

THE FINCHLEY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 1991 No 1/91 SUPPLEMENT

This supplement comes with best wishes to all members for 1991. Although we live in troubled times at a number of levels, let us hope that the shared activities and companionship that come with membership of The Finchley Society, will cheer us more than a little throughout the year.

THIRTY YEARS AGO Timothy Johnson

It was 1960. We were working hard to sort ourselves out after what had been the eighth move in ten years. Although this somewhat nomadic existence had made other parts of England familiar territory, we were now, in Finchley, on completely unknown ground where first impressions were making indelible marks on the memory.

We had paused for a brief well-earned tea break when a window cleaner called and set to work. He lowered the sash and glanced in at our sketchy catering arrangements. His eye seemed to fix for a moment on a plain brown teapot. "Bin cleanin' these windows for years", he announced, "Now when Mrs XYZ was 'ere she never let me clean 'em when she was 'avin' tea ... four o'clock on the dot it was when she 'ad 'er tea ... 'ad a lace tablecloth she did ... and a silver teapot". He then gave it as his considered opinion that the neighbourhood was going down, and shut the window. We had the feeling of having failed a test.

But we fared better across the road, where we had been invited for drinks, and where our hostess told us she had known the XYZ family for years and years. Like herself, they were real 'old Finchley People', so we had a conversational introduction to local history by one who had seen quite a lot of it in the making. Local history, as we all know, is not just a thing of the past - it moves forward all the time with ourselves at the front end of it!

Ballards Lane at that time, with trolley buses, but as yet without high-rise blocks, probably looked much as it had done for years, and may even have been a little out of step with changing times elsewhere. Many shops had retained a respectably old-established look, and seemed in no hurry to modernize themselves behind flashy new shopfronts. Although the term 'self-service' was understood, the general idea was still to state your requirements at a counter, and to be served by an assistant who knew exactly where to find all the goods. Customers had not yet been trained to do all their own finding, fetching and carrying. Some establishments still wore a quaintly comfortable air of times past and change from the cash desk was apt to rattle past on overhead wires. On arrival at the counter it would be checked carefully by an assistant

reciting such time honoured phrases as "Four and eleven - five-seven and six - ten and ten's twenty." Looking back, it seems that the £.s.d. money was treated with more respect: we are usually left to check our own devalued change today. Despite the many shops, the catering trade was poorly represented and Beale's restaurant had little opposition. That was where ladies checked their shopping lists while chatting over morning coffee, just as their counterparts were doing at the time in all the market towns of the shires.

Our long-haired white Chelsea-cat from Pimlico was initially terrified by the sight of so much unaccustomed space outside his new windows and refused to go out, but curiosity soon overcame natural caution and he became an over enthusiastic bird watcher. His unusual colour drew attention to the acrobatic agility of his squirrel-like performances in the trees and we saw he was becoming something of a local celebrity. Although very friendly with us and our close friends, and even a bit gushing at times, he never even noticed anyone else without a proper introduction and always ignored the entire human race outside his own windows.

So it was a surprise one morning to see him seated regally on the high brick wall separating the length of the garden from the road. He seemed to be holding court for a little group of admirers on the pavement below and this led to a major breakthrough in our own public relations. Passers-by now had a choice of three opening topics if they wished to make themselves known. One was the cat; another was the progress in reducing the obstructively overgrown privet hedge to human scale, and the third was one of our trees. (Its lower branches had been removed to allow pedestrians to turn the corner without either crawling on the ground or stepping off the pavement). Neighbours appreciate such things and it encouraged integration.

The Borough of Finchley, we discovered, had one thing in common with The City of Westminster. Dustcarts in both places carried the warning 'No Gratuities'. Nowhere else had we found domestic rates to be so fully inclusive! One noticed the characteristic local front garden walls with patterns composed of red bricks and what looked like brown stones, but which turned out to be burnt or overcooked bricks. A neighbour spoke of them as 'Middlesex Walls', and then, by way of the first rates demand, came the information that, despite its misleading London postal address, The Borough of Finchley was actually in the County of Middlesex. A further communication from the council offices told us something else we had not known. Mrs XYZ, it seemed, had obtained planning permission to build two garages and the council wished to know whether we intended to proceed with the work. It took little time to decide that we did not: the last experience with builders was too recent to allow contemplation of another upheaval and we preferred, in any case, not to encroach on the garden. So the car remained in almost solitary state at the kerbside; residential roads were still fairly free of the long lines of parking clutter that we know today.

Our chatty milkman couldn't get a proper view over the wall, so he put his head through the gateway. "Getting things straightened up I see", said he cheerfully, "You wouldn't know it now of course, but this used to be a beautiful garden in the old days - lovely lawn it was too - like a billiard table - mucked it up something' 'orrible didn't they" - "when they was doin' the alterations I mean'. It was right. It looked like a slag heap. "Ah well, rather you than me, Ta Ta'. And so saying he went back to his vehicle, an odd sort of electrically assisted truck which he accompanied on foot, navigating it accurately from door to door.

Exploration of the district began to reveal unexpected places of interest. It was something of a surprise, for example, to find country walks so close at hand and we sometimes walked for miles, discovering such features as the quaint old village post office by the pond at Mill Hill village, and then marching off across the fields to Totteridge (but that was 30 years ago). Avenue House grounds captured the attention when someone told us that the house was the former home of the legendary 'Inky' Stephens. The house itself was then still Finchley's 'Town Hall'.

Passengers on the top decks of trolley buses got a splendid view of something highly unusual. While locals among them took little notice, strangers tended to stand up to get a better view, and then perhaps to sit down and wonder whether they had really seen what they thought they had seen. What they had actually seen, within a stone's throw of the noisy North Circular Road, was a dairy herd grazing peacefully in green fields. This was the Express Dairy Farm, looking much like a highly idealized picture in an old Ovaltine advertisement. College Farm itself, of course, is still with us, and open to the public every day.

Just off Nether Street one came upon the sadly romantic sight of a dignified old mansion standing deserted behind closed shutters in a decaying garden. This was Brent Lodge, a place rich in history and almost the last survivor of the many grand houses which once graced this part of Finchley. The demolition of Brent Lodge, soon afterwards, was one of the events leading up to the formation of The Finchley Society.

Since 1960 we have moved house yet again, but only to another part of the 'village' and Finchley has seen many changes, some perhaps for the better, others certainly for the worse. But if, like the window cleaner, you think the neighbourhood is going down, then you should look before you leap. You know you could go further and fare worse, don't you! - much worse!

FROM A SUSSEX OUTPOST

Member Leslie Martin wrote to us from Lancing in the autumn with interesting notes about the various local societies he belongs to or has news of, in the general area of West Sussex. They include West Sussex Archives Society, Sussex Industrial Archaeological Society, Worthing Archaeological Society, plus the Beeding and Bramber Local History and Littlehampton Local History Societies.

Leslie doesn't mention the total population of the area, which has large groupings at Chichester, Horsham and Worthing, but he does refer to Worthing alone having 80,000 residents. The area covered by our own society has for comparison a population of around 100,000. It is interesting to compare respective memberships - the five organisations which Leslie listed combine at just over 1000 estimated members and our own figures tend currently to float up and down about the 900 mark. One has of course to appreciate the distances involved in West Sussex, a rectangle roughly 30 miles east/west by 20 north/south. As Leslie remarked, ... would you travel 25 miles each way to attend meetings or outings, unless you had someone to go with?'

Having said all that, the really interesting facts emerge when one takes in his chronicle of those Societies' annual programmes, in terms of news bulletins, lectures, and visits both local and distant. Beeding and Bramber with 60 - 70 members arrange seven lectures and two outings per year, while Worthing Archaeological (230 members) have lectures only in winter, therefore no more than five or six at the outside, but engage in as many as six major outings a year and as Leslie put it "go outside the county in a BIG WAY!". Those sorts of figures point 'to participation-in-depth by their respective memberships and set a good example to the likes of Fin.Soc. by suggesting that there's more fun to be had when more of the membership are involved in the Society's general activities - no couch potatoes in West Sussex!

Finally, Leslie related that a recent evening event of the Littlehampton Local History Society took the form of a presentation by two members of "What happened in 1965 in Littlehampton and outside". The two speakers researched general events such as the F.A. Cup, the Derby, Grant National, etc. but the larger interest came from local prices for various commodities / services - e.g. a shampoo and set, a three piece suite, installation of a new cooker, together with typical wages for local railway workers and of course the price of a family saloon car. The three piece suite, incidentally, cost £62.10.0d!

Now there's a good idea for a Fin.Soc. evening in our 1992 programme, with two or three members taking a random year each.

FINCHLEY RECALLED Irene Shuttle

I remember an important event that took place in October 1933. It was when the status of Finchley was raised from Urban District to Municipal Borough.

The occasion was attended by Major General, the Earl of Athlone, K.C. and H.R.H. Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone, who conveyed the Royal Charter to the first Mayor of Finchley, Alderman Vyvyan Wells.

I was just a schoolgirl then, and must confess that I was far more interested in the colourful celebrations that took place around the district. There were swings and roundabouts on the Gun Station land in Summers Lane. There was a circus too, fireworks and various entertainments to be enjoyed by all. Other splendid official functions and banquets were attended by local dignitaries.

The new Borough acquired Armorial Bearings which symbolised Finchley's history. I'm not a student of heraldry but can recognise the green shield which represents the forest lands used by monarchs for sport in days gone by. There are the hunting horns, the stag and the Tudor Rose. The mitre indicates the Bishop of London's ownership of land - as does the closed helmet taken from the Lord of the Manor's coat of arms. I particularly like the little finch on the crest of the blazon. This alludes to the name of a dweller of that name who lived in a clearing known as Finchelee.

Another change of administrative importance took place in 1965. (I don't recall that this was accompanied by any public celebration). This was the amalgamation of Finchley, Hendon and the three Barnet Urban District Councils to form the large London Borough of Barnet. I see that the arms of this Borough incorporate the stag, the helmet and the roses - I'm rather sorry that the little finch hasn't been included, but so glad that it has been perpetuated in the logo of The Finchley Society."

Irene adds: "Several years ago, I thoroughly enjoyed seeing a cine-film of the Charter Day festivities. I wonder if it would be possible to see this again? Members who have joined the Society more recently would, I'm sure, enjoy it as I did."

REPORTS OF RECENT FIN.SOC. EVENTS:

OCTOBER MONTHLY MEETING

Our Chairman, Norman Burgess, introduced the speaker as "Not The Man from Uncle, but The Lady from Auntie!" The lady in question was Patricia Outram and the "Auntie" referred to was of course the BBC.

Patricia had come to Finchley to tell us about the BBC's Natural History Unit which, she ventured, just like The

Finchley Society, is much involved with Conserving, Enhancing and Educating.

Her talk unfolded a story of incredible growth and success for the unit, founded as recently as 1957, primarily as a radio service, with just two people on the staff - Desmond Hawkins and Tony Soper - just another small unit based at Bristol at the BBC regional facility there. Today the staff numbers 120 and the unit literally earns millions of pounds annually for the Corporation.

Patricia gave her view that the twin touchstones for that success were the explosion of television programming during the '60s and since (TV, she said, could almost have been created for natural-history work), plus the timely arrival as the Boss of BBC Channel 2 of Richard Attenborough. Patricia reminded her audience of the distinguished list of wildlife presenters and storytellers through the years - Peter Scott, Armand and Michaela Denis, Hans and Lotte Hass, James Fisher, Gerald Durrell, Desmond Morris and Jacques Cousteau.

Among the incredible range of today's "little earners" by the N.H. Unit are -

- * Regular scheduled programmes for Radio and TV.
- * Major TV Natural History Film Series for sale worldwide
- * "Stills" for sale to agencies.
- * Library "trims" of various films, for sale to scientists, etc.
- * * Video compilations for sale to the public
- * Video books
- * BBC Wildlife Magazine
- * BBC Wildlife Books
- * BBC Natural History Records
- * Training courses for overseas natural-history film crews, etc.

The 1979 major BBC film "Life on Earth" was, said Patricia, a milestone to remember - three years in the making, filmed in over 100 locations in more than 40 countries and in every continent. Its subsequent sales have been no less phenomenal all around the world. Today's UK viewers are of course absorbed by yet another blockbuster "Trials of Life". This also took 3 years to film, has cost £4m (of which ABC and Turner Corporation put up £2m in return for a share of sales rights) and has already secured over £1m in assured pre-sales outside the U.K.

Patricia completed her presentation to us with a film titled "Eye on Nature", showing the BBC's Natural History Unit at work and principally revealing how it set about the making of that first epic, "Life on Earth".

After all that, it was quite difficult to adjust back to the human scale of things in our own life on earth, in urban Finchley!

NOVEMBER MEETING

THE NATIONAL TRUST

Very nearly 100 years ago – on 12th January 1895 to be precise, three determined people got together with the then Duke of Westminster, to form the National Trust. Today the membership is around two million. In that way our November speaker Pamela Wright, Chairman of the Barnet section and Regional committee member for Thames and Chiltern Area, began her outline of the history and development of the organisation.

Those three founders were –

* Octavia Hill, a housing reformer (and, interestingly, brought up in Finchley.) Eds - who could research a newsletter piece on her background?)

* Sir Robert Hunter - Marylebone solicitor and champion of the cause for Surrey wildlife vs railway development.

* Canon Hardwick Rawsley, a successful campaigner for conservation in the Lake District, threatened at that time by ideas for quarry railways along lake shores.

Pamela revealed that aside from the 'oaks from little acorns' growth of membership the N.T. financial resources have also been developed from within, or at least with only general public support - no government funding whatsoever!

The Trust's first purchase of land was modest and in Wales - its second activity was the purchase and restoration of a 14th century Clergy House. Sums of the order of £10.00 were involved! In 1907 a valuable boost came in the form of an Act of Parliament which made gifts of land given "inalienable", i.e. safe for all time. By the 1930s, with many country houses decaying due to lack of cash or in many cases suitable heirs to take them on, the N.T. was accumulating properties fast, but very wisely in many cases, enabling former owners to continue living in them after refurbishment to help care for them with keen interest.

Our speaker then listed the bewildering range of buildings / properties / land, etc. which is in the care of the Trust today - farms, castles, chapels, churches, wind and water mills, great barns, whole villages, inns, prehistoric sites, industrial monuments, great tracks of land and, of course, following the Enterprise Neptune Appeal, over half of Britain's remaining unspoilt coastline (512 miles of it).

She told us that the N.T. is the largest landowner in England and Wales - and the largest conservation body in the world!

Amazingly, outside of professionals hired to do the skilled building, rebuilding, conserving work. etc., the day-to-day

guides, ticket-sellers and other staff encountered at National Trust sides or properties, are all volunteers being recompensed only for their expenses.

After the great storm of October '87 no less than forty member-surveyors came forward to help survey all storm damage at Trust property!

The Barnet Association was formed in 1979 and now has 630 members. It is just one of 34 associations in the Thames and Chiltern Area. Pamela was proud to report that "Barnet" recently raised funds to provide a battery-powered car for the use of handicapped visitors to Stowe, the N.T.'s latest acquisition. (Park, gardens and temples among its attractions).

In 1990 Barnet donated 4 rams to one of the Trust's flocks of sheep!

Pamela rounded off her talk with a rallying cry well understood by The Finchley Society audience in our own context - WORTH SAVING, WORTH SEEING, WORTH JOINING THE NATIONAL TRUST.

She also suggested "To hear is to forget; to see is to remember; to do is to understand!!

In a warm vote of thanks to Pamela for so inspiring us, Chairman Norman Burgess made special mention of the very high quality slides which illuminated her talk - all of them the work of husband Dudley Wright, who skilfully monitored their projection.

For a while it was a trifle eerie to be part of a social group of friends, but with an 'identity" only recognised by the others and not known to oneself! That resulted from the unusual greeting given by Hon.Sec. Eileen Cox to all arrivals for the Christmas "evening" at our usual rendezvous, on December 13th, of attaching a sticky identity label to their backs. But the identity of course was that of another (usually famous, sometimes infamous) person. The surprising thing (at least to this writer) was the speed and skill with which most of the company were able to discover who they were - are so many Fin.Soc. members from the "20 Questions" era, the programme of both radio and T.V. fame!?

One could say that the remainder of the evening was spent predictably - and why not! - it was predictably pleasant! The ample space of the Synagogue was again put to good use by Shirley Avery and her "catering" helpers, with tables and food attractively laid out to encourage circulation and conversation yet still allowing plenty of seating space. Many thanks are due to all those who helped -- in preparation, serving, clearing and, of course, washing up - after such excellent fare -- not to forget our "barman" Kurt Weinberg.

This year's Christmas raffle went well too - well everyone loves a raffle don't they, especially when the prizes are well

distributed, as was the case this time! The "sporty" members got their promised "musical chairs" and were further amused to realise towards the end that three out of five remaining participants were Averys! (Do they secretly practise at home or is it a skill born of shortage of Avery chairs!?)

David Smith made the evening complete with another quick-fire verbal quiz, based on personalities and places with the "Finchley connection", David is very retiring and modest about his quizzes but they really are fun -- simple, instantaneous and most of the audience do quickly get the "connection"! Two questions that floored some of the audience were -

1. Which actress campaigned to keep the Phoenix Cinema open?
Answer Maureen Lipman (resident of Muswell Hill), and

2. Name the famous brothers who attended Christ's College.
Answer the brothers Saatchi (of Saatchi and Saatchi).

BARNET ARTS WORKSHOP

The workshop, now at 1 Thomas More Way, East End Road, East Finchley, N2, have reminded us of the scale of their activities, sending through their programme for January to March.

Too detailed to reproduce here in full, our members should know that the workshop conducts courses in Photography, Screenprinting for Beginners, Video Production, VHS Editing and Script Writing. Also on offer are direct services to community groups in the production of publicity materials, exhibitions and videos.

For Barnet Arts Workshop details and bookings. 'phone (081) 346 7120.

FRIENDLY LIGHT BULBS!

Friends of the Earth urge us to switch wherever possible to the use of Low Energy Lighting. Technically this could take a number of different forms, some involving changes to lighting circuits, but the simple angle that FoE is proposing is the greater use of what are miniature compact or folded fluorescents complete with integral electronic circuitry and capped with either standard bayonet or standard E27 Edison-screw bases to allow immediate connection in normal mains light-sockets.

They also have an acceptable colour appearance corresponding to conventional incandescent lamps, but they are however not of equal size, shape and weight to ordinary household bulbs and one must be selective about the fittings and the ambience in which they are employed.

A typical manufacturer's claim for savings, examples an 11w compact giving light equivalent to a standard 60w filament lamp and having eight times the life. After allowing for much higher initial cost (say £15) the overall saving through the life of the lamp is put at £12.

Interestingly, the Barnet branch of Friends of the Earth have set themselves up to supply such lamps and Fin.Soc. members are invited to contact Elspeth Cracken-Hewson on 346 4535, who will liaise with Barnet FOE.

ON THE BACK PAGE - is illustrated another of the "cards" by Timothy Johnson which are currently on sale from our monthly bookstall and at College Farm.

For The Finchley Society

John and Carol Halls (Editors). Finchley Park. N.12

Henry Charles Stephens, often known as "Inky Stephens", and sometimes as "the uncrowned king of Finchley", was a generous local benefactor who died in 1918 leaving the mansion house, lodge, stable block and other buildings in ten acres of landscaped grounds to the people of Finchley, to be "open for the use and enjoyment of the public always..."

While the splendid park and gardens have always been open, public "enjoyment" of the house itself has been somewhat limited by events. It was formally opened in 1928, but in 1940 the old municipal offices were bombed and Avenue House became Finchley's temporary "Town Hall" for the next quarter of a century, Subsequent restoration of the building was interrupted in 1989 by a fire which destroyed the east wing and the Stephens Museum Collection assembled by The Finchley Society in the recently--restored laboratory.