

Labour Heritage



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Bulletin Spring 2020

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32 Woolwich Road (Greenwich)

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Stan Newens 70 years membership of Labour

West London Labour History Day

This annual event was held on Saturday 22nd February at the Hammersmith Quaker House. It was attended by over 30 people. The three speakers have written up their papers/speakers notes for the bulletin and they are published here.



Photo Sarah Newens

William Morris: Socialist Activist in Hammersmith

By John Stirling

On 4th April 1878 William Morris rented Kelmscott House in Upper Mall, Hammersmith for £85 a year and remained there for 18 years until his death aged 63 on 3rd October 1896. He had moved there from Horrington House in Turnham Green Road where he had lived from 1872-8.

He was living at Kelmscott House when he joined the Democratic Federation (subsequently the Social Democratic Federation - SDF) in 1883 and established the Socialist League, after splitting with the SDF and its successor the Hammersmith Socialist Society. He wrote *News from Nowhere* there as well as many other socialist lectures and articles,

When Morris moved in to Kelmscott House in 1878 it was bordered by a slum area known as Little Wapping and had industry nearby along Hammersmith Creek including lead mills and malt houses alongside the boat builders. There was a brewery nearby and, where the Dove Public House is now there had been a pub since the 17th century. The place was not the quiet haven we might see today. Morris told an audience in 1881:

‘As I sit and work at home I hear the yells and shrieks ... it was my good luck to be born respectable and rich , that put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on

the other side, in the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shop, the foul and degraded lodgings.’

The environment on his doorstep that made the inequalities in Victorian society a daily reality and its class nature were clearly apparent to Morris. Something he felt personally as he wrote to Georgina Burne-Jones: ‘I don’t seem to have got to them yet – you see, this great class gulf lies between us’. Morris was a comparatively wealthy man but he had chosen to side with the working class.

The Politics of William Morris

Morris’s politics were dismissed by his early biographers and often regarded as the romantic views of an unwordly artist. However, Morris was emphatically a socialist and the nature of Morris’s socialist politics has been repeatedly discussed and debated even before he had died with almost anybody with the slightest socialist orientation either claiming him for themselves or at least asserting his influence - even if it is sometimes painfully hard to see.

There is little doubt that his politics has been reclaimed today and asserted as the revolutionary socialist he was and remained. This is most clearly discussed in E. P. Thompson’s *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* and it is not my purpose here to go over that ground. Rather I want to discuss Morris as a socialist activist in the area outside the front door of Kelmscott House in Hammersmith. His politics were formed from active engagement rather than the library, with other socialists, with the world round him, from his own direct experience of life and work and from Hammersmith too.

Activism and Campaigning

For William Morris his socialist commitment meant he had to be an activist. There was no point in being a socialist if you weren’t trying to convert

others to ‘The Cause’. In his six most active years of campaigning he delivered over 250 public lectures & uncountable outdoor speeches (every Sunday in Hammersmith for example).

He wrote for and published *Commonweal* and was engaged in the day to day business of the SDF and, later, the Socialist League and the Hammersmith Socialist Society. He participated in the unrewarding work of committee meetings as well as often being the single source of funds for impoverished socialist groups or individuals who had fines to pay or needed someone to stand bail.

Hammersmith Socialist Society

Kelmscott House became a focus for socialism in Hammersmith and a base for Morris’s campaigning. In particular, the Coach House (or Kelmscott Hall) became a home for meetings of the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League and then from 21st November 1890 for the 120 members of the Hammersmith Socialist Society. Morris had finally abandoned the Socialist League and *Commonweal* to the anarchists who struggled on but without Morris’s money or reputation.

The new Society, however, maintained the old aims of the Socialist League, calling for ‘international revolutionary socialism’ and ‘the destruction of the present class society’. As to its methods it also retained the League’s approach. The rules of the new society proclaimed its objective as ‘making socialists’ and its methods as ‘lectures, street meetings and publications’.

Whilst it was clear about its own aims and objectives Morris and the Hammersmith Society was also committed to working with other socialist groups and parties. In December 1892 the Society proposed a Socialist Federation bringing together all groups to retain their own aims but to work together. It never really gained momentum as the labour movement grew

independently through the trade unions, the Independent Labour Party and then the Labour Party itself.

The Society published the monthly *Hammersmith Socialist Record* from October 1891 to June 1893. This focussed on a range of socialist issues: international and national but local campaigning was not forgotten as this short quote from one of Morris's own contributions illustrates:

‘In a shop window in King Street Hammersmith may be seen the notice: *For the sons of toil, margarine at 8d per pound.* We would ask the workers in Hammersmith to consider the meaning of this choice little advertisement. To us it means that the idlers, that is to say the well-to-do people, who are dependent on the workers for every scrap of the food they eat, and every shred they wear, have eaten all the good butter, and now invite the toilers to satisfy themselves with a cheap and nasty substitute.’

As usual, so much of Morris's straight talking is in the piece alongside his abhorrence of the ‘cheap and nasty’ that workers have to subsist on. This was not just about a price but about capitalism and its class divisions.

The Coach House

The Coach House or Kelmscott Hall was home to a regular weekly Sunday meeting of between 40 and 70 people – which would have meant a packed audience. May Morris vividly records the meetings which she describes as ‘an institution’ with never a lapse from the foundation of the Hammersmith Branch of the Democratic Federation. She recalls a ‘frugal meeting place with bare floor and matting and white washed walls’. ‘My father’ she says, would always chair the meetings’ when he could and when he was not speaking himself and, in a nice sidelight, she would note that if he got bored he would doodle away at another design for a fabric or wallpaper pattern. After the

meetings, some members of the audience would be invited for supper in the house and talk into the small hours. The climax of the week May describes it.

The list of speakers becomes a who's who of socialism of the period and reflects Morris's open mindedness and also the interwoven nature of socialist organisations with individual members of both the Fabian Society and the SDF for example. Between 1891 and early 1893 speakers included: Morris (8 times) Hyndman, Keir Hardie, Tom Mann, G.B. Shaw, Annie Besant, Prince Kropotkin, Stepniak, Edward Aveling and so on.

On the Streets

Less commonplace activities included the Hammersmith Socialist Choir (conducted on occasion by Gustav Holst who stayed at the House and who attributes his socialism to Morris and was sometimes to be seen ‘on the socialist cart playing the harmonium’.

Monthly discussion groups were held on various topics. French lessons were begun in September 1888 and delivered on Fridays 8-9 by Cecile Desroches a Socialist League member. These were in preparation for a Paris socialist congress for some or a tour of France for others. The poet W.B Yeats attended but it's not clear with what or any purpose.

Morris did not stop there. He was a regular speaker at open air meetings at big demonstrations in Hyde park, Victoria Park and during a miner's strike in Northumberland. Some of these were to defend the right of socialists to speak and ended in bloody confrontations with the police and militia. However, he did not neglect his local outdoor meetings in Hammersmith. E. P. Thompson records: ‘summer and winter, the open air stands were kept open with a regular audience of 300 at the Hammersmith Bridge site. Morris was still a frequent open air speaker sometimes carrying the banner and

the platform himself'. This was after serious illness and the beginnings of continuous ill health.

May Morris recalls the campaigning vividly in a passage worth quoting at length:

'Beside the set programme of evening lectures the [Socialist League] branch conducted an open -air propaganda on Sunday mornings at various spots where we were likely to attract a group of listeners without the chance of being moved on. One favourite pitch was a little space of ground beside Hammersmith Bridge, where there was a certain projection from the bridge itself and within view of those coming and going across the river, besides being on the track of holiday-folk making for the water-side. You can picture the scene on some fine May morning: the little group of 'the faithful' clustered round the red banner, the women strolling around, giving out leaflets and offering *Commonweal* for sale; my father in his loose blue serge suit and soft felt hat speaking, a little nervously at first, but warming to his work as the crowd drew closer, and by the end of his 'turn' answering objectors and scoffers with vigorous repartee and picturesque chaff of his own. On the bridge would hang a long fringe of 'non-committed' listeners, smoking and lounging as they waited for the public-houses to open, from a passing omnibus would come (from one familiar with our movements) an ironical cry of "Three cheers for the Social Revolution!" or perhaps a genuine salutation of the well-known figure in blue. My father himself is presently released from speaking and wanders round the outskirts of the small crowd to watch how things are going.'

News from Nowhere

Hammersmith remains firmly in Morris's mind when he sets out his vision for a new society in *News from Nowhere*. He wakes up to find:

'the soap-works with their smoke vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineers works were gone; the lead works gone ... then the bridge. I had perhaps dreamed of such a bridge, but never seen one out of an illuminated manuscript; for not even the Ponte Vecchio at Florence came anywhere near it ... both shores [of the Thames] had a line of pretty houses ... and looked, above all. Comfortable as if they were, so to say, alive and sympathetic with the life of the dwellers in them.'



Kelmscott House, Hammersmith

The starting point of this article was Hammersmith's influence on Morris and Morris on Hammersmith and I hope I have shown how intertwined they are. His daily life at Kelmscott House helped shape his understanding of the poverty and degradation in the lives of workers in the surrounding streets and workplaces. He used Hammersmith as part of the location of his future society in *News from Nowhere*. He engaged with Hammersmith as an active socialist. He was seen on the streets. People knew Mr Morris and his house by the Thames.

There are so many ways to finish – so many wonderful obituaries - but perhaps in the current climate this is the most appropriate from *The Dream of John Ball*:

'Men fight to lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes it turns out

to be not what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.'

Men, and women of course, and another battle to fight for socialism.

The Coach House at Kelmscott House, 26, Upper Mall, is open to the public between 2.00 - 5.00 pm on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays with no charge. For further information about Morris and the William Morris Society please see the website williammorrissociety.org

A Revolution in 1921: Madam Thring and Seven Days that shook Acton

By John H. Grigg

The 1918 General Election gave a landslide victory for Lloyd George's Coalition between the Conservatives and the half of the Liberal Party that had broken away from the official Liberal Party during the war. This was the first election when all men over 21 had the vote and women over 30 with a property qualification also had the vote. There was a fear that this tripling of the electorate to 21 million, a great proportion of which was working class, would result in large gains for the Labour Party. This did not happen although Labour did increase its number of MPs to 57 and became the largest opposition party (Sinn Fein won 73 seats but did not take them up.) Lloyd George's Coalition won 473 of the 707 seats.

The unrealised threat of a Labour Government did not dispel the fear of general unrest. There had been revolutions in Russia and elsewhere in Europe and monarchies had been deposed. Millions of soldiers with military experience were returning from the war. Soldiers in many

barracks in Britain refused orders and there were mutinies in the camps at Calais and Folkstone. There were soldiers' marches to Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square where huge rallies demanded demobilisation.

The government had reasons for delaying demobilisation. Releasing millions of men when munitions factories were closing and before a peacetime economy could be re-established would leave many jobless. Yet the men wanted to get back to 'civvy street' and they thought that those who had been in the forces longest should be released first. But only essential workers were being released and many of them were the last to be conscripted during the war. This was a great cause of discontent, solved by Winston Churchill, the Secretary for War, by scrapping the policy and changing to 'first in first out.' The government reduced the danger of unrest by paying allowances to ex-soldiers and sailors until they found employment.

Meanwhile inflation fuelled industrial unrest. There were many strikes. A Triple Alliance between the mining, railway and transport trade unions threatened a general strike in support of the miners who struck for higher wages in October 1920. The mines were still under war time government control and Lloyd George settled on the miners' terms. Soon after this the mines were returned to their former owners and a bitter dispute broke out over wage reductions. The miners' unions refused to compromise and were locked out in April 1921. Supporting strikes under the Triple Alliance from the railway and transport men did not materialise on the planned date of Friday 15 April – a day that became known as 'Black Friday' in the Labour movement. The miners were forced back to work on the employers' terms in July. They stood little chance of victory because the country

had plunged into recession during the winter of 1920-21.

There was a brief economic boom after the war as a result of reconstruction from a war to a peacetime economy, and an assumption that Britain would resume its pre-war world trade prominence through exports and shipping. However, the country's overseas markets had diminished. The USA and Japan had captured many markets and shipping was no longer dominated by Britain. India was producing its own cotton goods and the Lancashire cotton industry was in decline. There had been signs of decline before the 1914-18 war, but the war had left Britain in debt and its industries and shipping no longer dominated world trade.

So, the brief post war boom broke in the winter of 1920-21. Unemployment soared, wages fell and there was a renewed fear of 'Bolshevism'. Lloyd George had extended unemployment insurance to practically all trades during the war and the payment of unemployment benefit took some edge off discontent. There were riots in Glasgow and marches and rallies around the country, but barricades were not set up in the streets. Discontent extended to the more monied classes and a 'Middle Classes Union' emerged to campaign against high national and local taxation which they saw as subsidising the less deserving classes.

Ex-servicemen set up several organisations that campaigned and marched for higher war pensions and widows' pensions and for preference in the job market. Eventually the four most prominent of them merged to form the British Legion in May 1921.

The other movements that started up were amongst the unemployed once the slump suddenly hit in late 1920. An Unemployed

Workers Movement emerged in London. As well as marches and rallies the movement's activities involved occupying public buildings as centres for the local unemployed, where relief and fundraising activities could be organised, leisure activities set up, and meetings and lectures held. These occupations also attracted much attention and publicised the seriousness of unemployment. Prominent in this movement was Lillian Thring, one of the leaders in the seven week occupation of Essex Road Library in Islington and the inspiration in the occupation of Acton Baths in December 1920.

In Acton were several engineering firms; Napiers that made internal combustion engines was one of them. Trade unions had a strong presence. When the slump came Acton was hit hard. One factory which had employed 900 men on two shifts now employed only 100 on one shift. The local press reported 5,000 men unemployed in November. The important Acton laundry industry, already in decline, was also hit and many women lost their jobs.

Trade unions organised meetings demanding government action, Labour councillors persuaded Acton Council to set up an Unemployment Committee. There were demands that the Council bring forward road schemes and there were deputations to the Council Offices. On one occasion an angry crowd threatened to occupy the town offices because of the council's alleged inadequate action. The men elected their own Acton District Unemployed Committee to co-ordinate activities

Open air meetings frequently took place in Acton market. The unemployed, many of whom were ex-soldiers, had meetings

there before marching the High Street with collecting boxes to draw attention to the plight of those thrown out of work. Early on Wednesday 8th December 1920 'Madam' Thring from Islington, representing the London District Council of the Unemployed, addressed a meeting of men from Acton, Ealing and Hanwell.

Who was 'Madam' Thring?



Lillian Mary Harris was born in 1887 in St. Pancras, London, the eldest of seven children. Her father was a marine store dealer. She began work as a shop assistant with Selfridges in Oxford Street and became active in the suffragette movement. In 1911 she went to Australia and continued involvement with the women's movement there. In Melbourne she came in contact with revolutionary movements and joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and gained a reputation as a brilliant public speaker.

In Australia she met Cyril Thring and they moved to Khartoum in 1913 where they married and had a son. In 1915 she was back in England working with Sylvia Pankhurst in the East London Federation of Suffragettes. Her husband died in 1917.

By 1918 she was in the North London Herald League, was active in the Hands off Russia Campaign and was later a founder member of the Islington Communist Party. In 1920 she was prominent in the Unemployed Workers Movement and took part in a seven week occupation of the Essex Road Library in Islington and was inspirational in the occupation of Acton Baths in December of that year.

The National Unemployed Workers Committee was formed in 1921 at the International Socialist Club in Hoxton and she edited their fortnightly paper *Out of Work*. In the national press she was being called 'Red Rosa.' She was part of an occupation of a St. Pancras piano factory demanding a wage increase for the workers there. She had inherited her father's marine store business and a police raid found parts of two German machine guns there. She was arrested for unlawful possession of arms but ultimately found not guilty at the High Court.

A month later she was the agent for Shapurj Saklatvala, the Communist candidate in Battersea North at the 1922 General Election. Labour gave him a free run and he won but lost the seat in the 1923 General Election. She afterwards left the Communist Party and was supporting Fenner Brockway the Independent Labour Party (ILP) candidate at the Abbey division of Westminster by-election in 1924. She was a member of the Battersea Council for Action during the 1926 General Strike and in 1927 became involved in the Women's Co-operative Movement. During that year she married Robert Harvey and a daughter was born in 1929.

In the 1930s she was an early activist in the Anti-Fascist Movement. She left Robert Harvey in 1935 for George Tasker, a fellow member of the ILP. The ILP

opposed the Second World War on pacifist and anti-capitalist grounds and Lillian supported that position and she assisted deserters and conscientious objectors. After the war she helped with squatters' movements and was secretary of the National Agricultural Union Rochford Branch. Later she was an ILP local councillor for a short while and finally joined the Labour Party in 1950. Lillian Thring died in Rochford in 1964.

There doesn't seem to be any place other than the *Acton Gazette & Express* where Lillian Thring was referred to as 'Madam'. The paper reported on 'Madam' Thring delivering a forceful address on Wednesday 8th December 1920 in the Acton Market Place. She told in 'furtive' phrases of what had been achieved throughout London by the seizure of public buildings and the conversion of them into centres for the relief of unemployment. The paper described her as a pale faced woman with a red ribbon on her breast, and an eager voluble speaker that had a great effect on the crowd. She proposed constitutional orderly direct action and stressed the need to obey the dictates of their committee.

Occupation of Acton Baths

Following her speech about 750 men were formed into small companies and accompanied by policemen processed quietly through the streets until they reached the Acton Swimming Baths where the main pool had been boarded over in the winter and used for dances and other events. 'GHQ' was scrawled on the building's notice board and 'cancelled' was written across bills advertising dances and entertainments. The crowd then took possession of the Acton Baths Hall. Madam Thring said they should act in a constitutional manner, do no damage and

be careful where they put their cigarette ends. It clear from reports that the action was well planned and many of the men came from outside Acton from nearby Ealing and Hanwell and from other parts of London as far away as Islington which was where Lillian Thring lived. The men had meetings in the Baths Hall, organised collections of food from local traders and set up boot repairs and hair cutting. At night several men stayed to make sure the building remained in their hands. Trade union cards had to be shown to gain admittance. It was bitterly cold and Acton Council turned off the heat at night.

During next few days Acton Council, led by its chairman, the formidable Miss Smee who was Acton's first woman councillor, had several meetings with the men's committee about them vacating the baths hall. The Labour Party had seven councillors who had constantly urged the council to help relieve unemployment by bringing forward road repairs and the painting of schools and council buildings. They could not, however, approve of the local swimming baths being invaded and their response was to try to find other more suitable council accommodation. Meanwhile Madam Thring had been arrested by plain clothed policemen, perhaps because of her suspected involvement with revolutionary causes rather than the occupation of Acton Baths. A Labour councillor stated that the capture of the baths was the outcome of a general attempt to form a Soviet government in the country by the International Socialist Club in East London which, he said, 'was mainly controlled by young Jews.' Madam Thring was released without charge.

There was local opposition to the occupation of their swimming baths partly because it led to the cancellation of popular dances and entertainments and also because many men from outside Acton were involved. Yet donations for

the relief of distress were coming in and several local traders donated food.

Also opposed to the occupation was the Acton United Services Fund Club that supported unemployed ex-soldiers and sailors. They said that only Acton men should be looked after and that there were men from other districts at the baths who were benefitting from collections and donations of food from Acton people.

Things came to a head during a meeting with the Acton Council's Unemployment Committee when the men turned down an offer made to the council by the Reverend Piele of the use of two rooms adjacent to All Saints' Church in West Acton. The United Services Fund Club quickly accepted the offer and many unemployed men moved in. Then some of the Acton men at the Baths also switched to the church rooms. On Tuesday 14th December the Town Council resolved to secure possession of the baths and at 11pm that night the police moved in. There was little resistance from about 40 men and one woman in the hall. They were allowed to keep five bags of street collected money and a red flag was captured and taken to the police station. The local paper stated that a few men seemed relieved to have an excuse to go home.

During the next couple of days men evicted from the Baths Hall marched to the rooms at All Saints' Church where there were confused negotiations but only Acton men were allowed in. There were rumours that a great march would descend on Acton on Thursday 16th December to demand reoccupation of the baths. Shopkeepers boarded up their windows and extra police were drafted in. A procession assembled at Shepherds Bush where the Kings Hall cinema was occupied for a meeting. At about 8pm a crowd of up to 2,000 set off for the Acton Council Office and were joined by local men. The High Street was blocked and trams were held up. The Council's Unemployment

Committee was in session and received deputations that included Madam Thring who, it seems, had once again been arrested and released earlier in the day. The deputation said the All Saints' Church rooms were ill equipped and too small. They demanded that the Baths be returned to them and they could not be held responsible for what would happen if they told the crowd that the Council's chairman, Miss Smee, would not give way. Outside the besieging throng was singing the 'Red Flag' and 'While Shepherds Watched' the latter being an allusion to the police. Miss Smee did not give way and the deputation withdrew calling her an obstinate, hard hearted woman. It would be fascinating to know, but we never will, how the discussion went between Madam Thring and Miss Smee. But there was no disorder and the crowd, no doubt to the disappointment of some of the deputation dispersed quietly. Miss Smee had, however, said that if the All Saints' Church premises were inadequate Acton Council would try to provide other accommodation.

Those men who had declined to accept the All Saints' Church contended that the council had a duty to provide accommodation. The All Saints' rooms were charitable in nature. They wanted the Baths back but that wasn't going to happen and they were offered and, no doubt grudgingly, accepted use of Osborne Road School for two hours every evening and on Saturday afternoons. This wasn't satisfactory and so they finally approached the men at All Saints' to discuss amalgamation. After much talk this was achieved and a joint committee at the church rooms was formed.

By now all agreed that the church rooms were too small, were only temporary and facilities were poor. Acton Council accepted this and offered two army huts on King George's Gardens by the High Street. The huts were already in stock and the

men constructed them themselves and put in work to make them acceptable. They moved in – Acton men only and strict rules prohibited gambling, card-playing, obscene language and spitting. A small group of ‘ultra-red’ who caused trouble at the outset were ‘dealt with.’ Meals were provided and the huts became a meeting place for the unemployed where entertainments and fund raising events took place.

The huts were listed in the *Out Of Work* journal edited by Madam Thring as one of 23 metropolitan centres affiliated to the London District Council of the Unemployed. The ideal of the Council, it was reported, was ‘the overthrow of the capitalist system and the establishment of the workers’ republic in Great Britain.’

Revolution in Britain 1918?

So can this tell us anything about the threat of revolution after World War 1? There was discontent in the army about demobilisation, which resulted in mutinies, but I have found little evidence of ‘armed revolution’. They wanted to get out of the army, not use it to overthrow the state. Revolutions around the world frequently involve seizure of power by an army led by a general or groups of officers. No officers seem to be involved in the so-called mutinies in Britain after the War. The ‘mutinies’ consisted mainly of refusing to turn up to parades or leaving barracks to go on marches demanding demobilisation.

Industrially there were many strikes, even a threat of a general strike. All these were for higher wages and shorter hours. The miners at the centre of industrial unrest were resisting wage cuts and wanted the mines nationalised.

The unemployed workers movements focussed on demands for public works and relief in money or kind from relief funds organised in conjunction with local

councils and from Poor Law Boards of Guardians. Often they were organised by ‘extremists’ such as Madam Thring’s London District Council of the Unemployed that sought a workers’ revolution in Britain. But the rank and file, certainly in Acton, didn’t want to know about that and once established in their hut no further acts of rebellion were reported. There were nevertheless continued fears of Bolshevism often reflected in national and local newspaper reports

Sources: *Acton Gazette and Express*. There is information about Lillian Thring on Wikipedia, including an article by Graham Stevenson.

History of the Labour Movement in West London: the Story of Acton

By Barbara Humphries

In the General Election of December 1918 the Acton Labour Party stood a candidate in the parliamentary division of Acton for the first time ever. His name was Robert Dunsmore and his supporters called him ‘the man for Acton and the man for action.’ He had been born in Kilmarnock, Scotland. His campaign consisted of evening public meeting on the Mount in Acton High Street. This became known as ‘Dunmore’s corner.’ In the aftermath of World War 1 Dunsmore called for government help for war widows and orphans, a programme of public works to guarantee employment, the maintenance of wartime controls on prices and wages, support for the League of Nations and Home Rule for Ireland. In line with Labour Party policy he campaigned for a capital levy on the rich to pay off Britain’s war debt.

The Representation of the People Act (1918) had increased the electorate of the

UK three fold. A large part of this was the enfranchisement of women over 30, but also many working class men were enfranchised for the first time. Dunsmore faced his Conservative rival, Sir Harry Brittan, a local company director. Both candidates addressed the significant working population of Acton - railway workers at the Old Oak Common depot on the Great Western Railway and women laundry workers in south Acton. In a post-war election where 'Hang the Kaiser' was main focus, Dunsmore lost to Brittan, by 4,241 to 11,671 votes.

The Industrialisation of Acton



Napiers on Acton Vale in the 1920s

West London was then part of Middlesex and London suburbia. Its towns and villages had distinctive features. Some of them like Ealing the 'queen of suburbs' were home to a commuter population who worked in the city of London, others like Southall were industrial towns with a population of railway workers. As a town Acton was both a working suburb and dormitory suburb. It had a working class population who worked on the railways or the trams and buses, or in the laundries of Soap-Sud Island in South Acton. South Acton was once the centre of laundries employing thousands of women. These women had husbands with insecure employment in the building trade so it was essential for them to work, even when they had young families. Living conditions in Acton differed very much. Homes with all

mod-cons were built for city gents in Gunnersbury in contrast to the multi-occupied terraced housing in South Acton.

In the interwar years the industrialisation of Acton continued apace like other towns on the outskirts of London, where land was cheap. One the largest employers, Napiers had relocated from Vauxhall to Acton Vale in 1904. It was the centre of aircraft engineering during World War 2, employing at its peak, 20,000 workers. Other factories like Eversheds and Landis and Gyr opened on Acton Vale. In north Acton there were food processing factories like Walls. The Park Royal site was developed during World War 1 for munitions works and that also became a key industrial area. By the 1930s Acton had hundreds of factories and was an industrial town. The resulting change to its politics took place more slowly however. The 1921 census showed that as many people travelled into Acton to work, as travelled out of Acton to work.

The trades unions were strong on the railways and London transport. There was an equal pay strike on the London trams in 1918 supported by the workers in Acton. There was support for the 1926 General Strike called in support of the miners. Joe Sherman (whose portrait can be seen in the West London Trades Union Club) described the strike in Ealing as being 'solid' and mass meetings were held on Ealing Common.

Members of the National Union Railwaymen and their wives were active Labour Party members and some like Joe Sparks became local councillors. The basis for Labour support in Acton came from south Acton (South West Ward) and from the north east of the borough. In 1919 the Addison Housing Act provided funding to local councils to build housing and Acton council took advantage of this to build the

East Acton estate. The Labour Group on Acton Council led by Joe Sparks pressed the majority Conservative backed Anti-Waste Party (Waste in the sense of guarding ratepayers' money nothing to do with recycling) to buy land for housing on Acton Vale in 1937. This was not developed until after 1945 when 300 flats were built.

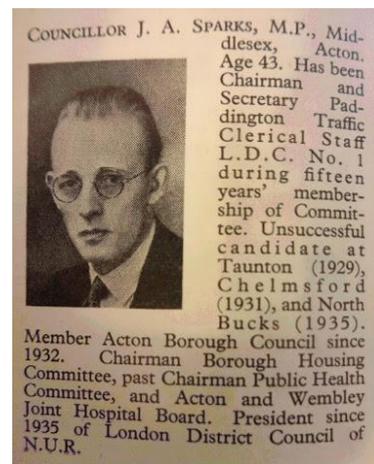
As the population changed in Acton and it became more of an industrial town, the Labour Party increased its support. Robert Dunsmore was not to stand as a candidate again, but the party fielded a couple of interesting candidates. Mary Richardson, a former suffragette who had slashed a painting in the National Gallery, stood in 1922. She was replaced by a new candidate called Oliver Baldwin, the son of Conservative leader and prime minister Stanley Baldwin. Supporters of Mary Richardson were so angry that they stood their own independent candidate in October 1924. Oliver was not elected but offered a safer Labour seat in the west Midlands. He was elected as a Labour MP in 1929, sitting on the opposite side of the House to his father. His legacy to Acton Labour Party was the Acton Socialist Choir. Socialist choirs were a feature of local parties then, along with drama groups and whist drives.

The Road to 1945

Acton however itself elected a Labour MP in the 1929 General Election. By this time the electorate had been expanded by extending the franchise to all women over 21. As in most other parliamentary divisions, women voters were the majority in Acton. The local Labour Party Women's Section and the Women's Co-operative Guild appealed to new women voters. The Labour candidate Joe Shillaker called a rally in the local Globe cinema which 3,000 attended and many

more had to be turned away. The event was a spectacular scene with lighting effects. On the eve of poll a banner draped across the stage described Shillaker as 'the first Labour MP for Acton'. Shillaker was elected by 467 votes, joining MPs from neighbouring Hammersmith, Willesden and North Kensington, as part of Labour's electoral success in London.

Due to national events and the fall of the 1929/31 government when leader Ramsay MacDonald joined the Conservatives, Acton was lost in 1931, not to return a Labour MP until 1945. That MP was Joe Sparks who achieved a substantial victory in what was the political earthquake of the 1945 General Election. Sparks Close in Priory Road, North Acton is named after him.



Joe Sparks (Hayes Peoples History)

Sparks received much help from workers at Napiers, organised in the Amalgamated Engineering Union. They organised factory gate meetings and collected funds in the factory for his campaign. In a stormy election campaign the Conservative

candidate Captain Longhurst was shouted down at a meeting in Soap-Sud Island. He called on his supporters to 'vote Conservative and make Sparks fly'. But he was to lose, winning 12,134 votes to 19,950 for Sparks.

There had been no general election since 1935, due to a wartime electoral truce. In 1943 in Acton however there had been a by-election, in which Walter Padley, a member of the Independent Labour Party challenged the coalition candidate. He did not win but gained the half the number of votes of his Conservative rival - a sign that there was a growing appetite for change.

The Housing Problem



The South Acton Estate

After 1945 Labour had a majority on Acton council until it was wound up and amalgamated with the London Borough of Ealing in 1965. The council's most pressing problem was still that of housing and shortage of land. Actonians were encouraged to move out of the borough, to new towns for example. Finally a decision was taken to re-develop the south Acton area, replacing terraced housing with new flats in tower blocks. There was a vision which would provide better housing conditions for residents in south Acton, many of whom lacked basic amenities such as an inside bathroom, as well as community facilities such as playgrounds

for children. However by this time the Conservatives were back in control in government and subsidies for council housing were being cut. Rents were also de-controlled in private tenancies which affected Acton very badly.

Acton, like the rest of Greater London enjoyed full employment after 1945. There were always more vacancies than those searching work. This had an upward lift on wages. The unions also remained strong. It was claimed that Acton had more branches of the AEU than any town south of Watford. But in 1962 came the shock announcement that Napiers 'the industrial giant' was to close. The local council, the now Conservative MP, Phillip Holland and local trades unions appealed to the Prime Minister (Harold Macmillan) to save Napiers but without any success. Napiers was closed with the loss of 2,000 jobs and a hole in the Acton economy. Unemployment in the town doubled within a year.

By the late 1950s the Acton constituency was no longer a safe Labour seat, with the Conservatives determined to revive their support in London's suburbia. There was a feel-good factor and memories of the 1930s seemed far away. In the 1964 General Election however, Bernard Floud was elected as a Labour MP. He was one of Harold Wilson's majority of four. Acton as part of the London Borough of Ealing was to become very much election swing territory, changing hands on a regular basis.

This article will also be published in the *Acton Historian*

32 Woolwich Road

By Mary Mills

This article is going to be about a modest little shop in a down market parade in working class East Greenwich. The reason is that it has been in the same use for over 90 years and has just had a major makeover.



In the 1890s the parade of shops 22-46 Woolwich Road was almost the last addition to an area which was rapidly changing. The land which once belonged to Coombe Farm near Westcombe Park Station was rapidly being covered with houses and Tunnel Avenue would soon open up as a huge new road through the area. There was a new police station, a Baptist Church and a mission room soon to be joined by a library and a police station. To the west in Woolwich Road were the workhouse and a complex of schools and to the south of these new shops was the Royal Hospital Cemetery - now East Greenwich Pleasance. William Booth's survey, apparently written following a walk in 1899, says that the road was 'unbuilt' as far as the Baptist Chapel at the bottom of Kensing Road, apart from an 'old farmhouse occupied by a market

gardener'. This must have been the last market garden in East Greenwich, as 'Westcombe Cottage' it appears on older maps.

So the row of shops dates from around the 1890s and hoped no doubt to serve new residents moving into the houses in Chevening and Halstow Roads and Fingal Street. An early street directory has two confectioners, a butcher, a fishmonger as well as, sadly, a pawnbroker and also an 'incandescent shop' - whatever was that? No 32, in the middle of the terrace was the business of Alfred Rees, corn dealer. Ten years later in the 1911 census no.32 has become a draper's shop run by Sydney and Florence Burns, a couple in their late 20s. What happened next we don't know as the Great War came to disrupt everyone's lives. Did Sydney and Florence survive it - a draper doesn't seem the most vital business for the war effort.

In 1926 the shop was taken over by Greenwich Labour Party. Now before we get any further, we need quite a bit of explanation, because that was something very different in 1926 than it is now. Today the building belongs to Greenwich and Woolwich Labour Party which didn't exist in 1926. There was Greenwich Labour Party and there was Woolwich Labour Party. This article is not going to be about Woolwich Labour Party. In 1926 that was a body which was unique and amazing and lots and lots of articles and theses and even some books have been written about it.

Greenwich Labour Party was set up, along with most other local Labour Parties, in 1918 following a decision made nationally to inaugurate a network of local organisations. Labour parties were set up in most parliamentary constituencies and they took their rules and procedures from the existing rule book of Woolwich Labour

Party and most importantly, Woolwich's ideas of individual party membership. There had been, of course, as in most industrial towns, labour movement activity for some time before 1918.

In the 1895 General Election, Gas Workers Union organiser, Pete Curran, had stood as the candidate for the Greenwich and Deptford Labour Electoral Committee with support from such luminaries of the trade union movement as Will Thorne, and Tom Mann. His candidacy was also endorsed by the then vicar of Christ Church, East Greenwich. Bottom of the poll he got 391 votes but it was a start. By 1919 they were doing well in local elections with a number of wards – Deptford, Marsh (Peninsula), West, electing Labour councillors with big majorities. In 1919 came overall control and the first Labour Mayor of Greenwich, Benjamin Lemmon after whom Lemmon Road is named. The Labour Party was then and henceforth in charge of the Borough.

So what do we mean by 'Greenwich' in 1919? Certainly nothing to do with Woolwich. In 1899 a new Act of Parliament set up the Metropolitan London Boroughs. Greenwich was made up, I think, of the parishes of St. Alfege, Greenwich, St. Luke, Charlton, and St Nicholas Deptford roughly the same area as the west part of the current Royal Borough. There was a town hall, the old St. Alfege vestry hall in Greenwich High Road, now West Greenwich House. So Greenwich Borough was up and running – leftish labour, a bit 'arty', a bit sort of clever 'posh' as has been described to me lately. It built baths, and clinics and libraries, and eventually the first ever local government computer centre and its ground breaking architecturally important art deco town hall. There was also a lot of help for blind people – you may remember the blind workshops. This was because

Arthur Chrisp, a leading councillor, was blind and hopefully the residents of today's Chrisp House in Maze Hill are aware of him and his work.

Scattered round the Borough are reminders of other activists from these early days. Beacham Close in Charlton is named for Tommy Beacham, elected to Greenwich Council in 1919, Mayor in 1929 and London County Council (LCC) member in the 1950s. Minnie Bennett (Minnie Bennet House) was Mayor in 1956. She told me how pleased she was to prevent a sewage disposal plant being built on the Peninsula. Harold Gibbons (Harold Gibbons House) was three times Mayor of Greenwich. Johanna Gollogly (Gollogly Terrace) was Mayor in 1947 and LCC member in 1948. Ada Kennedy (Ada Kennedy Court) had been a suffragette and was councillor for Marsh ward from 1932. Jack Phipps (Phipps House) was a road sweeper. His portrait hung in the Party offices for many years. (Where is it now?) The redoubtable Peggy Middleton was a Greenwich councillor in the 1950s and also LCC member. Most famously she knew Paul Robeson. Peggy Middleton House was pulled down ten or so years ago now.

In 1963 Greenwich was required to join Woolwich in the London Borough of Greenwich, as a very junior partner. The atmosphere in Greenwich at the merger was described in the *Mercury* newspaper as 'plain unadulterated gloom'. Neither the posh town hall, nor the revolutionary computer centre survived the transfer to Woolwich for very long.

This was not, I hope, what was foreseen in 1927 when the Greenwich Labour Party took over the little shop in Woolwich Road – they called it the 'Labour Hall' although 'cat swinging' is not a Labour Party activity. Greenwich has always been a

'mass membership' party - for instance in 1929 it had 2,435 members and this office and a meeting room were very necessary. The previous office had been on Blackheath Hill, but this is hearsay and anyone with any on this detail would be very welcome

The shop was opened on 22nd December 1927 by Parliamentary Candidate Edward Palmer who said "It was not a large place but it was a good beginning". From then on Committee meetings were held there while large meetings were at Three Cups Hall in Trafalgar Road, as now when they tend to be held at Charlton House. The work of the Party and routine election work has continued at Woolwich Road. Despite success on Greenwich Council the LCC seats were not won by Labour until 1934. The parliamentary seat was also less secure. Edward Timothy Palmer had won in 1923, but reflecting the fortunes of the Ramsay Macdonald era, lost in 1924, won again in 1929, lost again in 1931. In each election he stood against a strong local Unionist candidate, Sir George Hume, who went on to hold the seat throughout the 1930s. It was not until 1945 that Joe Reeves became Labour MP for Greenwich with a 10,000 majority, followed successively by Richard Marsh (1959), Guy Barnett (1971), Nick Raynsford (1992) and now Matt Pennycook (2015).

Looking at resolutions passed by the Party in the 1930s you realise how nothing changes. There are just as many condemning the Secretary for sending notices out late and to the wrong address then, as now and moans about lack of time for proper discussions. As the Second World War began there were worries about black-out lights, but also support for keeping pigs on council allotments. I noted a lecture on proportional representation in 1945. There was great

support for the coming of the National Health Service despite some worries about the future of clinics, which were then largely still council owned.

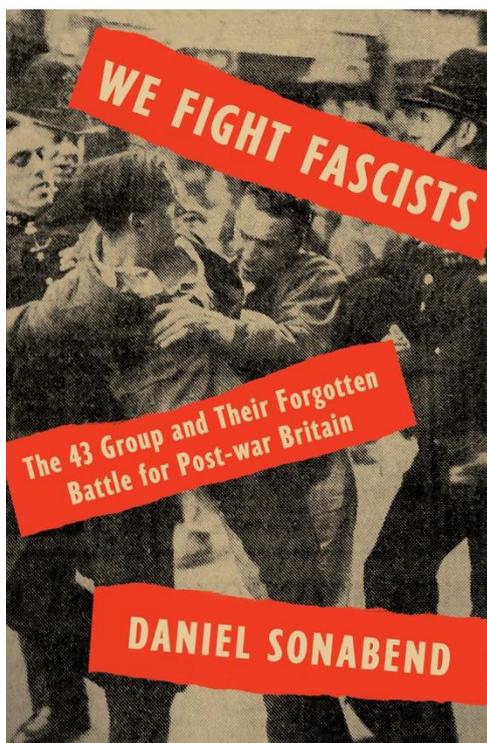
At various times some of the rooms have been rented out, for example in 1943 to the Greenwich Rabbit Club, on condition no rabbits to be brought into the building, and in the 1960s to the Barge Builders Union. John Austin remembers them queuing down the road to pay their dues on a Friday night. The Women's Section met there. Who remembers Peggy tearing up her Party card over something or other at every meeting she went to? As Women's Section Secretary she let men join as long as they were the husbands of women members. Members of Parliament, for instance Guy Barnett have used it as office accommodation. Throughout the fabric has been maintained by what has essentially been a community effort. Every year someone with known handyman skills has found themselves elected 'in charge of the building', and so it is only after ninety years that a professional restoration of the fabric has become necessary.

And so this humble little shop has had a makeover, and many thanks to the Party Treasurer who has acted as Clerk of the Works throughout as well as co-ordinating fundraising, because this hasn't come cheap. Structurally sound and smart let's hope it sees us through the next ninety years so well. It has provided a service not just to the Labour Party but, by providing a base for its elected representatives, and their advice services, the community as a whole as well.

Book Reviews

***We Fight Fascists: The 43 Group and Their Forgotten Battle for Post War Britain*, by Daniel Sonabend (published by Verso Books, 2019)**

Reviewed by Robert Whytehead (published in the Hackney Archives Newsletter)



‘In 1946 many Jewish soldiers returned to their homes in England imagining that they had fought and defeated the forces of fascism in Europe. Yet in London they found a revived fascist movement inspired by Sir Oswald Mosley and stirring up agitation against Jews and communists. Many felt that the government, the police and even the Jewish Board of Deputies were ignoring the threat; so they had to take matters into their own hands, by any means necessary. Forty-three Jewish servicemen met together and set up a group that tirelessly organised, infiltrated meetings, and broke up street demonstrations to stop the rebirth of the

far right. The group included returned war heroes; women who went undercover; and young Jews, such as hairdresser Vidal Sassoon, seeking adventure. From 1947, the 43 Group grew into a powerful troop that could muster hundreds of fighters turning meetings into mass street brawls at short notice. The history of the 43 Group is not just a gripping story of a forgotten moment in Britain's post-war history; it is also a timely lesson in how to confront fascism, and how to win. (*Guardian* book review)

Much of the book describes events in the East End, where the fascists undertook provocative actions, and from where much of their opposition was drawn. One of the 43 Group leaders was Hackney-born Gerry Flamberg, and the book reaches a form of crescendo with a chapter on ‘The Battle of Ridley Road’ in the summer of 1947, at a time when anti-semitism was exacerbated by events in Palestine.

Reform & Revolt in the City of Dreaming Spires: Radical, Socialist and Communist Politics in the City of Oxford 1830-1980 by Duncan Bowrie (University of Westminster Press, 2018)

Reviewed by Linda Shampan

Many historical studies of Oxford focus on the university but, as Duncan Bowrie points out in the preface to his study of local Oxford politics, he aims to include the interaction between the working class political activists in the city and the university-based intellectuals. While Oxford and Cambridge are often lumped together as ‘Oxbridge’, one traditional centre of privilege, he views the towns as significantly different: Cambridge being very much a university town, while Oxford

is a town with a commercial and industrial history.

He points out that many leading Labour politicians gained early political experience not only through the traditional 'Oxford Union' of the university but engaged in the politics of the city. The Labour Party revival in the 1930s was initiated in Oxford by Cowley workers such as John Ida, and attracted a number of academics such as Richard Crossman and Patrick Gordon Walker who later served in Harold Wilson's cabinet. (He notes though that Clem Attlee, Harold Wilson and Tony Blair all studied at Oxford but had no involvement in city politics and joined the Labour Party some time later.) Bowrie himself has the dual experience of being involved in student politics in the early 1970s while studying for a history degree and also being active in community campaigns and the local Labour Party, including serving as a councillor 1979-1983.

The dates covered are chosen partly for historical significance. 1830 marks the beginning of the Reform movement which sought more democratic representation in both local and central government, and 1980 was the year that Labour won for the first time an overall majority on Oxford City Council. But Bowrie acknowledges that the main reason for ending the book in 1980 was the difficulty of juggling his work as a councillor, a housing job in London and continuing to write. The original text was written between 1976 and 1980, and recently revised.

Bowrie includes a lot of fascinating material from local primary sources in particular the local newspapers such as the *Oxford Chronicle* and *Oxford Herald*, and Boundary Commissioners' reports.

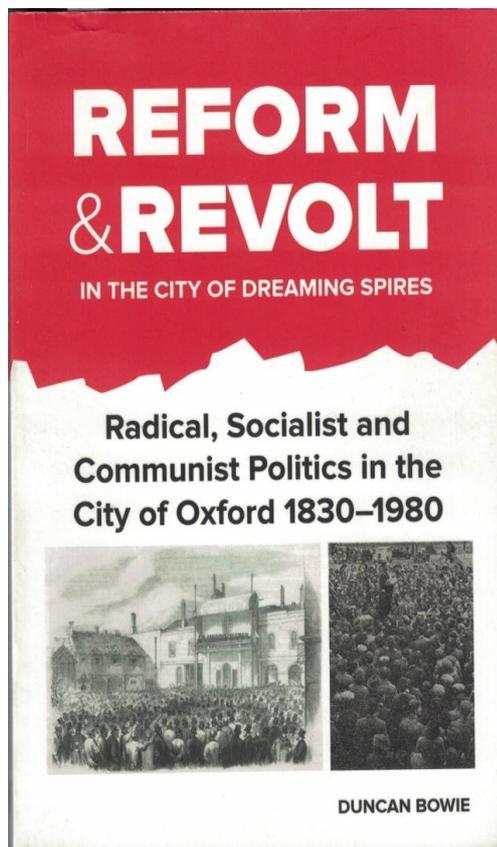
I found the first part of the book particularly interesting, outlining the key progressive concerns *prior* to the formation of the Labour Party, in particular the development of 'Reform politics', Suffrage and anti-Corn Law campaigns, Chartism, the abolition of slavery, revision of the Poor Law and efforts to improve factory conditions, such as the 1843 Factory Bill, huge national issues viewed through the lens of a specific town including its local governance.

Until 1835, Oxford was governed by a corporation under a charter of James 1st, with the Reform Act passed in 1832, the franchise was given to 'every male of full age who occupied as owner or tenant a building of the yearly value of not less than ten pounds' - a limited franchise, but one that did enable *some* local people to select who governed the city (and represented them in parliament).

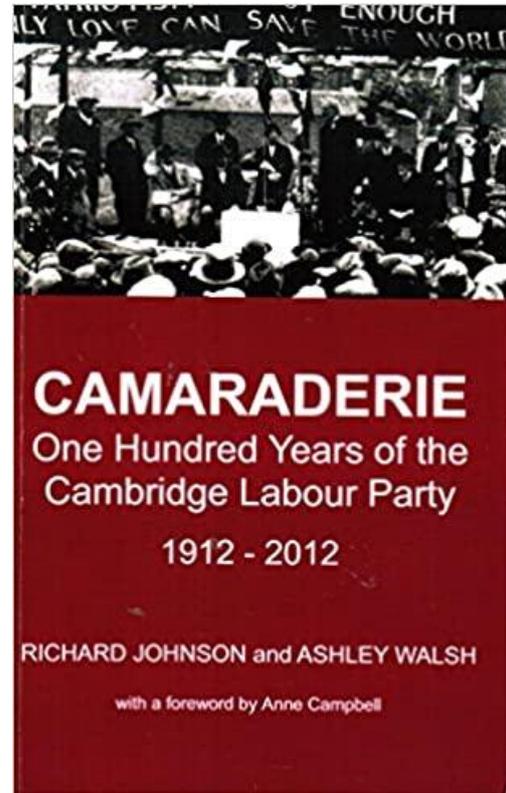
The book's second section charts the growth of socialism, the formation of the Oxford Socialist League (1883) and the early years of the Oxford Trades Council (1888-1900). The foundation of the Oxford Municipal Labour Representation Association in 1902 sought to establish for the first time a working class voice on the City Council, Board of Guardians and the School Board, without which provision of fair-rented good housing, good tramways and payment of trade union rates of wages in all public services could not be achieved.

The latter half of the book then traces the history of the Labour Party in Oxford, set in the context of key national events and movements, including the First World War, the General Strike, unemployment, the growth of both communism and fascism in the thirties. Throughout he contrasts the approaches of those engaged

in progressive politics seeking reform and those who preferred the politics of revolt, protest and revolutionary rhetoric, and the interaction of working class and middle class groups within the labour movement. He sees this as co-existence rather than co-operation, 'while it could be argued that the involvement of intellectuals in the city's progressive politics has made the local movement more vibrant, but it has at times been destabilising....sometimes with negative outcomes'.



Reform and Revolt overall gives a vivid picture of local politics in the city of Oxford over a 150 year period, brought to life with extensive quotes from contemporary sources. The cost of the book is relatively modest (£22.99) it can also be downloaded free as a pdf.



This book was published in 2012 to commemorate the centenary of the Cambridge Labour Party.

As in Oxford students and academics played a very active part over the years, but the party also had a strong base in the town itself. In the early years support was given by railway workers and builders in what became known as 'Red Romsey'. Later, however this working class district was to become 'gentrified', populated by professional people. Cambridge did not experience the growth of industry in the interwar years as did Oxford. It had a rural hinterland of agricultural workers, much of which has now disappeared. Current Labour MPs started their political life in Cambridge. Richard Burgon (Leeds East) for instance was a Labour Club activist and Barry Gardiner (Brent North) was Mayor of the City in 1992.

Stan Newens celebrates his 90th birthday and 70 years membership of the Labour Party



This commemoration took place on Wednesday 26th February in Portcullis House, hosted by Jeremy Corbyn. It was attended by members of Harlow Constituency Labour Party and members of Labour Heritage. Stan was an MP for Harlow and MEP for Central London. He was a founder member of Labour Heritage and until recently chair of the organisation. In recognition of his achievements Jeremy Corbyn referred to Stan's autobiography *In Quest of a Fairer Society*.

For more information about Labour Heritage see www.labourheritage.org. Visit also our Facebook page for more photos. <https://www.facebook.com/labourheritage/>