

# Wandsworth Historian

## The Journal of the Wandsworth Historical Society

Number 112

First published in 1971

Autumn 2021

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### From the editor

It's all about 'perspective'. By that I mean, with the passing of time and our own inevitable increase in worldly experience, we can – indeed, we should – look upon the same set of facts in a different light. Letting go of a long-held view and reassessing our first impressions is a particular challenge for historians, but one, through gritted teeth, we must be eager to take on.

When I was about 16 I bought for half-a-crown a 1925 bound volume of *Punch*. At the time the book was only forty years old, and yet I was enthralled by what I perceived as its sense of long-lost innocence. Browsing through it I laughed when it suggested going for a drive in a car in order to relax, and its wry smiles over the fashion for cloche hats and the novel pleasures of newspaper crosswords.

Looking back at it recently, now that it is close to a hundred years old, I am struck by how insensitive I was. Search as I may, there are no dignified images of black people, no sympathetic

hint of the exceptional anguish that the divorce laws at the time could produce, and *definitely* no mention of homosexuality. It's still the same book, and yet it's not. Being a historian is no easy sinecure. We need to stay flexible and reconsider the past with ever-changing eyes. Like I say, it's a case of constantly reappraising our perspectives.  
*Neil Robson*

### Front cover

Clapham Junction, Battersea from St John's Hill in about 1905, with a skyline in the distance virtually unchanged in nearly 120 years. Munt's Hall, home of a prominent firm of piano dealers, appears on the right; the Arding & Hobbs departmental store, destined to be destroyed by fire in December 1909, stands in the centre; and the 'Falcon' public house towers gaudily to the left. Metal tracks score the streets at a time when the local tramways were yet to be converted to electric traction, and when liberally scattered horse manure made crossing the road a less than pleasant adventure. (Coloured postcard from the WHS Research Collection)

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## Front cover

Presbyterianism was a Scottish reformist movement, particularly influenced by the French theologian John Calvin and greatly mistrusted by Elizabeth I's government. It was in Wandsworth that the First English Presbytery was established in 1572, the leader of the cause at the time being Rev. Thomas Cartwright, a man so riddled with gout that he was allegedly obliged to deliver all his lectures and sermons from a kneeling position.

In May 1922, 350 years after its English foundation, Wandsworth's Presbyterians celebrated the anniversary, combining the event with the fiftieth birthday of their own church on Merton Road. On that occasion the *Wandsworth Borough News* applauded the local congregation for remaining 'staunch to the highest ideals of conduct and faith'. The church itself was destroyed by bombing in the Second World War. (WHS Research Collection, item no. 1518)

## From the editor

Don't get me started about copyright! In the United Kingdom all creative works – photos, sketches, ephemeral jottings – are subject to restricted reuse by other people, and those protections last for the lifetime of their creators plus seventy years after their deaths. As a result, unborn relatives are able to enjoy unearned rights decades after their predecessors' demise. 'Creating a copyright aristocracy' was how one American academic scornfully described the situation. And so, although E. M. Forster died as long ago as 1970, his 1910 novel *Howard's End* will stay under copyright – until 2041! Bonkers!

Is this really a concern to people like us? Yes it is; present-day historians wishing to publish the results of their research must weigh the risks before reproducing any sixty-year-old snapshot, map or even an entry in a diary. And as a consequence, we readers lose out too. What an intolerable state of affairs.

If I ruled the world, creators' rights would be protected during their own lifetime but no more than a handful of months beyond that, and their yet-unborn relations would simply have to take care of themselves, just like the rest of us. But copyright is not an issue liable to be resolved in the near future, because law cases are expensive and any damages awarded are unlikely to be large. Besides, there's currently no political will to change these aggravating constraints, though I have to confess there are moments when frustration pushes me to the very edge of rebellion.

*Neil Robson*

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## Front cover

It was 1950, the week before Easter, still not five years since the end of the war, and the 'Forces' Sweetheart' was coming to Tooting. The venue was the Granada Cinema (now Buzz Bingo), even then celebrated for its eclectic interior; the organiser was the Kyiv-born impresario Sandor Gorlinsky; and for his main supporting artist he picked Reg Dixon, a well-liked radio comedian, famous for his signature tune *Confidentially*.

But the real draw was the 33-year-old Vera Lynn, renowned for her hugely successful sound recordings and her work boosting the morale of overseas troops. And with the price of the cheapest seats at only half-a-crown (12½p), this event was bound to be a crowd-puller. Who among that audience could have imagined that their star that Sunday would turn into a National Treasure and live for another seventy years?

(Programme cover, Patrick Loobey Collection)

## From the editor

'Festival', *noun*: 'a period of celebration along the lines of a themed event'. It is often unwise to drift into superlatives, but surely this year's Wandsworth Heritage Festival was one of the best. Its format was broad – talks to attend, guided walks to enjoy, and even some pre-recorded presentations posted up on YouTube. And the topics it covered were remarkably diverse, ranging from the industrial archaeology of the Wandle, via a shout-out for various past Battersea women achievers, to an absorbing insight into the rich archive of the South London Swimming Club.

Without a doubt this year's Festival should be counted a success; it inspired a whole range of local historians to engage with numerous audiences and 'tell their stories', whilst at the same time reaching out to people well beyond what we might call our regular customer base. I was amazed, for example, that during our Platinum Jubilee party in Southfields no fewer than three of my neighbours told me they'd watched the online talks I'd produced.

Looking forward to 2023, why don't you consider participating and thereby relishing the sense of fulfilment that goes with the experience? If that's a step too far, do come along and lend your support to other historians and the efforts they have made. The Heritage Festival is a time for us to enjoy an uncommonly wide mix of events linked to an activity that gives enormous pleasure to so many of us. Make sure next year that you are part of it.

*Neil Robson*

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There's a lesson to be learnt here. As healthy historians we must develop the courage to weigh our own country's experiences much more frequently alongside those of other lands. We might even find that there are aspects to them that point us towards admitting something we hadn't appreciated about ourselves. And that has got to be a good thing.

*Neil Robson*

## Front cover

At 12.45 on 3 July 1902, nine-year-old Reginald Baker, proudly sporting a ruby-red cardboard badge on his chest, joined crowds of other schoolchildren outside the Ram Brewery in Wandsworth High Street, waiting to set off down Merton Road to the official local celebrations for King Edward VII's Coronation. An hour later they arrived at Leg of Mutton Field, a large open space west of Sutherland Grove, Southfields, where donkey rides, coconut shies and eventually fireworks awaited them.

In 1968 Baker donated his badge to the WHS together with his Programme of the day (see *WH* 80 (2005), p. 20), adding in his letter that this was 'the first large event that the new Wandsworth Borough Council had to organise'. 'God Save the King', they cried after a gap of over six decades. It is interesting to reflect that we find ourselves in precisely the same position.

(WHS Research Collection, item no. 1289)

## From the editor

While recently reading a 1923 pulp fiction thriller (*The Return of Clubfoot* by Valentine Williams, since you are asking), I came across this potent line: 'That sublime sense of superiority, which we British suck in with our mother's milk, is a heartening thing when you find it in your fellow Britisher abroad.' Here we go again: our old friend 'exceptionalism'. A few days after I'd finished the book, I happened to watch a YouTube video of a Swedish graphic designer assessing the merits of King Charles's new royal cypher. He contrasted it against the ones of Queen Victoria, George V, etc. that can still be seen on old British pillar boxes but – being a foreigner – he also drew comparisons with the present-day regal cyphers of a number of other European kingdoms. What's more, he actually preferred a couple of them to the latest British effort. What! Praiseworthy cultures outside our own sceptred isle?

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Eliot savouring the success of *Adam Bede* in Southfields in 1859, one of Barbara Hepworth's sculptures taking centre-stage in Battersea Park in 1951, or The Beatles performing live at the Granada Tooting in 1963. What an opportunity to showcase our proud past to our neighbours and our visitors – and maybe surprise them along the way!

The Council team aim to present their submission in December, with the result expected early next year. And if – oh happy thought! – we are successful, the award will put culture and heritage right at the heart of our community. That will be our moment: with us sharing our knowledge, explaining how we research, and passing on our enthusiasm. Historians have power; let's channel it to add value to other people's lives.

*Neil Robson*

## From the editor

The historian as an 'influencer' – now there's a thought. But first we need the right moment, and luckily one may well come our way, for this spring our Council announced its intention to bid for the honour of Wandsworth becoming London Borough of Culture 2025. Ours has long been 'the brighter borough'. It's home to world-renowned creative organisations covering art, song and dance, and here would be a chance for us to take stock of ourselves as a diverse society and be part of something extraordinary.

How could we historians play our part in it? Most of us fall into the category of grass-roots enthusiasts, which means we are the go-to people when it comes to highlighting exceptional individuals and events connected with our area's history, whether it be George

## Front cover

'A spacious gastropub with rustic-chic décor' is how The King's Head at Roehampton is nowadays marketed. Maybe it was ever thus. An ale houses operated on this site in Roehampton High Street as far back as at least the 1720s, though the extensive clapper-board part of the structure may date from the even earlier period of the 1670s (per *WH* 69 (1998), pp. 1-3).

This particular print comes from 1886 and is based on a sketch by the prolific landscape artist, W. C. Keene. The scene is one of measured rural charm and yet, apart from the road surface, the wrought-iron pub sign, and the passing horseman, it is a view that has remained remarkably unchanged right down to our present time. (WHS Research Collection, item no. 1453)

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## From the editor

A couple of months ago I was at a concert in Tooting when one of the soloists stepped forward and sang 'Something wonderful' from Rogers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*. It's a number I've always admired; it speaks to me. I was so moved that the following day I decided to check out other people's thoughts about the song on-line. 'This loathsome piece is nothing less than an abuser's charter,' posted one commentator; 'What every woman sings before she's struck yet again,' cried another. I was astonished – but maybe they had a point.

Quite a sobering experience, yet one that reminded me that we must constantly allow ourselves to see things in a new light. As emotionally healthy historians, we owe a duty to ourselves to look at whatever we're considering from different points of view.

This means actively seeking out alternative opinions – those perhaps from people with contrasting political perspectives to ours, those maybe from a different ethnic background from our own. Reappraising our personal take on Britain's imperial past is a case in point; reconsidering our feelings about returning certain museum objects to their original localities is another. In short, we must be ready to give ourselves permission to change our stance on heritage matters. We may think our approach to the past is totally 'spot on', but that's not always necessarily the case

*Neil Robson*

## Front cover

The tide ebbs steadily towards the mouth of the Thames, and gas lights burn dimly in the fading twilight, while Putney Parish Church rises beyond in silhouette. Here is the scene captured for posterity in 1885, just a year before the demolition of the town's old wooden bridge. Indeed, the crane to the right implies that the task has actually started. This striking image is the work of Frank Short (1857-1945), an acclaimed British printmaker and engraver.

The technique he used was mezzotint, whereby a metal plate was pricked with thousands of tiny dots, after which parts were selectively burnished to produce lighter areas, the remainder being delicately etched to give the design a greater definition. The outcome could be one of exceptional richness, though with the coming of photogravure printing, the process practically sank without trace. (Cleveland Museum of Art / Creative Commons CC0 1.0)