LOUGHTON & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER 150

DECEMBER 2001 **Price 20p, free to members**

An outing of little Londoners

From *The Car Illustrated* – 16 August 1905

'Last Wednesday, fortunately for hundreds of the poor children of London, remained bright and sunny, and was put to good use by the organisers of that excellent charity the Fresh Air Fund. The Shaftesbury Retreat, Mr Pearson's headquarters at Loughton for the Fresh Air Fund, was an exceedingly busy, one might almost say congested, spot with the running to and fro of its 800 little visitors. On several previous occasions kind and thoughtful motorists have lent their cars, to assist these little children in having a 'really good time' and this year was no exception. On Wednesday cars were kindly lent by Captain Banbury of the Mors Company, Messrs HHP Deasy and Co, the Ford Motor Company, and H M Hobson, Ld. Motor lorries were also lent by the Beaufort Motor Company and the Germain Company, and they proved extremely useful.

The cars arrived at Loughton station about midday and were kept busy during the whole afternoon, a fact which can be vouchsafed for when we learn that the whole of the party, consisting of 800 little children, each received a ride in Epping Forest. *The Car* next season hopes to be able to collect motor-cars on different occasions to assist Mr Pearson in the entertainment of these little guests at Loughton, and meanwhile we thank the owners who lent the cars and the drivers who worked so indefatigably and cheerfully for the amusement of the Fresh Air Fund children.'

Contributor's Note: I have the unusual interest of vehicle registrations and was carrying out some research at the Beaulieu Museum library when I came across this little gem. One objective of my researches was to find photos of 'General Identification Marks', the name used for the format of trade plates before 1921. The photo accompanying this article showed five vehicles with their 'cargoes' of children all carrying union jacks (people were more patriotic in those days!). The number on one of the vehicles was A3 BT. This was one of the elusive GIMs which I had been researching, so I was doubly rewarded in this find! The 'BT' in the registration would indicate that it was one of the Beaufort lorries – personalised numbers are a lot older than you might think!

Incidentally, vehicle registrations can be quite helpful to historians in dating old photos. If any Society members require help in this respect, they are welcome to contact me on 8508 8851. JOHN HARRISON

The Shaftesbury Retreat was, of course, the subject of David Wilkinson's book, From Mean Streets to Epping Forest, *published by the Society in 2000. David's book gave rise to the following observations from Alan Smith.*

Thoughts on From Mean Streets to Epping Forest

ALAN W SMITH

David Wilkinson's recent publication is not only of local interest but also gives readers an insight into the reality of the 'Two Nations' living in England in the 1890s. The visiting children, as David notes, were seen as an alien race – filthy, destructive and given to obscene language. (One is reminded of views of the first wartime evacuees.)

There is, however, much more to be learned about this situation, as I found when reviewing a book for the old *London Journal* in 1978. It was Peter Keating's *Into Unknown England 1866–1913: Selections from the Social Explorers* (Manchester University Press, 1976).

A 'Social Explorer' is defined as someone of one class setting out to explore the life of a class lower than his own. Mayhew speaks of 'the undiscovered country of the poor' and surveying the material one is struck by certain recurring images. Booth's *In Darkest England* is a clear analogue of Stanley's *Darkest Africa*.

An even more striking image is that of 'the Abyss' – the unknown and probably monster-haunted depths below us. William Booth stands on the 'verge of the Abyss'. Jack London chronicles his 'descent into the Abyss'. C F G Masterman dreaded what might come 'out of the Abyss', while Mary Higgs only took 'glimpses' into the same awesome gulf.

Defoe and Cobbett reported on the state of the nation in their times but never felt the need to disguise themselves nor did they get the praise that was given to James Greenwood who in 1866 spent the night in a workhouse – as thousands then had to. He was commended by the editor of the *Morning Post* as being worthy to receive the VC.

Keating's book is a 'must' for all those who would – at least in imagination – go from Epping Forest back into the mean streets.

Closing Buckhurst Hill level crossing

HARRY PAAR

One indication of the cheap methods of construction used on the Loughton branch line was the frequency of level crossings – but the promoters could hardly be blamed for not visualising the way in which the then rural surroundings of the line would be developed nearly a century later.

Proposals for electric railways in the area were put forward from 1894 onwards but the Great Eastern Railway and its successor the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER) managed to counter them by improvements in their steam services, by proposals for improvements and by lip-service to the idea of electrification. In 1935, however, a scheme was adopted in conjunction with the then London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB) and with financial support from the Treasury. The cornerstone was the conversion of the Loughton line from steam operation to working by Central Line tube trains. Clearly, congested level crossings could have no place in this scheme.

It is easy enough to close a level crossing, but to make adequate provision for the displaced road traffic is another matter, especially when the land round about is built up with shops and houses. This was the case at most of the stations on the Loughton line and also the land was flat, which enforced the construction of costly approach embankments, viaducts and bridges.

At Buckhurst Hill, the Queens Road level crossing was itself a simple matter, for the road on the east side led only to a few houses, but, when considered in conjunction with crossings to the north and south, the whole presented a more substantial problem.

In 1939 the 'Buckhurst Hill Level Crossing Elimination Scheme', a joint venture by the LNER, LPTB and Chigwell UDC, was being formulated, the costs to be shared by all parties, the proportion due from the Council being 6.25%.

It was not simply a matter of closing the Queens Road crossing, although that might have been inferred from the existence of the overbridge, carrying Roding Lane, at the other end of the station. There was another, smaller, level crossing about 200 yards south of the Queens Road crossing, which served a footpath which led to Luxborough Lane, on the other side of the River Roding: this crossing, too, had to be closed.

Looking to the south, towards Woodford, there was an old brick-arch bridge just north of Woodford Junction which had carried a farm track over the line. This was small and inadequate for public road traffic. At the north end of Woodford Station was the Snakes Lane level crossing, itself due for closure, which was destined to force the construction of the expensive Broadmead Road bridge, which would be even further south and thus more remote from Buckhurst Hill.

Evidently it was thought to be unreasonable to make the traffic which was using the two level crossings go round via the Roding Lane bridge, and equally unreasonable to put it over the line at Woodford. Thus the Buckhurst Hill level crossing – little more than a cypher in road traffic terms – became a sizeable stumbling block to the planners.

The solution adopted was to replace the farm bridge near Woodford Junction with a much larger and stronger bridge; to provide a pedestrian subway under the line at the Queens Road level crossing site; and to provide a footbridge at the Luxborough path level crossing.

The LPTB wrote to the Chigwell Council on 13 March 1939 advising that construction of the bridge or alternative provision to enable the Queens Road crossing to be closed could not be completed before November 1940. However it was hoped to be able to operate electric trains from the Central London line to Loughton by the end of April 1940, and, 'as alternative facilities exist by way of Roding Lane and Albert Road North', they proposed to seek powers to enable the level crossing to be closed, either completely or at particular hours.

On 3 September 1939 war was declared on Germany, yet in December the Chigwell UDC decided not to postpone the letting of the contract for the subway and, in under a year, the contractors, Rendell, Palmer & Tritton, submitted their completion certificate for the overline bridge near Roding Valley Halt, the Queens Road subway and the Luxborough path footbridge (September 1940).

The subway was not opened, however, and on 3 November 1941 the clerk reported to the UDC that it could not be completed until the existing footbridge had been removed, adding that, in his opinion, if public rights of way over the

footbridge existed, some legal authority, such as an order of Quarter Sessions, would be needed to extinguish them. This was because the footbridge did not link platforms but existed so that the public could cross the line when the crossing gates were closed to the road. Chigwell UDC resolved to inform Essex County Council urgently that they had no objection to removal of the footbridge so that work could proceed on the completion of the subway without delay.

In late 1943 much talk went on at the UDC about lighting of the subway, in which the County of London Electricity Supply Company was involved, for wartime blackout restrictions had to be observed.

In September 1944 the clerk of the Essex County Council wrote to the Secretary to the Ministry of War Transport about the painting of the Luxborough footbridge: 'This footbridge was constructed as part of the scheme for the elimination of the level crossing at Queens Road . . . to carry the footpath known as the Luxborough footpath over the railway line.'

So far as can be ascertained, the level crossing was closed in 1945 and probably in late September, because, on 8 October of that year, Mrs Hannah Owen of the Railway Hotel, Queens Road, wrote to the Council drawing attention to the danger presented by the wall bounding the railway at the bottom of Queens Road.

There had been a series of accidents, the most recent on Friday night, 5 October, when a cyclist, who was unable to see the wall, rode head-on into it and was injured. She described the annoyance to neighbours 'by the not uncommon sound of the screeching and grinding of brakes at night when a motorist is suddenly confronted by the wall when expecting to find a clear road'.

A practical woman, Mrs Owen suggested the provision of a danger lamp, and only a month passed before the UDC resolved on 5 November that an existing street lamp be moved to a suitable position and kept alight all night, and that a reflecting sign at the top of Queens Road should indicate the through road to Chigwell down Westbury Lane. Meanwhile there was another accident at the wall in October when a lorry demolished it.

There was considerable delay in rebuilding the wall because of a disagreement as to whether the UDC or the LNER was responsible for placing red warning lights on it. Mr Berwick Law, the injured cyclist, was caught up in this wrangle, neither of the other parties being willing to entertain his claim for compensation.

In May 1946 the LNER Estate Surveyor told the UDC that a temporary chain link fence had been erected. The UDC felt that the dispute over lighting need not delay rebuilding, but it was not until March 1948 that the clerk could report to his council that the Railway Executive (which had taken over the whole railway system on 1 January of that year) had begun the reconstruction of the wall – over two years after its demolition.

A determined life reviewed

EDDIE DARE

Members may recall reading articles in the *Newsletter* by Ivy Alexander. She wrote in November 1993 (No 121), 'Lousy Loughton and the Ragged School Union: an East End Girl's Story' (which was reprinted in part in *From Mean*

Streets to Epping Forest) and in March 1994 (No 123) she told of her perilous cycle ride from Epping Forest to Canning Town on the first day of the Blitz in September 1940. Further, in November 1994 (No 126), she gave us some history of the 'Plotlands: Arcadia for All' which were developed in such places as Jaywick and Canvey Island, and, on a more personal note, her mother's plot at Hook End near Blackmore.

Now Ivy Alexander has brought together more experiences of her life in *Maid in West Ham: My Formative Years 1924–1948*. This is more than the story of her own life: it is an excellent example of how to write a family history placed in a social context.

She was born in 1924 to an ill-matched couple – her father had been a professional boxer who started his career in the boxing booths of the time and who later suffered from brain damage which caused him to have fits of aggression. Her mother had married him to get away from home.

Ivy's father's forebears were mostly agricultural workers in Essex: his paternal grandfather became a brickyard worker on Wanstead flats, a place where Ivy was to spend happy hours as a child. Her grandmother was said to have had 21 pregnancies of which, after miscarriages and still-births, only eight children survived to maturity.

Her mother, who was born in Poplar, came from generations of artisan Londoners. Ivy's maternal grandfather was a chef and her grandmother was born in Penge, south-east London. Broken families are not a new phenomenon: this grandmother left her family to live with a licensed victualler while, at a later stage, during the war, Ivy's mother left her husband and then, in 1952, emigrated to New Zealand. This was the last time Ivy saw her mother; her father lived on until 1970.

Ivy, the third child in a family of six, was born in Wharf Street, in that part of West Ham known as Old Canning Town. It is here that her story starts and enfolds the reader with concern for the members of her family, her friends and their circumstances.

The family home for father, mother, three sons and three daughters, was a two-bedroomed house where a constant battle had to be waged against the bugs which got into the bed springs, behind the wallpaper and even in the brickwork and plaster, in spite of the family's great efforts to wipe them out. She tells of the arm's length relations with neighbours which existed in pre-war East London: respect for people's privacy and no 'dropping-in', and the strict injunction to children to 'know nothing' if a stranger called and of an understandable coldness towards the relieving officer.

The book is an encouraging story of how a determined girl made a break from this background and from the problems of education in the Second World War years. The key to that break was what she describes as 'a love of, and indeed thirst for, education' which shaped her life.

After education at a central school, she got employment in a Tuberculosis Clinic in Plaistow where she began to question why, in those pre-NHS days, patients had to be income-assessed for extra nourishment, and to wonder what was the treatment available to the rich. This led to the thought that 'something must be done' and then to political campaigning for socialist ideas.

Her thirst for education included five nights a week at evening classes to which were added cycling trips, rambles, dances, amateur dramatics, concert and

theatre-going, immediate post-war visits to France, and university – all of which brought a wide circle of friends – an adventurous young woman!

Ivy's book worked for me on several levels: family relationships; social history; the importance of friendships; the need to retain a sense of humour in adversity; and the love of life – I can thoroughly recommend it as a life story with all those components in abundance.

Ivy Alexander has published the book herself. It is a well-produced 160 page paperback with many photographs. It costs £10, including postage and packing, from Mrs Ivy Alexander, 4a Fordington Road, Winchester, Hants SO22 5AL.

As Ivy Alexander's account of her perilous cycle ride was first published some eight years ago, it was thought that readers might appreciate another chance to read an abridged version of it:

Blitz – and a perilous cycle ride

IVY ALEXANDER

The following is taken from Ivy Alexander's diary of the time. She was almost 16 and had left the Russell Central School in Queen's Road, Upton Park, two weeks previously, starting work the next day as an invoice typist in Aldersgate. She and her friend Irene Green, who lived in Manor Road, always cycled to school together.

Saturday, 7 September 1940: As we have been kept in most of the week, owing to air raids, Irene and I decided to go out cycling in the country. We thought we would go to Epping Forest. This we were warned against as the Germans had said they would set Epping Forest alight, because our Air Force had recently dropped bombs in the Black Forest and set a good portion of it alight. However we decided to take the risk and set off in good spirits. When we were in Epping Forest the air raid siren went. Nobody took much notice as the raids had not been very intense. From the Forest we could see hundreds of planes crossing to London. We thought these were British, but apparently they were Jerries. Many air battles were going on and there was plenty of gunfire. We saw five planes brought down and saw several airmen bale out. Irene and I chased off on our bikes to try to find them, but soldiers were on the scene before us. Shrapnel was falling everywhere, so we sheltered under trees for protection. When things seemed quieter we decided to go home and the 'All Clear' sounded when we reached Wanstead at 6pm. As we approached London we could see huge black smoke clouds and thought we were in for a storm. We later discovered it was smoke from the many fires started by bombs. Damage became more severe as we approached home and on arriving at Stratford everything seemed to be burning. To get home we had to go by the Leather Cloth factory but we could not get near it as it was on fire. We could not get near home at all as we were turned back by policemen. Eventually we made a detour and went along by a canal (the Cut) at the back of the factories. Most of these were on fire and we were both drenched with water from the firemen's hoses.[I was confused by this time as I had lost my bearings, but Irene knew her way about.]

From the Cut we arrived at the Sewer Bank and walked along this until we reached West Ham station, which was badly damaged. Nobody seemed to be about and as we went to get to Irene's house we were stopped and told by a Warden that a time-bomb was in her front garden. In fact, there were time-bombs all along the route we had taken from Stratford. After some time we found Irene's family in Gainsborough Road School with a lot of other families waiting for time-bombs to explode. I was not allowed to leave the school . . . Two hours later, after much persuasion, I was allowed to try to get home (if it was still there). Rene's brother, Eric, accompanied me and after making many detours I eventually arrived home. Mum had been very worried and practically bit my head off, giving me no time to explain. She said I was NOT to go out any more. I had been in about five minutes when another raid began and we all spent the night in the Anderson shelter. Bombs dropped all night and the sky was red for miles around with the glare of fires . . . Thousands of civilians were killed in the air raid.

Sunday, 8 September 1940: I called to see Irene but her home was destroyed when the time-bomb exploded. I went to Gainsborough Road School but she was not there. London was again heavily bombed and thousands killed.

Monday, 9 September 1940: Went to work as usual. [Actually I walked all the way to Aldersgate.] In the evening police cars toured the streets saying anyone who wished to be evacuated to the country could go to Hoy Street School and buses would take them immediately.

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