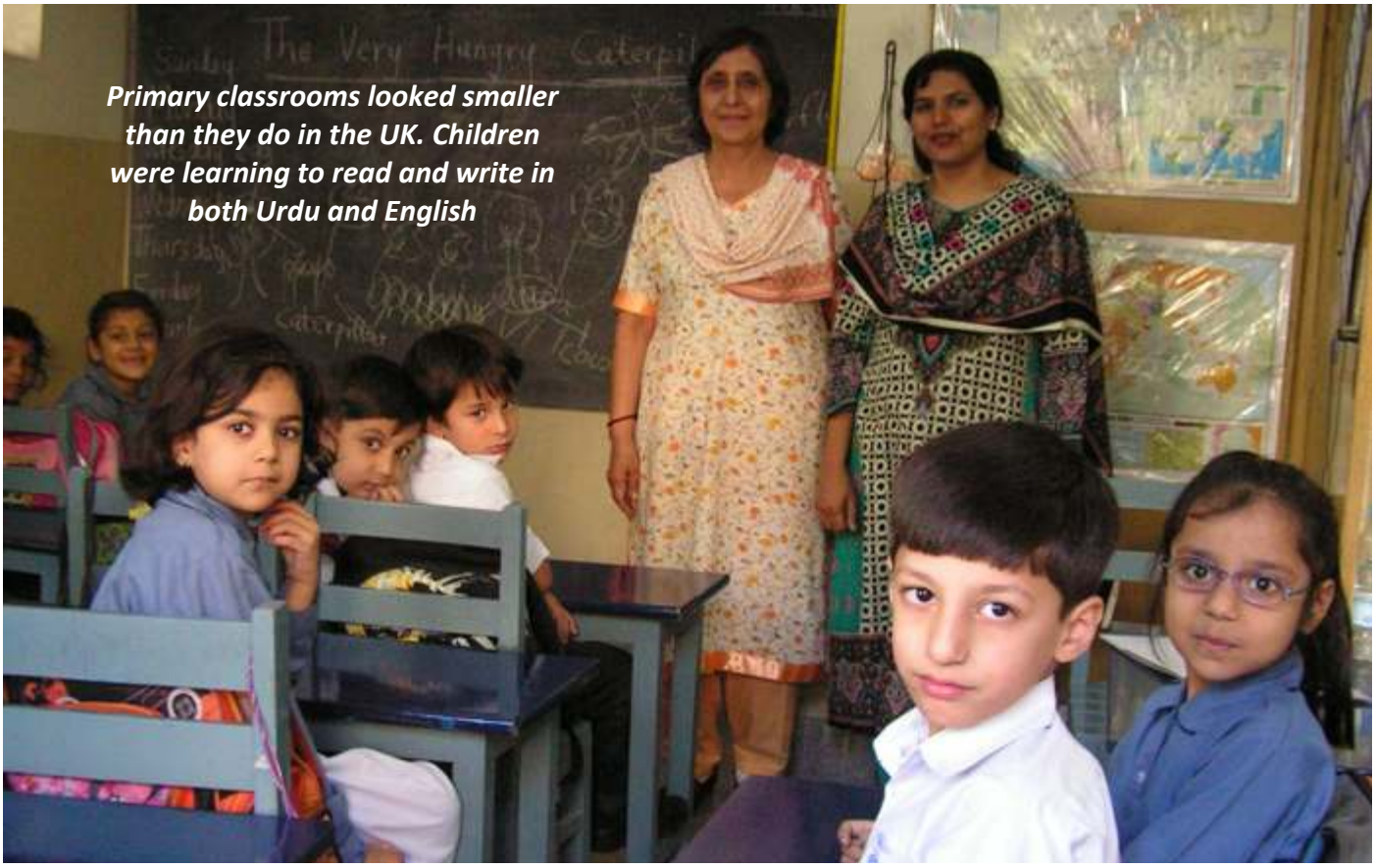
As well as observing lessons Sitwat ran an inter school workshop on the UNESCO world heritage site Taxila, which is near to Islamabad. Taxila is a large site containing a Mesolithic cave plus the archaeological remains of four early settlement sites, Buddhist monasteries, and a Muslim mosque and madrassa. We learnt a lot and I would have loved to have visited when I went in October but it was deemed a security risk.

On Sitwat's last day we had a big cultural fair and shared food from the various cultures in our school and Sitwat delivered a presentation to parents about famous Pakistani women which was received very well. It was really reassuring to meet Sitwat before my visit and have some idea of what I would see and experience when I went in October.

Pakistan

In October I made my trip to Pakistan. I travelled via Dubai. I left Heathrow early in the morning and arrived

With teaching staff in Rawalpindi



Primary classrooms looked smaller than they do in the UK. Children were learning to read and write in both Urdu and English

at Islamabad airport late that night- as I arrived, Malala Yousafzai was being flown out after being shot by the Taliban. The airport was very busy and as I entered the arrivals hall I was very happy to spot Sitwat and her driver amongst the mass of men! It was a short drive to her house, on an air force base in Rawalpindi. Rawalpindi is a garrison town with army and air force bases. I was very happy to go to bed that night but it was strange to be woken up early by the call to prayer from nearby mosques.

It was Saturday and that afternoon we attended a big show in which the school children performed songs and dances. They paid tribute to Malala at the end and I admired the way they were standing up for their right to education. As we drove through the town I was struck by how colourful everything was- most of the women wore beautifully bright salwar chemises and scarves and the large lorries were very ornate!

On Sunday I was treated to brunch at a country club and then visited Margallah Hills National Park, which has spectacular views of Islamabad. Plus some very cheeky monkeys begging for food!!

The next few days were taken up with school visits. The first was to a primary school where the youngest pupils were. I was given a tour of all the classrooms. The children were aged 5 to 7 years old. The classrooms were much smaller than I was used to, and the children sat in rows. They were very nicely decorated with displays. I noticed that the children learn to read and write both English and Urdu. All the classes had made little presentations for me to watch, centered around nursery rhymes and stories.

At the next school I ran some workshops for the teachers on phonics and poetry. Phonics is not taught there and they were very interested in the progression we use in teaching sounds and putting them together. They enjoyed the opportunity to receive some training and to do something different like writing their own poems. All the staff were very welcoming and had lots of questions about our schools.

The older pupils at these two schools had prepared presentations on Pakistan and the environment and spoke very eloquently in English about their subjects.

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to Pakistan. My host family had a lovely home and were so welcoming and Sitwat ensured I had time to sight see as well as visit schools.

The Pakistani people are amazing hosts and it really is a beautiful place with stunning views of the Himalayas and very green. It is a real shame that the political situation does not allow for tourism to flourish. I was very aware that the police all had rifles and even the security guards outside the schools are armed. I count myself very lucky to have had this experience and see how education works in a different country.

The Bookseller of Newham

an appreciation by Liz Dolan

Bookshops have always fascinated me. They come in many guises: those that dictate an ordered progression along alphabetically aligned shelves; those that direct you by virtue of category; those that tempt you to browse curated stands of the newest paperbacks; and finally, those that invite serendipity. The Newham Bookshop in Upton Park falls very definitely into the last category. There are books in shelves, some displayed flat to entice you by their cover, some in boxes, others in piles without an obvious reason for their position.

The Newham Bookshop is run very successfully by Vivian Archer, who knows where everything is and can readily put her hand on another book that might interest you. I asked Vivian what had first drawn her to the world of bookselling. She told me she came to it almost by chance, helping out a friend after a decade as an actor and being open to a change of direction, and then following up the possibility of opening up her own premises.

The bookshop is owned by a charity and operates on a non-profit basis. Vivian sees it very much as a community resource in an area of considerable deprivation in East London. Vivian pointed to other community and educational initiatives in the area which have a similar focus. The East London Black Women's Organisation (ELBWO) holds classes and meetings including events around Black History Month. Teachers in local schools are frequent customers, and like so many of our profession use their own funds to supply the gaps in school and family provision, as do other local customers, making generous donations of books to schools.

Community

The sense of belonging to the local community, which is vital to Vivian, was very clear on the day I visited to talk to her: there was a constant stream of customers, many of them regulars and greeted personally, whether they came to browse, to purchase or to collect books that had been ordered. As one woman said, when you don't know what to give someone, there is always a book!

I had been warned beforehand "Vivian will make you buy books!" and indeed, without any aggressive salesmanship, that is exactly what happened. I came away with four hefty tomes, by no means reluctantly. I am now set up for a late autumn immersion! With first hand evidence of her methods, I asked whether

Vivian Archer

her personal involvement with prospective customers was important to her and how that shaped the choice of books to stock. "Absolutely." She sees it as a crucial part of establishing the position of the bookshop within the local community and one of the rewards of the job.

The children's section takes pride of place as you enter and I talked to both Vivian and her part-time assistant John Newman about some of the perceived issues with children's engagement with books and reading. The consensus was that children need to be surrounded by books, and opportunities for reading and being read to should not be crowded out by the exigencies of National Curriculum, literacy hour and an obsession with narrow testing. John responded to my concern that there might be a temptation for both publishers and writers – and even some bookshops - to jump on the bandwagon of focusing too much on curriculum and exam requirements at the expense of broadening horizons, by suggesting that whereas that might have been true for a while, a more nuanced and enlightened approach was now the norm.

A quotation from East London author Vaseem Khan seems apt here:

"Those evenings when he invited children from the nearby slums to the bookshop and read to them,

Book-signings by prominent children's authors such as Julia Donaldson (slightly visible above) help young people to become immersed in books and reading

shadows gathering round him as he transported them to faraway lands and mystical adventures." *

One of the aspects of being situated in a neighbourhood with a distinctive character is the opportunity to support and encourage local writers. Newham is an area of high immigrant density and many of its residents are now second or third generation, firmly British, and therefore well embedded in the resulting hybrid culture.

This is reflected in the novels of this youngest cohort, writing about the London they have grown up in and also harking back to the countries their parents and grandparents left many years before. Vivian suggested that one by-product of this is to offer an element of cross-cultural escape into the exotic, exploring a different country and way of life, acknowledging the very different experiences of immigration.

She pointed out that many of their customers are young women who are breaking with a traditional way of life and making their own adjustments and compromises. The catalyst for this article was Vivian's eloquent testimony to the late Benjamin Zephaniah, a writer and poet originally from Birmingham but who was based for many years in Newham, making good use of the bookshop and Vivian's support. When I asked what made her decide that a new writer stood out and was worth encouraging, Vivian said "I don't know" but went on to explain that it came down to a gut feeling about the quality of the writing and whether the subject matter grabbed your attention. It's always a gamble, but quite plainly it usually works. As a significant part of her ambition to bring books to a wider public, Vivian organises a regular succession of book and author events – many of them at the Wanstead Tap – and runs stalls at events hosted by other bodies.

I came away with a strong awareness of the hard work and dedication that has gone into establishing the deserved reputation of the Newham Bookshop, continuing throughout the various lockdowns of the pandemic when Vivian ran a postal service from home. Although a little off the beaten track, it's well worth a visit.

*from the first book in the Malabar House series **Midnight at Malabar House** where a description of the bookshop run by the main protagonist's father clearly derives from the Newham Bookshop!

Gary Kenneth Watt writes about Parkinson`s and the impact the condition has had on his life.

Living with Parkinson`s Disease

Although my experience of Parkinson's Disease (PD) is that of one individual, this account is written for and on behalf of all those suffering from this cruel illness, together with the spouses and partners who care for them.

Symptoms

The date is 15th June 2015. Following a DAT scan at the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel, I was formally diagnosed with Parkinsonian Disorder. In hindsight, I could see that the symptoms had first manifested themselves around 2.5 years earlier: initially, difficulty in walking and shuffling my feet; also, a weakness in my left hand when performing acts of daily living (ADLs) - eg, brushing my teeth, washing up, tying shoelaces and, moreover, experiencing constant fatigue.

Overview

About 1 in 200 people suffer from PD in the UK. It's among a group of related illnesses such as Motor Neurone Disease (MND), Multiple Sclerosis (MS), Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME), each affecting the brain and nervous system. PD advances when a significant quantity of brain cells die off, thus preventing the transmission of dopamine, the chemical whereby the brain sends signals to the other body parts. To date, there is no known cure, although its progressive degeneration may be arrested by individually calibrated medicine and exercise. There are five stages of PD: Stages 1-2 take up to 4 years and Stages 2-5 are 2-year steps. It is possible to suddenly progress from one stage to the next. Personally, I knew two individuals who declined very rapidly and passed away. Another friend suddenly developed an uncontrollable tremor, which seriously undermined his confidence. Formerly, it was thought that the illness is not hereditary, although the most recent research claims that there might be some genetic factors.

Extremely useful information is available on the Parkinson's UK website, as well as a dedicated helpline. Membership, which costs only £6 per annum, entitles you to a quarterly magazine plus regular research updates. The Waltham Forest branch holds monthly meetings, as well as quizzes, holidays, Xmas food parcels and dinners *etc*. Through consistent campaigning, funding was secured for a Parkinson's UK registered district nurse, who is extremely supportive.

My Story

For eight years, my condition was fairly stable under the expert care of a wonderful Consultant Neurologist and Physiotherapist at Whipps X Hospital. I was able to lead a reasonably `normal` life, though having to adapt to patiently performing tasks very laboriously and developing the use of my right hand; unfortunately, I'm left-handed.

However, in May 2022 my condition suddenly went into free fall. I began to undergo severe panic attacks that can be activated by even the smallest degree of anxiety, causing heart palpitations, fever symptoms and shortness of breath. The episodes are of variable duration, lasting anything from an hour to an entire weekend. I have read that Parkinsonian Disorder, a variant of PD, is characterised by no tremor and is more immediately responsive to medication, though its effect lessens after seven or eight years. So, I wonder whether this has possibly happened in my case?

Impact of PD

PD has disrupted my life in 3 principal ways:

1) PD and/or the prescribed meds often cause insomnia. For the past three years, I've only averaged about four hours sleep each night. This has been extremely debilitating, leading to

2) Chronic fatigue: *eg* on difficult days, I don't even have enough strength to operate my smart phone. Fatigue management means rationing your energy in a similar manner to budgeting your wages in between paydays. On `bad days`, which are becoming more frequent, I simply try to get through the hours as best I can, adopting `good old` Charlie Brown's motto and `hope that tomorrow will be a better day`. I often just lie on the bed all day, listening to the radio, which I find a great comfort.

3) Lack of mobility leads to isolation and loneliness. So, a `Befriender` from Age UK visits me every Friday afternoon for an hour, just to provide some welcome company.

Support

I have been truly blessed with support from family, friends, neighbours and ex-work colleagues. The support provided by the wider community is simply humbling: there are all the doctors and staff at my GP surgery; there is the local pharmacy who deliver my monthly prescribed meds; and there is LBWF Social

On the mantlepiece opposite my bed I have two photos on display of my very dear late parents on their wedding day and my favourite photo of my late younger sister.

services, as well as Talking Therapies and OHS. In addition, of course, there are all our wonderful, dedicated NHS workers. I like to think of all this support as an example of Karma - *If you treat people well on life's journey, they'll reciprocate*.

Age UK provide a home help for two hours every other Monday, and so I'm billed monthly for four hours. On other days, I receive an hourly visit by a carer from Angel Care Solutions to help with personal hygiene (washing, dressing, showering etc) charged at an hourly rate.

Loss of normal activities

One of the most difficult aspects to come to terms with has been the erosion of my normal activities which gave me purpose and pleasure. I've had, for example, to give up my voluntary roles as an English language classroom teaching assistant (ESOL) at two charities. Also, I can no longer serve on the committee of our very active CWU Retired Members' Branch or get along to Brisbane Road to watch my beloved Leyton Orient more than occasionally; and away games are off the radar for now. I seldom attend our monthly Age UK Book Club meetings *etc*. Even going to the supermarket across the road, walking to the nearby cafe in the local park or riding my bike are usually beyond my strength now.

Carrying On

Given these limitations, you may well ask `*What keeps me going?* `My very dear late father's life taught me the invaluable lesson that you must always strive to overcome any adversity. An older cousin, who has suffered ill-health throughout his life, once advised me that if you incur a disability, you must simply adapt to it and get by as best you can.

On the mantlepiece opposite my bed, I have two photos on display of my very dear late parents on their wedding day and my favourite photo of my late younger sister. Although I have no religious beliefs, one thing I do believe is that, *for as long as we keep a person's memory alive, they never die completely.* I don't know why I have been chosen as the last survivor from the four of us. But I shall endeavour to carry the torch as far and as for as long as I possibly can in their memory.

As for lacking self-pity, I`ve had plenty of `dark moments` and I now understand exactly what Napoleon meant about `that 3 o`clock in the morning courage`.

Despite this gradual retreat from normal life and my diminishing options, I still enjoy keeping in touch with family and friends via WhatsApp and email, as well as following football online. I've also recently found a new interest: Henry has encouraged me to submit articles for this publication and his editorial abilities have helped me enormously in transmuting my initial efforts into material worthy of publication, with the generous approval of the Editorial Committee.

There are grounds to be hopeful about the future. `The ice bucket challenge`, undertaken by celebrities worldwide, raised unprecedented funding for research into MND. Some progress has been made, with new trials of medication to supplement or replace Levodopa - the current principal medication. However, pharmaceutical companies will only fund drug development and marketing on the basis of profitability rather than need. Capitalism has been ever thus. Research is advancing towards a breakthrough, though it may not be within the next generation or two.

And finally . . .

I'll finish with a quote from `The Lower Depths` by Maxim Gorky: 'Everyone, brotherkin, everyone there is, lives towards something better!'

If you would like to write about a health condition from any angle, then please get in touch

Who do you think you are…really?

Phillip Hawker writes about where we come from and challenges one or two myths

Some four years ago, Bob Archer invited me to give a talk to the Redbridge Teachers' Association on the subject of the Origins of Our Species. I had recently completed my MSc at the Institute of Archaeology, (UCL) and I jumped at the chance of sharing the astonishing discoveries that had recently been made about where we first emerged as a species and how we evolved to have the suite of behavioural characteristics we have today.

Then the full impact of the covid 19 pandemic made itself felt and the talk was shelved (though perhaps to be resurrected in the future). Then, as I reviewed my course notes and termly papers, the horrifying reality of how out of date so much of it was, since I graduated in 2011! I could not give a talk on the state of our understanding of the subject on the basis of what we knew - or thought we knew - in 2011. This introductory paragraph, dealing with all the new discoveries, from an article in The New Scientist last year illustrate the problem:

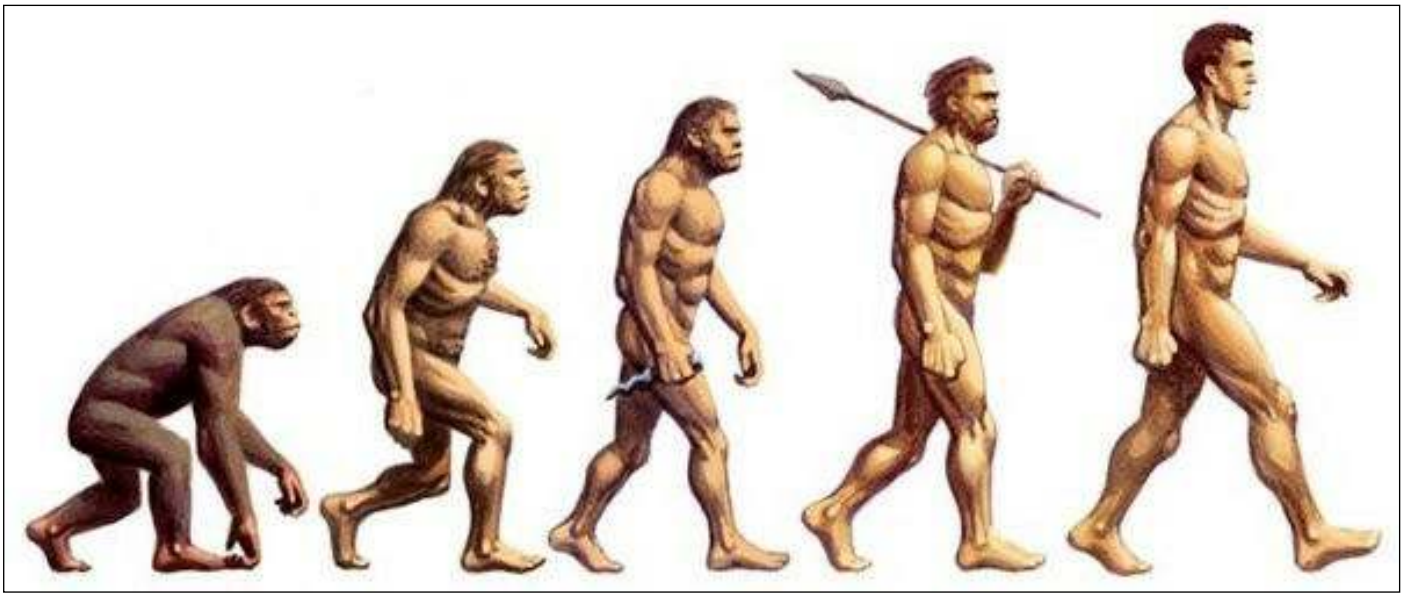
"At this point it's a truism that the story of human evolution is being rethought. Discoveries in recent years have forced us to rethink many crucial points, such as how old our species is – about 300,000 years old as opposed to 200,000 – and what extinct hominins like the Neanderthals were really like."[1]

What follows is an attempt to write an interesting summary of the current state of our knowledge. I hope it will be as interesting to read as it was for me to research and write! I had intended to discuss 10 topics, but the - very understandable - word limit made this difficult.

We have only recently become the only species of human on the planet.

We have only comparatively recently become the only hominid species on Earth. For most of our evolution we would have coexisted with other species of human in Africa before we expanded out of that continent and made our erratic way to wherever in the world we were headed. We thought we were the only species off human for most of our prehistory, but with the recent discovery of fossils of other human species in Africa, we now know we shared the continent with many others. Fossil evidence now demonstrates that we interbred with these 'sister' species which led to the acquisition the mosaic of traits with which we emerged before we eventually expanded out of Africa.

The story of our origins is further complicated by the fact that earlier waves of migration by early hominids had evolved to very different from their ancestors left behind with us in Africa. There is genetic evidence that Homo sapiens began leaving Africa we interbred with the species we encountered in Europe and Asia. We used to understand human evolution as a simple, linear process: humans evolved from a species that came before, which in turn evolved from a predecessor



We used to see human evolution as a simple linear process, as shown in this picture

species and so on without any admixture from other species. We used to see it as something like this the picture at the bottom of the previous page.

But we now know from fossil evidence that homo sapiens shared the planet with eight other species that went extinct: Homo neanderthalensis ranged from Europe to central and south western to central Asia[2]; Homo erectus - a particularly ancient group - lived on in Asia[3] ; the Denisovans lived in Siberia[4] ; homo Heidelbergensis lived in central and southern Africa[5] ; others include Homo longi living in China[6]; Homo floresiensis lived in Indonesia[7]; other candidates include Homouzonensis[8] ; there were more! Palaeontologists dispute the exact number because the fossils sometimes not unambiguously characteristic of one species.

Extinct species are still with us in our genome.

A corollary of interbreeding in early hominin species is that it would have resulted in the modern human genome of the population that migrated out of Africa. This gene flow from other hominids at different times in our distant past has meant that the linear theory of human evolution has giving way to the 'braided stream' model which looks more like this (See below):

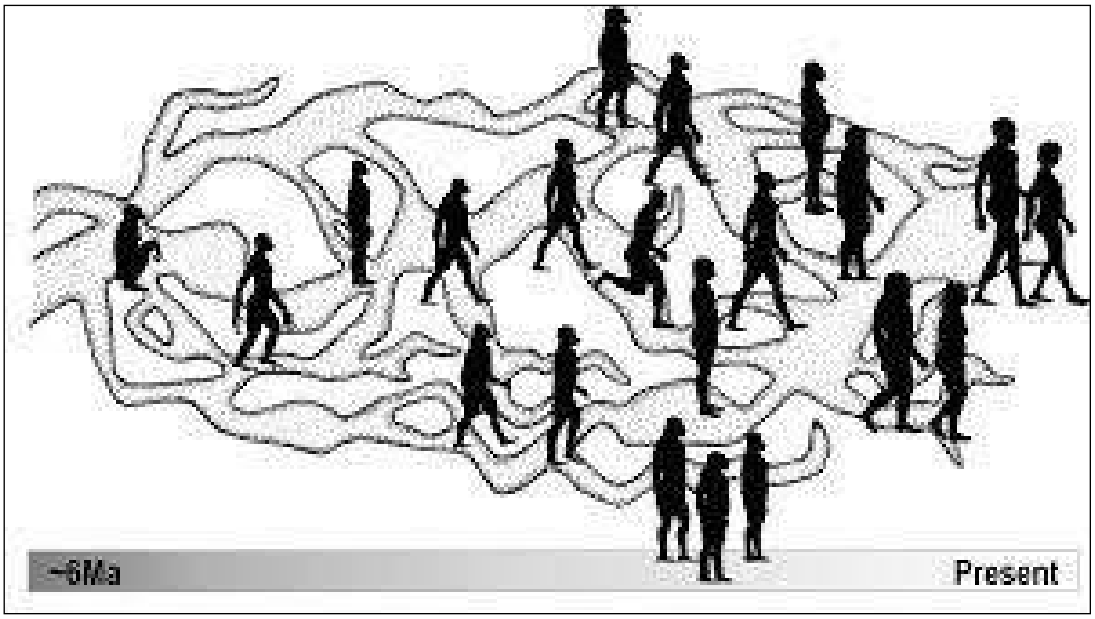
In contrast, when I began my MSc in 2008, we believed all earlier hominin species either went extinct long before Homo Sapiens evolved or as in the case of Neanderthals, we had little if any contact with them. However, recently analysed DNA of their fossil remains, the development of palaeo-proteomics, suggests that many of them have contributed genes that we still carry with us today. It is estimated that all non-African people living today have between 1 and 2 per cent Neanderthal DNA; in the far east, people are estimated to have between 4 and 6 percent Denisovan DNA.

Why do we have such large brains?

The size of an animal's brain is highly correlated with its body size, but we are off the scale. It used to be thought we evolved big brains to think more complicated stuff than other mammals (when did you last see a chimp trying to solve a Rubiks cube?) This seems to have been the default explanation for centuries and fitted well with our arrogant and quite unjustified assumption that we are in some way superior to all other animals. Then, in the 1970s some researchers began to focus on a key variable hitherto neglected: it began to be understood that our brain size was highly correlated with something else: the size of the social group and the cognitive demands of navigating critical alliances with other members to secure resources like food and mates. Humans live in very large social groups. The fullest explanation of the causes of brain size increases, or 'encephalisation, has been given by Robin Dunbar who developed what has come to be known as The Social Brain Hypothesis[9].

Did we evolve where we thought we did?

When I was a student, there was largely a consensus about where in Africa our species originated : the east African Rift Valley. It was argued that mountain building in east Africa caused climatic changes which saw thickly forested jungle give way to swathes of savannah separating isolated woodland. Early humans evolved upright walking (bipedalism) to move safely and swiftly between the patches of fruit bearing trees; it was a valuable trait for any species needing to run quickly across grassland which was home to many predators. While this model of evolution from a tree dwelling species to an upright walking -and running - one is still considered the most likely scenario, some palaeoar-



The 'braided stream' model looks more like this

chaeologists are urging more exploration of other sites in Africa[10]. They argue that east Africa has received more attention because the sites are more accessible and other sites across Africa, less favourable to the preservation of fossils, have been neglected.[11]

When did we start walking upright?

Point 4 above suggests why we became bipedal and turned our backs on life in the trees. It won't surprise you to learn that it was a **very** long time ago! The consensus is that we evolved from our ape-like ancestors about 6 million years ago but we were still basically tree-dwelling for a very long time.

We evolved into a group of species known as Australopithecines who could walk upright when the need arose but were more comfortable with the tree dwelling life they had inherited. They have been described as upright apes because they may have had the ability to walk but still possessed very small - ape like - brains. About 2 million years ago Homo habilis evolved from our Australopithecine ancestors (the jury is still out on which one but, if you like a flutter, you might put a few quid on Australopithecus sediba or Australopithecus afarensis.)

Though still better equipped to a tree-dwelling life than a ground-dwelling one, Homo habilis could walk more competently than any of her Australopithecene ancestors.

But the gold medal for speed walking has to go to Homo erectus, which evolved some 2 million years ago. We can trace our own meandering line back to homo Erectus and we haven't looked back since (unless they checked they weren't being followed by a hungry carnivore!) Read this quickly because much of it may be out of date by next week!

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What is your area of experience, expertise or simply general interest?

Lots of us are bound to find that interesting.

We would love to see your articles and photos or other illustrations

Please send to Mike Peters at: mike321peters@gmail.com

Gary Kenneth Watt writes about the history and appeal of

the Wallace Museum and Collection

The Wallace Collection is one of the most popular art museums in London. When I was working nearby, at the Baker Street Post Office, visitors from all over the world regularly asked for directions to the museum.

History of a museum

It is a museum which contains the works of art collected in the 18th and 19th centuries by five generations of a British aristocratic family – the first four Marquesses of Hertford and Sir Richard Wallace, the son of the 4th Marquess. In the 19th century, the Hertford family was one of the wealthiest in Europe. They owned large houses in England, Wales, and Ireland, and increased their wealth through successful marriages. The 3rd and 4th Marquess and Sir Richard Wallace became leading art collectors of their time.

The Wallace Collection, which has about 5,500 works of art, was left as a gift to the British nation by Lady Wallace after her death in 1897. The state then decided to buy Hertford House to show the collection and it was opened as a museum in 1900.

A varied collection

As a museum, the Wallace Collection's main attraction is its extraordinary array of 18th century French art: paintings, furniture, porcelain, sculpture and gold snuff-boxes of the finest quality and also some beautiful items from other great collections. Though many of these artefacts are miniatures, in my mind's eye they are simply exquisite, reminding me that '*small is beautiful*'

In addition to the 18th century French works, there are masterpieces from the 16th to 19th centuries - paintings by some of the greatest names of European art, such as Titian, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Hals, Velázquez, Gainsborough and Delacroix.

I consider the facial expression of *The Laughing Cavalier*, in the famous painting by Frans Hals, to be just as enigmatic as the *smile* of *the Mona Lisa*. I wonder, is he really '*laughing*'?

I was also struck by the contrasts between some of these celebrated masterworks. Thus, the expansive landscapes of Canaletto and Rubens demonstrate their subtle variants of light and shade. Whereas, the dark tones, typical of Rembrandt's portraits (interior) intensify the focus on the minute details of his son's face.

On display are also the finest collection of princely arms and armour in Britain; and superb medieval and

Frans Hals' Laughing Cavalier

Renaissance objects including Limoges` enamels, maiolica, glass and bronzes. Paintings, furniture, and porcelain are displayed together to recreate the atmosphere of the great private collections of the 19th century.

The building

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Hertford House was the townhouse of Edward Seymour, 1st Earl of Hertford (1539–1621) and was in a different place - in Cannon Row in Westminster. His father Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset (executed 1552), brother of Queen Jane Seymour, had started building the grand Somerset House on the Strand as his townhouse, but did not live to finish it.

The wonderful present House, in Manchester Square, was the townhouse of a later branch of the family. Hertford House was where Sir Richard and Lady Wallace lived: a London townhouse that was first built in the 18th century and afterwards continuously changed and refurbished. It was one of the many houses that belonged to the family, although before Sir Richard and Lady Wallace came to live there in 1870, it was only lived in briefly by the family in the late 18th century. In the past, the house has also been both the French and Spanish Embassies.

In 2000, the inner courtyard was given a glass roof and a restaurant was opened named '*Cafe Bagatelle*'

after the Château de Bagatelle in Paris, purchased in 1835 by Francis Seymour-Conway, 3rd Marquess of Hertford.

The museum does not try to recreate the state of the house when Sir Richard and Lady Wallace lived there. However, apart from the exhibits, I think that the décor is exquisite in relation to its furnishings, curtains, wallpaper, tapestries, carpets etc.

Study facilities

The museum provides a dedicated study room for student groups with refreshments available. I used to take groups of ESOL students to the museum and at the end of our visits we would have several activities for our students, such as asking them to write a brief description of the museum exhibit(s) they enjoyed most and why.

The Wallace Collection has a remarkable arrangement with the Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants: each year, students are invited to apply for half a dozen allocated places to train and qualify as a Museum Guide. They each choose two objects in the collection to present to visitors' groups. It is inspirational to see them develop their English Language skills and gain in self-confidence.

Reasons to visit the museum

Art is not the preserve of the elite; it is there for all of us to enjoy. While the Collection was acquired through the enormous wealth of the Wallace family, it was bequeathed to the benefit of the public. If you have not experienced this wide range of exhibits, some by world-famous artists, then I urge you to do so and assure you that your time there will be well spent. And if you have already visited, why not take the opportunity to be shown around the exhibits and informed by the wonderful team of refugee Museum Guides?

Additional information

- is available on their website: //www.wallace collection.org/
- the address is**:** Manchester Square, Marylebone, London W1U 3BN
- entry to the Museum is free and it is open every day from 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.
- there are regular tours and there is a free highlights tour of the Collection, daily at 2.30-3.30pm.
- a maximum of 25 people can attend tours and talks; places cannot be booked in advance and are allocated on a first come, first served basis

For a free guided tour of the Wallace Collection, check out the following YouTube video https://youtu.be/NCtU_pkoGAs?si=r86qrs2584U_IApI.

Samples of the exquisite artwork, furniture and objects held in the collection . All photos courtesy of Wallace Collection

Winston Churchill: the greatest Briton of all time?

Henry Tiller casts a critical eye over his reputation

Reputation

Churchill served as the MP for Wanstead and Woodford for an incredible 40 years from 1924 to 1964 and so he's very much part of the history of Redbridge. In a poll conducted in 2002 by the BBC, Churchill saw off the likes of Shakespeare, Darwin and Brunel to get the `greatest ever' title bestowed upon him. So, to what extent does he deserve this accolade? Well, considering that there have been hundreds of books written about the man, it would be somewhat presumptuous to try do full justice to the issue in just one thousand or so words in this newsletter! Thus, I shall mainly draw upon a selection of the many quotes by him and about him to give a flavour of the man in relation to some of the many issues with which he was concerned over a considerable period of time.

Churchill's special place in the hearts of many, but by no means all, Britons is undoubtedly most associated with his role as WW2 leader, his refusal to agree terms with Hitler in 1940 and the inspiring, brilliantly crafted and delivered speeches that he made during this time. Of all these speeches, the one below, written by himself, is his most famous, and is surely one of the most inspirational speeches ever made:

'We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.' (From a speech given to the House of Commons, warning of a possible German invasion of British shores)

However, during his long career in politics from 1901 until his retirement in 1964, there were many other aspects of his life and decision-making which are much less well-known, which cast him in a less favourable light, and which challenge the `Churchill myth'. Here are just a few examples:

Women's Suffrage

As early as 1897, when Churchill was just 23 years old, he expressed his views on women's suffrage; he believed it to be contrary to natural law and the practice of civilised states and that there was no necessity for granting women the right to vote. Later, in 1911, in a letter to Asquith, he said: *'The women's suffrage movement is only the small edge of the wedge, if we allow women to vote it will mean the loss of social structure and the rise of every liberal cause under the sun. Women are well represented by their fathers, brothers and husbands.'*

The statue of Winston Churchill on Woodford Green

The Tonypandy Miners' Strike of 1910 and the General Strike of 1926

Churchill left no room for doubt about his views on organised labour in relation to the above. The miners' strike of 1910 was an attempt to improve their extremely poor wages and living conditions. Conflict erupted between the strikers and the local constabulary and Churchill sent the troops in against the miners. **'***Drive the rats back down their holes***'** was his rallying cry. And the workers fighting to resist wage cuts in 1926 were dismissed by Churchill as a *'concerted, deliberate organised menace'* (I somehow doubt that he'd have been too impressed by the recent wave of strikes by teachers, NHS staff, railway workers and others!).

World War 1 and the Russian Revolution

The Battle of Gallipoli in WW1 was Churchill's brainchild, which ended in humiliating defeat and caused the unnecessary deaths of thousands of troops on both sides. Unchastened by this human and military disaster, as Lloyd George's Secretary of State for War from 1919-1921, it was Churchill's idea to mount an

Left: An early march for women's suffrage: 'The women's suffrage movement is only the small edge of the wedge, if we allow women to vote it will mean the loss of social structure and the rise of every liberal cause under the sun. Women are well represented by their fathers, brothers and husbands.'

Right: Gallipoli. The aftermath of the battle of Lone Pine. *(digital-classroom.nma.gov.au)*

armed intervention against the Russian Revolution in order to put the Tsar back on the throne and to *'strangle the Bolshevik baby in its crib'***.** Despite being outnumbered by the allied armies, the Red Army were victorious in what was generally accepted as a disastrous intervention. Dwight Wright, author of a detailed history of the allied intervention, describes it as *` one of the most ill-conceived and poorly planned campaigns of the twentieth century' achieving `little other than loss of life and maiming of many hundreds of soldiers, sailors and airmen …'*

The return to the Gold Standard in 1925 at the old pre-war parity

Although persuaded by the top bankers of the time, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, this was ultimately Churchill's decision and one that has generally been derided as one of the worst economic blunders of the 20th century, being the direct forerunner of the General Strike of 1926 and the Great Depression of the 1930s. Writing in 1923, two years before the event, the leading British liberal economist, John Maynard Keynes, wrote that 'In truth , the gold standard is already a barbarous relic. And after the event, Keynes savaged the decision which he said Churchill had made 'partly because he has no intuitive judgement, partly because of the clamorous voices of conventional finance, and, worst of all, because he was gravely misled by the experts.'

India

Apart from declaring that 'I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion, Churchill stands accused of being responsible for the terrible Bengal famine of 1943 that killed more than three million people. He claimed that famine was their own fault 'for breeding like rabbits' and his hard line against providing famine relief to Bengal led the then Colonial Secretary, Leo Amery, to the following conclusion: 'On the subject of India, Winston is not quite sane … I didn't see much difference between his outlook and Hitler's.'

Benito Mussolini, the Italian fascist dictator

In 1933, in a speech delivered to the Anti-Socialist and Anti-Communist Union, Churchill described Mussolini as a 'Roman genius' and called him 'the greatest law giver among living men' for his anti-communist stance. Churchill appeared to be very much at ease with Mussolini's brand of Italian fascism although, in fairness, he did go on to later describe the dictator, in 1941, as Hitler's 'tattered lackey'.

Final thoughts

So, was Churchill the greatest Briton ever? Well, you've probably guessed from my small, personal selection of quotes that, by quite a long shot, he isn't for me, but please make up your own minds!

Recommended reading

There is certainly an enormous selection of books to choose from, including one from the disgraced and disgraceful Boris Johnson. However, if, like me, while recognising Churchill's inspirational leadership during WW2, you think that he was, overall, more Tory villain and blunderer than hero, I'd thoroughly recommend Tariq Ali's new book, *`Winston Churchill: His Times, His Crimes'* (denounced by Simon Heffer, writing for the *Telegraph,* as 'A Marxist insult to history'!).

Do you have strong views on Churchill or any other historical figure. Please get in touch if you do.

Post election special:

The big interview with former Conservative MP Timothy Upshott-Croakley

In the last edition of the newsletter, Henry Tiller reported on Upshott-Croakley's farewell speech as Conservative MP for Snobish South. In this edition, he interviews him to ascertain his post-election thinking. Just to recap: in his speech, Upshott – Croakley (U-C) was very much of the view that the electorate had got things hopelessly wrong in voting the Conservatives out of office. Far from being a failure, he argued, the party had been a great success in implementing the `free market' agenda started by Margaret Thatcher in 1979.

Joseph E. Stiglitz: Nobel laureate in economics under the influence of the politics of envy

HT: *Timothy, thanks for meeting up with me today. I just want to check that it's ok to call you `Timothy'.*

U-C: Oh, yes, of course. In fact, please call me `Tim'. Back in 2005, David Cameron said that the Conservative Party has to show that 'we're comfortable with modern Britain'. So, there's no need for formality. Let's be modern. Sadly, in the last election, among voters under 30, less than 20% voted Conservative, the other 80% presumably not seeing us as part of `modern Britain'.

HT: *Ok, thanks Tim. That defeat at Snobish South, after 18 years of loyal service as an MP there, must have been a devastating blow for you. Could you tell us how things have gone for you after the dramatic events of that night?*

U-C: Well, as disappointed as I was to be voted out, every cloud has a silver lining. In fact, shortly afterwards, I received several offers of employment with City firms and am now fully engaged as an Offshore Financial Investment Consultant.

HT: *I'm pleased that you've acquired alternative employment, but I assume that, to put it bluntly, you're now involved with tax avoidance schemes. Could I refer you to something that Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics, has recently said about this: 'Tax avoidance has impeded governments all over the world from providing basic services to their citizens, contributing to global inequality, which is at an all-time high. Fewer than 3,000 people hold nearly $15 trillion-equivalent to the annual GDP of Germany, India, Japan and the UK combined.' So, do you think that the work that you're now engaged in is morally right in prioritising the rich few over the world's 8 billion population?*

U-C: Now just look here. It's morally right and completely legal. This Stiglitz fellow is clearly under the influence of the politics of envy and communist claptrap, for which I've got absolutely no time. These 3000 people, and others, that he attempts to demean are the wealth creators, from whose entrepreneurial efforts we all benefit through the trickle-down effect. They need to be given every incentive possible.

HT: *Let's move on to discuss some of the policies adopted in the early days of this Labour government. One of the first things to happen was that 7 prominent left-wing Labour MPs were suspended from the party for rebelling on an amendment to abolish the 2-child benefit limit.*

U-C: Well, I have to say that I found this to be most encouraging. There are 2 issues here. Firstly, you describe the 7 expelled MPs as `left-wing', while I'd call them a bunch of Marxist-Leninists and Trots. Keir Starmer was absolutely right to get shot of them if he wants to make the Labour Party and, indeed, himself `respectable'. I know this to be one of his top priorities.

Secondly, as the great American political scientist Charles Murray argued, welfare policies of all kinds create a 'culture of dependency' by altering incentives, with the benefits system in this case rewarding the breeding of unaffordable additional children and thus generating further poverty. I'd also add `a scroungers' charter' to that.

HT: *But, with over one million children in the UK currently living in a state of destitution, it's been estimated that the removal of the 2-child benefit limit, would immediately help to lift somewhere in the region of 500, 000 kids out of poverty. Why should children be punished for decisions made by their parents? And the 7 expelled MPs were only voting for something that most Labour MPs believe in anyway but didn't have the courage of their convictions to support.*

U-C: Well, I can only emphasise the wisdom of Murray's perspective on welfare dependency, the message of Thomas Malthus, admittedly some years earlier, on the dangers of rapid population growth, and the importance of fiscal prudence. Keir Starmer had pledged to adhere to our fiscal rules, although they are indeed somewhat arbitrary, and so he was absolutely correct to take measures to ensure that government borrowing did not initially increase. He's got his priorities right: ***balancing the books over the ending of child poverty and hunger***. And, in an otherwise reckless tax and spend budget, I was heartened to see that Starmer and Reeves decided to maintain their position on this.

HT: *And, presumably, you would agree with the removal of the winter fuel allowance for over 10 million pensioners for similar reasons?*

U-C: Broadly speaking, yes, although I must admit to a certain feeling of ambivalence here. As a high proportion of our vote has traditionally come from old people, we'd always be reluctant to antagonise them, and *so I'm delighted to see a Labour PM continuing with our austerity policies instead.*

HT: *You've been surprisingly complimentary about Keir Starmer's refusal to immediately end child poverty and hunger. Presumably, you don't feel quite the same way about his policy of repealing anti-union legislation on minimum service agreements and extending workers' rights, and his granting of above inflation pay increases to public sector workers?*

U-C: You're absolutely correct. This is clear evidence to me that a leopard never changes its spots and that the Labour Party is already caving in and capitulating to its paymasters, the union barons, who, as ever, are holding the country to ransom.

HT: *You talked before about the need for your party to be 'modern'. A number of recent surveys have shown that attitudes in the UK are changing and that more and more people are recognising the importance of trade unions in representing the interests of working people. By being so anti-union, do you think that you and your party are in danger of alienating an ever-larger proportion of the electorate? And as Jack Jones, General Secretary of the TGWU during the 1970s, wryly noted: 'If capitalism is a free for all, why shouldn't trade unions be part of the 'all'?'*

U-C: Well, I'm afraid that this all just goes to show the degree of indoctrination by left-wing organisations such as the BBC, otherwise known as the Bolshevik Broadcasting Corporation. And, as for this Jack Jones chappie, volunteer for the Trot International Brigade who fought against the admirable General Franco, it was his ilk, and the likes of `Lenin' Murray, that led to the `Winter of Discontent' and the coming to power of our beloved Margaret in 1979.

HT: *How do you feel about the election of Kemi Badenoch as party leader?*

U-C: Well, I'm mightily relieved that no namby-pamby centrist has got control of our party. However, although Kemi's heart is clearly in the right place, for me, no other female could possibly take the place of Margaret, the greatest woman to ever live, as our party leader. So, I have to say that I'm rather disappointed that Robert didn't get the job. After all, he is a man and, I might add, one after my own heart. Just look at his fine principles and record. He would, for example, get us out of the European Convention on Human Rights, vote for Donald Trump and have any protestor arrested who shouts 'Allahu Akbar'. Moreover, he was most impressive as immigration minister. He was fully behind the ingenious Rwanda plan and made it absolutely clear that an asylum reception centre for children was 'not a welcome centre' by ordering staff to strip Mickey Mouse and Baloo posters from the wall. And, writing in the Daily Mail, he wisely explained that the UK had basically done countries a favour by colonising them. Still, I'm sure that, for a man of such calibre, his time will come.

HT: *Finally, what is your concluding message to the nation?*

U-C: Let's make sure that these coming years of socialist rule are not allowed to squander the wonderful inheritance of the Thatcher era: less of the nanny state, lower taxes for our wealth creators, movement towards a fully privatised, deregulated, hire and fire utopia and a shackling of the union bully boys. I only wish that I was still an MP so that I could help save our great nation from potential ruination.

HT: Tim, thank you for your open and honest answers to my questions. They have been most revealing.

Costing biodiversity value

Edward Milner writes about how to mitigate the continuing destruction of the natural world

What is the biodiversity value of natural habitats, from the pristine all the way to those highly polluted? Pollution frequently causes damage to natural habitats, but could this damage be costed? And if so, could the guilty parties be levied an appropriate amount to restore the biodiversity? There are precedents in the UK: developers found guilty of felling trees that were deemed valuable, such as having a TPO (Tree Preservation Order), have been fined in the courts; and an errant landowner who destroyed the wild vegetation along a stretch of riverbank was actually jailed. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to assess the damage to the natural habitats of river and riverbank and charge accordingly, using the money to restore the damage - which may take some time.

Paying the price for destroying the natural world

What are the likely costs of restoring various degraded habitats (or creating entirely new ones)? Thirty years ago *English Nature* (as was) produced some figures such as: £890-1241 per hectare (1999 values) for grazing marsh and £2800-£5045 for standard reedbed, with a whole range of estimates for other habitats. If appropriate figures could be produced for damage to existing habitats – and then applied by charging the guilty individuals or commercial interests involved – then a lot of damaging activities could look far less attractive to rogue landowners, business owners or financiers. Felling mature or veteran trees, damaging natural woodland, burning grouse-moors, draining wetlands, polluting rivers, roadbuilding in natural/semi-natural areas could all look much less appealing if the true costs of damage to these habitats was levied. But the *English Nature* figures are apparently based on single, one-off payments – as if Nature could be recreated at a stroke for a few hundred pounds per hectare! If only that was the case. As the Society for Ecological Restoration has shown, the process is complex and must always be understood as a long-term enterprise.

The complexities of restoration

The idea of creating or restoring habitats raises a number of questions. Can a natural habitat be fully restored even in a reasonable timescale such as a decade, and how would the success of such a process be determined? Simple measures might be the restoration of a whole plant community, or a key invertebrate profile, although bringing back top predators might be a more daunting task. Starting with more obvious targets, such as returning land damaged by modern agriculture to some sort of acceptable semi-natural state would be a start. 'Set aside' land, which was formerly arable cultivation takes years to recover, while restoring healthy peatland after misguided attempts to convert it to pasture could take decades. Assuming that at least provisional answers to these questions could be agreed, it is clear that any sort of true costing would have to be based on a stated timescale.

Preventing river pollution

The River Wye in the west of England is famously polluted, largely by agricultural runoff and the waste from intensive chicken production units. Other natural water bodies like Lake Windermere (in northern England) and many rivers are polluted by untreated sewage. Legal loopholes seem to abound, with the result that enforcement of regulations to limit such pollution seems ineffective. However, perhaps if costs of damage to natural ecosystems could be assessed and the bill sent to the water companies and chicken farmers it would concentrate minds to find a way of reducing the damage. As efforts over recent decades has shown, cleaning up rivers and restoring their biodiversity can be a much more rapid process than recreating a forest. Simple data like the presence of a range of key invertebrates or the profile and number of fish species breeding in the river could be a start. The absence of noxious organisms is already used in water-quality assessments, but this whole process could be widened and used to develop a biodiversity levy on the riverside businesses involved.

The Impact of HS2

I recently visited Cubbington Wood in the English midlands, a piece of ancient woodland from which was gouged an enormous cutting to accommodate a section of England's current HS2 high-speed rail project (see picture). The wood is on a hill and the damage could have been avoided if a tunnel had been cut instead – but this was deemed too expensive. But as with similar acts of vandalism this calculation was surely flawed; lost mature woodland cannot be recreated by planting a few whips, however well-meaning the attempt. The 'new woodlands' that the construction company hopes will develop as the new trees grow will bear little

Getting to grips with the value of biodiversity … *(picture by WorthValleyPrimary.co.uk)*

resemblance to the lost forest and its total biodiversity - insects, spiders, fungi, microorganisms etc. This fiasco – repeated in at least 29 other parcels of ancient woodland in the path of HS2 - occurred because the actual biodiversity loss when a piece of ancient woodland is destroyed was neither valued aesthetically nor accurately costed. By definition in the UK 'ancient woodland' has been continuously wooded for 400+ years. Most of the trees in the remaining part of Cubbington Wood are upwards of a century old, some of them much more than that. Seen in this light the biodiversity cost of deforestation would continue to add up for decades or centuries.

The way forward

If a biodiversity levy was applied to destroyed or damaged natural ecosystems such as ancient woodland, old-growth forest, undrained wetland or mangrove forest, landowners or exploiting businesses could be charged an annual levy for the biodiversity loss forcing a more realistic cost-benefit analysis of such new activities as raising cattle or growing crops like soya or palm-oil.

These levies would effectively become a continuous mortgage charge on the land. Such levies would of course be quite separate from any legally imposed charges for unauthorised felling or other law-breaking but would reflect the ongoing impoverishment of the local ecosystem. Of course, such levies could be reduced or mitigated substantially if major habitat restoration was conducted on the land, though obviously this also would involve a long-time scale. A major benefit of such a scheme would be to provide funding for environmental restoration projects to counter damage caused.

Thoughts on a walk to remember

Janet Clarke reflects on a recent organised walk centred on the 1911 Sidney Street Siege, in which two Latvian revolutionary immigrants, suspected of a jewellery robbery, resisted arrest.

Back in June, I joined my retired teacher colleagues from Redbridge for Andrew Whitehead's Walk retracing the steps of the Siege of Sidney Street protagonists. Bill Harrison wrote about the Walk earlier this year but as a colleague from Hounslow, these are my thoughts and impressions of the day in an area of London I rarely visit.

The Latvian connection

Although I had heard of the Siege, because the majority of East End migrants were Jews escaping the pogroms and religious persecution of Eastern Europe, I thought, like many others, that the event was an entirely Jewish affair. I was unaware of the numbers of Latvian émigrés – revolutionaries and anarchists – who also lived primarily in the East End. Amazingly, the Siege was captured on early newsreel and shown in cinemas only hours later.

Rosa`s story

I was also interested in the involvement of women, especially in the poignant story of Rosa Trassjonsky. Having looked after one of the leading participants, the dying Gardstein, she eventually ended up in 1911 in the Colney Hatch asylum in North London, recorded as suffering from 'melancholia' and later 'mania. Registers got her name wrong and it was even thought she had committed suicide but in fact she remained in Colney Hatch until 1960, probably unaware that in the same year her character was the female lead in a feature film based on the Sidney Street shootings. After being institutionalised for so many decades, she was unable to cope and was informally re-admitted to Colney Hatch, where she died in 1971. To add insult to injury, her death certificate recorded both her names incorrectly, gave no place of birth and her date of birth as simply 1884. Well done Andrew for bringing us her story.

A diverse area

Maybe due to its position close to the docks and the estuary, the East End seems to have always given a home to refugees and migrants from Huguenots and Jews fleeing religious persecution to new migrants from the former 'colonies.' At the back of the East London Mosque is an engraving marking the previous entrance to the Fieldgate Street Great Synagogue. From what was a predominantly Jewish, Yiddish speaking community, the area is now home to a large Muslim community.

Coming from Hounslow, which is quite a diverse area, my curiosity was piqued as to the nature of this London community. All of the Muslim women I saw, young or old, were dressed completely in black, with many wearing face veils, whereas in Hounslow this form of dress is quite uncommon. Surprised isn't really an adequate word to describe what I felt about this, although I was 'surprised' not to see the black relieved by a coloured hijab, a lacy cuff or a piece of jewellery as you might find in my locality.

All in all, the Sidney Street Walk was interesting for many reasons and, like Bill, I would highly recommend Andrew's book.

Andrew Whitehead`s book is titled A Devilish Kind of Courage. **If you are familiar with a particular area of London and would like to write about its history, please let us know.**

Colleagues listen spellbound as - on the very site of the Houndsditch atrocity - Andrew Whitehead describes the botched safe-cracking attempt which led to so much carnage

Bankers and Bakers Walk

Tuesday 5th November 2024.

Tina Jacobs reports

Seven of us met at eleven at Aldgate Underground Station on a cold and clear Tuesday morning. David Rosenberg was going to guide us around the City and Tower Hamlets learning about the Jews who arrived between 1650s and 1870s.

We started the walk near St Botolph without Aldgate, a lovely church that plays a large role supporting vulnerable people in the local area. We then walked along the site of the old city walls and down towards Bevis Marks Synagogue which is Britain's oldest Jewish place of worship. This is one of many synagogues that we learnt about on the walk including the Great Synagogue in Dukes Place.

In and out of the City

Jews were allowed to live in the City but had to run any businesses outside the walls so this explains why the walk weaved in and out of the City and Tower Hamlets.

Bevis Marks Synagogue is behind some office buildings. Due to some ongoing building works we could not get too close. I look forward to visiting when the general public are allowed again.

There were lots of different organisations set up by the Jewish settlers to support their community. This included charities and schools. One school that was founded in Tower Hamlets was Jew's Free School on Middlesex Street, which was formerly called Petticoat Lane.

This was interesting as there was a real push to fit in with the non jews but this conflicted with the need to preserve their Jewish faith and culture. The school still exists. It is now called JFS and has moved to Brent.

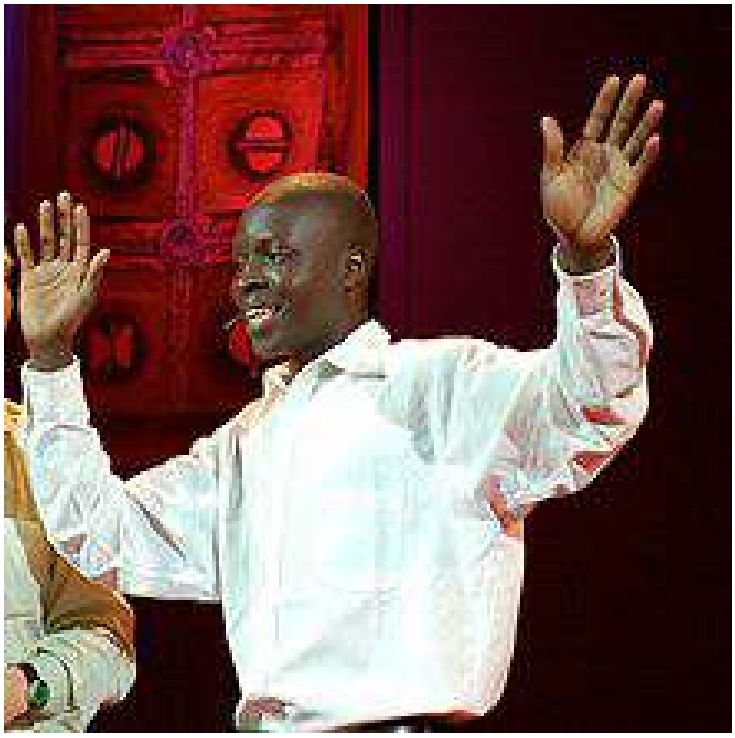
I really enjoyed the walk. I learnt a lot more about Judaism and the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews. The title of the walk was 'Bankers and Bakers', which shows the different levels of economic success the Jewish immigrants achieved. Whilst some Jews were very rich, others were working in the rag trade and factories of the East End.

Top: The old crowded alleyways are now dominated by the huge skyscrapers of the modern city

Right: The walk finished up at the still-functioning Sandy's Row Synagogue by Bishopsgate

Bill Harrison writes about the background to a new musical about an `impossible dream`

Malawi – the Musical



(Right) William Kamkwamba

In 2007 the TED Global Conference met at Arusha in Tanzania. (TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design). There, scientists, inventors and innovators got together and shared their experiences and ideas. At this conference a young man from Malawi called William Kamkwamba was invited to tell his own story of discovery.

Turning dream into reality

Malawi is a country where, for most people, 'magic rules, modern science is a mystery and hunger and drought are a daily reality'. William's village was poor and opportunities were hard to find. Unable to afford tuition fees to follow his passion for science at school, William had an `impossible dream`. With a few textbooks from a primary school library and incredible determination, William built a crude `windmill` that brought electricity and water to his village, using only materials from a local scrapyard and bicycle dynamos.

Inspiring a musical

His initiative drew the attention of the local newspapers, and he became a local celebrity. His story showed how, with determination and self-help, knowledge could be acquired and applied to solve local problems. William`s story was told in a book, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind,* written with the help of a Canadian teacher, Bryan Mealer. This led to a film, made by actor Chiwtel Ejiofor. Now there are plans to make his story into a musical for the stage. The initiative for this came from an Essex artist, Richard Hughes, who has won awards for musicals aimed at the teenage and young adult market. The production is at an advanced stage, and it is planned to start at Stratford-upon-Avon in 2026, before going to Chicago and returning to the West End.

Looking forward to a better future

85% of Malawi's population are dependent on farming even though the climate and soil are fragile. `Moving Windmills` is an organisation to help resilient farmers problem-solve Malawi's challenges, to secure viable futures for their families and communities and to become less reliant on outside aid. Low-cost drip irrigation systems, natural crop defences, permaculture techniques, composting and locally processed fertilizers are all viable solutions for Malawi.

Now is the time for countries like Malawi to use all their resources, especially their people, to make their own futures, and William Kamkwamba has led the way.

If you have an `inspirational` story to tell, please get in touch

Broaden your outlook!

Bob Archer looks at two new books which encourage broader thought about human history and where it has been made:

William Dalrymple: ***The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World.***
Jack Weatherford: ***Emperor of the Seas: Kublai Khan and the Making of China.***

It is impossible to do justice to this book in a few paragraphs. William Dalrymple dramatically presents the people who between about 250 BC and 1200 CE carried Indian culture north, south, east and west as religious/philosophical ideologues, as artists and scientists, and as traders. They step forth as flesh-and-blood in these account. Their achievements as components in the development of human culture resonate, and this makes for a passionately exciting read. Dalrymple celebrates the Buddhist monks who trekked back and forth across deserts and mountain ranges carrying their ideas like a precious burden; the merchants who ranged the seas from Indonesia to East Africa and Egypt, not to conquer, but to trade in goods and share ideas; the universities and scientists who developed astronomy and the origins of modern mathematical notation, including the concept of number zero; the Middle-Eastern and European thinkers who adopted and developed these intellectual tools.

This is a book which will spin your view of the world on its axis, if you were brought up to believe that modern culture and science are purely European achievements.

Two particular points are worth mentioning: Dalrymple talks about an 'Indiosphere' into which Indian cultural and material products were diffused peacefully and without political or social domination. There is a trend in Indian political thought, shared by the current Indian government, which also celebrates India's former prominence in the whole region, but which glories in her supposed political-military dominance and seeks to recreate it. Dalrymple has elsewhere specifically repudiated such views.

While emphasising the importance of cross-continent cultural and trading links around the first millenium CE, Dalrymple casts doubt on the idea of an historic 'Silk Road' between China and Europe. He reviewed two exhibitions in London for the *Observer*, 6 October 2024 under the headline: 'The Silk Road: Less an ancient trade route, more a seductive western fantasy'. He claims that the whole concept of a 'silk road' was made up in the nineteenth century. (By the way, in the first paragraph of his review he calls both exhibitions 'magnificent'. William Dalrymple is a generous controversialist!)

Jack Weatherford is an anthropologist and historian whose interests include Mongolia, the history of money and the study of the global contribution of native Americans.

Emperor of the Seas picks up from his previous work, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. That book dealt with the establishment of a Mongol power which extended from the shores of the Pacific Ocean to those of the Eastern Mediterranean. This new book centres on the life of Genghis Khan's successor, Kublai Khan. After tracing his ancestry and upbringing, the book describes how Kublai Khan tackled the challenges of completing the conquest of China and helping to making the country an economic and cultural world power.

The Mongol conquerors of Northern China had the outlook and tactics of horse-riding nomadic marauders of the steppes. In Kublai Khan, Jack Wetherford sees a ruler who was able to adjust and look away from the steppes to a huge, settled country where waterways rather than endless grassy plains were extremely important in trade and warfare, as well as being a significant resource for agriculture and a highly dangerous destructive force. Genghis Khans' cavalry hordes did not do naval fighting; the next generation of Mongols had to master that art if they were to subdue Southern China and secure their flanks against other nations such as Vietnam and Japan.

Jack Weatherford devotes quite a lot of the book to the developments in Chinese naval technology under Kublai Khan as well as the resulting development of Chinese participation in world trade. In his preface, he says:

'In the twenty-first century, some observers have been surprised by the rise of China as a world sea power. The western response has vacillated between disdain and an alarming level of anxiety. China's emergence as a dominant player in global politics has been treated as a discontinuity in world history, something out of character for a land-focused culture and an inward-looking Confucian society. But as the remarkable man at the centre of this book shows, China's seagoing empire is nothing new. China was the world's first superpower of the sea'.

This book provides a detailed but very readable overview of Yuan Dynasty China as an economic, military and cultural world power. It is a gripping and thought-provoking read. Strongly recommended!

Book Review:

Janet Clarke reviews a recent historical novel about a forgotten historical incident

Mad Blood Stirring by Simon Mayo is a book that I came across while browsing the shelves in Osterley Library. I am familiar with Simon Mayo from the radio but didn't know that he was a writer. This was an interesting read because it takes a forgotten piece of history related to the 1812 war between Britain and the United States. Using some characters from the past and real events, it weaves them into a believable story that explores various themes, including relationships between black and white shipmates, 'forbidden' relationships between men and the topic of racial segregation within a British prison -segregation requested by the Americans. As someone who is interested in history, grew up in Devon and had never heard about the story, I was intrigued.

The author has not tried to sensationalise or include things that a reader would find impossible to accept. I found the novel a compelling read, investing in the characters, and sharing with them the frustration that, although the War was over, they were not going to be released until treaties were signed by both sides, which obviously was taking time, going back and forth across the Atlantic. It was these frustrations, as well as a 'gang culture' and the treatment of the now 'free' sailors that boiled over to trigger what became known as the Dartmoor Massacre, in which the British military killed or wounded many of the black American sailors held in captivity.

I grew up in Plymouth and although we did local history, the only thing I remember learning about Dartmoor Prison's past was that it was built to house French prisoners of war. No mention was ever made of the war of 1812 and the housing of American sailors, and certainly not black sailors.

It was also a surprise to learn that that Block Four prisoners staged Shakespeare plays, possibly the first all-black productions in Britain, which the other sailors, the Governor and his wife and the doctor attended. They also performed gospel music, again probably for the first time in Britain

Why has this story of what happened at Dartmoor Prison remained one of history's footnotes even though a thousand black sailors were living in Devon in 1814? Were we not looking? Were we not interested? Perhaps the ordinary working people, who came into contact with the prisoners, just accepted them, irrespective of race or colour. The black sailors` voices are not recorded but then that is not surprising, given who usually writes the history books.

Simon Mayo's *Mad Blood Stirring* is a good read and goes some way to righting the wrong that was done in 1815, for, as the historian David Olosuga says, `black history is everyone's history`.

Further recommendations: the Luke Carlton stories by Frank Gardner and the latest page turner by Camilla Lackberg in the Patrik Hedstrom/Erika Falk mysteries – *The Cuckoo*.

If you have a favourite book, you think others might enjoy, please write a short review for the next edition of the newsletter.

Wanstead Belgique coffee morning

Rachel Brittle reports

As well as our regular committee meetings, Redbridge Retired NEU organises coffee mornings for retired educators who live in Redbridge and elsewhere. We like to organise one in October to welcome members who have retired in the last academic year.

Our get-together this October was very well attended, with two recent retirees coming along for the first time. It is also a nice opportunity for former colleagues to meet up, with a particularly large contingent this time from Ilford County High.

As a fairly recent retiree myself, it is heartening to see that these former colleagues still get together regularly after nearly 10 years.

We also had a special guest for this coffee morning- Jane Shallice, who is the convener of London`s retired teachers. She spoke highly of our newsletter and the work members still do to support the local association with casework and campaigns. We hope that the coffee mornings continue to be successful in bringing members together … and the coffee and cakes are very much appreciated!