

The Finchley Society Newsletter
MARCH, 1986 No.3/86 SUPPLEMENT

LONDON ROAD SAFETY ALERT Eva Flessati

I was asked to attend this one-day conference by our Chairman and was also encouraged by the road safety officer for the London Borough of Barnet, on which I represent the WRVS (Eastern Division). I therefore aimed at keeping both issues - the environment, and the interest of the elderly - in the forefront of my mind. The conference was organised by the Friends of the Earth. After some misgivings as to whether the conference would exhibit genuine concern or would simply be an anti-government platform, I was impressed by the real concern and un-party-political attitude of all present. Unfortunately there were only 25-30 of us.

The first three speakers dealt with Drinking and Driving, the Bicycle Campaign, and the Blind. After each short introduction, we assembled in small groups to discuss that subject in depth. Of great interest was the group led by the representative of the Federation for the Blind, Mrs. Jill Allen. She raised some novel ideas including one for a "pebbly" surface for road-crossing points, to provide more secure footing for the blind and partially sighted. It was suggested that a surface of that sort around permanent bollards would act as a useful "early warning" of the objects. Other subjects of interest in that field were the fight against pavement obstructions such as standing signs, pavement parking and broken paving stones. (I was asked, by the way, whether in Barnet there is encouragement to photograph offending vehicles, as evidence!).

There was an interesting talk by the founder of the Campaign against Drinking and Driving with a demand for much stiffer sentences, more random breath tests.

After lunch we heard a report on Transport with a demand for more bus-only areas and bus lanes, more bus shelters, etc. Reference was also made to ROSPA and their successful seat belts campaign, and their own Drink and Drive ideas.

One consensus of the conference was praise for Mrs. Linda Chalker who had been a most concerned and active Junior Minister. Her departure from the Ministry was much regretted.

GREEN BELT - OUR GREAT CONCERN

Vice-president Jean Scott, in her capacity as representative on the London Green Belt Council, was one of a delegation of four that recently met with Junior Environment Minister, Richard Tracey.

Led by Sydney Chapman, M.P. for Chipping Barnet, but in his capacity as President of the London Green Belt Council, the delegation discussed with the Minister important issues such as the effects upon Green Belt management after the GLC is abolished, the question of land possibly vacated in future by hospitals situated in the Green Belt and, of course, the never ending battle of housing and business development versus Green Belt preservation.

Jean reports that the meeting should prove to have been valuable, not for any particular "instant" result, but for the opportunity to impress upon the Minister some very practical concerns and practical suggestions for future management of the Green Belt. The Minister, said Jean, was most courteous and receptive of our views.

FEBRUARY MONTHLY MEETING Mary Hodgkinson

Members who turned out - 59 in all, a very creditable number on a bitterly cold evening, were rewarded by our February guest speaker, Dr. Leo Batten, with a wealth of verbal and visual detail on the subject of the Welsh Harp Reservoir. Dr. Batten, of Nature Conservancy, has had a long association with the Welsh Harp and is chairman of its conservation group.

His talk and excellent slides reminded us how fortunate we are to have this area of natural beauty and abundant flora and fauna within easy reach. Fortunate, also, is the fact that Dr. Batten and his colleagues continue to monitor and resist, when necessary, unsuitable development in the area which would increase its urbanisation.

When the reservoir was constructed just over 150 years ago as one of three "feeders" for the Grand Union Canal, local naturalists made careful recordings, but it was not unusual for them also to shoot birds and other wildlife not, as now with a camera, but with a gun! In that early Victorian period, they had the place virtually to themselves - it was not until the 1870s that Londoners acquired the habit of spending their leisure on the banks of the Welsh Harp.

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At first, access was by two coaches (old style) and on horseback. Then came the railway and by the 1890's London was beginning to encroach upon the area. It became a popular site for sport and various forms of recreation. In 1896 fishermen had a field day with a harvest of 179 pike at the start of the season, the cost for one day being one shilling (and for the season, a guinea a rod). The Royal Canoe Club was among those who took to the water and, in severe winters, International Ice Skating Championships were held there. In 1890 and 1892, with ice 4 inches thick, someone drove a coach and four horses across the reservoir for a bet!

In more recent times the leisure activities could hardly be described as "general merrymaking". Serious problems such as river pollution and care of threatened species of birds and plants have occupied the conservationists over long hours in and around the site. Heavy duty oil, fish and chip residue from a neighbouring shop, chemicals and sewage have all found their way in the reservoir, with sad consequences for birds such as the kingfisher. This bird was finally driven away by pollution from a mineral water factory, but has recently been seen more frequently. Solid pollution has been much reduced by the construction of a boom to trap oil and rubbish. Urged by conservationists and others, the GLC erected and maintained this boom, but of course, with the impending abolition of the GLC its future is uncertain. It is hoped that responsibility for maintaining the barrier will devolve upon the Thames Water Authorities.

The magpie population comes and goes, the nightingale - heard until the 1930s - is no more, but herons have been encouraged to return to feed, and the goldfinch, the wood warbler, willow-tit, black cap are all seen in season. An exciting current development is the presence of the great crested grebe and small numbers of smew. Dr. Batten concluded that although the area has deteriorated in some respects, much natural beauty has been saved for our enjoyment.

JANUARY MONTHLY MEETING Mary Hodgkinson

In his lively talk about late Victorian Enfield, Mr. Graham Dalling, the Borough's local history librarian and vice-chairman of the Edmonton Hundred Historical Society, shared with us his own enthusiasm not only for documents but also for oral tradition. One of his best sources was the memory of his grandfather, who died in his 90th year after a lifetime in Enfield.

Outlining the growth of the Borough – haphazardly over a long period and today “virtually built up solid” – Mr. Dalling quoted comparative infant mortality figures for 1900 which members found of great interest. Enfield, with a figure of 145 deaths per thousand live births, was better than the Middlesex average. Finchley’s rate was only 111, Friern Barnet’s 113, while Hendon’s was 131 and Southgate’s 180. Hornsey, “which had become the plushiest of North London suburbs”, had the lowest figure of the group – 102. At that period Enfield’s public health record was fairly reasonable, said Mr. Dalling, thanks mainly to Dr. John James Ridge, Medical Officer of Health, a man of considerable character and achievements – “brisk, efficient and a quite formidable opponent” when legislation was flouted and when “good management and practice” were not observed.

The MOH had to contend, of course, with the human consequences of overcrowding and excessive rents, problems to which Dr. Ridge applied radical ideas in medicine and politics. He was one of the most remarkable local government men in the annals of Enfield, and he epitomised “the best of Victorian values”. Interestingly, his great grandson practices medicine in Enfield today and is also active in local liberal politics!

Even in Dr. Ridge’s time, the local authority was tackling the problem of litter – yes, even before the age of takeaways and plastic bags for everything. Unfortunately, a campaign which involved the distribution of educational leaflets was a total failure – in fact, the leaflets were thrown away, thus adding to the litter! As for street crime, some vicious attacks on tramps and so-called pranks by youngsters, which ended in disaster, were recorded even in “the good old days”.

Alongside high-class housing developments at the turn of the century were some shoddy ones. “The worst single case of jerry-building” cited by Mr. Dalling was that of mixing mortar for a wall near Enfield Lock with road sand, which would naturally have included horse manure.

Mr. Dalling gave us an intriguing glimpse into the life of a suburb which retained its country town atmosphere well into the present century, which was full of “characters” and an “interesting place in which to grow up.”

Expressing our thanks to the speaker, Rosalind Batchelor remarked that, like Enfield, Finchley “still has some of the

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old metal 'curly-edged' street nameplates in use, and that a Council officer was "keeping an eye on them".

WE'VE ALL GOT FAMILY THEES

Members may already know that our archivist Cyril Pentecost, aided we believe by most of the present members of his family, all of whom worked very hard at the task over a considerable period of time, has produced for their personal interest a "Family book", tracing the family back through several centuries and to their origins in France.

We hope that Cyril will in due course be kind enough to permit us a glimpse of that history but meantime he reports that, while pursuing the subject is very time consuming and, frankly, quite expensive, it is nonetheless an extremely rewarding activity.

At a simple level can anyone suggest, for instance, which Finchley Society member/s' families might have the longest residential record in any of the parts of Finchley? Alternatively do any members claim royal blood in their veins or would any reveal those unexpected 'skeletons' found in their cupboard? May we please invite your stories for the newsletter too!

INVITATIONS

1. HERTS & MIDDX TRUST FOR NATURE CONSERVATION

Sunday, 20th April - A conducted tour of Darland's Lake Nature Reserve to see the Snake's Head Fritillaries and other wild flowers. Meet in The Close, just to the west of the Orange Tree public house, Totteridge Lane, N20 either 10.30am or 2.30pm for a one and a half hour tour with Derek Warren.

Tuesday, 22nd April - A meeting at 8pm in North Finchley Public Library for a talk (and slides) on the subject of bats.

2. THE MIDDLESEX SOCIETY

Thursday, 17th April - Harmpstead Garden Suburb Walk. Meet Dorothy Millard at Golders Green Station under the bridge at 2pm.

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Saturday, 31st May - The Annual "Out-of-County" outing, to which Fin.Soc. members are also kindly invited, is this year to Wilton House, Wiltshire. Apply for booking forms (must be booked by 14th May) to Miss M. Hamilton, 16 Capthorne Avenue, Rayners Lane, Harrow HA2 9NE (tel: 868 6308). Costs for the journey and Wilton House entry are Adults - £6.00, Children under 15 - £4.50.

Other Middlesex Society invitations of local interest will be noted in the April, May and June newsletters.

WHOSE FAIRIES?

Did you see the piece in the Local Advertiser of 13th February, suggesting that the Fin.Soc. was to help support St. Mary's Church Spring Fayre with the theme "Fairies and Friends", in costume! Your committee has disclaimed any intent or responsibility for this amusing inaccuracy but meantime, if the true owners of the fairies would care to come forward

OUR MUSEUMS

Chairman Paddy Musgrove draws our attention to a leaflet, now available from local libraries, which attractively publicises all the museums of North and North West London.

Produced jointly by Barnet and Enfield Councils, the leaflet includes details about Church Farm House Museum, Hendon and Barnet Museum, Wood Street Barnet. Also described are what each museum contains and how to reach it.

POET MARY

Members may have spotted a recent reference in one of the local newspapers to further success by Mary Hodgkinson in another national poetry competition. This time it was the 1986 Scottish National Open Poetry competition.

From more than 1000 entries, Mary's was among the top 30, gaining the award of "Diploma of Excellence". Her poem was titled "Poet at the Disco" - we've long suspected that Mary, with her journalistic background, was a dark horse!

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For The Finchley Society

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