

The Clapham Society

Newsletter



Issue 428

July/August 2020

Lockdown is still with us, but it is easing. In this issue, we hear from local musicians, a new author and Marie McCarthy, Artistic Director of Omnibus Theatre, where we look forward to resuming our monthly meetings as soon as the all-clear sounds. We also salute those who have given of their time during this tough period and report on the Common. Do send the Society your news, engage with us on social media and, most importantly, remind your friends to join.

Omnibus Theatre has been thinking outside the box

It was with great sadness that we had to postpone all scheduled performances and activity from 16 March, but the wellbeing of our audiences, artists and team was our first priority and continues to be. Eighty per cent of our staff are furloughed but our small team of three is tirelessly applying for emergency funding and devising new methods to reach our audiences, our communities and the artists we work with.

Omnibus Theatre Online (omnibus-clapham.org/omnibus-theatre-online), a new digital platform with theatre to enjoy from home, has prompted us to learn how to stage a scratch night on Instagram Live and to host improvised performances on YouTube and interactive storytelling for young people on Zoom. So far, this content has been viewed by over 2,500 people. Our most ambitious event so far, *We R Not Virus* by Moongate Productions, took place via Zoom on 13 and 14 June and was an artistic response to the rise in hate crime during this crisis towards people of East and Southeast Asian heritage.

Our commitment to young people continues and LunchBox was created to provide a daily packed lunch to the children of families most in need. Thank you to The Arts Society Clapham Common, who supported this project, and to our volunteers who delivered the lunches via bicycle. We look forward to resuming a socially distanced Routes, our holiday hunger programme for young people during the school holidays (*page 3*). Thanks also to the April Trust, who have enabled us to share our storytelling skills with local seniors who are in isolation, and produce a community cycle ride with stilt-walkers, musicians and soundscapes – more news to follow. We hope to open our café/bar during the summer so that you can take socially distanced advantage of our garden, which has had a makeover thanks to our volunteer gardeners.

As a small independent theatre and a registered charity, we recognise that all these projects, like so many others, would not be possible without the incredible support we receive from our community, audiences, members and local organisations like The Clapham Society.

My resolve and determination to keep our local theatre going is stronger than ever and it is helped by all of you who have rallied to our cause, giving donations, volunteering or sending cheering words of encouragement. Through your support and generosity we can remain hopeful of a time when we can welcome you again to our beautiful red-brick building. Until then, take care and thank you from us all.

Marie McCarthy (above, centre left, before lockdown) and the Omnibus Theatre team



Local History news – walks and festival may be virtual for some while

The June Local History walk was cancelled, but I hope to be able to do another, *Some Clapham Old Town People*, on **Wednesday 29 July** on Zoom. If you would like to join, please email me at alysonwilson.sw4@gmail.com and I will keep you informed.

September's Lambeth Heritage Festival, organised jointly by Lambeth Archives and the Local History Forum, will take place in some form, if necessary online.

The Local History Fair, originally planned for 5 September, has been cancelled, and there will be no printed programme this year. We hope that there might be one event each day of the month, however, on Zoom. The final schedule will be available in early August; further details will appear on our website and in the September newsletter. The Society's contribution to the Festival will be the *Clapham Ghost Signs* walk on **Sunday 6 September**, followed by our meeting on **Monday 21 September** about Peter Jefferson Smith's book, *The I'Ansons – A Dynasty of London Architects & Surveyors*. Again, both will be on Zoom if necessary.

Meanwhile, the popular lockdown talks given each week by Lambeth archivists on Zoom will continue into July. For the full programme and log in details email archives@lambeth.gov.uk. The earlier talks will be on Instagram [@lambetharchives](https://www.instagram.com/lambetharchives). *Alyson Wilson*

Rosanna Amaka, an exciting new voice in British fiction



London is celebrated as one of the most diverse cities in the world, and south London – Clapham and Brixton, in particular – has an important place in the history of that diversity. The desire to understand the impact of this history on present-day lives was the motivation for Rosanna Amaka to write *The Book of Echoes* (Doubleday, £12.99). Growing up in Brixton in the late 20th century, she saw her community fast disappearing and set out to give it a voice. Her debut novel, 20 years in the writing, has already garnered high praise from many quarters.

‘It was important for me to tell this story,’ says Rosanna. ‘First, as a way of recording the presence of the older generation within my community that was

disappearing due to gentrification or simply the passing of time, but also to tell of the love, support and hope that they instilled.’

The book shows how damage is perpetuated and renewed down the ages and yet redemption is still possible. ‘Love is always important, whether it be between parents and their children, between siblings, friends, or neighbours. I try to make the most loving choices and often fall short, but still each morning I rise hoping I might succeed the next day. That is why I love writing; it gives space for me to try to forgive and correct myself.’

The novel doesn’t avoid hard issues such as slavery and death in custody. ‘Despite knowing this happens,’ says Rosanna, ‘I still feel traumatised by accidentally witnessing the death of a man on video and the subsequent attempt, yet again, by the authorities to cover this up. The death of George Floyd has been a catalyst for change so I hope that it will not have been in vain, that we can all play our part in creating a better world. May he rest in peace.’

Memory, including memories of childhood and of healing of various kinds, plays an enormously important role in the book, giving elasticity to its chronology and an elegiac tone.

‘I was very conscious of this when writing,’ Rosanna continues. ‘The book examines the effect of subconscious memory, which we pack away in order to survive, and also the memory of others, those we love, who have the greatest impact on us, and the memories of society and the impact these have on the next generation and the next, echoing down the line. Hence the title, *The Book of Echoes*.’

The story includes a myriad of voices, each differentiated by language: the varieties of English as spoken in Nigeria, the Caribbean and by several generations of people of different cultural heritage in London. ‘This was challenging because I don’t speak in most of those voices or accents,’ Rosanna explains. ‘But I had a good base to work from, as I grew up hearing those different voices from loved ones and the people around me. I worked very hard at listening to the way people spoke, and tried to capture a sense of this on the page. I thought it was important to capture a sense of who the characters were through their language.’

The importance of place, of ‘home’ and the displacement from it also echoes through the book. ‘Home is extremely important,’ Rosanna agrees, ‘because, usually, it is where you find warmth, protection and shelter, not always for some, but fortunately it was the case for me, supported by my community in Brixton and Clapham.’ *Julie Anderson, Chair of Clapham Writers, organisers of the Clapham Book Festival. (Julie’s next novel, Plague, will be reviewed in our next issue. A longer version of this article can be found at jandmanderson.com.) For a taster of The Book of Echoes, visit rosannaamaka.com.*



Backing tip-top talent

For the past few years, St Paul’s Opera has been the grateful recipient of personal funding from **Agur Arrien** of Clapham-based Pilates Sanctuary. As Agur sought to develop her skills base, complementing her hugely respected gift (recognised by many members) as a Pilates teacher by studying clinical massage therapy, she offered massage treatment to clients in exchange for a donation. This was subsequently gifted to St Paul’s Opera to support its summer productions.

Why is Agur doing this? She is passionate about opera, having performed on the operatic stage in a career covering two decades – not as a singer but as a classical ballerina. In recent years, Agur (*below, rehearsing in David McVicar’s production of Carmen at Glyndebourne with Ashley Bain*) has danced in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Giulio Cesare* (as well as *Carmen*) at Glyndebourne. ‘I still get that teenager’s tingling feeling being on stage in beautiful costumes, wigs and makeup, immersed in telling the story of the opera through dance.’

And why support St Paul’s Opera? ‘I had just returned from a *Giulio Cesare* rehearsal and went straight to SPO’s *Così fan tutte*. I found it so uplifting and a refreshing contrast to the grand opera house experience. It was a production of tip-top talented singers with a strong sense of real-life storytelling – the quality and professionalism were palpable. That was the moment I knew I wanted to support this amazing organisation in the heart of the Clapham community.’

While Covid restrictions remain, SPO and Pilates Sanctuary have an online presence with fortnightly virtual concerts by SPO singers and musicians until 17 July, and Zoom Pilates classes respectively. *Tricia Ninian, founder of St Paul’s Opera. (This article is an extract from an interview with Agur for an SPO blog. To read more, join the SPO mailing list by emailing info@stpaulsopera.org.) Contact Agur at agur@pilatessanctuary.co.uk.)*

Clapham Community Choir is Zooming



CC Choir has taken to Zoom until normal service is resumed. Same time: Tuesday 7.30 pm; different place: our living rooms and kitchens. It keeps voices and brains engaged. New members welcome. Visit singclapham.org or email info@claphamcommunitychoir.org. *Tony Bell*



Vasari Singers get creative in lockdown

The acclaimed chamber choir Vasari Singers and their conductor Jeremy Backhouse are feeling very deprived during lockdown as their weekly rehearsals in St Luke's, Thurleigh Road, have been suspended since March. Their connections with Clapham go back to the choir's foundation 40 years ago. Jeremy Backhouse takes up the story...

'Just after we started the choir in 1980 I was living in The Chase and so was able to form links with local churches. Our first concert in the area was in Church of the Holy Spirit in Narbonne Avenue and we sang several times in Holy Trinity Clapham, including for many years the Christmas celebration in aid of Trinity Hospice. We also filmed a broadcast of BBC TV's *Songs of Praise* there. We have been rehearsing at St Luke's for nearly ten years and although I now live in Salisbury I am missing my weekly visits to Clapham. 'The lockdown has been hard for singers as there are worries that the virus may be more easily passed on in a choir setting, so it is not clear when we might



Ash Mills

be able to meet again in person. All the choirs of which I am Music Director, including Vasari Singers, ceased to function in mid-March, so life took a strange and worrying turn. To keep ourselves occupied, we have been working at other projects; notably a fascinating history of the choir and a new recording entitled *Heaven full of stars*. We have also just released a moving short film, *I am the voice of the wind*, based on a poem about remembrance by the daughter of one of our choir members who died tragically young, set to the music of the well-known composer Gabriel Jackson. We hope that in these troubling times it might provide a shaft of light and comfort.' You can watch the film and find out about other Vasari projects during lockdown (and beyond!) at vasarisingers.org.

Routes to a child's heart

Each school holiday The Arts Society Clapham Common helps to fund Omnibus Theatre's Routes, a free programme for local 5-to-11-year-olds, which provides drama workshops to children receiving free school meals. The children work with the Omnibus team to develop a play on a theme of their choice and, while there, receive breakfast, snack and lunch, organised and made by The Arts Society. Feedback is always positive. 'It's the best thing I've ever done,' said one child. Routes will run for the full summer holiday subject to government advice – and funding, so, please, if you can, make a donation. Volunteers are needed to help with catering and daily duties. Email genagilbert100@gmail.com if you or any of your over-18s would like to help. Donations can be by cheque, payable to The Arts Society Clapham Common and posted to Juliet Upton, 17 Holmside Road, SW12 8RJ; or by bank transfer to The Arts Society Clapham Common, 20-45-45, 33171760; add your name and CS Routes as the reference. Gena Gilbert, Chair, The Arts Society Clapham Common

Pianist Ian Tindale wonders what's next

My career as an accompanist and collaborative pianist primarily focuses on working with opera singers, mostly on the recital platform, as well as with chamber ensembles and orchestras. This is a career I've chosen because I thrive in an environment of real-time interplay with my fellow performers, fuelled by the thrilling nervous energy of being in front of an audience.

Like most of my colleagues, my vocation as a performer is on pause, and I have no idea when I might return to the world of stages, green rooms and actual audiences. Owing to the inherent limitations of the technology available, my 'performances' now consist of recording a lonely piano part before a colleague records his or her vocal line over the top and combines the two; it's a poor imitation of collaboration. My future engagements are slowly getting cancelled, and my social media feeds are full of the venues and festivals I work with on the brink of permanent closure.

It's extremely bleak, and on a day-to-day basis I actively have to avoid thinking about it. I'm lucky because I have had access to the Chancellor's grant for the self-employed, and my teaching (now solely online) has been able to continue and expand, a very enriching part of my life. Aside from this, playing the piano is reduced to a hobby: I do it for my own pleasure, partly to maintain and enrich my technique, and completely without remuneration or performance deadline.

There is some hope as organisations in the UK begin to announce reduced programmes of small numbers of performers, empty auditoriums and online audiences. What else will be possible, and when will I be part of it again? As we head for a recession in a country with a government which has chronically underfunded culture, and in an industry which has therefore had to rely on philanthropy and private sponsorship, the future is so uncertain. When live performance returns, I know it will be a more precious and privileged experience than ever before.

Ian Tindale

If we're very lucky, Ian, who is based in Balham, will perform a concert for us when lockdown is over. To find out more about this prize-winning musician visit iantindale.com.



Ruth Atkinson Photography



A Common perspective

In recent months the Common has provided a hugely important resource and escape for local people. Every day sees many of us taking exercise or a more leisurely sojourn to enjoy its wide vistas and trees away from the enforced seclusion of our homes, queues for essentials on the High Street and the gloomy news on Covid-19's progress. It helped that April and May were the sunniest on record. How lucky that our Victorian forebears had the prescience to protect our metropolitan commons from development by taking them into public ownership and legislating so that they could be retained and protected for the benefit and enjoyment of all as London expanded into the surrounding shires.

The **intensity of people congregating** on parts of the Common has been a cause of concern, especially over the Easter and Maybank holiday weekends. Lambeth and Wandsworth are among the London boroughs hardest hit by the pandemic but fortunately, at the time of writing, we have not seen a spike in cases following these weekends, and the incidence of new infections seemed to have dwindled markedly in early June. We hope both trends will continue as restrictions are further relaxed.

Sadly, one of the most negative outcomes of these busy weekends has been the **quantity of litter**. Despite Lambeth's strategically placed Eurobins, some people choose to ignore these or do not think to take their litter home. Across Lambeth's open spaces, there has been a 44 per cent increase in rubbish collected over the past year. Short of mass re-education and draconian enforcement powers, it is difficult to see how this problem can be overcome, but well-designed signage and community litter-picking events may help.

An issue that divides opinion about the Common is the holding of **large ticketed events** on the field adjoining the netball court and skateboard park. In recent years the Council has rented out this area for major commercial summer concerts. In 2017 and 2018, the area was also made available for Winterville during November and December. These events attract large numbers of people from far and wide, generate income for the Council, benefit some local businesses, and are enjoyed by some local people. However, they result in a large and accessible part of the Common being enclosed (especially during the school summer holidays) and substantial structures being erected that cause lasting damage to the ground; they also give rise to anti-social



behaviour and dispersal problems late at night. Owing to Covid, this year's events have obviously had to be cancelled.

The Society opposes the use of such a large area of the Common for commercial events. We believe that enclosures and structures of this scale are incompatible with the purpose of a metropolitan common, and while the Council's need to increase its income is understood, this does not fully compensate the very real costs – economic, social and ecological – resulting from these events.

Members will be pleased to learn that the redesign and re-equipping of the **playground off Windmill Drive** is still planned to go ahead in the autumn, and the public loos nearby are due to reopen imminently following health and safety checks.

Turning to more controversial measures, the Council proposes the **imminent closure of Windmill Drive near the Green Waste site**. This is being effected using temporary traffic powers and will result in the loss of several parking spaces on the Lambeth side of the boundary with Wandsworth. In addition, a **controlled crossing is being introduced across Rookery Road** near the boating pond, and a **new cycle crossing across The Pavement** next to the existing pedestrian crossing is also being implemented. The latter is to enable Bromells Road to include a contra-flow cycle lane. These three measures will provide partial implementation of Quietway 5, the cycle route planned to link Croydon with the Southbank. *Mark Leffler (Photo and report)*



Ruth Eastman

Local volunteers who keep our NHS safe

Since the start of the pandemic, people across the UK have been sewing scrubs, scrub caps, laundry bags, masks, ear protectors and tabards for doctors, nurses and healthcare workers who have put their own lives at risk to care for sick and dying people. **Barbara Callender**, who lives in Balham, has helped distribute nearly 4,000 such items to hospitals and care homes across south London. She has worked tirelessly throughout, liaising with hospitals, finding volunteers, delivering materials, collecting finished articles and then delivering them to the hospitals. Many people have helped but one key person is Clapham resident **Liz Johnston (left)**. Liz trained as a couturier in Paris and was a professional dressmaker of the highest calibre. Although retired, she personally has sewn over 50 sets of scrub caps, scrubs, tabards, bags and masks which have been gratefully received by medics and careworkers at King's College Hospital, Kingston Hospital, the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability and ChoiceUK. Thank you, Liz, Barbara and all who have helped.

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

