

The Clapham Society Newsletter



Issue 429

September 2020

We're not out of the woods with Covid yet – if only – but more continues to open up, especially in the world of food and drink. This month we bring news of the Lambeth Heritage Festival, which has some amazing offerings, a live outdoor opera concert (yes, really) and recent developments from the Clapham literati. Thank you for reading and do please keep the contributions coming.

Lambeth Heritage Festival

Traditionally this takes place in September and despite the pandemic it is still happening, but online. Lambeth Archives have put together an enticing programme offered by local societies, museums and cultural organisations, with at least one event most days of the month. Highlights are the History of Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, a Wildlife Nature Walk with Dr Iain Boulton, the story of the new Lambeth Palace Library, a virtual tour of Van Gogh House, the National Theatre Archive and more. Visit love.lambeth.gov.uk/lambeth-heritage-festival-2020 or claphamsociety.com.

The Clapham Society is hosting two of the festival events, starting with **Clapham Ghost Signs**. On **Sunday 6 September** at 2.30 pm, Alyson Wilson will lead a virtual walk from Clapham North to Clapham Common exploring the fading remains of old advertising typically found painted on walls. In this short stretch, you will see the vestiges of 12 signs and hear about the research into the companies advertised. We shall also look at a few ghost signs in other parts of Clapham. The walk was devised by Sam Roberts (aka Mr Ghostsigns) with photographs and sign reconstructions by local photographer Roy Reed.

The I'Ansons – A Dynasty of London Architects & Surveyors by Peter Jefferson

Smith is the subject of a talk on **Monday 21 September** at 8 pm. The team who saw the book through to publication after its author's death will speak about the book and its completion. Peter spent many years unravelling the lives of the three generations of Clapham-based architects, all confusingly called Edward I'Anson. This talk will trace their careers throughout the 19th century from surveyors of sewers, designers of city offices, estate managers and developers to architects of local town halls, libraries, a village school and a church, with an emphasis on their legacy in south London. The book is available for £20 at Clapham Books or through our website, claphamsociety.com.

To book The Clapham Society events, email alysonwilson.sw4@gmail.com. Login details will be sent out 24 hours beforehand. *Alyson Wilson*



Roy Reed



Dana Kubick

Annual General Meeting

In line with many charities, we have decided to postpone our AGM, due to take place on Monday 19 October, until the position with Covid is clearer. Copies of the Annual Report and Accounts will go out with the October newsletter along with a copy of last year's Minutes. Committee Members will stay as elected at this time. If any member has a question, please email me at annabelallott@outlook.com and I will respond. We will review the situation before the November meeting, so keep an eye on our website and social media. *Annabel Allott, Chairman*

Opera in the open air

St Paul's Opera returns to live performance with a late summer picnic and gala of opera favourites on **Saturday 5 September**. The concert will be held in the lower churchyard at St Paul's Church, Rectory Grove. Tickets are free, but with limited allocation in adherence with government social distancing recommendations. Audience members are encouraged to bring chairs, tables, rugs and other picnic essentials for the evening's enjoyment. The concert will commence at 5 pm and conclude by 7 pm to ensure the light is good throughout. The church gate will open at 3.45 pm to allow ample time for picnics before the concert.

Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, the church facilities will not be open to the public so you might want to build in extra time to nip back home before curtain-up. Whilst tickets are free of charge, donations to St Paul's Opera will be very gratefully received to help safeguard future events, including the 2021 production of Benjamin Britten's comic opera *Albert Herring*. Tickets are available through stpaulsopera.org. *Tricia Ninian*



Urban greening in Wandsworth

On **Tuesday 22 September** at 6 pm, the Battersea Society will hold a talk by Nina Kowalska, co-founder of Green the Grid, a project to make Southfields Grid London's first Front Garden Friendly Neighbourhood and encourage urban greening in other areas of Wandsworth. To hear the talk (on Zoom), email events@batterseasociety.org.uk. Login details will be sent out 24 hours before the event. *Sue Demont*

Omnibus Theatre Café Bar

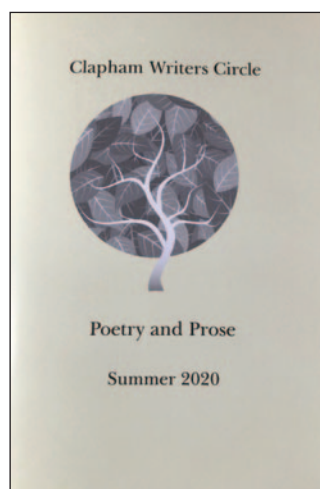
Following latest government advice, we are thrilled to reopen our Café Bar. Located in the heart of Clapham Old Town with beautiful views of the Common, it is open every Friday, Saturday and Sunday; for opening hours visit omnibus-clapham.org. On offer are hot drinks, craft beers, wine and seasonal cocktails in addition to a limited food menu that includes freshly baked pastries, delicious cakes and savoury light bites. As an independent theatre and registered charity, we rely completely on bar sales and ticket income to survive. Until we're able to relaunch our theatre programme, your support and custom are more vital to us than ever. Every tea, coffee or glass of wine sold helps to #SaveTheArts. *Eleanor Grice*



Eleanor Grice

Dining out in Clapham (and this is just a snapshot)

Restaurant goers are enjoying meals out again as their favourites reopen, heedful of Covid safety measures. These include Trinity and Trinity Upstairs, at 4 The Polygon, and Bistro Union at 40 Abbeville Road. To book and for opening times, visit trinityrestaurant.co.uk, trinity-upstairs.co.uk and trinitybistrounion.co.uk. Osteria Toscana at 31 Abbeville Road (020 3417 3056) has also reopened, while Northcote Road has become pedestrianised at weekends so that tables can spill out onto the pavement and street to ensure socially distanced dining alfresco.



Writing and reading

It's been a good year for butterflies. Dare we claim the same for writing? Certainly, the strange conditions imposed by Covid-19 gave us more time. How did we use it? Long-promised novels have at last been started – in some cases, actually completed. Diaries, memoirs, poems and many varieties of prose fiction have sprung to life in notebooks or on computer screens. Some promising insights have ceased to be just a few words easily lost on scraps of paper. Might we yet see them transformed via the contemplative chrysalis into life-enhancing butterflies?

For several years now, Clapham Writers Circle has existed as a loose affiliation of writers who meet monthly for informal discussions regarding any and all aspects of our writing lives. We aim to help overcome the isolation that many writers can experience, to offer encouragement and to share knowledge regarding publication. Our members have many and varied life experiences, and different levels of literary knowledge and attainment. We are united in an absorbing interest in the written word, and the delights and difficulties of all who seek to express their thoughts and feelings in words on paper.

Our recently published chapbook presents works ranging from an extract from a new novel and excerpts from a family history, to intriguing short stories and poetry, both serious and humorous. Here is a kaleidoscope of genres and styles which we hope our readers will find enjoyable. *David Armstrong*

(Poetry and Prose Summer 2020, £5, at *Clapham Books*. *David Armstrong*, who modestly describes himself as 'an aspiring playwright and author', was recently long-listed for the Branagh Award for New Drama Writing, 2020. *Clapham Writers Circle*, forbitou@gmail.com.)

Special birthday celebration at Hibbert Almshouses

The first day of June marked the ninety-fifth birthday of Society member Mrs Joan Deckker, who came to Hibbert Almshouses from Cambridge in 2005 to be nearer her two sons. Her daughter lives in Glasgow, and she has two grandchildren. Joan is unique among the residents in that not only is she the eldest but she has an academic background and lived for seven years in Canada, where her husband was Professor of Physics at the University of Saskatchewan. The party took place in front of the almshouses with all of us careful to keep our social distance. The other seven residents attended, as did Anthea Bishop, a fellow trustee, myself and a few others. Joan received three cakes, this one (*right*) baked by a member of her book group. Her son Sebastian visited her earlier in the day. Joan enjoys good health, and is vigorous in mind. *Euan Kennedy, Chairman, Hibbert Almshouses*



New members

We extend warm welcomes to Patricia Faulkner, Zoë Hendon and Shirley Kermer. If you are a member and would like your children, who live locally, to get involved – an open door awaits the next generation – membership to The Clapham Society makes a great gift, £10 per person or £15 for a household of up to three members. Contact Jennifer Everett (details on the back page) or visit our website.

What is Westminster trying to hide?

If ever there were an aptly named book for our time, *Plague* must be it. This is not, despite the title, a Covid potboiler nor is it an exploration of the Black Death. Rather, it is a taut weaving of 21st-century political intrigue through the tortuous corridors of power. Expect hedge-fund wheeler-dealing, macabre murders, and power-play used as a drug to propel the action. Above all, expect a great sense of place. *Plague* is a true London novel, served up in crisp, punchy prose.

From the first chapter, in which we descend below Bond Street Tube station in our hard hats to discover at the bidding of the Deputy PM why work on a Crossrail-type project has been interrupted, the suspense kicks in. As it would when an ancient plague pit is revealed! Enter the fear of a modern wave of the plague and London morphs into the dystopia that we in recent months know all too well – only this time creepier, as one of London's underground rivers, the Tyburn, churns up the miasma. There are riots, there is sensational newspaper reporting – so far, so like 2020 – there is also romance and sexual attraction, possibly even fatal. Clapham, where the paparazzi await our heroine outside her flat, features too. Pacy, suspenseful and richly detailed, the book is utterly compelling. If you have to put it down, you cannot wait to return.

The author is Julie Anderson (left), Chair of Trustees of Clapham Writers, organisers of the Clapham Book Festival, and recent contributor to this newsletter. When we met recently, I asked her what inspired the story. 'I wanted to write about power,' she said, 'something prompted by my previous role in the civil service. Not just political power, which I had glimpsed people wielding at first hand, but wider. In *Plague*, the balance of power in relationships, both romantic and professional, is as important as governmental power or the power of money. I have tried to capture some of these elements, insofar as that is possible in a commercial thriller.'

Interestingly, the novel owes its inception to a conversation at the Clapham Book Festival where a guest from the independent publisher Claret Press encouraged Julie to turn her hand to a thriller, having read and been impressed by her earlier works for young readers. Without giving anything away, I can reveal the publisher's hunch was right. *Ruth Eastman* (*Plague* is published on 15 September at £9.99 and can be purchased or pre-ordered at [Clapham Books](http://ClaphamBooks.com) and online. Julie will be blogging about it at julieandersonwriter.com and posting about her *Plague* Bookwalk through central London – and Clapham – on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.)



Helen Hughes

La vita imita l'arte

The Italian publication of *The Museum of Broken Promises* just scraped in before lockdown, but the future looked bleak, writes its author, Elizabeth Buchan. In the company of hundreds of other authors in the same predicament, I was resigned to the author's nightmare of negative sales and the prospect of towering remainder piles.

But Italy is Italy: gorgeous and full of unexpected surprises. To my delight, I was contacted shortly afterward by Giordano Martinelli who runs a small museum and hotel, the Casa Cordati, in Barga near Lucca (casacordatifriendlyhotel.com), which exhibits his grandfather's paintings in its interior. He told me that he was highly intrigued by the idea of a showcase for broken promises and wished to adapt a room for his museum. Would I be interested? Interested? I was enchanted. I wrote back and told him to go ahead.

He has sent me the following report:

'Your idea, I understand better now. It's not only a museum, but also a kind of social experiment. It's not easy to find an object which represents a broken promise. It is intimate, difficult to share, difficult to find. I had the first two objects – can you believe? – from Boston and Florida, from two women who were not my friends but only acquaintances and now we feel friends.

'Because we shared a story – small or great, does not matter – makes me understand better your novel. And it makes me feel a better person. Is this the message you wanted to teach your readers?'

If anyone from Clapham is visiting the area, Casa Cordati is waiting. There would be a warm welcome and, if you felt so inclined, an object could be left. *Elizabeth Buchan* (*The Museum of Broken Promises*, *Corvus* £8.99/£14.99, is a great read; see issue 427. Available at [Clapham Books](http://ClaphamBooks.com) and online.)



Congratulations and good luck

Brixton author Rosanna Amaka's *The Book of Echoes* (reviewed in the July/August Newsletter, 428) has been long-listed for the Historical Writers Association Debut Crown 2020. The shortlist will be announced in October. We congratulate Rosanna and wish her the best of luck for future success.



'Spend £2 or £52 and you get the same service'

This article was submitted a few years ago by a former Clapham resident, Peter Skuse. It seems timely to publish it now since, as many readers will know, A D Robertson (Robertson's) is one of the few local shops in Clapham that has remained open throughout lockdown. Everything described below stands as written except that, sadly, Clem Baptiste died in June 2017. Photograph by Dana Kubick



There's been a hardware shop at the top end of Clapham Park Road ever since it changed from a private residence in around 1954. My memory was convinced of its existence from the immediate post-war period. Kelly's Directory showed otherwise, but I certainly recall passing it often at a two-digit age when walking up from Parsons Corner to go swimming at the Manor Street Swimming Pool. Entering the shop to buy something, it was always a welcome we received and ready help to pick the right item for our needs. (I always went swimming in the company of at least one other friend.)

Robertson's had competition, not from DIY chains but from traders in the same street: Cooper & Hedges at the bend at Parsons Corner and Benbrook's halfway up the hill. Benbrook's was a little less obliging and expected the customer to be fairly clear about what he or she wanted. Cooper & Hedges staff needed to know even more precisely and you felt a fool if you hadn't the detail in your head. But go to Robertson's and the man would patiently listen and ask polite questions to elicit the need and suggest products that would fill it. As children, sent on an errand or requiring something ourselves, we preferred to walk a bit farther up the hill to that shop than to the other two.

Mr Robertson was succeeded by Clem Baptiste in 1977. He and his family have run the shop in a similar style and, while Clem retired in 2002, he still calls in to pay a social call on his daughter, Debbie, and her husband, Wayne, and Clem's grandson, Michael. More goods are on display than in Mr Robertson's day, with gardening items now among them. Customers range from builders working locally, who need something they didn't bring, to passers-by reminded of a product they want but haven't yet got, to folk who need an item at home, or others who call in for a chat and buy on impulse.

Asking about popular merchandise, I was told that rat traps, mouse traps and rat poisons sell well, as there are so many restaurants in the area and food waste isn't always effectively cleared; drain cleaner products are needed as a concomitant of this. Moth repellent is bought all year round, and white and cream paint are perennial favourites.

Helpful, caring assistance summarises the approach to selling, whether it's a high-quality lock to a single slot-head screw. Spend £2 or £52 and you get the same service. Visiting the shop on three occasions, I had the privilege of observing customers and overhearing their conversations with Debbie and Wayne. One customer declared he liked coming here because 'I like the smell of the shop'. Wayne told me that the clientele used to be mostly middle-aged folk, while now it tends to be younger people, and mostly tenants rather than landlords.

Was there an item that Wayne regretted having stocked because it didn't sell? With great confidence he told me that after more than two decades of helping run the shop he knew what would sell, so there is nothing on display that doesn't. Each and every customer I saw went away with a smile, happy to have received reliable service and advice and, where appropriate, a product they had set out to buy. Robertson's is now the road's oldest retail shop and retains the style that customers have wanted since it began 65-odd years ago.

Through a glass brightly

On our drive home from Normandy last month my husband felt that, in deference to Abbeville Road, it was only right that we should pay our respects to the eponymous Picardy town. As in Évreux earlier in the week, churches were open (subject to the wearing of face masks) and very few people were about. The cathedral in Évreux was majestic inside and out, while the most striking aspect of Abbeville's collegiate church of Saint-Vulfran was its stained-glass windows, replacements for those lost in 1940 at the hands of a German bomber. The crowning achievement, Google revealed, of Missouri-born artist William Einstein (1907-72), they are vibrant beyond measure and catch the eye the minute you enter the church. Einstein went to Paris in 1927, where he mixed with Giacometti, Duchamp and Soutine, the latter of whom was a major influence. After a spell in New York in the 1930s, he settled in the Picardy village of Acheux-en-Vimeu with his French wife. It was there that he was commissioned to design the stained glass for Saint-Vulfran in nearby Abbeville. Sunset, apparently, is the best time to visit, when light pours in and daubs its stone interior with jewel hues. Even with the overcast sky the day we went, colours danced in the space. I cannot think of another cathedral to rival the stained glass here. Worth that detour, even if the town of Abbeville itself may have been a bit lacklustre. It is always so exciting to discover something – or some artist – new. Comforting, too, to see that good can come of evil. *Ruth Eastman*



If you have any queries about **The Clapham Society** or have news of local events, please contact the appropriate person below:

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Details of meetings, activities and a full list of our publications can be found on our website at claphamsociety.com

