



# *The* **Redbridge Newsletter**

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

**Summer 2025**



Two amazing photo-essays in this issue are Tina Jacobs' take on on Chelsea Flower Show 2025 (starting page 5) and Rachel Brittle's researches into street art (starting page 21). What other talents can retired colleagues bring to bear? The bar has already been set very high!



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# Editorial *Summer 2025*

## **The public sphere**

A year ago I speculated about the areas an incoming Labour government might focus on. The slow pace of action, the caution inherent in some policy statements, and the lack of visible consultation with interested parties are disappointing, the outcomes deferred and uncertain.

The pandemic gave rise to growing concerns about health and social care provision – is this government doing enough to counter the years of neglect and squeezed funding under austerity? Is it perhaps introducing austerity under another guise in the changes to disability benefits and the failure to remove the two-child cap? The disruption of education at school and university level has not yet been addressed in any meaningful way: the growing number of children with significant problems, both within and without the SEND framework, bodes ill for future life chances. While funding continues to be limited, can the Secretary of State's innovations work?

Clawing back on net zero and green energy pledges does not address the ever-greater threat posed by the damage humans are inflicting on the natural world. Recent evidence of this is undeniable: volcanoes erupting, more frequent earthquakes, devastating wildfires as a result of unprecedentedly high temperatures, and flooding which results in land destruction and, as recently in Texas, an appalling loss of life. Towns and cities are not immune – there have been several fires across London's open spaces already this summer, and sudden rainfall on parched land causes flash-flooding damage to city infrastructure. Images of submerged cars on urban roads are becoming commonplace.

## **Some thoughts on opposition**

No-one who has lived or worked with children and young people will be a stranger to confrontation. Children seem to thrive on disagreement and a refusal to conform. That doesn't change as we grow up: arguing, disagreeing, getting things wrong, making mistakes are all vital aspects of the way we learn and develop. But then so is listening to others who may have different opinions or simply know more than we do.

Many of us will have noticed that opposing views are often missing from debates. While life can be said to be easier if we don't question a proposition, the right to disagree is enshrined in the concept of debate. It should be accepted that we can hold opinions and have allegiances that may be at odds with those of our fellows.

In an increasingly adversarial world, however, we are seeing a fairly consistent closing down of argument by methods that leave too many discontented and disaffected. Dissent is now all too frequently repressed and dissenters crushed and punished. Protest, the lifeblood of a healthy society, has become something that is seen

as a threat to governments, vested interests and social and religious groups, rather than a legitimate and democratic expression of contrary beliefs. Hefty fines, banning orders and prison sentences, not to mention suspensions, appear to be felt as appropriate responses. Is this counter-productive in the long run? Others will take up the banner, splinter groups will form and ever more ingenious ways of frustrating the imposition of regulations will be found. To seek to suppress opposition moves a society towards authoritarianism, tyranny, dictatorship. It risks removing compassion and humility from our interactions and decision-making.

## **A newsletter for all London**

Thanks in large measure to Jane Shallice's database of London "members who have retired", itself stemming from the highly successful London meetings she has organised for many years, the distribution area of the newsletter has expanded considerably. As I outlined at the last London meeting, this changes our emphasis: to orientate ourselves towards the whole of London effectively, we need contributions from all quarters of the region. We continue to feature our local Redbridge news, particularly where the issues have a universal significance, but what about sharing news from other branches? What activities, campaigns, concerns might interest readers? Not to mention the political scene at home and abroad, which provides fertile ground for controversy and protest, as systems disintegrate and fail to recalibrate, corruption, cronyism and vested interests impose their agendas and international leaders seek to dominate at whatever cost; armed conflict has proliferated and human misery escalated beyond endurance. There is plenty to fuel our sense of outrage. And that means plenty to write about.

So come on, Londoners, get writing, send us your articles, letters, general thoughts, and make this a genuinely all-London production, reflecting the life of retired members in our capital city!

**Liz Dolan**

## **Have your say!**

The Newsletter is very keen to receive letters or articles of any length on a range of topics. Maybe you've read something in the current issue that has annoyed or pleased you – do drop us a line or two. Maybe you have strong opinions about a current issue in the news – do let us know. Maybe, you have a hobby or pastime our readers might like to hear about – do share your interest and knowledge with the rest of us.

Please send your contribution to the Editorial team at – [mike321peters@gmail.com](mailto:mike321peters@gmail.com)

**We look forward to reading your contribution!**



# NEU Redbridge news

## Maureen McCarthy reports on some key District events and issues

### A controversial letter

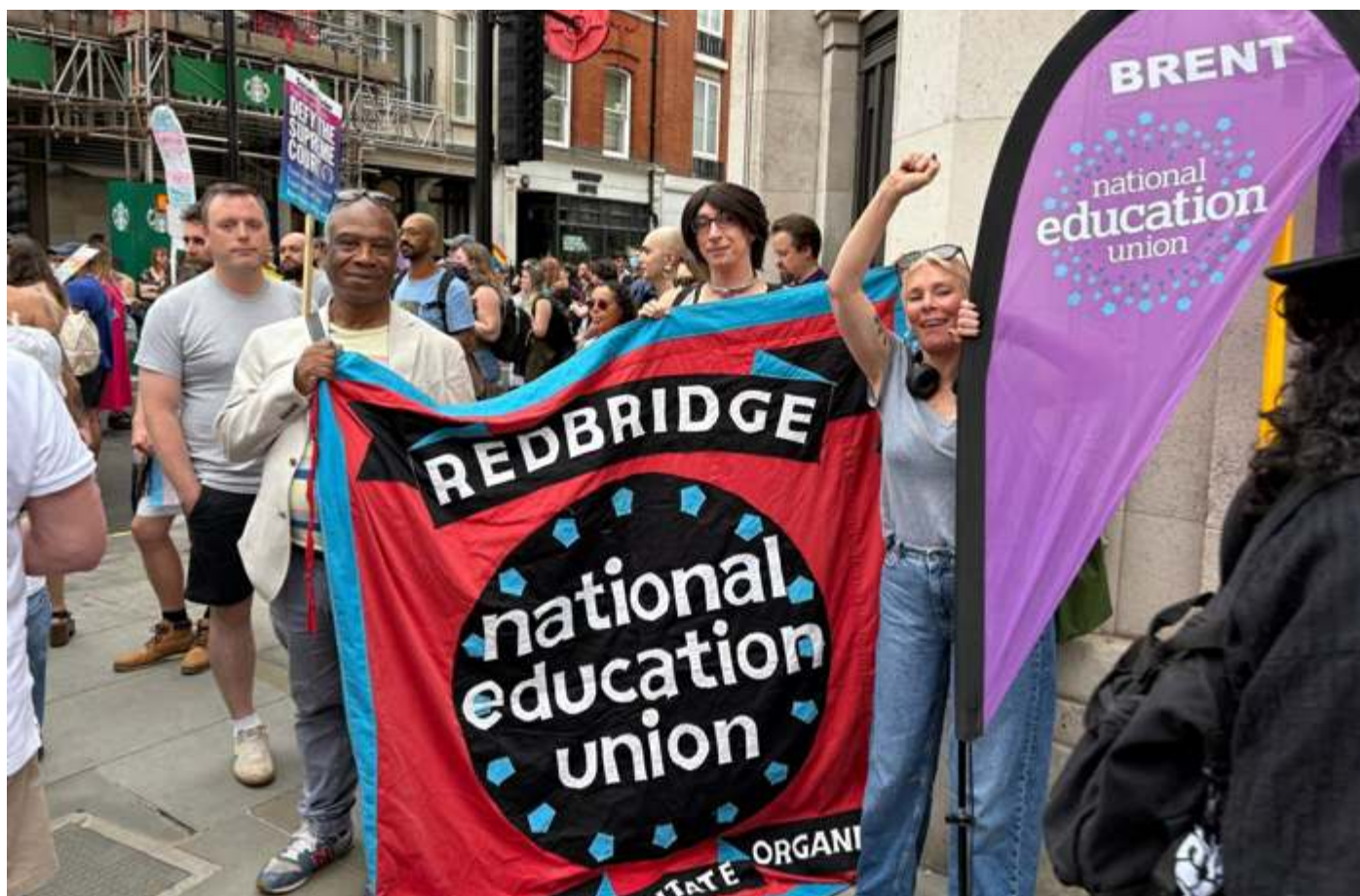
The Headteacher of Wanstead High School sent a letter to parents, just before Ramadan started, which included this statement: *"It (Ramadan) can also bring about increased stress, anxiety and mental health concerns, especially for young individuals balancing academic responsibilities alongside fasting and other religious observances."* The letter went on to ask parents and families *"to consider the impact of fasting and potential sleep deprivation on their studies and assessments."* There was no information about any changes the school had put in place, such as prayer-rooms, or even wishing families Ramadan Mubarak.

The response was immediate from NEU members, horrified at the patronising and ill-informed language used. This continued in the Redbridge NEU WhatsApp group. Why would parents need the advice of a headteacher on how to look after their children? Why

does the headteacher see Ramadan as a problem? What about her lack of knowledge about the principles of fasting and how they can be amended regarding personal circumstances?

Then a letter was sent by Parents United, a group of Redbridge Muslim parents, which condemned the "crass communication" sent by the Headteacher, lecturing parents and students about the impact of Ramadan and using flawed data to link mental health issues with fasting. Most damning of all: "you have also made the presumption that you think Muslim parents are in need of your uninformed 'advice' when caring for their children's welfare during Ramadhan (their spelling)."

They demanded an immediate response without which they would launch formal complaints with Ofsted and the EHRC. Result: the headteacher met the deadline set and apologised.



**Redbridge NEU members took the District banner on the London Pride march in July. Photo courtesy of NEU members**

That this letter was sent by a Redbridge headteacher in 2025 is astounding, but seems to reflect the tone-deaf (stronger words can and have been substituted) attitudes adopted by SLTs in some schools and the lack of scrutiny or challenge by the LEA. On this occasion parents stood up and achieved success.

### **Teachers` pay**

The principal issue in the District this term was engaging members following the decision at Conference to move to a formal postal ballot over teachers' pay. The preliminary ballot held before Easter resulted in a relatively lower turnout (47.2%) nationally. Redbridge at 72%, helped to boost the total, with schools with reps having massive turnouts of 90%+.

The original offer of 2.8% unfunded was superseded in May when the government accepted a new proposal of 4%, partially funded, with schools having to finance 1% from their budgets. Massive organisation by reps and district officers worked to ensure a high turnout in the snap poll held in June. However, at the time of writing, the national results haven't as yet been published.

### **Improving consistency**

Thirty school reps attended NEU training at Hamilton House in July. The aim is to be able to focus on key issues across the Borough to improve the situation for all members. It's obvious that the same issues arise in most schools but are addressed individually. A more collective approach should be much more effective. Currently model letters regarding the new Pay Policy are being sent to headteachers by reps with the aim of achieving greater consistency across schools in the Borough.

### **Two key issues: cover and heat**

Two areas of focus in the summer term have been related to cover and the impact of three heatwaves. The cover situation in many schools is appalling. It seems that many SLTs have consigned the "rarely cover" policy, which we fought so hard to implement, to the dustbin of history.

As stated in the last report, teachers in primary schools are being expected to double up classes, often with pupils not having chairs. School halls are being used in secondary schools to put several classes together due to a shortage of teachers, and support staff are being used to stand in for teachers. Has anyone, other than the NEU, looked at the impact on children of this chaos?

Regarding the temperature, teaching and learning at 34 degrees in classrooms not designed to cope with such heat is inevitably having an impact on staff and

students alike. While some schools responded immediately to the heat waves and made changes regarding uniform regulations, shortened lunchtimes, providing fans (although how effective one fan per classroom can be is debatable) and suspending after school meetings, others, with more intransigent headteachers, insisted on carrying on as normal. Indeed, one school wouldn't put the air-conditioning on because of the cost!

### **OFSTED**

Redbridge has been in the top 10 LEAs nationally for many years, so the publication, on June 27<sup>th</sup>, of a scathing Report on SEND in the Authority, by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission, came as a shock. Before the report was seen, the Director of Education, Colin Stewart, no friend of the NEU, together with both deputies, went on gardening leave. The report was damning – "widespread and systemic failings" throughout the LEA. The section entitled "What is it like to be a child or young person with SEND in this area?" was truly shocking, highlighting how parents and their children have been left struggling by the "litany of failures".

However, one area which was praised was the assessment and addressing of early year children's needs. Also, Ofsted acknowledges the dedication of individual practitioners in both education and the healthcare systems, as well as the constraints under which they work.

A question for the report's writers is as follows: do the constraints originate from central Government, the LEA or the local Health Authority, or from the schools themselves?

A Redbridge (now ex-Redbridge) SENCO recently contacted an agency to look for a job. Posted by 10.00pm, by 8.00am the following day, details of five posts had been sent and more followed. Obviously lack of funding has been a factor. Look at the millions in SEND deficits across the country.

However, systemic failures regarding organisation and communication between agencies are areas that could and should have been addressed. In addition, ignoring or marginalising parents is inexcusable. The report has demanded an action plan to address its concerns, stating that the voices of parents and carers must be heard regarding developing strategy and informing everyday practice.

Let's hope something positive comes out of this in Redbridge. Looking ahead, I suspect that most, if not all, the other 151 LEAs will be fearing a similar inspection and outcome.



## Flower show: Report and photos by Tina Jacobs

# Chelsea 2025

One of the joys of living in London is that there is so much going on. Every year I look forward to visiting Chelsea Flower Show. One of the most popular features is the big show gardens.

Every year the gardens are judged by the Royal Horticultural Society and by the visitors. Although I don't give out medals, gold or otherwise, below are some pictures of my particular favourites ...





The overall winning garden was:  
Cha No Niwa - Japanese Tea Garden.

This was designed by Kazuyuki  
Isihara.

I really liked this garden. The  
planting was stunning and had some  
interesting plants. It felt really restful  
even though the site was crowded.



I always enjoy the display in the Floral Marquee. Usually they are built by plant  
nurseries. Often they are set out as gardens but sometimes they are more formal displays  
of particular types of plants.





As well as the big gardens, there are also smaller gardens dotted around the site.

Some are designed for charities, but they all can vary a lot.





As the show is held in the gardens of the Chelsea Hospital, there are always Chelsea Pensioners enjoying the displays. This year, there was a garden designed especially for them



The flower show is filmed extensively by the BBC, so I do spend some time trying to catch pictures of gardening presenters. It's difficult, as usually they are filming a garden or display, and they are often obscured by filming equipment. This year I managed to get a picture of Adam Frost.



Every year, however, the person I most want to photograph is Monty Don. It looked like I wasn't going to manage it this year, but just before I left, I saw him and was able to photograph him. (Sadly, though, Ned his dog wasn't there, so I couldn't get a shot of him!)

This year's show was excellent, and I highly recommend a visit if you ever get the chance. Book early, though, as it is very popular and tickets sell out fast!



# Gaza: Medics Under Fire

**Jane Shallice writes powerfully about a recent documentary film on the experience of medics in Gaza (July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2025).**



***Redbridge NEU members joined this march for Gaza across east London and rally in Plashet Park, Newham, last year***

*Gaza: Medics under Fire* is a must watch film. Many refrained from viewing it, worried that it would be disturbing or “it would leave them distressed” or “I know about it is and have seen it all before.” If you did not watch this documentary, find it on Channel 4’s site.

## **BBC News v Channel 4 News**

It is a film which raises questions far wider than the content of the film itself. The first time that we became aware of it was when it became clear that the BBC, which had commissioned it, was having cold feet. Their coverage of the war on Gaza has been dreadful, unlike Channel 4 News which has consistently covered Gaza or the West Bank. The way the BBC handled that fine film on the impact of the war on children when they “found out” that the narrator was the son of a Hamas official, was disgraceful, especially as the scripts had been written by the documentary producers. Refusing to confront the pro-Zionist stance of the British government, amongst others, the BBC withdrew it from their streaming service and apologised for not showing “due diligence”. But this is insufficient for the Labour Government and Lisa Nandy, the minister for Culture Media and Sports, who is demanding weeks later to know why no-one in the BBC was sacked for its showing.

In the case of *Gaza: Medics under Attack*, the BBC made the decision that they would not show it (the producer later saying they had been under pressure to sign a non-disclosure agreement which they’d refused to do), but Channel 4 stepped in and it was shown on 2nd July 2025. **I urge everyone to watch it.**

## **Conditions in Gaza**

Yes, of course, the film is disturbing, distressing and compounds all the things that we have been watching for almost two years since October 7<sup>th</sup>. It shows people struggling to maintain their work as doctors or medics under the most horrendous circumstances. With overwhelming numbers of casualties arriving constantly at facilities short of all basic supplies - electricity, clean water, dressings, medicines, sufficient beds and stretchers - and all the while the hospitals under surveillance or targeted or attacked by drones or by tanks or members of the IDF.

And yet it is the dignity of so many interviewed which stands out. Doctors or paramedics whose families have been killed, either in their homes or in the streets as they are sheltering from death raining down, and they are still attempting to save lives and relieve the horrendous traumas experienced by all. Maybe the supine



response of the BBC was engendered by the fact that many of these surgeons and doctors stated they are Hamas supporters, this after these men are silent in response to questions as they attempted to control their tears, wiping their eyes in silence. Men who were struggling to answer.

### **Doctors under attack**

The constant targeting of hospitals which we have known since early after October 7th is demonstrated sharply. Mapping the destruction of one hospital after another is shocking.

But then even more so is the documenting of the capturing of doctors and medical workers and their illegal detention and in many cases torture by the IDF, with sufficient evidence from whistleblowing former soldiers now being heard. For some medics it is clear they have been removed to "black sites" in parts of Gaza or in Israel, with the fate of many still unknown. When asked by the IDF about what has happened to specific people, the usual bland response, or should we call them lies, is offered about adhering to international laws.

### **Gaza then and now**

The woman narrating the film in Israel persists in asking questions and gently revealing the anguish of so many. You become aware that the film opens with her standing at a viewing place, complete with telescopes, overlooking Gaza where people come to watch the destruction of lives and homes. As the film shows the early stages of the bombardment of Gaza, you are reminded of what Gaza looked like, with apartments and buildings and roads. Today Gaza is seen as piles of rubble and skeletal shells of apartments.

### **What can't be replaced**

Importantly one of the most telling statements made in the film is when one of the doctors, whose wife and child were killed, says that hospitals can be rebuilt relatively quickly but what is being destroyed, and cannot be replaced, is the expertise, experience and knowledge of skilled doctors. That is the human, social and political destruction of a people being undertaken by the Israeli government.

### **The threat to legitimate protest**

We all know that the very fabric of Palestinian society is being exterminated under the watching eyes of the world and nothing is stopping it. Yes, we march, and we argue, we picket, write letters but never has a genocide been witnessed with such clarity - witnessed by social media and not by the "national" Broadcasting Corporation. To try to prevent the British government from selling arms in support of the hollow argument that Israel has a "right to protect itself", people will be sentenced as terrorists under a new law, and those of us who believe that peaceful direct action has an important place in a democratic society could be dragged into the maws of an increasingly authoritarian state.

### **Who are the terrorists?**

Real terrorism is when children are slaughtered or left with deep traumas which will impact on them all their lives. Real terrorism is when children are being starved and are forced to live with almost nothing surrounded by heaps of rubble. Real terrorism is what we watched when doctors who have signed the Hippocratic oath are targeted, detained without legal process, some tortured or disappeared and many killed.



***This summer, local residents lobbied a meeting of Redbridge Council to support calls to disinvest council employees' pension funds***



# Conference news Easter 2025

## Venda Premkumar (Branch and District Secretary, Redbridge NEU) reports from the NEU Conference

We had a successful conference, with 7 members of the delegation speaking on motions. This reflects how engaged the delegates were in the debates. We had a representative delegation made up of 50% women, mostly serving teachers, three first-time attendees, and one support staff member. SEND schools were well represented in the delegation, whereas the primary school sector was not. Next year we aim to have more support staff and educators attend from the primary sector.

Our support staff delegate, Sue Penna, who is the incoming Chairperson of Redbridge NEU, addressed Conference on the issue of professional unity, citing examples from her school regarding the impact of cuts, with support staff bearing the burden of a massive increase in workload. This is why it is so important that the NEU must act in solidarity with its increasing number of non-teaching members during the next academic year.



*Redbridge NEU delegates in the body of the hall, while (below) Redbridge NEU member Rade debates the motion on Artificial Intelligence. Photos courtesy of Redbridge NEU members*





# The Thatcher Legacy (part 2)

**TIMOTHY UPSHOTT-CROAKLEY'S Newsletter Swan Song**

**Henry Tiller in conversation for the final time with the former Conservative MP for Snobish South.**

*Editor's Note: this conversation took place in May 2025 before the vote on the amended Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill in early July.*

**HT** Tim, thanks for joining us once again. Just to recap, in the last edition of the Newsletter, we discussed 3 key aspects of the Thatcher legacy: the aftermath of the Miners' Strike, privatisation and the NHS. There are, indeed, so many other aspects of her legacy that we could discuss, and so many problems besetting the UK today, that we thought we'd invite you back one last time to give our readership the benefit of your opinions and insights.

**U-C** Thank you. I appreciate that. Well, as I've said before, I think that the electorate made the most terrible mistake in voting us out of office after the implementation of 14 years of highly successful Margaret-inspired, free-market policies. But, notwithstanding this, there's so much to feel optimistic about at present. Take Donald Trump's regime in the USA. What an inspiration this is. Ok, so Margaret believed in free trade and was very much in favour of the tariff-free Single European Market. But Donald's main agenda to "Make America Great Again" is to cut back the public sector and welfare payments, to slash taxes for the better off wealth-creators and to put an end to all the red-tape and regulations that hinder the profit-making activities of businesses - how Margaret would have approved of that!

**HT** Sounds very much like a form of class war that Trump is launching in which he'll heavily tilt the balance of class forces in favour of capital and the rich, away from labour and the poor.

**U-C** That's certainly not how I'd put it and I'm afraid to say that's a perfect example of the negative, stentorian language of the Marxist hard-left and their politics of envy. Donald is simply trying to create a business-friendly environment in which the wealth-creators will be able to pursue their quest for profit unhindered, the benefits of which will trickle down to all.

**HT** And other things to feel optimistic about?

**U-C** Well, firstly, a recent report found that the 50 wealthiest UK families now own more than the poorest half of the population combined. Margaret was very much in favour of allowing the tall to grow taller through their entrepreneurial spirit and business dynamism,

and this is very much the realisation of her dream. And let's take the Labour Party.

Of course, loony-left, woke thinking is still evident in the appeasing of the trade union barons through the raising of the minimum wage and the bill to improve employment rights. But there was so much that Sir Keir was doing that was straight from Margaret's playbook. Take the adherence to strict fiscal rules or, put more plainly, good housekeeping.

Being the daughter of a grocer, that was something which was very close to her heart. So, as much as it pains me to praise our opponents, the cutting of the winter fuel allowance and disability benefits and the preservation of the 2-child benefit limit were exactly what was needed to keep the books in balance, just as Margaret would have wanted. Unfortunately, I feel that Sir Keir, against his better judgement, is being forced to capitulate to the whinging, neo-Corbynite, bleeding-heart liberals and is pandering to their culture of dependency. Hopefully, he'll pull back from this folly.

**HT** But these fiscal rules are entirely arbitrary and there are now over 4 million children living in poverty, who go to bed cold and hungry, and whose childhood and development are being blighted. Shouldn't that at least take precedence over so-called fiscal prudence?

**U-C** Certainly not. These children are in poverty because their feckless parents are in poverty and their parents are in poverty because, living on handouts from the taxpayer, they can't be bothered to get themselves employment. As Norman Tebbit, one of Margaret's top generals and a man much admired by her, once famously said: "I grew up in the '30s with an unemployed father. He didn't riot; he got on his bike and looked for work and he kept looking 'til he found it."

**HT** The trouble with that, Tim, is that a significant proportion of those in poverty are actually working. In 2022/23, for example, 68% of those in poverty in the UK, lived in families where at least one adult was working part-time or more.

**U-C** Well, that may be so, but even this shows the wondrous influence of Margaret's policies all these years later – she took on the union bully boys, 'the enemy within', defeated them and laid the foundations for more 'flexible' labour markets. So, now employers are less held to ransom by the unions and are free to



***'Wonderful legacy': Margaret Thatcher as immortalised on 'Spitting Image'***

offer such benefits as zero-hour contracts and an affordable 'market wage' to their employees.

**HT** Ok let's move on. When asked what she regarded as her greatest achievement, Thatcher is said to have replied: "New Labour". She was clearly very impressed by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown who were dubbed "sons of Thatcher" for embracing her free-market thinking. So, I assume that she'd be similarly impressed by Starmer.

**U-C** Oh yes, absolutely, and this admiration would surely be mutual. Sir Keir has rightly praised Margaret for bringing "meaningful change to the UK" and for stating that she "sought to drag Britain out of its stupor by setting loose our natural entrepreneurialism."

**HT** And other aspects of Starmer's Thatcher-inspired policies that give you grounds for optimism?

**U-C** Immigration. Margaret wasn't at all keen on foreigners coming here and referred to us as being "rather swamped by people with a different culture". She was quite clear on the subject: "We must hold out the prospect of a clear end to immigration." It's so heartening, therefore, to witness Sir Keir entering into the spirit of Margaret, and that of Enoch before her, as it's so important that the electorate shouldn't be taken in by dangerous Marxist claptrap and dogma ...which runs along the mistaken lines of the capitalist system

itself being the root cause of the country's socio-economic problems. So, Sir Keir's references to us becoming an "island of strangers", to forces "pulling our country apart" and to ending a "squalid chapter" of rising immigration are immensely helpful in enabling the electorate to see clearly their true enemy: the hordes of foreigners invading our beloved nation. How many of them would pass Norman Tebbit's 'Cricket Test', eh?

**HT** Well, Tim, once again, spatial Newsletter considerations mean that we'll have to draw our discussion to a close. So, just one final question: following your party's relatively recent election drubbing and the plainly inept leadership of Kemi Badenoch, would you consider throwing your hat into the ring when the next inevitable ballot for Tory Party leader takes place?

**U-C** Well, you know, 'noblesse oblige' and all that. So yes, I certainly would. The hand of history is weighing heavily on my shoulders, and I feel that someone must carry forward the torch of Margaret's wonderful legacy into what could be such a bright future. I'm truly ready to take up that challenge when it arises to save the nation.

**HT** Tim, I'm sure that I'd be joined by all our readers in thanking you for sharing your views with us so candidly.



**A personal wartime memoir:**

# **‘DANCE WITH MY FATHER’**

**Gary Kenneth Watt writes movingly about his father's war time experiences.**

## **Introduction**

Just before my father's 22nd birthday, he received his summons for military service, soon after the outbreak of WW2 on Sunday, 3rd September 1939. A 12-year term in the Royal Navy simply wasn't an option for the eldest child and principal family wage-earner, so he signed up for the RAF [Royal Air Force] instead.

## **Battle of Britain**

Most of the young pilots inducted were university students. Both my parents had left school in their early teens, seeking work in "the Hungry 30s", with about as much chance of receiving a university education as of walking on the moon. However, my dad had served an apprenticeship (a highly respected pathway, long since seemingly fallen by the wayside), then passed his City & Guilds exams to qualify as a Master Electrician. Consequently, in the RAF, he was a ground crew member with the rank of LAC (Leading Aircraftman, Electrical and Instrument Section.)

My dad's wartime memorabilia comprised medals, photos, letters, and various documents, which are kept in an ancient, battered sweet tin. After he retired, he visited the RAF Museum in Hendon and just before his passing in 1993, he began to record a wartime memoir, though sadly owing to ill-health, he had only managed to complete four handwritten, foolscap pages.

His unit was stationed at Fairlop (an airstrip in Essex) and in Kent. During the Battle of Britain, in September 1940, the ground crews worked round the clock to repair the damaged Hurricane and Spitfire fighter planes and get them airborne again asap. Some pilots on the squadron came from as far afield as Australia and Poland. It may be a cliché, but they literally did "count the planes in", as they returned from their combat missions. Sadly, all too many of these brave young men he knew did not make it back to base.

## **Leisure activities**

In his rare down time, my dad sometimes played football and boxed for his unit. He reached a good standard as an amateur welterweight (10 St 7 lbs). On one occasion, to entertain the troops, he fought an exhibition bout against Eric "Boy" Boon, from Chatteris, the former British Lightweight Champion in the 1930s. Although they were only really sparring, Boon would



***Robert Maurice Watt, RAF Leading Aircraftman in 1944 aged 26***

occasionally throw a solid punch to keep him in his place!

## **D-Day operation**

Two weeks after the D-Day landings (6th June 1944) his squadron was deployed to France. In the wake of the invading forces, departing from Caen, they followed La Route de la Liberté. I cycled along this road through Normandy in 1983. The path of the Allies was strewn with floral tributes and the liberating troops were deluged with local foodstuffs from the grateful populace. I still have a letter he received in September 1944 from the family with whom he was billeted in Courchelettes, France.

Amongst other "advice", the handbook issued to British Servicemen in France states on page 35 ("Do's and Don'ts"): "Don't get into arguments about religion or politics. If a Frenchman raises one or more points

that have strained Anglo-French relations since 1940, drop the matter. There are two sides to every story, but you don't want to take either". (Sic)

The squadron was also stationed in Belgium and Denmark. Around the time of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, in September 1988, I also cycled to Copenhagen. It was a poignant moment to visit the renowned statue of The Little Mermaid, 43 years after my dad had been there.

### **Bergen-Belsen**

There was one wartime experience which always remained at the forefront of my dad's mind: in April 1945, his unit arrived at the gates of Bergen-Belsen, three days after its liberation by American troops. There are simply no words to describe the profound impact this made on a 27-year-old Jewish young man. Orthodox Jews might argue that, like the Old Testament trials of Job, it is not the prerogative of mere humans to question the inscrutable will of the Almighty. However, from then on my father could no longer believe in the existence of a deity who did not intervene; or if he did exist, showed such indifference to suffering.

### **War's end**

Towards the end of the War, my dad and some mates happened upon a social gathering of senior personnel, with Margot Fonteyn, the famous ballerina, also in attendance. The ACs felt embarrassed but were welcomed by their superiors. In many ways, WW2 undermined social barriers, leading to the election of the 1945 post-war Labour government. This was despite the reputation, as war leader, of PM Winston Churchill. This theme was explored by Arnold Wesker in his play "Chips With Everything" [1962] based on his own National service in the RAF.

Eighty years ago, my dad and two cousins celebrated VE-Day on the 8th May 1945, by getting paralytically drunk. However, he was not finally demobbed until December 1945. The very next day, he was out looking for work, alongside his younger brother. With a living to earn, for them there wasn't the luxury of taking a rest!

### **Post-war**

("Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes." - Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Part 51).

Despite his agnosticism, in May 1945, he attended the Jewish RAF personnel "Service of Praise and Thanksgiving for the Victories of the Allied Nations." He was also a proud member of the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women (AJEX). On two occasions in the early 1990s, my dad re-visited the Normandy landing beaches with some friends. Anyone wearing the Normandy Veterans' badge receives all food and drink



"on the house", in gratitude, to this day.

After his retirement, my dad was once in dispute with the LB Redbridge over a parking ticket. He wrote to them saying: "When I was in Normandy in 1944, they let me park my lorry, wherever I liked". His fine was duly waived! (maybe an argument worth trying?)

His wartime RAF service had been my dad's "university of life". He had never lived away from home, let alone travelled abroad. He enhanced his skills as a craftsman and learned to drive. He encountered people from different backgrounds and stations in life. Apart from his responsibilities as a dutiful husband and parent, it was the formative experience of his life.

### **And finally ...**

My father had a cousin, Sidney Felman, from Cardiff, who was killed in action, on 10.4.41, aged only 22 years. He was a Sergeant gunner on a Lancaster bomber, shot down over East Friesland. When my dad was stationed in Germany, he undertook a personal journey to visit his cousin's grave at the Rheinberg War Cemetery to recite the "Mourner's Kaddish" (the Jewish Memorial Prayer for the Dead). In Yiddish, the word "Mensch" [literally "a Man"] is used to describe a fine human being.

If only I could be half as much of a Mensch as my Father.



## How the unemployed transformed Wanstead Flats

# Guided walk

Peter Bianchi reports on a recently organised retired teachers' event



*The leaders (Mark and Peter on the left) and the (small but enthusiastic) party of the led*

### Making a start

It was already warm, when thanks to a prompt 308 bus, I was first to arrive at the neatly named 'Tamping Grounds' café meeting place. Soon, others also arrived and we greeted old and new friends in our small but enthusiastic party. Local historians and Walk leaders, Peter Williams and Mark Gorman, introduced themselves and outlined the focus of the walk.

A few of the group have been locals for a long time, notably Henry Tiller, who lived in a nearby street as a boy. Others were newer arrivals to the area but most of us know Epping Forest to be home to many ponds and lakes. Fundamental to the theme of "Supporting the unemployed during hard times" was the fact that there are very few natural ponds in Epping Forest. Those that we all know have been man made, including the bomb holes.

### Ponds

Tamping Grounds is opposite the SW corner of Wanstead Flats, and so we went to find one of the natural ponds formed by water running in a gully across this flat. It was called the Cats' and Dogs' Pond as, without heavy rain, it soon dried up. Owing to this very dry year, the level of water in all the lakes is as low as I have ever seen since 1977. We also learned that some amateurs have recently worked to maintain the pond by ensuring that the gullies do not become overgrown.

### Historical background

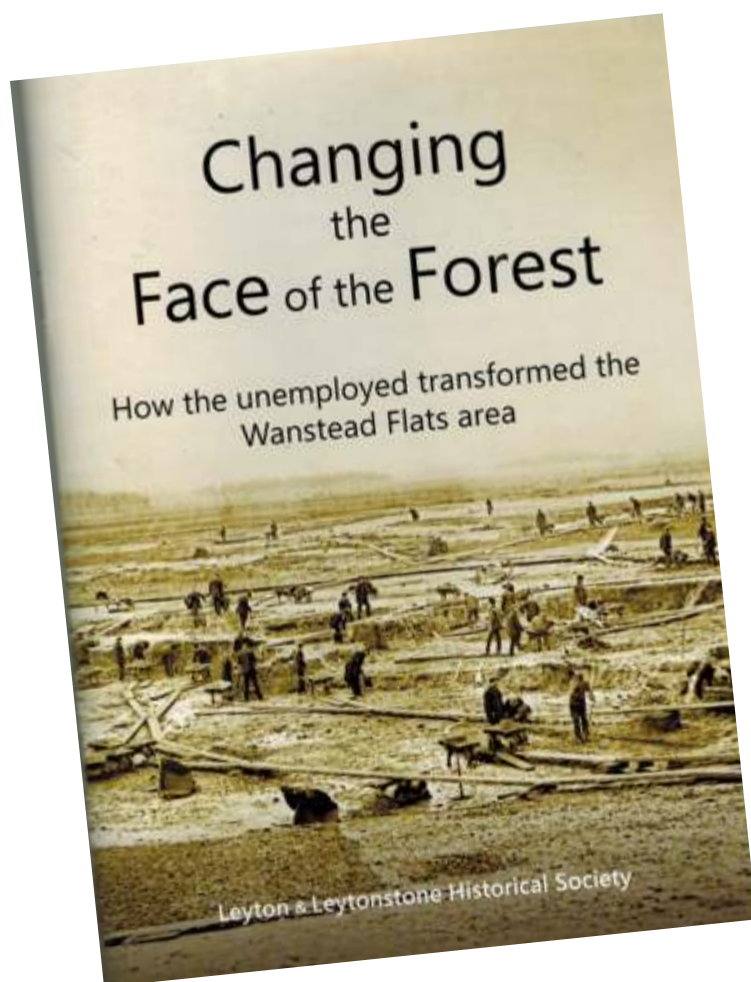
We learnt so much about the economic, political, social and other influences that I can only mention here just a few items. The origins of the ponds go back to the last ice age. When the ice melted, the Thames, then a tributary of the Rhine, may have been several miles wide and flowed over gravel beds laid down by glaciers. On to these beds were later deposited sand and clay.

For a very long time the extraction of sand and gravel took place alongside the use of the forest for wood and hunting and the Flats for grazing of local cattle, and later of herds driven down to feed the capital. Fattened animals would pass through the Forest (toll) Gate to reach the market in the City of London.

The clay deposits were exploited for making bricks and tiles, eventually supporting a thriving industry. The pits and quarries would later fill to become ponds, and their number and size increased in response to increasing demand during the period of industrialisation.

### Victorian endeavours

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local lords of manors sought to enclose parts of the forest, some to benefit from the boom in housebuilding, the results of which can be seen all along the southern boundary of the flats. The interests of the Corporation of the City of London and the local working people aligned sufficiently to support action by parliament. The Epping Forest Act of 1878



***You can obtain the pamphlet “Changing the Face of the Forest” and other local history publications from Number 8 Forest Gate Emporium, 8a Sebert Road E7 0NQ, from Newham Bookshop, 743-745 Barking Road E13 9ER, or from Leyton and Leytonstone Historical Society at [www.leytonhistorysociety.org.uk](http://www.leytonhistorysociety.org.uk).***

secured the future of the forest in many ways and gave the Corporation of London responsibility for managing Wanstead flats.

#### **Recent developments**

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century economic conditions had much improved and people, in their still, very limited free time, regularly enjoyed the Flats. Unfortunately, however, local unemployment increased due to the decline of shipbuilding on the Thames – an increase mitigated by the work of various relief committees. Expected problems between employers and workers did not derail the project of “disafforestation”, which included the regeneration of the Flats as an open space for the “recreation and enjoyment of the public”.

Many of the unemployed found work on the Flats. It was hard manual work in all weathers to drain the area, and to level and seed it. One statistic from *Changing the Face of the Forest* is that, before WW1, 180 acres had been completed to enable the creation of 40 cricket and 164 football pitches.

The foundations and water supplies for the ponds were properly constructed, making them available for recreation and wildlife. The Flats had been the site of an annual fair for generations and now some trees were carefully planted, and further features were con-

structed, for example a bandstand near the most southerly point.

The Flats in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have seen a wide variety of other uses, including, during wartime, prisoner-of-war camps, anti-aircraft gun sites and emergency housing and, in this century, a temporary mortuary during the pandemic.

#### **Final words**

Our guides pointed out many places and artifacts of historical evidence, but I have only space for two more interesting points. Firstly, early meetings at the location of the Bandstand Pond may well have been the start of the modern ecological movement.

Secondly, it's worth noting that the commissioners of the Forest continue to take extensive action to manage the vegetation, with the aim of controlling and limiting the spread of wildfires.

I am conscious of omitting so much and thank Peter and Mark for sharing their knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm with our group. If you want to know more about this area you can find their publications by accessing the Leyton and Leytonstone Historical Society.

Website address: [www.leytonhistorysociety.org.uk](http://www.leytonhistorysociety.org.uk).

**Lastly, do look out for future events for retired teachers.**



## A forgotten story:

# Saving the People's Forest

Mark Gorman writes about a neglected but significant historical struggle

Just over 150 years ago, on a summer's afternoon in July 1871, thousands of people gathered on Wanstead Flats, on the southern edge of Epping Forest. They came to protest against the illegal fencing of part of the Flats by Earl Cowley, Lord of Wanstead Manor. London was growing rapidly, open land was being eaten up by housing and local landowners saw the opportunity to make a quick profit from their land. East London, in particular, was spreading across the river Lea into rural south-west Essex.

### The People's Playground

For many thousands of Londoners, the land, which was being fenced off and laid out for housing, was not simply the property of local landowners but time-honoured open spaces which belonged to everyone. Epping Forest especially was "the people's playground", where the public had free right to roam and East End families came in their thousands to enjoy the forest. Wanstead Flats, the closest part of the forest to London, was the most visited, and picnics, donkey rides and sports were among the attractions which drew huge crowds. All this was under threat from the enclosures.

In 1871 matters came to a head.

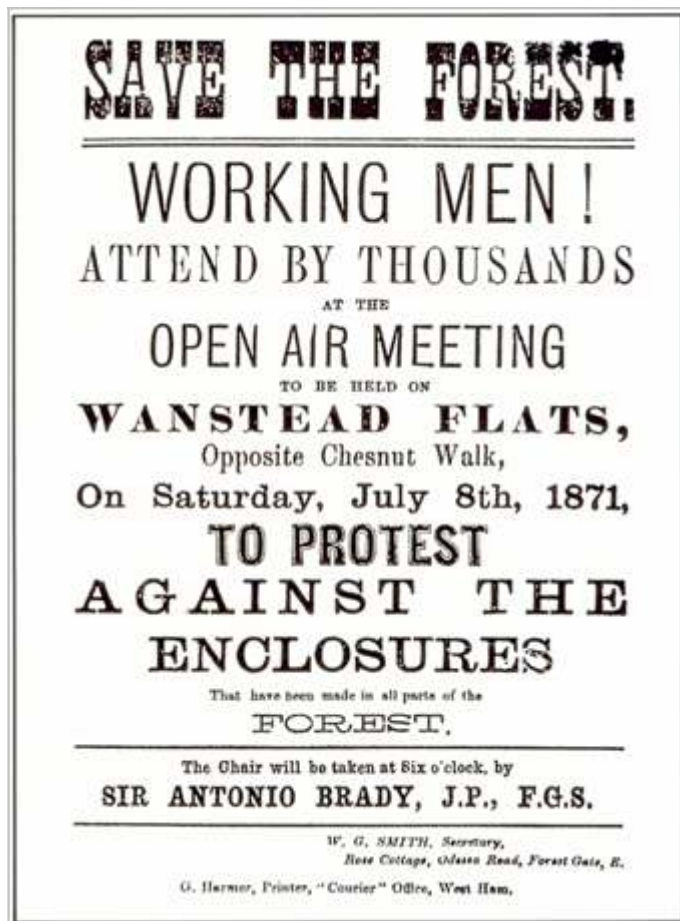
### Protest

Cowley's enclosures were the last straw, and protest meetings were held across east London. A great demonstration was called for 8<sup>th</sup> July and thousands of east Londoners responded. They descended on Forest Gate, and when their leaders tried to hold the meeting away from Wanstead Flats, in the grounds of a nearby house, the crowd refused, manhandling the speakers' wagon onto the Flats.

The gentlemen leaders of the campaign called for calm and counselled against damaging the fences, and on this sunny afternoon the atmosphere seemed peaceful. As the meeting ended, a large contingent of police, sent to guard the fences, were marched away to their barracks. However, then the mood changed.

In the evening, a man sitting on a section of fence was pulled off by his friend, and some of the fencing gave way. Within minutes, hundreds of metres of fencing was destroyed. The police rushed back, but too late to save the fences.

The crowd mockingly invited the police to mount a



*This 1871 poster advertised the protest meeting on the Flats. Picture courtesy of London Borough of Newham Heritage Services*

guard over the piles of matchwood, all that remained of the enclosure.

### Government Action

Most of the press condemned the demonstrators, but some commented that Cowley was the real criminal for erecting fences in the first place. The government, which had been dragging its feet over protecting London's open spaces, was galvanised into action and a month later rushed through the first Epping Forest Act to protect the forest from development.

### Campaign to change the law

For the protestors this act was far too weak. A campaign was now underway, one that Oliver Rackham, historian of our national forests, has called "the origin of the modern British environmental movement." The next few years also saw action by the

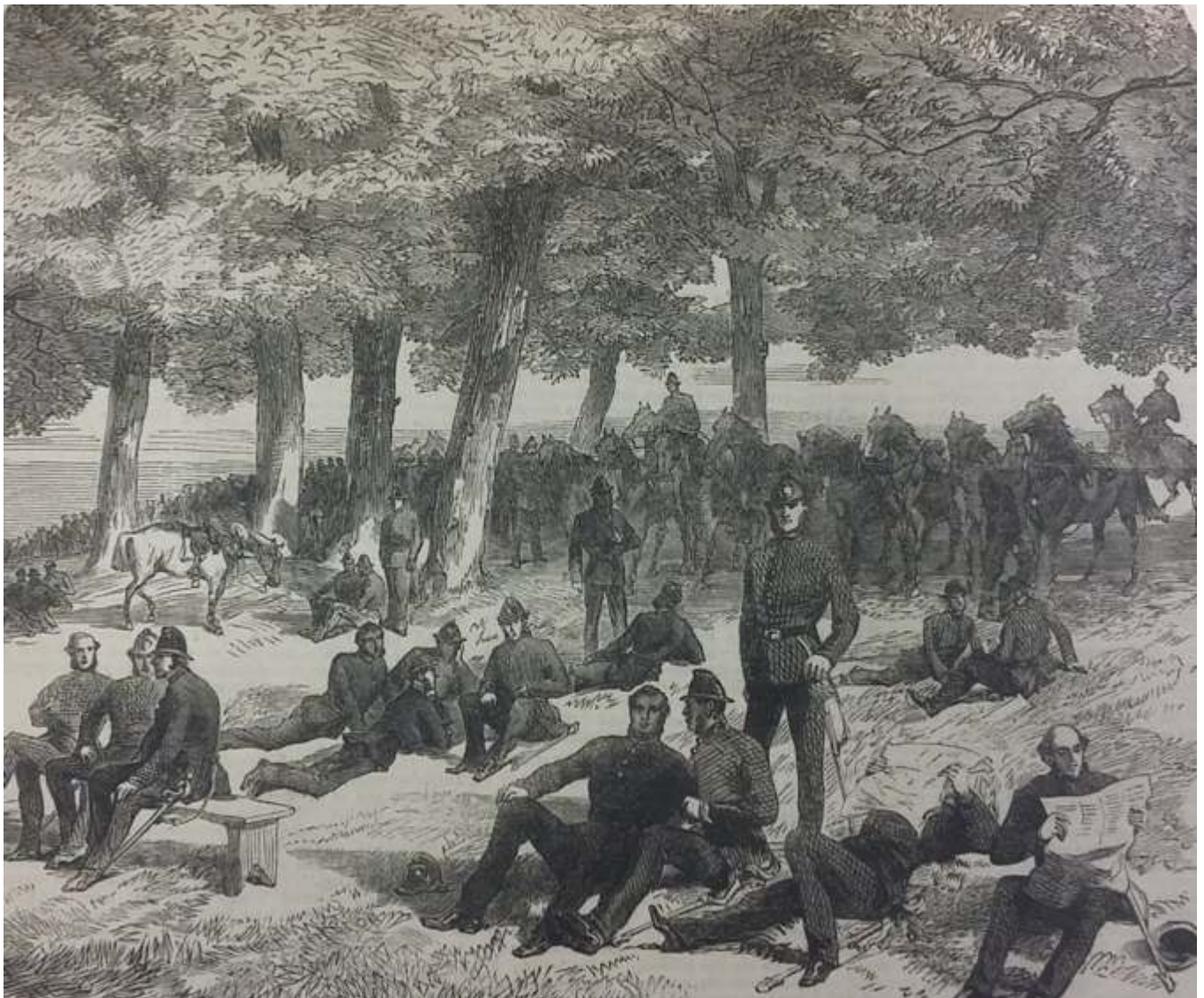
City of London Corporation in the law courts. They used their commoners' rights to sue the Epping Forest manorial lords, whose fences blocked their entitlement to graze cattle over the whole forest. These struggles in the law courts and in parliament were supported by petitions, public meetings and lobbying of MPs. This popular protest was a key factor in driving forward the campaign to save Epping Forest and other well-loved open spaces around London.

The Wanstead Flats demonstration gave a huge boost to a movement which contributed significantly to a key change in the law. The 1878 Epping Forest Act was the first declaration in English law of the public's right to use an open space for leisure. The people's forest had been saved and dedicated by Queen Victoria to the "use and enjoyment of my people for all time."

So, in honouring the leaders who campaigned to preserve open spaces against relentless development, we should also remember the protestors who gathered on Wanstead Flats to save Epping Forest, listening for the echo of the unknown voice from the crowd that day, who called out "it is our own".



***(Above): 'Epping Forest in Danger' according to a popular newspaper at the time and (below): Police on Wanstead Flats in 1871. Both images provided by the British Library Board. All rights reserved***





## Solidarity with Congo

# A powerful call to action

## From: NEU London International Solidarity Newsletter

On 4<sup>th</sup>. May, educators, trade unionists and community organisers gathered for a moving and urgent event in solidarity with the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The day was proudly led by Sala Ba, Croydon NEU Vice Chair and International Solidarity Organising Forum Officer, who spoke about the importance of building sustained and purposeful solidarity. 'We are here not just to witness, but to organise,' Sala said. 'Solidarity means listening, learning and taking action together.'

### Female Labour

The day began with the screening of *Mikuba*, a powerful documentary by Congolese filmmaker and activist Petna Ndaliko Katondolo. The film offered a stark portrayal of life in the DRC's mining communities, where workers -particularly women – toil under dangerous and exploitative conditions to extract the minerals powering the global tech industry. Interwoven with these stories of injustice were moving scenes honouring Congo's ancestral cultures and spiritual practices, reminding viewers of the dignity, resistance and beauty that still flourish despite centuries of exploitation.

### Miners

A particularly emotional moment came with the contribution of the Basandja Coalition, who were unable to attend in person after being denied UK visas by the Labour government. Instead, they shared a deeply moving video message. Their testimony exposed the systemic abuse faced by artisanal miners: toxic working conditions, lack of access to clean water and healthcare, poverty wages and gender-based inequalities. Women especially are exploited, working without safety equipment and earning less than their male counterparts. Their message highlighted the deep global inequalities driven by corporate greed and political neglect.

### True Internationalists

Hoda Chentouf, Brent NEU International Solidarity Officer and Vice Chair of Educators for Congo, chaired the panel discussion. She spoke powerfully about the historic and structural racism underpinning this exploitation and reminded attendees that global injustice doesn't happen in a vacuum - it is maintained by policy, profit and silence. "We cannot call ourselves internationalists if we ignore Congo", she said.

## Breaking the Silence

Throughout the day, speakers reinforced the urgency of breaking the silence. Charlotte Bosawas Eyenga Simon traced Congo's long history of foreign plunder -from rubber and uranium to today's scramble for coltan, cobalt and gold. 'They say the riches of Congo are a curse,' she said. 'But Congo does not deserve the killing of its people.' Her words echoed the sobering reality that over five million lives have been lost since 1994 due to ongoing conflict and exploitation.

### Solidarity

Louise Regan, Chair of the International Solidarity Officers network, reminded the room that solidarity is not just symbolic - it is strategic action. "When educators come together like this, we build power," she said. 'We are not just here to witness suffering - we are here to challenge it.'

Writer and activist, JJ Bola, issued a powerful call for collective resistance. "Together we are strong. The passion for Congo is growing - don't ignore it." His message was echoed by Sylvestre Mido (aka Sly Coltan), who reflected on the early days of the Congo solidarity movement: "We started with a few voices in 2013. Look at this room today - we are growing."

### The role of education

The day concluded with a vibrant and inspiring final panel chaired by Daniel Selwyn, Newham NEU International Solidarity Officer and Chair of the London Mining Network. The discussion centred on the role of educators in challenging corporate exploitation and reshaping the curriculum. "We must teach the truth", Daniel said. "Our students need to understand how their digital lives are connected to the people who mine the minerals in Congo."

### Closing words

Petna Ndaliko closed the event with a stirring call-and-response, invoking the myth of Yaminge, a legendary figure who carried knowledge across the world and entrusted it to Congo. "Solidarity is an investment in our humanity. Congo is us."

JJ Bola left attendees with a final reflection: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now."

The event served as a powerful reminder that Congo is not a distant tragedy - it is central to the world we live in. And as educators and trade unionists, we must care, connect and act, because solidarity with Congo cannot wait.

For more information, follow Educators for Congo on Instagram and Facebook:

**Facebook:** Educators for Congo – NEU Solidarity

**Instagram:** @EducatorsForCongo

# Street Art Rachel Brittle celebrates some superb examples of art work in our towns and cities



When I retired, I joined a walking group and began to discover my local area. I was struck by how people tried to make an urban area more attractive, and I wrote about the numerous community gardens in my last article. Another thing which caught my eye was the amount of street art popping up. London has always had graffiti from what I remember - usually a sign of anti-social behaviour and often political in nature. However, some graffiti artists possess a great artistic talent, and the paintings became more pleasing to the public's eye, resulting in what has become known as Street Art.

## London's East End

The first batch of photos are from Brick Lane in London. This area has become a mix of old and new and is home to several different communities. There is street art everywhere you look but I have chosen a few of my favourites - first an eye which contains great detail.

I chose the next image as I could not work out what it depicted but it was very striking- a bird? a person? a mixture of the two?







The third image is a beautiful, stylised face and next to it a piece of more graffiti style work. The black and white wall is very striking – almost disguising the doorways within. I chose the bird on the wall partly because I am intrigued how people get up to the top and actually paint. The frog and skull caught my eye, and you can see clearly the artist tags.







It is topped by an image of a magnificent grey, black and white cyclist - this is actually an advert for Rapha cycling gear.



## Portraits

The second batch of photos reflect famous people. Firstly, Omar Beckles from Leyton Orient embracing his PE teacher, who encouraged him to take up football. This was part of a Leyton Orient art trial in the Spring and is on a building just off Leyton High Road. The second image is of Ian Curtis of Joy Division - in Manchester of course! Finally, William Morris on a Morris inspired background in Walthamstow.





### Not just in London

I have included three photos from Vilnius in Lithuania, as I liked them. A cat, an old man with a barrow – to invoke how the street would have looked in the past – and (see next page) a banner and swing hanging from a bridge on the entrance to the artistic quarter in Vilnius.





This is more a sculpture or installation. I saw a similar one in Saltburn, tied to a gate this time. (See above).





I have included a couple of mosaics - these are more likely to be commissioned works but street art nonetheless, as they brighten up the neighbourhoods in which they are situated.



### Local art

Finally, a couple of end-of-terrace murals - one from Saltburn, one from Walthamstow, two from Leytonstone. One of those has a bird in it as an Alfred Hitchcock reference as he was from Leytonstone. I thought the Saltburn one (see next page) is very similar in style to a Banksy. The final image is the famous Banksy one on a chip shop in Walthamstow!







# Buying Influence

Edward Milner reflects how companies across the globe ruthlessly pursue their own interests

This morning, I sent a small donation to Tree Aid - £10. Tree Aid has 'worked together with communities (in Africa) to find long-term solutions to poverty and climate change' by helping them protect and improve their land, plant useful local trees and promote income-generating activities. Tree Aid groups participate in planting the Great Green Wall across the Sahel, part of a worldwide effort to improve the environment and counter deforestation. Occasionally, small charities like this do ask a few anodyne questions to keep supporters onside about their work, but for my small donations I don't expect to influence the way they operate, where they focus or how they decide on priorities. Tree Aid isn't a membership organization, like a golf club, where decision-making is (supposedly) democratic.

## Undue Influence

What happens at a charity like Tree Aid when Mr or Ms X comes along and offers say, half a million pounds? Inevitably, large donations are seductive. They can allow long-imagined ambitions to be realized or allow

pet projects to go ahead. Whether this is a situation Tree Aid has ever faced I don't know. Without going into the matter of how the individual comes to have half a million pounds available to donate, my immediate question would be - have they what is commonly known as an ulterior motive? Are they interested in a particular country? And what if they are looking to 'encourage' the charity to favour particular racial or religious groups? Or even as a way to influence the political context in their chosen country? Is a big donor wanting direct influence on overall policy - bribery? Or just *buying influence*? I would hope that Tree Aid would resist such an approach - as I feel sure they would.

Political parties are not charities, but they also depend for their existence on individual donations, and not only from their formal members. While there are supposed limits to these contributions, there is a current tendency for the rules to be relaxed, allowing big companies and the very rich to have new opportunities to influence policy directly. The rich and powerful



**Women in Ghana are planting trees with support from a tree-aid project. This is all contributing to the Green Wall movement. Photo credit: Rowan Griffiths, Daily Mirror**

have other concerns as well as the election of politicians. Almost without exception their public relations departments present a positive spin on their activities and perceived social benefit, as well as acting to minimize negative publicity, such as from pollution issues or failure to manage waste. Many go further by employing an army of professional lobbyists to create a favourable political context for the conduct of their business.

### **Lobbyists**

Wikipedia defines bribery as *the* 'offering, giving, receiving or soliciting of any item of value to influence the actions of an official ... in charge of a public or legal duty'. What started me thinking about my donation to Tree Aid, even as I wrote the cheque, was the news that both the recent COP 29 meeting and the Global Plastics Treaty negotiations were heavily influenced by the presence of large numbers of professional lobbyists funded by the fossil fuel companies. Their priorities are fundamentally conservative – preserving the status quo that is so profitable to their business and opposing major changes in energy strategy or plastic production and use, while refusing to accept any culpability for downstream damage, such as pollution or increased atmospheric carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. This stance is in clear denial of the wider public interest - which was the original motivation for both these international processes.

### **Taking to the streets**

Meanwhile, among those excluded from formal discussions are civil society organizations such as Tree Aid, whose interest in benefiting ordinary people and the global environment is clearly wider than the profit-making of large companies. Some civil society organizations get frustrated by this lack of access and promote public demonstrations outside the venue; they are then labelled agitators or troublemakers and various sanctions are applied, which may escalate to violence in the streets, casualties and arrests. Unsurprisingly, there were very few demonstrations outside or inside COP 29 – one of the 'advantages' of holding such meetings in places like UAE and Azerbaijan, where such activities are strictly controlled. Of course, the whole idea of civil society separate from the state is anathema to many autocratic regimes, with 'foreign agent' prohibitions virtually exterminating the independent sector, while all power and influence on matters of policy is restricted to the state, whatever its level of legitimacy and representativeness.

### **Government failings**

Is it any wonder that radical decision-making, or any decision making beyond platitudes and generalities with regard to climate-change issues, is difficult to

achieve when many of the actual negotiators are so obviously compromised, and the wider public interest goes unrepresented - and unheeded?

It gets worse: it seems that this transactional view of the world where everything, even opinions, are bought and sold, now predominates among some of the most powerful figures in what used to be called 'the free world'.

The U.S. President wants to offer cash to take over Greenland or takes donations from oil companies to 'drill baby drill', while his erstwhile close ally Elon Musk claims that 'having investments in some German companies' gives him the right to directly influence the German election (he failed). And this not on behalf of improved national debate but in support of the most extreme right-wing party spouting the same dangerous nonsense that was comprehensively defeated in a World War eighty years ago.

It does not bode well for our common future if the urgent issues of climate change and the biodiversity crisis continue to be approached by the very powerful in a purely transactional way. We are far from the day when public figures, like Jimmy Carter and Al Gore, spearheaded international campaigns for human rights and global health, care for the planet and global biodiversity, with Bill Gates philanthropy standing out as virtually unique.

### **How to improve things**

I worry because my grandchildren will be growing up in a world under the overwhelming influence of commercial interests. It is no secret that the failure of international negotiations, such as the COP process and the Global Plastics Treaty, has led to public alarm around the world. Is there any way in which the process could be usefully reformed, so as to redress the balance of competing interests? Perhaps allowing some wider formal opportunities for civil society participation would be a start.

At recent COP meetings, and in other UN meetings, there has been much more significant participation by representatives of Indigenous peoples, and this has certainly widened the debate at the margins. I suggest that this must be built on and opportunities for civil society groups must be expanded if realistic progress is to be made at future international gatherings. Certainly [some](#) experts believe that much more needs to change if the COP process is to become effective. In the present political climate, it is difficult to be optimistic.

Ultimately, there is no long-term future, even for the rich, whilst they remain oblivious to the danger of the Earth becoming uninhabitable. Meanwhile I'm still supporting Tree Aid.



# My favourite novel of all time

Gary Kenneth Watt reviews *Le Grand Meaulnes*, by Henri Alain- Fournier

*Le Grand Meaulnes* is one of the most beloved French novels - a unique depiction of adolescent, unrequited 'love at first sight', magically and mysteriously interweaving dream and reality, set just before WW1, amidst the glorious countryside of the Sologne region, in central France, the area mostly to the north of the River Cher.

And a recent poll of French readers, asking them to vote for their favourite novel, placed "Le Grand Meaulnes" in the top 10. The only published novel of the author, killed on active service during WW1, 110 years ago, it still has a special place in the hearts of readers today.

## Structure

'Le Grand Meaulnes' is divided into three parts. In Part 1, comprising the first one hundred pages, the writing is of such quality and brilliance as to stand comparison with many of the greatest works of literature that I've read. The enthralling suspense and mystery is masterly. Meaulnes doesn't know himself whether he is dreaming or not about the 'strange feast' that he discovers at the Chateau. And neither does the reader.

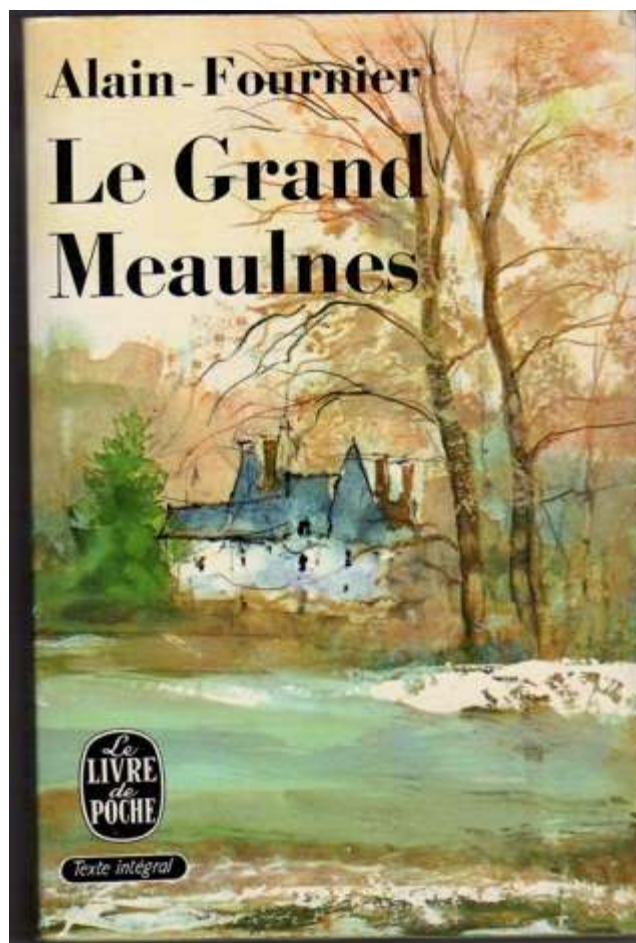
However, Alain-Fournier is unable to sustain this splendour in Parts 2 and 3 which, by comparison, are disparate and lacking cohesion. Part 2 centres around the return of Frantz in disguise, following his failed suicide after being jilted by Valentine. In Part 3, the mysterious secret of Meaulnes' 'lost years' in Paris are revealed through the ingenious device of a series of diary entries in a school notebook, discovered fortuitously by Seurel.

## Theme

The theme of the 'quest' has been a feature of literature since its earliest days, most notably the search for the 'Holy Grail' by the Knights Templar and Parsifal. This theme is allied to the ideal of Chivalry and Courtly Love, embodied in the Knights of the Round Table. Meaulnes' obsession with finding his way back to the chateau and Yvonne de Galais stands in this tradition.

## Autobiography

Many aspects of the novel are based on the author's own life. The school at the centre of the novel derives from Alain-Fournier's own experiences, with his younger sister, Isabel, attending the village school administered by his parents. In 1905, when Alain-Fournier was a 19-year-old student in Paris, on leaving



an art gallery, he encountered a beautiful young woman, chaperoned by her mother. He was so smitten, that he followed them home at a distance, then stood in the street outside her apartment building every night for two weeks, until he learned that she was no longer living there. He found out that her name was Yvonne de Quievrecourt. When he finally made her acquaintance, seven years later, she was married with two children. She was the original for the character Yvonne de Galais. And in Part 1, Chapter 15, 'The Encounter', Alain-Fournier quotes in the novel some of the exact words spoken between them at their first meeting. Similarly, the character of Valentine, Frantz's fiancée, is based on Jeanne Bruneau, Alain-Fournier's mistress.

The idyll of rural France in the 1890s was destroyed by WW1 and Alain-Fournier's pastoral scenes have since evoked a nostalgic yearning to regain that lost innocence of the era before an entire generation underwent the wholesale slaughter of its youth. This aspect of the novel reinforces the principal theme of Meaulnes' and Seurel's efforts to regain their lost adolescence.

### The title

Any French edition of the novel is, of course, entitled '*Le Grand Meaulnes*'. When Francois first meets Augustin, he is impressed by the new pupil's physical stature. The very first adjective used by Francois to describe him is "grand" which means 'tall'. However, 'grand' can also be used in the sense of 'grandeur' (an individual having great influence).

His classmates soon take to calling Augustin "Le Grand Meaulnes" and Seurel states clearly that Meaulnes completely transformed their lives. However, English translations have included such titles as 'The Lost Domain' (referring to Meaulnes' endeavours to find his way back to the Château), 'The Lost Estate' (referring to 'rites of passage' and Meaulnes' search to recapture the lost innocence of youth), and lastly 'The Wanderer' (referring to Meaulnes' restless search for adventures and pastures new.)

My personal view is that the title is untranslatable and should be allowed to stand in its original form.

Although the plot comprises several implausible coincidences, Alain-Fournier is a great writer in the literal sense, *ie* in his use of words. He also wrote poetry, and so this novel reads like a glorious prose poem. The flora and fauna, the sights, sounds and smells of the countryside, almost make them into characters in their own right. The author skilfully evokes appropriate 'mood music' through his use of 'sympathetic background'. When we evaluate a novel, we consider the combined elements of plot, characters, dialogue, setting, theme and ideas. Despite its flaws, I hope that what I've written above about the novel's unique amalgam of these elements convinces you of the claim of '*Le Grand Meaulnes*' to 'grandeur'. The past is always with us: although Augustin Meaulnes and Francois Seurel are so different in character, they share a mutual desire to recapture a past that always eludes them.

*"Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music: Do I wake or sleep?"*

John Keats: '*Ode to a Nightingale*'

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## Review:

# Will Podmore reviews a new book that illuminates and clarifies several philosophical questions

*Solving, resolving, and dissolving philosophical problems: essays in connective, contrastive and contextual analysis*, by P.M.S. Hacker, paperback, 234 pages, ISBN 978-1-394-27881-7, Wiley-Blackwell, 2025, £25.95.

Peter Hacker is the pre-eminent scholar of Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'the first philosopher of the age' and arguably the most important philosopher alive today. With his colleague Maxwell Bennett he wrote, "Philosophical reflection on human nature". Reflections on the body and soul, go back to the dawn of philosophy. The polarities between which they fluctuate were set out by Plato and Aristotle. According to Plato, and the Platonic-Christian tradition of Augustine, the human being is not a unified substance, but a combination of two distinct substances, a mortal body and an immortal soul.

However, according to Aristotle, a human being *is* a unified substance, the soul (*psuchē*) being the form of

the body. To describe that form is to describe the characteristic powers of human beings, in particular, the distinctive powers of intellect and will that characterize the rational *psuchē*. Modern debate on this theme commences with the heir to the Platonic-Christian tradition, namely, the Cartesian conception of human beings as two one-sided things, a mind and a body.

Hacker and Bennett oppose Noam Chomsky's notion that language is a deep grammar, governing our real spoken language. Chomsky wrote in 1965 that "Linguistic theory is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly ..." This idealism is as unrealistic and misleading as neo-classical economics, which posits economic actors of perfect rationality. Chomsky's Cartesian idealism splits mind from body, theory from practice, and competence from



performance. In philosophy, there are two lines – materialism, the thesis that mind is a product of matter, and idealism – the thesis that matter is a product of mind. Hacker is in the materialist camp, Chomsky in the idealist camp.

In his latest remarkable and original book, he uses connective, contrastive, and contextual analysis to examine philosophical questions that concern us all. Whenever, in philosophy, we appear to encounter a mystery in the nature of things, it is in fact a mystification in our reasoning about those things. For example, a logically impossible object (such as a disembodied mind) is not an object the existence of which is excluded by logic. Rather, it is a form of words that seems to signify a possible object but does not really do so.

Again, logically impossible events or actions, such as travelling backwards (or forwards) in time, life after death, or turning into a frog while retaining one's identity, are not kinds of events or actions. Rather they are forms of words that seem to describe possible events or actions, but do not really do so. They are forms of words that make no sense.

We need to dissolve mystifications by the three methods of analysis. Through connective analysis, we can describe a problematic expression's connections with related terms. We can investigate its contraries, contrasts and contradictions, because a common failure in our reasoning is to invoke misguided analogies. Contextual analysis is important, because many expressions can only be employed properly in certain contexts.

For example, talk of the mind is not talk about a kind of thing. Rather, it is a way of presenting human intellectual powers and their exercise. The classical mind/body problem, on analysis, simply dissolves into nothing. When we have rooted out the age-old puzzle about how we can know the contents of other people's mind, we can face the real problems of knowing other people – problems that are part of the human condition.

So, the question 'What is the mind?' is just a bad question. Why? In part, because 'What is' questions invite 'It is an' answers, and the mind is not 'an anything'. We should reject the question and instead ask, 'What has to be true of a creature for us to say of it that it has a mind?'

As Hacker asserts, "My body does not have a mind – what, one might wonder, would corporeal characteristics do with a mind. Similarly, my mind does not have a body – what could powers of intellect and will do with corporeal characteristics? As we have shown, "the mind cannot own its corporeal characteristics, nor can it reside in them. It is the living human being that has a



**Hacker.** Photo St. John's College Oxford



**Chomsky**

mind and a body."

Hacker rejects scepticism about the existence of the world. There are no circumstances in actual life in which the question of doubting the world's existence can arise. For the doubter raises his question in a vacuum: his behaviour shows that he does not in practice seriously doubt whether the world exists. After all, he behaves just as we all do. But if the question can never really arise in practice, why should we need to answer to it? The whole debate is empty.

Hacker investigates other concepts: knowledge, belief, memory, imagination, thinking and dreaming. He examines the realm of value, which is also amenable to these analytic methods. He dissolves predicaments about the place of value in a world of facts. He lays bare the roots of value and the nature of moral goodness, and the roots and nature of evil. He clarifies the notion of the human soul, without recourse to religion or to misconceived notions about post-mortem survival.

# This is what I'm reading...

## Janet Clarke recommends a few novels for our reading this summer

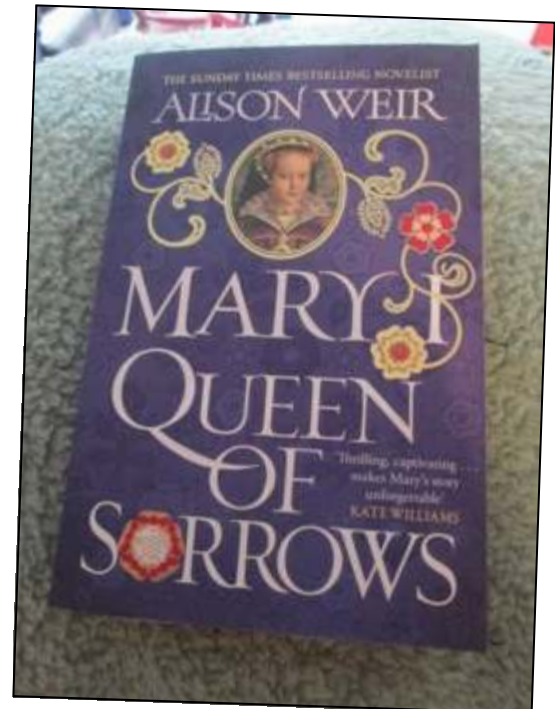
**Watch Us Dance by Leila Slimani:** This is volume two of *The Country of Others*. Amine, the former soldier turned farmer, has become successful and is now a member of the new middle class while his wife, Matilde, an Alsacienne, has come to accept life in Morocco.

Their children are now growing into adulthood and this volume centres mostly around them. I enjoyed it despite some unfavourable reviews as it is essentially a saga of a mixed family - their lives, loves and fortunes set against the changing political and social setting of Morocco in the 60s and 70s.

**The Persians by Sanam Mahloudji** is another story of a family, this time told from the points of view of the Valiat women. Well respected in Tehran, they now inhabit 'New Tehran' and 'Tehrangelles', having fled Iran following the revolution, leaving one sister and a child behind. Here their status is much reduced. We first meet them on a family holiday in Aspen and at this point I nearly gave up because I could not warm to the characters. However, I persevered. The different chapters are narrated by the various women of the family, including Niaz, the only granddaughter to grow up in Iran. She is forced to keep covered in public and knows 'what it's like to be furniture'. We gradually see the story change. Family secrets are revealed. One of the daughters finally sums it up: "All these stories of relatives, ancestors, heroes. But these empires, my friend, were long dead. All that mattered was us. The people we have. Real life."

I don't know about 'thrilling' as the cover puts it but **Mary Queen of Sorrows by Alison Weir** was compelling. Although the story is of Princess, later Queen, Mary, you get an interesting viewpoint on the Queens who usurped her mother and became her stepmothers and her relationship and attitude towards them, especially Anne Boleyn. We get an insight into the treatment of royal women, as well as Mary's feelings for her half-siblings, in particular Elizabeth, who she loved as a child but was later estranged from. In addition, we learn of her longing for marriage and children of her own and why she clung so steadfastly to her Catholic faith – the only thing she had left to call her own.

**Paris Echo by Sebastian Faulkes:** In this novel, contemporary Paris is seen through the eyes of runaway teenager Tariq, whose world view is coloured by the films he sees in his local cinema, and through the eyes of Hannah, the academic researching the lives of



women during the occupation of World War Two. Initially Tariq's reason for going to Paris is to search for traces of the mother who left him when he was small and as a result of coincidence becomes Hannah's lodger. Does Tariq really 'meet'/'see' women of the past? What does Hannah learn about herself through the lives of these women of the Occupation? Is there really an old puppeteer on the Metro called Victor Hugo who tells stories with puppets called Marius and Cosette? We see Tariq grow up and Hannah finally come to terms over a lost love. *Paris Echo* is a compelling and intriguing novel whose characters you can become involved with. It made me want to find my map of the Paris metro and follow Tariq on his favourite thing to do in the city – ride the metro.

**Tick-Tock by Simon Mayo:** Simon Mayo is the author who keeps on giving. The novel is a very contemporary, post-Covid page turner. Covid is more or less over but suddenly a strange, new illness breaks out in London and other large cities. Tick-Tock refers to the sound you suddenly get in your ears and which can be heard by others around you. Where does this new illness come from? Why do the symptoms seem so familiar? It is left to vaccinologist Lilly, English teacher Kit and his daughter Rose to follow a trail that takes them from London to Salisbury and Porton Down, shining a light on the actions of governments and the manufacture of chemical weapons in semi-secret facilities. (The much maligned bat is not involved!)