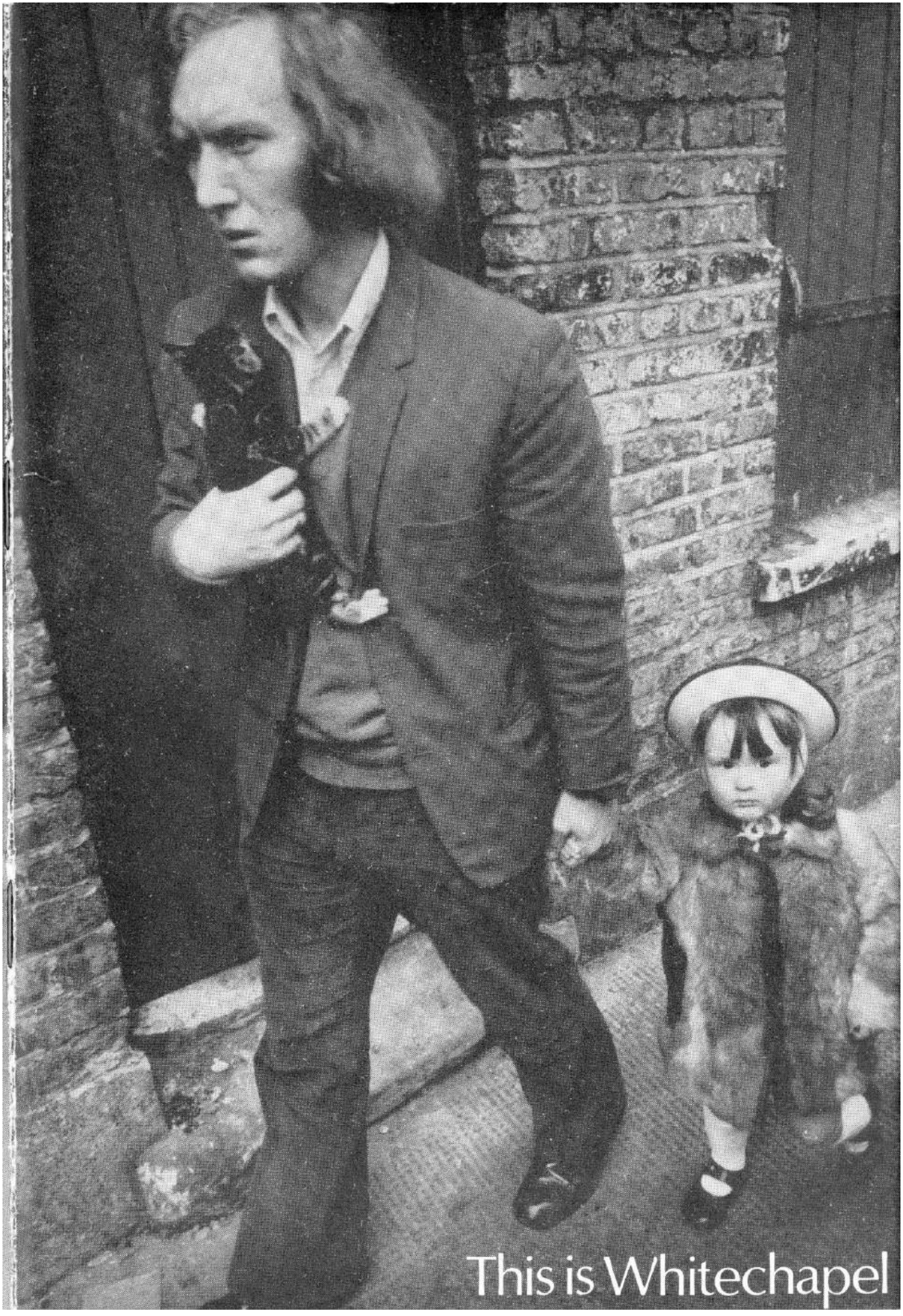
This is Whitechapel

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A companion to the exhibition of photographs by **IAN BERRY**

Whitechapel Art Gallery
High Street, London E1

28 July to 3 September 1972

The Trustees of the Whitechapel Art Gallery wish to thank the people of East London who have helped in the making of this exhibition. Their thanks also to John Donat who contributed additional photographs, the Tower Hamlets Amenities Committee who have lent historical photographs and the L.D. Phillips Charitable Fund which gave financial help.

(opposite) Hanbury Street

Whitechapel in Britain

Pumbedita, Cordova, Cracow, Amsterdam,
Vilna, Lublin, Berditchev and Volozhin,
Your names will always be sacred,
Places where Jews have been.

And sacred is Whitechapel,
It is numbered with our Jewish towns.
Holy, holy, holy
Are your bombed stones.

If we ever have to leave Whitechapel,
As other Jewish towns were left,
Its soul will remain a part of us,
Woven into us, woof and weft.

Avram Stencl

Newbolt Street

All the windows are thrown open.
The curtains blow in the wind.
A baby on the front-door step
Crawls about on its behind.

The mother, in an apron,
Sits on the step, in the street,
Smiling as her baby crawls about,
And tries to stand on its feet.

The sun is shining in Newbolt Street,
As it shines on a field new-tilled,
And the baby is growing here like the corn
In the farmer's field.

All the windows are thrown open,
The curtains blow in the wind.
The sun shines here as in a garden,
On a little Whitechapel child.

Avram Stencl

A Linden Tree in a Whitechapel Street

Not in the countryside in a green field,
Spreading its branches wide,
With a flock of sheep sheltering under it,
With the shepherd at their side.

Not rooted in soft country soil,
With green fields all round,
But in a Whitchapel street,
In hard asphalted ground.

With his legs bound and his wings spread,
But never able to rise and fly,
The tree stands in this Whitechapel street.
And so do I.

Then suddenly the whole street is aflame.
There's a bird singing in the tree.
And somehow it seems to be singing
Also in me.

Avram Stencl

Shakespeare and Whitechapel

The name Shakespeare drew me to London,
When I was a hunted Jew.
A sea-mew in a thick fog,
Into the Thames I flew.

A sea-mew in a thick fog,
I flew into London town,
And I found my way to Whitechapel,
Which had become my own.

Flying through the thick fog,
I saw a door opening here,
And a Jewish shtetl
Like my home-town appear.

I stretched out my arms.
Everything became clear.
Thank you, Whitechapel,
For all I have written here.

Avram Stencl

WHITECHAPEL AND SPITALFIELDS Edith Ramsey

If you live here, you know that for many reasons it is the place in which you are glad to have your home. If you are a stranger, you may think of this district in terms of Petticoat Lane, this Gallery, the London Hospital, or (most unfairly) of Jack the Ripper.

In either case, study the exhibition, and then spend an hour taking a short walk round the area. This article aims at giving you a glimpse of our history.

Whitechapel and Spitalfields form the north-west section of what was the Metropolitan Borough of Stepney from 1898 to 1965, when under the drastic revision of areas of Local Government in Greater London, Stepney was merged with Poplar and Bethnal Green, as the Borough of Tower Hamlets. But Stepney has a history of its own – stretching for two miles along the north bank of the Thames from the eastern bounds of the City of London, it has a unique position in this country – perhaps in the world. Every European capital has its foreign quarter. To Stepney for centuries, immigrants have come, made their homes here, settled and largely fashioned trade and industry.

From medieval days, within the City of London, (the 'Square Mile') Trade and Craft Guilds formed complete monopolies and used their jurisdiction to protect the interests of their members, refusing foreigners the right to live, work, or trade within the walled city. Yet as London became increasingly a world centre, it attracted from overseas, adventurous men seeking wealth, refugees and the persecuted in search of security and the homeless and hungry trying to escape destitution. Many arrived by ship at Stepney bordering on the City and yet free from restrictions imposed on them there as foreigners.

Naturally Spitalfields and Whitechapel, adjoining the City, attracted many settlers. Spitalfields takes its name from the Hospital of Our Lady or 'St Mary Spittle without Bishopsgate' founded among fields in 1235 (beside a Priory dating from 1197) in Spital Square. A plaque commemorating it can be seen on the wall of the Central Foundation Girls' School there, but the Hospital was demolished in 1538 by King Henry VIII, who appropriated the 180 beds 'well furnished for the relief of poor people' and a considerable sum of money.

In 1687, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, of the Huguenot refugees who managed to escape from France and the persecution of Louis XIV, no less than 13,000 settled in Spital Square and its immediate vicinity.

These 'gentle and profitable strangers' developed the area, built beautiful houses, lived an active intellectual life, provided a miniature welfare state for their own community, and practised skilled French cooking, teaching the English to utilise tails of oxen, formerly thrown away, for soup. They established and financed their own French Huguenot churches and early in the 18th century, there were 11 of these churches in Spitalfields. Assimilation was rapid, but traces of the advent of Huguenots remains not only in buildings but in street names – Duval Street, Nantes Passage, Fournier Street, Fleur-de-Lys Buildings for instance.

Leaving Spital Square – but pausing to admire beautiful 18th century houses in Elder Street now being well restored after being left to deteriorate into bad slum property – we pass the back of Spitalfields Fruit Exchange and Market, dating from 1682, when Charles II gave a charter for this market to 'John Balch and his heirs'. It was bought by the City Corporation in 1902 and, though in 1937 it covered eight acres, it has been much extended since then and extensions are still in process.

We arrive then at Artillery Lane, where in Tudor times, the Royal Artillery Company, stationed at the Tower, used to practise 'gunnery'. Hence the names 'Artillery Street and Passage' and 'Gun Street'. In Artillery Lane, there stands at number 56, what experts describe as the 'finest Georgian shop-front in London', first occupied by a silk merchant in 1756. Renovations are in process now, and the lovely proportions will not be lost to posterity.

Artillery Lane and Artillery Passage were both, until 25 years ago, inhabited entirely by Jewish or Catholic Families, now they are a centre of Sikhs and Indians, with shops selling Indian spices and food, or silk goods. Parliament Court is an alley leading off Artillery Passage and here was one of the early Huguenot churches. It still stands as a well kept small Jewish synagogue, but the entrance is now in Sandys Row, parallel with Parliament Court.

Dominating this district and visible near and far is the spire of Christ Church, Spitalfields. This church is one of three in Stepney, built by Nicholas Hawksmoor, a colleague of Wren, in the early part of the 18th century, when under an Act of 1711, an increased duty on coal coming up the river, was authorised, the product to finance churches for the outskirts of the City where owing to the huge increase of population, many people were left in 'spiritual destitution'.

The other two Hawksmoor churches in Stepney have the advantage of proximity to the river, but Spitalfields is the finest of the three. It has since its early days had a series of dedicated incumbents and it has had an immense impact on the life of the district and has always been supported by congregations of devoted parishioners. While the blitz destroyed so much of the district, this church survived but it was attacked by death-watch beetle,

and since 1958 it has been structurally unsound and cannot be used. With the help of the Hawksmoor Churches Restoration Fund renovations have been effected, and it is hoped before too long, the church can re-open. It had a peal of twelve bells, but they failed, and it is good that recently another peal of eight bells was supplied as a gift by the Royal Society of Cumberland Bell Ringers.

In the meantime, Christ Church continues to hold services and promote a most active church life centred in their Parish Hall in Hanbury Street, built in 1719 as a French Church, continuing from 1740 to 1786 as a Huguenot Church and, after occupation by differing religious groups, bought by the Revd. R.C. Billing in 1887.

Though the main church cannot yet be used, the large crypt below the church has for the last six years been a residential rehabilitation centre for a small number of the many vagrant alcoholics, who come to this area to find companionship with others suffering as they do and to escape from the pressures of life. The venture is approved by the Home Office and, while all modern provisions of social welfare are used, no visitor, still less the men who are helped, can doubt that this work has as its motive and source of power, Christian faith, love and compassion. It is not the first time that this crypt has provided living accommodation. During the blitz, when sirens warned East Londoners nightly of the advent of German bombers, countless local people flocked to the crypt and took refuge there for the night. There they had food, support and friendship and though often they returned to find their homes a mass of rubble, in the crypt they felt safe.

Visitors to Christ Church, should turn the corner and at 2 Fournier Street, they will see the only Rectory designed by Hawksmoor. On the 23rd May 1727, the Commissioners for the proposed new churches ordered 'that a Minister's House for the parish of Spittlefields be built for a sum not exceeding One Thousand Pounds.' In fact when completed the cost had risen to £1,456 – a large three-storey house, with a basement and a roof-garret, lovely panelling, staircase and balusters.

Walking along Fournier Street and not missing other beautiful houses which have been allowed to deteriorate perhaps past repair, we come to a large building, scheduled as an 'Ancient Monument', at the junction of Fournier Street and Brick Lane. This was 'L'Eglise Neuve', built by Huguenots as a chapel in 1742. High on the front of the building remains a sundial with the date 1743 and the words 'Ombra Sumus'. In 1809, the French tenure of this building ceased and after a long letting to Methodists as a Chapel, it was bought in 1897 by the Machzike Hadath ('Supporters of the Law'), a religious society, formed in 1891, to promote stricter observance of Jewish religious orthodoxy. It was known as 'Spitalfields Great Synagogue'.

For the following fifty years, this synagogue was crowded from dawn till

after midnight by men and women, praying and worshipping. Till the outbreak of war in 1939, 600 Jewish boys attended the school in the adjoining house for 2½ hours, 4 nights a week, to learn Hebrew and study the Talmud Torah. In December 1922, the freehold was bought from the French church owners.

In spite of the great reduction of Jewish people in the vicinity this Great Synagogue was redecorated, renovated and reconsecrated in 1951. Since then, so many Jews have moved from all over Stepney and services have ceased, for there is no congregation.

The synagogue would have Jewish worshippers if it could move elsewhere. But what should be done with the present building? In the terms of its Trust, it must be used for religious purposes. In Spitalfields and Whitechapel, large numbers of Pakistani have replaced the Jewish community. The Moslem Mosque, a mile away, will soon have to find other premises and a Mosque is needed in Spitalfields. Extensive alterations would be required, and the price might be high. But the beautiful building should be saved if at all possible.

The Jewish Community

Whitechapel and Jewry are still closely linked in popular thinking and that was certainly correct at the beginning of this century. In 1859, the Jewish population of London numbered between 25,000 and 30,000, the great majority of whom lived in Whitechapel. From 1880 onwards Jews, fleeing from pogroms and persecution in Russia and Eastern Europe, arrived in large numbers and joined their co-religionists in Whitechapel. In 1891, refugees from the Russian Empire totalled 1,636, but a year later they had risen to 3,277 and in the year preceding 1914 – when immigration was free and unrestricted there were nearly 5,000 annually.

Some provision was made for this invasion. The Jewish Board of Guardians (now the Jewish Welfare Board, in Charlotte Street, W1 was established in Middlesex Street, Whitechapel in 1859. In 1885 the 'Jews' Temporary Shelter' in Leman Street, was opened and newcomers were met on landing at the Port of London and taken to the Shelter where they were housed, fed and helped. The Jews' Free School beside Petticoat Lane (now in Camden Town) dates from 1860. An orphanage, soup kitchen, the issue of bread, meat and coal tickets and other charities were all made available for the needy Jewish residents of Whitechapel, estimated at the turn of the century as perhaps 100,000. Not only was this because charity and consideration for the poor is stressed in the Hebrew faith, but because the Jewish Community, like Christians of varied denominations, were reluctant to resort to the Poor Law, which in East London operated very harshly. The 'Temporary Shelter' still functions actively though in different ways in Mansell Street.

The full tale of these arrivals in London has probably never been told. There are today in Whitechapel aged Jews, still speaking Yiddish, who remember how they left their countries of birth and came here. They tell how on arrival they kissed the ground for they knew here they would be safe and able to follow their own religion. Jacob Fine, OBE who died two years ago, an undersized little fifteen year old boy, came alone from Poland. As his boat steamed up the river, Tower Bridge opened and Jacob said 'The gates of the city open to receive the just man'. But landed on the dock, he was lost – overlooked by the people who had come to receive immigrants, he stood alone, unable to speak one work of English. The police – seen from experience in Poland as his ruthless enemies – bore down on the little boy, took him to Leman Street Police Station, regaled him with white bread, thickly buttered and sweet tea, then escorted him to the Jews' Temporary Shelter. Later he became the Secretary of the Jewish Tailors and Garment Workers Union and an outstanding member of Stepney Borough Council. Countless stories such as that could be told of the immigrants.

The Whitechapel to which those people came was a district of narrow streets and courtyards, closely packed with little soot-blackened cottages, with a minimum provision of sanitation. Overcrowding was indescribable and the front room of the little cottages was often used as a work-shop. But soon the Jewish authorities wisely built large blocks of flats – Rothschilds Buildings and Nathaniel Buildings for instance – excellent flats in their day, but now condemned and being demolished, though still to be seen at the back of Toynbee Hall in Commercial Street.

Until 1939, the little cottages stood, with their doors rarely closed and, if they were closed, they could be opened by a string that hung through the letter-box. Open spaces were few and distant, but there was little traffic and the streets were playgrounds for the children. At the back of each cottage was a small yard, where flowers might grow and a tool shed was kept. Children, Jew and Gentile, played together. Games followed a regular rhythm – Good Friday was the day for 'Brewer's Rope' – in each street two adults swung a thick rope along the pavement and people of all ages in the street, skipped in it. On Good Friday too the little cottages were stripped of their paint and white-washed and on Easter Monday, blankets and curtains were washed. Outside the children played their traditional games – 'Tin Can Copper', 'Gobs and Bonsters', 'Spinning Tops', and cricket with a ball made of newspaper, a piece of wood for a bat, and a lamp-post for a wicket.

Here in these cottages, lived Jews and Gentiles. And it was not an unhappy life. A woman recently was describing the pressures she faced with a family, on her arrival from Russia in 1913. To the comment that things are much better now, she replied 'It was far better then – we were all friends and neighbours'. Or to quote from a letter from a girl, brought up in Whitechapel

in extreme poverty and now happily married in Ontario: 'I would not change my childhood for anything. I wonder what well-to-do people have to look back on when they were children. They will never know the thrill of running an errand for someone and getting a big slice of bread and jam for going, or being able to go to the baker's and say 'Any stale cakes, mister?' and have a big bag of cakes and broken biscuits given to you. We would sit on the doorsteps and share our luck with all the kids. And go around Spitalfields Market looking on the ground for all the fruit and vegetables. We would sell all the good stuff and cut out the bad parts and eat them ourselves. And there was always some kind old Cockney at the Market who would say 'Here luv, take that home to Ma' and hand us a bag of potatoes or cabbage. And we would run home as fast as we could. What rich child has these wonderful moments and memories to look back on?

I can remember seeing all the people going to Southend or to the seaside on Saturdays. We could not afford to go, but we had our own seaside resort at Tower Bridge and it did not cost us a penny and there was always lots of room, so who were the lucky ones?'

The Jewish settlers, or 'greeners' as the immigrants were called, were prepared to work extremely hard for incredibly long hours for little pay. Early in this century, Whitechapel was throbbing with Jewish tailoring businesses and that was so till 1939. Since the war, though there are still many Jewish firms, the number of residents, apart from aged Jews, has declined almost to vanishing point.

Continuing our tour, if we turn from Fournier Street towards Whitechapel High Street, the shops that once were Jewish are now in the hands of Eastern Pakistani, most of them displaying large notices about Bangladesh. The owners can rarely speak English and most of their customers are of their own nationality and tailoring businesses too are frequently run by Pakistani's. In some shops, children when not at school, act as interpreters. The local Mosque, a mile away, must move soon and it is hoped that premises will be found in Whitechapel or Spitalfields. In the meantime, arrangements have been made for Moslem children to attend a local school from 5.30 to 7.00 pm five nights a week, for religious instruction. The Imam in his little van collects children living at a distance and believes that in the near future there will be a nightly attendance of three hundred. It is in many ways a parallel to the Jewish immigration more than half a century ago.

In this as with other waves of immigrant invasion, the basic spirit of native East Londoners has stood firm, devoid of intolerance but giving respect. From the poisonous propaganda launched by Oswald Mosley in 1935, Whitechapel was completely free. We have every reason to hope and expect that the great contribution made by Jews to the life and industry of this country, will be matched by that of the newcomers.

Back in Whitechapel High Street we look across from the Art Gallery to a grassy square, where the Church of St Mary Matfelon, the parish church of Whitechapel stood till destroyed by bombs. It was a Victorian church built on the site of a 'white chapel' dating from 1329 and the name, (probably because the original chapel was covered with white wash), was given to the whole district. Beside the square, stands Whitechapel Bell Foundry, where for more than 400 years, bells (including Big Ben and bells from Westminster Abbey) have been cast and gone all over the world.

Walking east we approach the London Hospital, where to quote from the Hospital Minutes 'September 20th, 1757. The Committee this day admitted Patients into the new Hospital for the first time in number thirty, they being all who offered'. The site belonged to the City Corporation, who charged a ground rent of £15 p.a. It was known as White Chapel Mount Field, and beside the Hospital stood, till pulled down in 1818, a fort, 329 feet in length, and 182 in breadth, and higher than the Hospital now stands. This was built by men, women and children in 1642, after the Battle of Edgehill, to obstruct Royalist Cavalry, from whom an attack on London was expected. In 1665, debris from the Fire of London and skeletons from the Plague were dumped on the Mount, less than a mile from Aldgate, East London's historic gateway to the City. To-day, Mount Terrace, and East Mount Street on either side of the Hospital remind the viewers of where the White Chapel Mount Field used to be.

The hospital stands where it has stood for over two hundred years, a proof of the brotherly love that inspired its pioneers to raise money for its buildings in order to bring health and healing to the sick and suffering. In this hospital, second to none in the world, surgeons, doctors and nurses have worked skilfully and selflessly from its foundation as they still work.

It would be absurd to omit reference to education in any sketch of Whitechapel, however brief. But it can only be a reference, for the full story, fascinating as it is, is too long to be told here. If before 1870, when the provision of schools became compulsory, there were many children in Whitechapel, receiving no education, there were also many others who attended schools provided by religious agencies, some closed, some developed after 1870. The Davenant Grammar School in Whitechapel Road (only recently moved to Essex), has a long and distinguished record of teaching, sending many boys to universities. Christ Church School was opened in Brick Lane in 1883, funds for its building coming from the sale of the Charity and National Schools in the parish of Spitalfields, dating from 1708 and 1817 respectively. Schools had their difficulties, but teachers were rewarded by the trust and, it is not too much to say, the devotion of their pupils and the parents of those pupils.

About the year 1880, inspired by Canon Barnett, the vicar of St Jude's

Church, Commercial Street (which once stood where Canon Barnett School now stands) five graduates on coming down from Oxford, decided to settle in Whitechapel. They rented a disused public house and lived there. Arnold Toynbee, (the great-uncle of the Arnold Toynbee of to-day) known as 'Apostle Arnold', had hoped to join this group, but under the strain of academic work and his burning passion for social reform, his health was already failing.

In November 1883, Canon Barnett read a paper at St John's College, Oxford, outlining a scheme for a 'settlement' of university men in Whitechapel – a conjunction of learning and labour. In February 1884, a derelict industrial school in Commercial Street was bought, and structurally adapted to new needs. A pioneer band of men from Oxford and Cambridge moved in and, named after 'Apostle Arnold' who had recently died, Toynbee Hall was formed. It has a great and unique history. When it was founded, the 'Privileged and the People formed two nations.' But thoughtful people were beginning to question the belief that riches and poverty were divinely ordained. Toynbee Hall was the centre of much research that formed the real turning point in British Social History. Here for many years, graduates and local people mixed in friendship, learning much from each other, in addition to both formal and informal education. Here, Mrs Sidney Webb based her research into 'Sweating in East London' – Bernard Shaw scintillated at debates, Ben Tillet, John Burns and Tom Mann championed the cause of the casual, underpaid docker. In alliance with Canon Barnett, Charles Booth, the shop-owner philanthropist, led the enquiries that produced the vast volumes of his survey into 'Life and Labour of London'.

College Buildings, were built in Wentworth Street beside Toynbee Hall, to accommodate students. Shared lavatories and one tap, supplying perhaps twelve flats, were put on each landing but no flat had a water supply. In fact these buildings, till recently demolished, were used not by students but by local people. In the 1880s, bathrooms were strictly limited at universities, for terms only lasted eight weeks. No community could have been more contented than the people of Whitechapel, Jews and Gentiles, who occupied College Buildings for many years. In 1939, at the outbreak of war, only 5% of the dwellings in the whole of Stepney had bathrooms. It is right they should be essential in the manifold new housing provision of local authorities, but the friendship of those days was not dependant on good housing, nor does better housing create it.

Toynbee Hall was closely linked with the Whitechapel Art Gallery. Jimmy Mallon, the Warden of Toynbee Hall from 1921 till 1954, did much for the Gallery. Mallon Gardens, maintained by the Borough Council, can be seen in front of Toynbee, beside the small Theatre, built in 1937 by Mallon's initiative and now rented to the Inner London Education Authority.

Spitalfields Parish Church Report for 1900 reports: 'There is accommodation in the parish for between 3,000 and 4,000 men and women in common-lodging houses. They constitute a world of their own. Here they gather for such accommodation and comfort as fourpence a night will secure.'

Their proximity to the City, the presence of markets where casual labour was often needed, attracted the destitute from near and far to Whitechapel and Spitalfields. A hundred years ago Dr Barnardo found eleven boys, bare-footed and in rags, lying asleep on the sloping roof of a building in the Old Clothes Market in Petticoat Lane, with their feet in the gutter. Thousands of deserted children slept in similar ways. He founded his homes, but the concentration of human misery stirred the Christian conscience and a variety of agencies organised centres for distribution of soup, cocoa, bread and cheese. The Salvation Army opened large shelters where the homeless could sleep, and though with the war and the establishment of the Welfare State, the smaller agencies vanished, the Salvation Army still has a very large-scale lodging house, Hostel for the Aged, and other amenities in new premises, almost opposite the London Hospital and a large hostel for men and another for women and children, all in Whitechapel. In Crispin Street beside Artillery Passage, there is a vast building, grim in its exterior, filled with the warmth of loving kindness inside. Here, under the care of the Sisters of Mercy is Providence Row Night Refuge – a home for women too feeble to live alone, a hostel for business girls, a shelter for destitute men and another for destitute women and six flats to which the homeless can be admitted in family groups. 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in.' Neither the Salvation Army, nor the Sisters of Mercy, make any distinction of race, creed or colour among the people they serve. And to their service their religious faith gives a unique quality.

Children no longer play in the streets – they have television. Much of Spitalfields and Whitechapel awaits rehousing and planning, but numerically the population has decreased greatly since 1939. Colourful streets, people of varied races and cultures, historic buildings make a walk round the area a fascinating experience, and deeper than any sight is the spirit that prevails in the district.

Calm soul of all things! make it mine,
To feel amid the City's jar,
That there abides a peace of thine,
Man did not make, and cannot mar.

CANON BARNETT Helen Sachs

In 1872, the Reverend Samuel Augustus Barnett informed the Bishop of London of his intention to 'go East' to Whitechapel. The Bishop's reply was kind and slightly bemused, the sort of letter a father might send to a son who was proposing to settle in some far distant corner of the Empire. The vicarage was empty and the living available, 'But do not hurry in your decision' he wrote, 'it is the worst parish in my diocese and one which has, I fear, been much corrupted by alms.' The Bishop was speaking from hearsay, for beyond what had been written by a few intrepid 'explorers' or collected in the census of 1871, little was definitely known about Whitechapel.

Barnett and his future wife did not hurry to take up their residence there. They made enquiries; they read the census and they came to see for themselves. Of this visit, Mrs Barnett has given us a graphic description: 'When Mr Barnett and I went to see our proposed home, it was market day and the main street was filled with hay carts, entangled among which were scores of frightened cattle being driven to the slaughter house. The people were dirty and bedraggled, the children neglected, the beer shops full, the schools shut up. I can recall the realisation of the immensity of our task and the fear of failure to reach or to help those crowds of people, with vice, woe and lawlessness written across their faces'. They took the decision to try and Canon Barnett later wrote, 'We came to Whitechapel attracted by its poverty and ambitious to fight it in its strongest fortress.'

The 'fortress' was an area of 'but a few acres, bounded on the West by the city and on the South by Whitechapel High Street, where some forty keepers of small shops lived with their families. There were two or three narrow streets lined with fairly decent cottages occupied entirely by Jews, but with these exceptions, the whole parish was covered with a network of courts and alleys'. These were the evil 'rookeries' which so fired the guilt-infested Victorian imagination and live on in the etchings of Gustav Doré.

'None of these courts had roads,' wrote Mrs Barnett, 'In some the houses were three storeys high and hardly six feet apart, the sanitary accommodation being pits in the cellars; in other courts the houses were lower, wooden and delapidated, a standpipe at the end providing the only water. Each chamber was the home of a family who sometimes owned their indescribable furniture. In most cases the rooms were let out furnished for eightpence a night, a bad system, which lent itself to every form of evil. In many instances broken windows had been repaired with paper and rags, the banisters had been used

for firewood and paper hung from the walls which were the residence of countless vermin. In those homes people lived in whom it was hard to see the likeness of the Divine'.

Much has been said about the nineteenth century inhabitants of East London. Professor Huxley compared them unfavourably with 'brutish island dwellers before the missionaries': the writer's and journalists who went to see all chronicled their various impressions. Men such as George Sims ('Horrible London'), Jack London ('People of the Abyss') and Walter Besant ('East London . . . . the City of happily toiling bees') have described them with varying degrees of outrage, compassion and condescension. Charles Booth, the social investigator, was to become a friend of the Barnett's during his stay in Whitechapel. Of all the writers, his view of the average Whitechapel dweller, most closely approximates to Barnett's own.

'They are the casual labourers of low character' he wrote, 'and those in a similar way of life, who pick up a living with labour of any kind. Their life is the life of savages, with vicissitudes of extreme hardship and occasional success. Their food is of the coarsest description and their only luxury is drink. When they cannot find threepence for a night's lodgings they are turned into the street. The young men take naturally to loafing, the girls take almost as naturally to the streets: some drift down from the pauper and industrial schools, others drift down from the classes of casual and regular labour.'

Barnett thought this a fair and accurate description of the people: 'In this moderate language Mr Booth describes the class of people living in Flower and Dean Street,' he wrote. It is not entirely surprising that their views so exactly co-incided: Barnett and Booth shared a common and manifest moralism. They were both essentially middle class reformers, that Victorian genre so despised today. They did not see it as their duty to describe poverty in a more objective way. Nor would they have been able to. In fact it seems possible that in all his time in Whitechapel, Barnett never did see the people as they were, for his vision must have been severely distorted by his own moral and religious cast.

It is only fair to judge Canon Barnett's contribution to Whitechapel in the context of his time. Intellectual modesty and doubt were not qualities which most Victorians possessed – and Samuel Barnett was no exception. It was one of their many social and political misconceptions that poverty would be erased by improving the minds of the poor rather than their material conditions and the Barnett's subscribed to this with all the self confidence of their class. Canon Barnett's main concern was with spiritual turpitude and deprivation, yet he was for an idealist, an unusually practical man.

In his first years in Whitechapel, Barnett acheived a number of concrete improvements: he was a prime mover in the Artisans Dwelling Act of 1875

which made it possible to condemn dwellings unfit for habitation; he used the Sanitation Acts, which had been brought in after the great cholera epidemic of 1848 to ensure that sewers were connected: he helped to set up the East London Dwellings Company to purchase and rehabilitate slum properties along the lines laid down by Octavia Hill and he installed a wash house in the High Street paid for out of the rates.

When in 1877 he came to review the work of his first years, it was not however in these terms that he spoke. Instead the statement which he wrote in the parish report dealt mainly with his religious and moral philosophy: 'If one sentence could explain the principle of our work in Whitechapel, it is that we aim to decrease not suffering but sin. Too often has East London been described as if its inhabitants were pressed down by poverty and every spiritual effort which has been made for its reformation has been supported by means which aim only at reducing suffering. In my eyes the pain which belongs to the winter cold is not so terrible as the drunkeness with which the summer heat fills our streets. The want of clothes does not call so loudly for remedy as does the want of interest and culture. It is sin therefore in its widest sense that we are here to fight. Sin in the sense of missing the Best. . . .'

Barnett's primary attack on the evils of poverty was a sort of moral rearmament campaign for the poor. In this he saw education and 'that love which strengthens character' as his basic weapons. One of the first actions on taking over the Whitechapel Parish, was to dust out and open up the crumbling schoolrooms behind the vicarage. (It was in these rooms that he was later to hold the first of his art exhibitions, which lead in time to the founding of the Art Gallery in Whitechapel). As an educationalist, Barnett was both perceptive and original, his main concern being to create understanding and develop imagination rather than to teach facts. For this reason craft teaching was introduced as part of the St Judes school curriculum and Barnett held that classrooms should be pleasant places for children to be in.

Barnett's concern for the wellbeing of the slum children lead to the creation of the children's holiday fund in 1877. The fund, which was as much Mrs Barnett's idea, was intended to give the smogbound children of Whitechapel a breath of country air: to improve their health and to give them simultaneously a vision of 'God's greater purpose'. Awed by the freedom of the open country, and the luxury in which they were accommodated, the children behaved in an exemplary fashion. This Barnett took as confirmation of his belief in 'the friendship that binds classes'. For it is clear that, as had been said of him, that in Canon Barnett 'Christian optimism' became a moral determinism which few whom he befriended could evidently resist.

For thirty years, Barnett applied his principles to the practical task of

poor relief. In his role as a trustee on the Whitechapel Board of Guardians, he was intent on encouraging a spirit of self-dependence and his early attempts to replace the peremptory system of dole-giving by a more careful concern, were everywhere taken up as a model for welfare administration.

Yet of all his work, it is probably in his capacity of first Warden of Toynbee Hall that Barnett is best known and best remembered. Toynbee Hall was set up in Whitechapel in 1884 as a residence for university graduates eager to work and live in London's East End. It was dedicated to the memory of Arnold Toynbee, the young social historian who died in 1881. Based on a belief in social improvement brought about by a friendship between individuals, Toynbee Hall was immediately hailed as the cure for the chronic lack of contact between rich and poor in all growing industrial cities and it was the first of many such schemes to be set up all over the world.

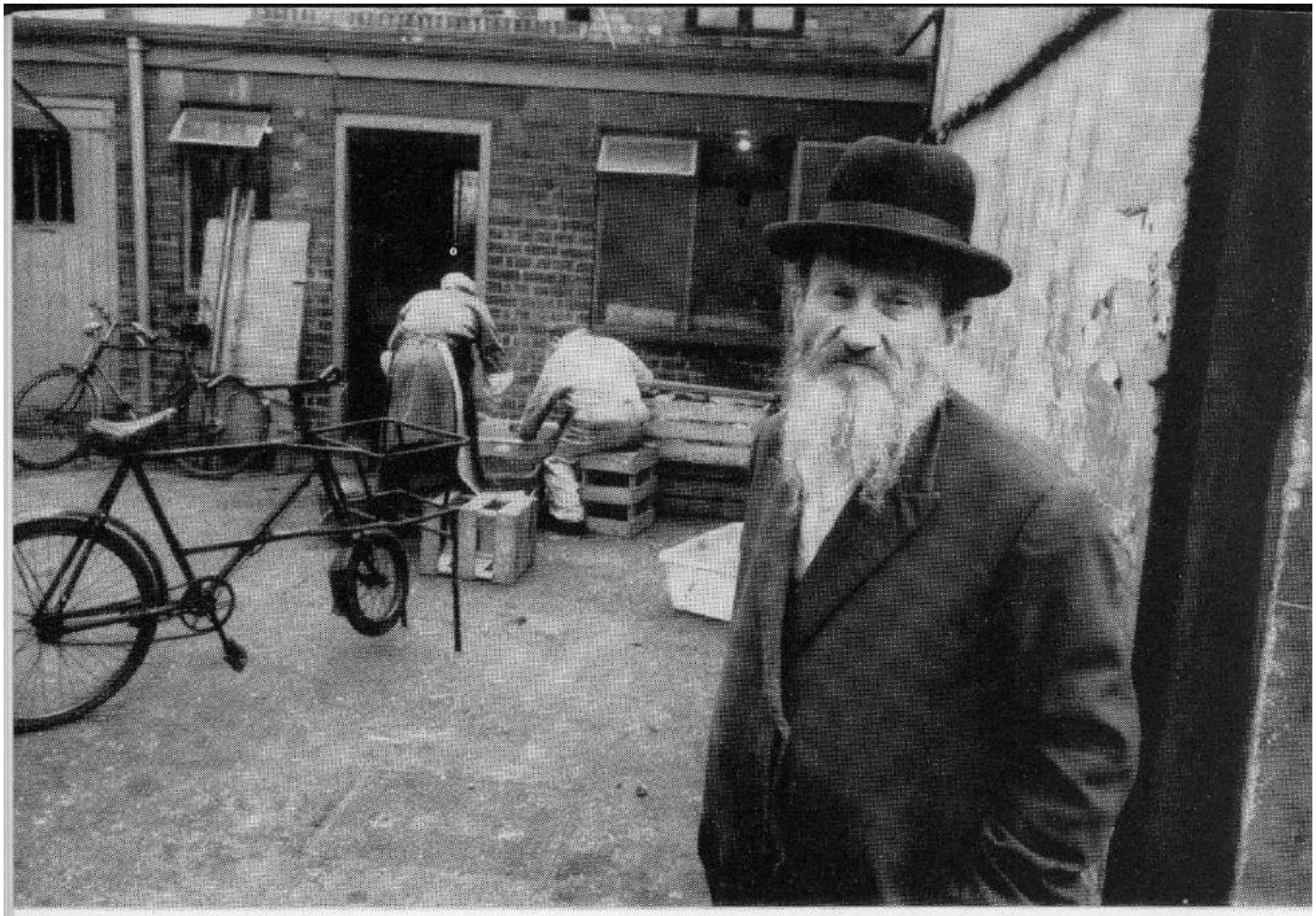
In his work as warden, Barnett supervised the work of his sixteen graduate settlers and helped them to organise their classes and courses. His talent for organisation was prodigious and it is said that he was remarkable for his ability to inspire effort in his co-workers.

Out of the excellent library for the residents and their students at Toynbee there grew a realisation of the need for a free public library in Whitechapel. Barnett persuaded the philanthropist John Passmore Edwards to provide the library which was to be one of the first free libraries in England. A building was erected in the High Street and opened in 1902. Five years later, Barnett formed a trust to purchase the adjoining site for the Art Gallery, which was to be his last project for Whitechapel.

Not all of his notions for the people were well inspired. In his almost hysterical alarm about the danger's of 'materialism' he seems to have ignored the fact that nearly half of his parishioners were living on less than subsistence wages. And it is hard to forgive him the view that the people had no cultural traditions of their own, no matter how repressed these may have been by their hard lives.

But if we are to recognise Canon Barnett's contribution to Whitechapel, rather than to castigate him for his shortcomings, it is well to remember that his liberal paternalism was certainly an advance on the savage *laissez faire* philosophy of his century. We are still left today with the need to separate welfare from moralism and it could hardly have been expected that a nineteenth century middle class reformer should have been able to transcend all the contradictions of his philanthropy.

When he died in 1913, an obituary in the 'Daily News' said of Barnett that he 'had changed the face of East London.' A place had been reserved for his tomb in the crypt of Westminster, for in 1906 he had left the East End to become a Canon of the Abbey, but he chose instead to be buried in the grounds of St Jude's church Whitechapel. It was his last tribute.



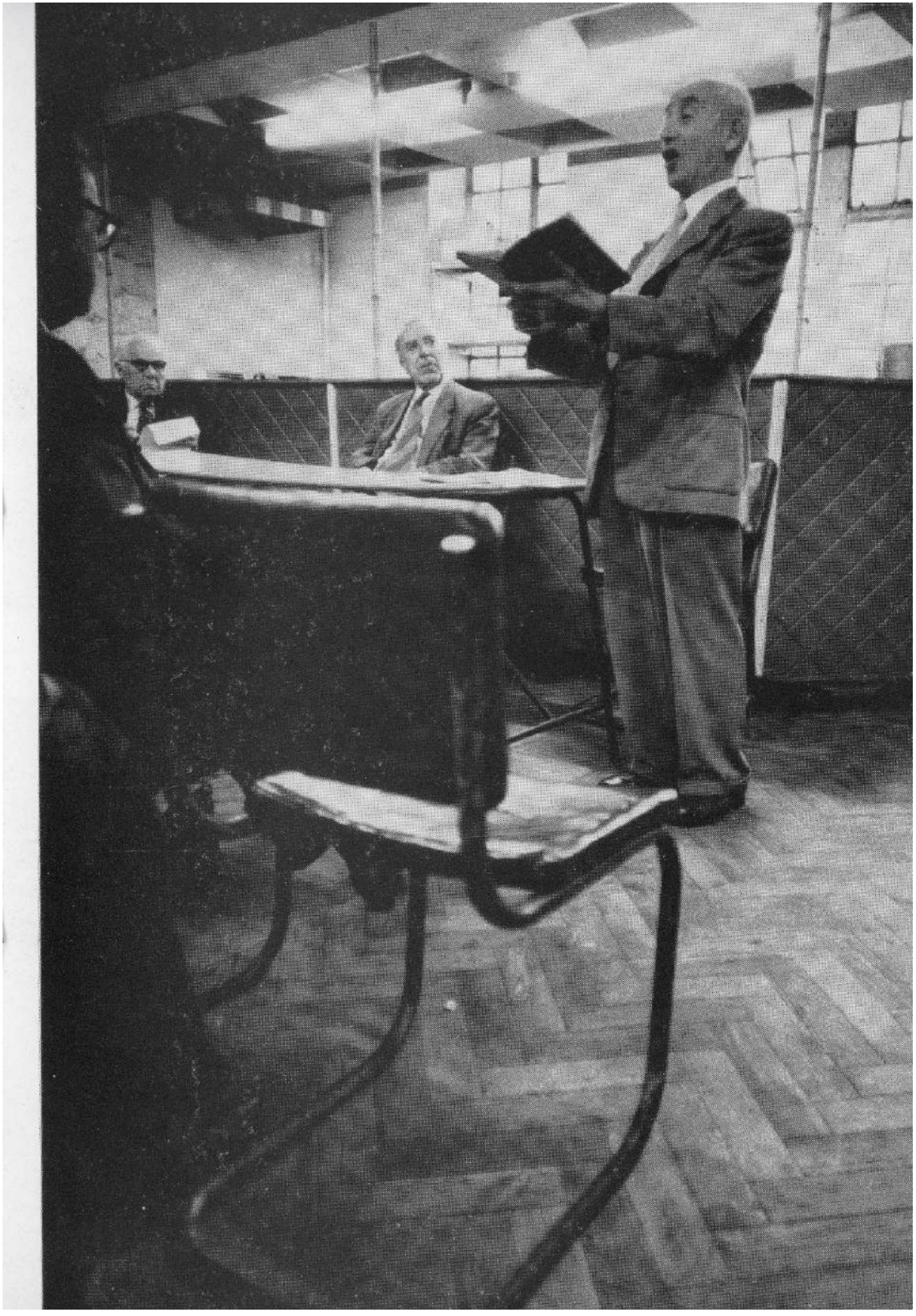
Brick Lane

Club Row

Cobb Street

Toynbee Hall

(following page) Toynbee Hall



Outside Blooms

(previous page) Yiddish Reading Circle

The Waste

THE WHITECHAPEL ART GALLERY Helen Sachs

Of the various palliatives offered by Victorian reformers for the social sickness of their age, none was the target of more derision than the notion of Art for the People. 'Once a year, as regular as clockwork' a Pall Mall Gazette editorial told its readers, 'the Lords and Commons amuse themselves with discussing whether the masses care for high art, whether they would like to have good pictures to look at on Sunday and whether they would derive any pleasure or benefit therefrom. These annual discussions are innocent enough, but somewhat superfluous inasmuch as the point at issue was settled some years since by private enterprise in the East End of London.

The Gazette was referring to the art exhibition held annually in the East End, which had been organised since 1881 by Canon Barnett, then Vicar of Whitechapel. The exhibition had grown out of a suggestion by friends that Barnett and his wife should show their Whitechapel neighbours some of the things they had brought back from a visit to Egypt. The idea took a firm hold and the more ambitious plan of showing pictures as well as objects soon evolved.

The accommodation for the exhibitions was far from ideal: 'We were brave if not foolhardy to hold free public exhibitions in the premises at our command' wrote Canon Barnett. 'There were three schoolrooms each 30 feet by 60, behind the church, not even on a central thoroughfare but approached by a passage yard. The light was much obscured by surrounding buildings, the doorways narrow and the staircase inadequate'.

Despite the inadequacy of their setting, the exhibitions were a resounding success. In the first year although an admission charge of 3d was made, 10,000 people came to see the show. The charge was sensibly abolished the following year and was never reimposed. As the years went on and the word got around that the exhibitions in the schoolrooms were worth a visit, attendance figures soared. By 1886, the year in which the Pall Mall Gazette saw fit to print the editorial quoted above, the number of visitors during the twelve days in March for which the show was open had increased to 60,000.

With the exception of the exhibits, which were amongst the best known and admired works of the time, the tone of the exhibitions bore little resemblance to the coldly impersonal West London academies. Flowers were placed in the entrance, friendly 'watchers' were invited from among the young of the West End, and a catalogue was written which gave simple and

evocative descriptions of the pictures. Many of those attending could not read and for their benefit Canon Barnett took to going the rounds of the exhibition giving impromptu lectures and sermons in front of the pictures. What the people thought of these strange sermons cannot be known, that they listened with grave respect is clear, for Canon Barnett was always able to command rapt attention when he spoke. For his part, Barnett declared that he never enjoyed himself so much as in his talks with his fellows, around the pictures of Watts, the pottery of de Morgan and the 'stuffs' of William Morris. 'I felt as I spoke in front of a picture, the power of speaking by parables, the people heard so much more than was in the words', he later wrote to his brother.

The Barnetts resolved from the first to keep the exhibitions open on Sundays when most of the working people of Whitechapel would be free to attend. As might have been expected, this caused something of an uproar. Mrs Barnett described how the Lord's Day Observance Society 'sent men to stand in the street and with loud voices threaten future punishment to those who entered the exhibition'. When this proved ineffective they wrote to the Bishop of London, who responded by sending Barnett a letter condemning the Sunday openings.

Barnett was fervent in defence of his action: 'Distinctly, I am certain that the sight of pictures, helped by the description of those who try to interpret the artist, does touch the memories and awaken the hopes of the people', he wrote in reply to the Bishop. 'Never have I been so aware of the Soul and its needs as when the people listened to what I had to say of Watts picture 'Time, death and Judgment'. I cannot think that if you knew the lives of my neighbours as I do, you would say it is better for the value of old Sunday associations to keep the people amidst the paralysing and degrading sights of our streets than to bring them within view of the good and perfect sights of God. Pictures if they could be more generally shown on weekdays and on Sundays would educate people so that they might realise the extent and meaning of the past, the beauty of nature and the substance of love.'

Barnett was not alone among Victorian reformers in believing in the power of art to 'elevate' the people. Both William Morris and John Ruskin, whose reforming philosophies were otherwise diametrically opposed, had combined to show the way. 'Life without work is guilt', wrote Ruskin, 'and work without art is brutality'. Those words were to become the motto of the 'art movement' in Whitechapel and were inscribed on the catalogues produced for the exhibitions.

The curious quality of Canon Barnett's art appreciation was that it was not based on any overpowering instinct for the beautiful. He was colour-blind and 'secretly', a friend later wrote of him,' regretted that all pictures could not be ethical allegories like Watt's paintings. But he was fortunate, for in Mrs

Barnett he had the ideal complement for his enthusiasm: She was as sentient as he was idealistic, and a true art lover. Raised in a refined and cultured family where 'pictures of Raphael were hung on the nursery wall', it was she who advised him on the choice of pictures for the exhibitions and supervised the hanging of the pictures and the decoration of the rooms.

Setting up the exhibitions was an arduous and complicated affair. For it was of neccessity carried out in a remarkably short space of time, as the schools could only be spared for 16 days and of these four were allowed for preparation. Mrs Barnett has given us a description of their work. 'On the Thursday before Maundy Thursday the school broke up. On Friday and Saturday the pictures were collected. On Saturday afternoon and Sunday the catalogue was written and produced. On Monday the 300–350 pictures were hung; on Tuesday morning the press were admitted and on Tuesday afternoon the public opening was held.'

Persuading the owners of fine pictures to lend their possession was one of Canon Barnett's main concerns. He summed up his conviction that his parishioners would appreciate nothing but the best pictures in the rather unfortunate phrase 'the highest art for the lowest people'. But his desire to prevent cultural condescension, if badly expressed, was very sincere. 'As yet' he wrote, 'the rich do not understand that the poor are their equals in their power of enjoyment. One of the best results that could follow the Whitechapel show would be a conviction of sin amongst picture owners, because the best pictures are never seen and when seen are not interpreted'.

Hanging the paintings must have been extremely difficult, for it was not as if the hanging could be settled along the principles that usually govern exhibitions. To those Mrs Barnett had to add 'the knowledge that people crowded and lingered around a picture with a story and as the floors were weak only one popular canvas could be placed on each wall. Also the means of entrance and exit were small, visitors sometimes drunken and panic easily aroused in crowds'.

Overcrowding was a problem from the start and, with the growth in attendance, soon became critical. In 1885 Canon Barnett wrote: 'Next year we must if possible have new rooms. We need more space and two staircases, for there is always some anxiety now lest an accident might happen.' In the absence of other funds, the donations of friends had helped to support the exhibition from the beginning. In 1887 they raised £2,500 for a new building and three larger rooms were built at the back of the existing schoolrooms. These satisfied Barnett for a while, but it was not long before the continued popularity of the exhibitions and Barnett's mounting conviction of the value of the art shows in Whitechapel set him thinking about the idea of a permanent gallery.

In 1892 a book by the novelist and historian Walter Besant entitled 'All

Sorts and Conditions of Men' had succeeded in persuading the public of the value of buildings for culture in the East End. As an antidote to the debauchery of the beer house and the music hall, he had suggested a cultural centre which would combine education and good music and thereby provide a cure for the 'joyless monotony' of the East End. The idea which was taken up enthusiastically by the well-to-do culminated in 1893 in the now defunct People's Palace in Mile End Road.

Barnett's first idea for the permanent gallery was along similar lines to Besant's. In an interview in February 1894 with the editor of a periodical with the unlikely title 'The Religious Review of Reviews' he outlined his proposals for the scheme: 'It might be a glorified Town Hall, for if an art exhibition is attached to a living body, it would run no chance of being stranded. We propose to get the parochial authorities to keep it up out of the rates, using it indeed for other purposes if necessary.'

Much effort was expended on this 'glorified Town Hall'. It was proposed to convert a Baptist Chapel in Commercial Street for the purpose and sketch plans were drawn up. But the scheme proved fruitless, as the safety requirements demanded by the LCC for the type of building Barnett was proposing were prohibitive on the relatively small budget available. The Whitechapel authorities, too, were not keen to take responsibility for such a building. In the end it was decided to build a separate gallery and place it under a body of Trustees.

In 1896 Mr Passmore Edwards, the newspaper proprietor and philanthropist, came forward with an offer of £5000 to construct a building, provided that a suitable site could be found and an endowment secured. Shortly afterwards, an option on a site adjoining the Whitechapel Library was obtained. It was not in fact a particularly suitable site for an art gallery, being small and hemmed in on all sides. Nor was the asking price of £6000 particularly cheap, but Passmore Edwards who, in his 'ubiquitous munificence' had paid for the construction of the library building some few years earlier was adamant that the site should be the one to accompany his donation and Barnett was left with very little choice in the matter.

Charles Harrison Townsend, the architect of the gallery can scarcely have had this site in mind in his first sketch design for the building. The design, which was shown at the Royal Academy exhibition in May 1896, was for a building almost twice the size of the present gallery. It was an ambitious project, but more in the nature of a design exercise than a serious scheme for its lavishness testifies to Townsend's obvious unconcern for the amount of money which could be feasibly raised for the project. The scheme places great emphasis on the use of mosaic, on which Townsend was something of an expert, having written and lectured extensively on the subject. Townsend wrote of the scheme in the journal 'The Builder': 'The design for the gallery

proposes that the exterior shall make a large use of mosaic, with the hope of adding an element of brightness to the somewhat sombre neighbourhood', and the building was described in 'The Studio', the contemporary magazine of the Arts as being 'a colour study, as demonstrated by the warm yellow tone of the exterior wall work, the bands of Cipolino marble in the centre portion, the reddish-yellow and white marble of the centre doorway and the green slates of the large flanking towers.

Barnett and his advisors determined to negotiate for the site and Townsend – a friend of the Barnett's and the designer of the 'highly original' nearby Bishopsgate Institute – was commissioned to design a more realistic scheme. The design which was completed early in 1897 differs substantially from its predecessor. The flanking towers were much reduced in importance and topped by rather oriental cupolas, which in fact were never built. The gallery was also much reduced in size: what had been a facade of 100 feet in the first scheme became the narrow 43 feet frontage which the gallery now has and the highly elaborate facade was limited to a terra-cotta 'treatment'. The emphasis on mosaic remained unchanged for it was an integral part of Townsend's conception for the gallery. The mosaic panel, designed by the artist Walter Crane was never executed and in a sense therefore, the gallery was never really completed.

On the whole, the final design for the gallery had a mixed reception from the press. Many did not know what to make of it, for it was quite unlike any other building in England, and was referred to alternatively as a 'gaunt shed' and a 'house beautiful'. While the architectural historians are unanimous in rating Townsend as a notable rather than great architect, he was exceptional in being really the only architect in England to design in the style of the art nouveau, a style which although it received its impetus from the English Arts and Crafts movement, was to have its real flowering in Scotland and the continent.

Once a feasible design had been provided and the site thereby proved suitable, Canon Barnett set about raising funds for the gallery. In addition to Mr Passmore Edwards' £5000, he calculated that another £12,000 would be required to purchase the site and pay for Mr Townsends' scheme.

Accordingly at the opening of the spring exhibition of 1897, he launched an appeal for the money. The exhibition, which that year contained 80 pictures by Mr Watts, was well attended by the press and Barnett's appeal was reported in all the national papers. All were unanimous in their glowing commendation that the gallery project should be supported. The popular half-penny 'Echo', under its proprietor Passmore Edwards – who was naturally a partisan – wrote of 'the humane spirit which uses educative and ameliorative agencies to improve and elevate the people.' The 'Daily News' spoke of the 'vulgar and silly people who used once to say that only the

comfortable classes can appreciate art,' and went on to express the pious belief that 'the best critics are not those who spend their lives in staring, but those whose familiarity with the viccissitudes of life enables them to comprehend the meaning of imaginative art.'

Barnett himself wrote a letter to 'The Times' in which he stated the belief that 'nothing has done more than the annual picture exhibitions to make East Londoners believe that the West End regards them as human beings, capable of sharing their pleasures and not only of receiving their doles. 'Large sums – complete sum would be welcome,' he ended hopefully, 'but small sums will soon swell the necessary amount.'

The response to the appeal was slow and at times, disheartening. Potential donors wrote to express their regrets that they were unable to help, giving unlikely excuses such as 'the Indian famine' and the Jameson raid both of which 'concern us greatly'. Nevertheless sufficient money was collected to start the construction of the building in 1898, the main sums being donated by Sir Edgar Speyer, Harry Lawson MP, Sir Alfred Yarrow and Lord Iveagh.

A most interesting part of the gallery's history is provided by the participation of these men, for they were among the most illustrious philanthropists of the time. It is clear that Barnett had an ability to attract such men to his schemes and that all were extremely willing to help. The chief donor, Passmore Edwards caused some difficulty, for as the scheme progressed he conceived the notion that the gallery was to bear his name. His 'little weakness' as he referred to his desire for recognition, threatened to upset the whole project when he withdrew the additional £1,200 he had promised to complete the building. The 'Passmore Edwards Affair', as Barnett later called it, came at an extremely awkward time, for building was already under way and the clause which the architect had put into the contract, limiting the gallery to a single storey if funds were not forthcoming, had been deleted. Fortunately, Edgar Speyer stepped in to provide the deficit caused by the hurt withdrawal of Mr Edwards and the building was able to continue.

From the start the gallery had more than its fair share of problems and delays. The lowest tender which came in for the building was for £8000 – almost £1000 more than had been raised. Barnett suggested that it might be economical to abandon the fire-proof cast iron floor that Townsend had specified, and replace it with something 'more traditional'. For as he wrote to one of his advisors, 'not even the Royal Academy has what our architect is proposing for us.

Townsend defended the use of the cast iron structure, for necessary reasons of support and attempted to find other ways in which money might be saved. 'I am at my wits end to see how any further cheapening can be effected' he wrote to Barnett. 'I have simplified my facade and cut out ornamental terra-cotta work. As now there is little difference between its cost

and that of a red-brick front, and our building is now quite of the cheap warehouse or artisans building variety.' Nor were the only problems of the building financial: sub contractors caused delay and heating and lighting installations proved extremely complicated. When the building was finally completed in January 1900, it took an inordinately long time to dry out and the interior furnishing could not be completed until the end of that year.

Getting an endowment set up for the gallery was also to prove difficult. A sort of chicken-and-egg problem arose, in which it was difficult to ascertain whether a Declaration of Trust had to preceed the endowment scheme or whether the endowment should come first. In the end the problem was resolved and the Charity Commissioners were persuaded to draw up a scheme for the Gallery which provided a sum of £20,000 to be paid out over forty years. The endowment and the running of the gallery were to be administered by a board of 13 trustees which included Speyer and Lawson as well as Mrs Barnett and representatives from all the relevant educational and local authorities. The scheme laid down the basic objectives of the gallery, which was to provide: (1) Exhibitions of modern pictures; (2) Exhibitions from the national museums of objects illustrative of trades or periods; (3) Exhibitions of work done by the children of the people; (4) Exhibitions of any works of art.' Barnett wrote of the objectives that while the first was a 'tried and trusted friend' and the children's shows at the Board schools were known to 'awaken interest', the remaining two were to be 'something of an experiment', which he hoped would 'prove fruitful'.

March 14th 1901 was the date finally settled for the opening of the gallery, and an exhibition, which included Pre-Raphaelite paintings, was mounted under the gallery's first director, Mr Charles Aitken. The press attended in force, convinced as they were by now of the consummate wisdom of Barnett's scheme. There was much comment on the building and nobody failed to remark on the brightly coloured interior – it had been covered in crimson hessian. Lord Rosebery who presided over the opening, spoke of his hope that the gallery might continue for many years to brighten the lives of the people of East London: his presence on the occasion was deemed auspicious, for it was he who had opened the first exhibition at St Judes in 1881. It was sadly ironical that the Barnett's were prevented by the death of their adopted daughter from attending the occasion that marked the fulfillment of their dream of twenty years.

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The Lone One

The old man sways about
as if his life is draining out,
he tries to get a bus,
but the bus goes
they don't want him he knows,

Just because he's drunk
they think he's a moron
but he's not—he's human
just you and me.
They think 'Don't let him on
he might do a pee'

The poor man thinks
'They don't want me,
well, they're wrong it's
the other way round.
I don't want them,
I would rather be poor and happy
than rich and sad.'

Tony Hussey

Young Boy's Story of the Slums

Below the chimney pots
Under the sky
I wonder where in the world am I?

My world is vision
My story one
My hopes, my destiny . . . .
I must have some

I have seen lonely looks
And begging faces
And stood alone
In empty places.

Little am I in age
Heavy I rest in thought
Stupid am I in sums
And yet I know
The story of the slums.

Andrew Strowman

A Strawberry and an Onion

Once
I heard a blind man say
God, give me my eyes again
But no-one came.

Once
I heard an old tramp cry
Please, Lord, do not let me rise tomorrow
But he did, and was overcome by sorrow.

Andrew Strowman

RUDOLPH ROCKER William Fishman

The East End of London is no stranger to political ideologues and Messianists. Its off-beat environment is propitious for the emergence of chiliastic sects and eccentric zealots. The paradox is that this reservoir of the under-privileged and persecuted from a variety of nations should have once housed men who have made history, as well as those of peculiar genius whom history has unjustly passed by. There were many of the former. In 1907 Stalin and Litvinov, delegates to a Bolshevik congress in London, lived in a Stepney doss-house, which still stands. Marx and Lenin often came to this area inhabited by their classic proletarians; and in Whitechapel, William Booth set up his first platform to preach salvation for their souls. Of the latter, one came to bring social regeneration to the outcast Jew. He was Rudolf Rocker, the German anarchist gentile, who devoted nearly twenty years of his life to organizing and inspiring the most despised of East End plebs – the immigrant Jewish tailors.

For the Russian Jews between the years 1880 and 1914 needed desperately both a Messiah and a Promised Land. Tsarist reaction to the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 bore heavily on the old scapegoats. They fled from the southlands of Russia and the borders of Poland seeking refuge in the ghettos of Western Europe. Into East London they poured, these 'greeners', the pulses of immigration reaching their heights during the pogroms. But there was no salvation for them here. On arrival they were brought abruptly into new environs of degradation – the slums and the workshop. It was here that the young German anarchist in exile joined them (January 1895) where, in retrospect, he presents us with the social setting into which they were plunged:

> There were at that time thousands of people in London who had never slept in a bed, who just crept into some filthy hole where the police would not disturb them. I saw with my own eyes thousands of human beings, who could hardly be considered such, people who were no longer capable of any kind of work. They went about in foul rags, through which their skin showed, dirty and lousy, never free from hunger .... scavenging their food out of dustbins and the refuse heaps that were left behind after the markets closed.
>
> There were squalid courts and alleyways with dreary, tumbledown hovels, whose stark despair it is impossible to describe. And in these cesspools of poverty children were born and people lived, struggling all their lives with poverty and pain, shunned like lepers by all decent members of society.[1]

[1] *'The London Years'*, R. Rocker, p. 79.

Into this social hell the exiles swarmed. The hatred and calumny mounted against them assumed almost a contemporary ring, with the stock argument against immigrants. The local gentiles accused them of depriving home-born workers of accommodation, even then a scarce commodity – Jack London reiterates this accusation in his *'People of the Abyss'*: overcrowding and insanitary conditions; undercutting wages and threatening employment; introducing ideas and religions that were anathema to the English way of life. Trade unionists were galled by the sweat-shop conditions under which the newcomers laboured, and despised them for their ineffectual attempts to combine in order to resist exploitation. National publicity was already directing activity towards the sweated trades. Efforts towards their suppression were stimulated by the findings of Charles Booth in his monumental survey of the London working class (1897–1900) and by the accumulation of bills, particularly those sponsored by Sir Charles Dilke since 1898. An Anti-Sweating League, formed in 1905, and the organization by the *'Daily News'* of a Sweated Industries Exhibition in 1906 paved the way to the Trade Board Act of 1909 – introduced by Winston Churchill, then President of the Board of Trade – which attempted to eradicate the evil.[2] But it was the leadership of Rocker among his anarchist field-workers, in direct industrial action, that registered a powerful defeat upon the sweaters in the clothing trade. Before doing so, he had to win the confidence of a people who, through bitter experience, had come to shun the gentile. His emergence from voluntary partisanship to leadership of these people is a remarkable tale. He dedicated himself to a threefold task: to organize and improve the conditions of Jewish workers; to implement better social relations between English and Jewish workers within the Trade Union movement; and, finally, to undertake the broader aim of educating all workers in the libertarian Socialist creed which would lead them towards the anarchist goal.

In the *'Sugar Loaf'* public house in Whitechapel's Hanbury Street, he became a welcome guest among the Jewish anarchists who met there. This area was particularly unsavoury.[3] It was hazardous to get through the pub to their meeting room since 'there were always several drunks there, men and women who used foul language and became abusive when they saw a foreigner'. He was struck by the contrast between the Parisian Jews and those in the East End. The former were mostly skilled artisans, well fed and clothed, while the latter 'looked sad, worn and half-starved'. They sat crowded together on hard benches, pale and taut in the dim gaslight, following with rapt attention the speakers and discussions, that opened up to them the vision of the new society. They soon surrendered to this young burly German who exuded warmth and generosity; and were overjoyed when

[2] Middle-class ladies learned with horror that their latest fashionable dresses were stitched by girls working sixteen hours a day for less than a penny an hour.

[3] Jack the Ripper had operated here eight years before.

he spoke to them in their own language, Yiddish. He had only recently mastered this, and it led to the extraordinary phenomenon of a gentile being offered the post of editor of a Yiddish political journal, the new *'Arbeter Fraint'* (Worker's Friend) in October 1898. The Jews' confidence would not be misplaced. The new publication achieved an international reputation in both libertarian and social-democratic circles.

The years 1898 to 1914 were lean years for the children of the ghetto– the Kishinev pogroms (1903) and the 1905 Russian Revolution brought new waves of immigrants and their incumbent problems. They also, not unnaturally, evoked a high peak of social and political agitation. Rocker was resolved on the parallel duties of teaching and organizing his people. A permanent institution would have to be established in order to implement this. It would not restrict itself to the propagation of ideology, but would develop as an all-embracing adult institute of education in the modern idiom. In Jubilee Street, in the heart of the Jewish quarter, an old Salvation Army depot was taken over and transformed. The project was financed by the accumulated pennies of the slaves of the sweatshop, many of whom contributed most of their weekly pittance.

On February 3rd, 1906, the club was opened by the doyen of all anarchists, Prince Kropotkin, who, though ill and warned by his doctors not to attend, felt compelled to give this unique venture his personal blessing. Messages of congratulations included those from the three greatest anarchists – Malatesta, Louise Michel and Tarrida del Marmol. The Jubilee Street club was to play a great role in the social and intellectual experience of all East Enders. It was a large building containing two halls: one on the ground floor supported a gallery that could hold eight hundred people; the other on the second floor housed a library and reading room with class-room accommodation in side chambers. Rocker himself emerged as one of the pioneers of London adult education. The Institute was thrown open to all workers, whatever their creed. Courses included English for the new immigrant, history, sociology, and public-speakers' classes. Groups were taken to the British Museum on Sundays, with Rocker himself acting as guide and lecturer. Meanwhile, a small adjoining building housed the presses of the *'Arbeter Fraint'*. It was here that Rocker mobilised his forces for the assault on the tailoring sweatshops and in 1912 led a successful tailors strike which broke the back of 'sweating'.

At the hour of victory he rallied to help the dockers' families, whose fathers were involved in the great dock strike. A trade union Committee of Aid was set up and the *'Arbeter Fraint'* enjoined its readers to succour the children. Offers of accommodation and gifts poured in from Jews, many of whom could hardly feed themselves. Rocker and his wife personally collected children from the docks; most of them were reduced to 'a terribly undernourished state, barefoot, in rags'. Local retailers subscribed clothing

and shoes. Dockers, trade unionists and social workers spoke of the warmth and hospitality shown to their unfortunate charges by the East End Jews. Over three hundred children were taken to their homes while the strike endured. It laid the foundation of friendship which neither time nor circumstance could erase. The 'hungry thirties' registered its fulfilment. It was the dockers of Wapping and St. Georges who were the militant vanguard of the movement which, in 1936, forcibly prevented the Mosleyite incursion into East London.

The years 1912–1914 were those in which Rocker reached the nadir of his power and influence. His efforts at importing union organisation among the tailors had been singularly successful. He had brought together workers of diverse creeds and traditions and provided them with a unifying force. But his fundamental objective – the proselytization of all to the anarchist creed – came to nothing. In the first decade of this century the anarchists seemed the most dynamic element in East End political life. By the 1920's they were already an anachronism, shadowy ghosts of another era. Why?

The incident of the Sidney Street siege in January 1911 revealed the breach in anarchist ranks. It focused the antithesis between the concept of educative growth combined with militant action, conceived by Kropotkin and Rocker, and the idea of 'propaganda by the deed' – that is, individual acts of violence and assassination as means of destroying the state and hastening the new millennium. The advocates of terror embraced a mélée of fanatical idealists on the one extreme and criminal homicides on the other. The post-pogrom immigrants contained many of the latter, conspirators and desperadoes, who had experienced the brutal ferocity of the Tsarist police and had fought back with bomb and knife. Unable or unwilling to adjust to their new conditions, they continued to associate government authority in Britain with that of Russia, 'where every policeman and every public dignitary was an instrument of despotism and oppression.' Peter the Painter was their ideal representative. It is symptomatic that he, the one who got away, should re-emerge into history as an offical of Lenin's Cheka and one of its most ruthless agents.[7] Sir Phillip Gibbs, novelist and journalist, visiting the Jubilee Street Club in connection with a report on Sidney Street, describes Rocker and his entourage and estimates the political potential of the group:

> These alien anarchists were as tame as rabbits. I am convinced that they had not a revolver among them. Yet remembering the words I heard, I am sure this intellectual anarchy, this philosophy of revolution, is more dangerous than pistols or glycerine. For out of that anarchist club in the East End came ideas.

He was wrong. A movement divided among itself cannot stand. A mixture of saints and sinners drove it into many directions and confused its disciples.

[4] Rocker's associate Alexander Shapiro, who met Peter in London, saw him in this capacity in St Petersburg in 1917.

Religious and political factors accelerated the process of disintegration. For in East London Rocker fought a losing battle against Jewish orthodoxy. Anarchist precepts of atheism and free love cut across the basic tenets of Judaism. J.L. Fine recalls the tragi-comedy of the anarchist Balls, deliberately held on Yom Kippur day (the fast of Atonement), the most solemn of Jewish festivals. Young politicals, flouting their contempt for tradition, marched in columns to the main Orthodox Synagogue in Brick Lane, smoking or brandishing ham sandwiches as gestures of defiance and rejection of their creed. The worshippers in full regalia swept out and attacked the scoffers with any weapon they could seize. The local people gazed dumbfounded at the antics of these strange foreigners; and police intervention was needed to restore order. These incidents ended with the outbreak of war. 1914 marked the climax of anarchist intercession, which, thereafter, rapidly declined. The movement split further into the pro- and anti-war elements. Kropotkin supported the war against Germany; Rocker and Malatesta opposed war on general principle. The columns of the *'Arbeter Fraint'* were thrown open to both, but their views were quickly suppressed when, in 1915, the police closed its offices and imprisoned the staff. Rocker himself was interned in December, 1914, as an enemy alien. His removal from the scene was a decisive blow to East End anarchism, from which it never recovered. The triple pulls of Zionism, Orthodoxy and Communism after 1917 offered new challenges to the residual anarchists. The Balfour declaration opened up the prospect of the Messianic realisation of a National home in Palestine. A second generation of Jews, over whom the lean years of suffering had passed lightly, returned to the security and respectability of their ancient faith. Many of the older generation saw their millennium in the advent of the Russian Revolution. They flocked enthusiastically to their old homeland and disappeared in the purges and executions of the Cheka. Many of the younger embraced the new Communism from afar with a fanaticism more lasting than the old. By the 1920's the anarchists had lost most of their leaders, and immigration, which had fed the movement with its most zealous followers, had virtually ceased.

Reprinted from 'History Today', January 1966 by kind permission

TOWN HALL HANGOVER Andrew Strowman

There has been a destruction in the East End, but no one seems keen to
wake you up. It really is one more skin shed. Remaining, are
characters from a different generation.

As a boy of eleven, I recall a bowler-hatted visitor,
collecting burial contributions on a weekly basis. Occasionally
I see him pray, in a white carriage of a Whitechapel–Hammersmith train.
Only yesterday, (Thursday 6 July), I met a short-nosed
dosser-faced man, by the name of Moshe, who wore a
walking stick in his lapel pocket.
You don't believe me?
How many of you realise the character alone
engendered by Pakistanis and Indians?
Those of you who say 'they' will never mix will I
think be proved wrong. Years, patient things, ought to
manipulate their individual affinity not only to each other, but
mobilise one generation onwards into sociability.
Some one reading this – might be a stranger to this area.
So let me crush one myth. It isn't true every single home
lacks a bathroom. Nor a rat. For one thing, there isn't
enough rats for everyone yet. These are some of
the middle class definitions of a slum.
Young people here, who lack the parental
encouragement for academic achievement, can always
aim at alcoholic achievements; isn't that right Mr Orwell? However,
through serious individual endeavours, it has been proven in many cases,
brat academic ones are capable too.
Quite opposite this site a sweaty old lady called
Gardiners Corner lies spreadeagled in ruin. Decrepit old
Montague Street is just about with us. You can't even see
dockers holding hands in Cable Street, anymore! Whose
for Petticoat Lane? (Most of my Sundays are well-spent in
Club Row).

I am certain that some of Ron McCormick's photographs on Stepney are pre-extinction pictures belonging to an era.

A glance in the Tower Hamlets Guide Book quickly verifies this, (copies *free* from Roman Road), as one turns the pages – 58. The 1912 Strike. 98. Freimuller and Son – the family shop in 1900, 99. The LCC Fire Engine.

Go and find the silk muffler before it reaches picture form.

I have noticed, while living in Stepney, some peculiar things. The disrespect shown to flowers and trees, and the atrocious sentimental bestowment upon prints *so* pretentious – yet reproduced abundantly to keep up with demand. A quantity of people suffer from an Art attack – Art with a capital A!

Is this illness to be supposed a product of a forthright existence?

People remark how much we are 'open', but Lord! even the type of literature displayed on second-hand bookstalls is raw and fierce!

I put my claim in, Mr Orwell, that there is a dire deficiency of entertainment for young people. What good are shut youth clubs, X certificates, and banned pubs to these people?, and so far as encouraging any establishing of centres with real artistic value to young people, you are worse than nonchalant, you frown on them!

Even the insanest person is able to see why Chris Searle and Ron McCormick (co-editors of Stepney Words) have brought something more to this community. And as a poet of this borough I pray with fairy lights of hope, that they, and others like them, will succeed in all such endeavours.

Andrew Strowman

11 August 1957

In the morning of a rare rainy day in August, calculated time eight a.m., was born Intiaz A. Malek, just another human come to increase the population of the under-developed country called India. And that person is the author of this passage, writing at the precise moments fourteen years after his arrival on earth. Born near the coast of the Indian Ocean, in the City of Baroda, common, highly populated. I was born in a well mannered house, where money was a small problem. This prosperous place did not belong to my father, who was an engine driver, earning 60 shillings (80 pence) a month. (The house belonged to his brother and we lived there). He was always a little exhausted (owing to night shifts), but full of enthusiasm and curiosity. He always thought and said about reaching higher and firmer ground.

September 1966

I was nine years old approximately, I did not know the shape of the world then, and could not place a plane from a duck. In early August of 1966 AD we were to come to England in a 727 (Air India) plane. I wasn't in the least excited, I did not know what a plane was. Late afternoon of the following week we arrived at the airport. The air vessels greatly fascinated me. I had not seen an aircraft from such minor distance. I was to get even closer by the time evening arrived. The deep round red body of Sol was disappearing from the horizon of India, when the aircraft lifted for its destination.

November 1966

Every day was a grey one, days passing like minutes. House, instead of stones seemed like damp paper. Purposeless objects. Despite all these facts I was alive in this country. It represented science, knowledge and the true shape and place of the earth. It represented the size of the universe, the countless billions of suns, solar systems, civilisations. Weeks passed and every day was eventless, when one day Dad brought home a television which brightened up the evenings. I watched the glowing box everyday, correction, evening. What interested me was a baldy man who appeared at 6 and 9 five days a week, much later I found out he was a newscaster, and strangely named 'Gordon Honeycomb'.

August 1967

The Royal Mint Square (Private Lodging)

A small portion of my life was given to these slums, half good and half miserable. I shall never forget those weird but kind buildings. I learned the two sides of English Society there, which were unusually different from each other.

Intiaz Malek

Timeless,
Godless,
Savages that lurk in the deepest universe
Shapeless paradise their home,
Gases they breathe
Cyanide they eat

Royal Mint Square

The dark and dreary place
Pulled down from existence,

Its happy sparks nearing the dynamite

Old people dying
With this unhappy world of Royal Mint Square.

The merciless dynamite explodes
Pulling the body of the square apart

The Dreamer

From the house he travelled,
Through time,
Cutting the distant thread
Into the new world
A shiny star
Where he would be
Adam,
And the star the Eve.

The Extinct Life

He sat by the window
Deep in the night
The silence was pierced
A distant soothing tune cutting through the dark
Still smog ran in his ears.
He was nearing a broken road now
A deep hole, an eternal hole
Which he would not live to reach his destination

Atomic Age

Now there is silent eternity
Godless race wandering across the black universe
Extinguished
Extinguished from the intelligent flame of life.
The dark burnt shapeless globe
Remains fatherless
Sunless.

Intiaz Malek

When the GLC election results for Tower Hamlets were declared in 1968 a television commentator described the area as 'Mile End, Whitechapel and that's about it.' His tone and attitude implied that the area and the people who live here are not worth further consideration. This often seems to be the attitude of people who live off the manor. Or worse still they come to the East End to do us 'good' for a couple of years and then retire to a pad in a chic part of London with a clear conscience. It's true we have problems. For example, unemployment is rising, housing is difficult, rents are going up and it's becoming more and more a struggle just to provide the basic needs of life.

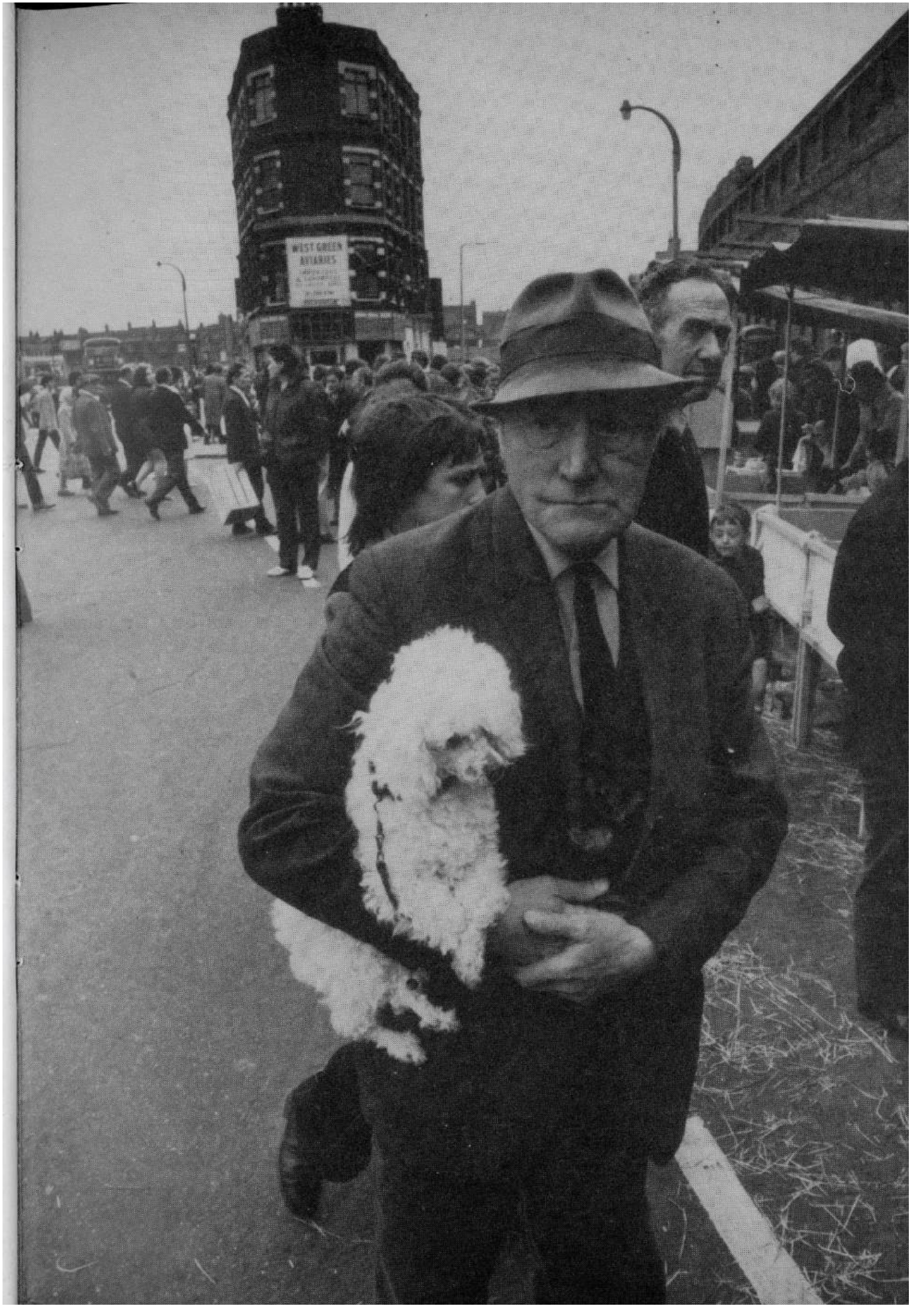
Struggle is, however, an integral part of being working class and Whitechapel is, thank God, working class. For many the working class struggle has only just began. Perhaps it was the Industrial Relations Act, perhaps it was the Common Market or the rise in prices but whatever the cause the struggle to maintain a wife and family and gain control of our own lives is sharpened. Our concern is not merely that people here, or anywhere else come to that, are well fed and watered but that we are given every opportunity to raise our understanding of life and the lives of those around us. If the surroundings appear bleak and old it's because the struggle to survive is bleak and old. Many improvements in the surroundings have of course been made over the years and in the conditions in which we work,but that's only the beginning of the real work which has to be done.First the mechanics of living and then the living.

You will find Whitechapel not only in the streets but also in the houses, pubs, labour exchanges, on the buses, in the markets and in the schools. Take a walk along the waste. There are few bomb-sites left where children play but you will still see them playing. You'll see meth drinkers, you'll see the market, the shops and the stalls. You'll see the mothers shopping and shouting at the kids. You'll see the station, the hospital, the breweries, the pubs and the churches, but most of all you'll see people. People who know what it is to go without and sometimes dodge the rent man. People who have learnt the hard way but have also learnt to make the most of things. Keep their chin up and struggle on. Laugh at themselves. There's nothing to lose. Brought up in the middle of industrial struggle yet with a vulnerable gentleness and sense of humour.

Jewish life may be changing to Pakistani but life goes on. Whitechapel goes on. The struggle to live and understand goes on. Sometimes we're aware of it, more often we just live it. All the joys, disasters and experiences in being born living and dying are here. A slice of life flavoured with people and thoughts not bitten with the hang ups of affluence. No hustle. Down to earth. Open and for me, thank God, home.

Paul Beasley

(opposite) Schlater Street


WEST GREEN
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