

# The Clapham Society

## Newsletter



Issue 432 December 2020/January 2021

We wish you a happy festive season and a better 2021 than 2020. With encouraging news about vaccines still ringing in our ears, happiness might just be in our sights! The next newsletter is the February 2021 edition, due out at the end of January.

We meet at Omnibus Theatre, 1 Clapham Common North Side, SW4 0QW. The bar opens at 7 pm and the talk starts promptly at 8 pm. Our guests normally speak for about 45 minutes, followed by questions and discussion for about 15 minutes. Meetings are free and open to non-members, who are invited to make a donation (we do not meet in July, August or December).

Owing to the continued uncertainty about the pandemic, we shall be meeting for the first few months of 2021 at Omnibus Theatre (all going well) and also on Zoom. Entry is by pre-booking only. Email [alysonwilson.sw4@gmail.com](mailto:alysonwilson.sw4@gmail.com) to reserve a place at Omnibus, or [christinearms52@hotmail.com](mailto:christinearms52@hotmail.com) to attend on Zoom. Further details will be sent out a few days before the event; please book in the appropriate month.

Our meetings for 2021 appear below and on page 2:

### Monday 18 January

After 25 years of being at the heart of Clapham's community, leading arts organisation **Studio Voltaire** will embark on a £2.4 million capital refurbishment project. **Laura Harford** will offer insight into the process, including the design plans by architects Matheson Whiteley and the history of the site. The public space at Studio Voltaire will be increased by 233% with a new community space, garden and café; the project will also, importantly, provide more affordable studios to ensure Clapham's thriving artistic community is maintained.

### Monday 15 February

**Bill Linskey**, Chairman of the Brixton Society, will tell us about the famous **markets area of Brixton**, where there are so many 'firsts', not least one of the first shopping streets in Britain to be lit by electricity. But the story of the markets is more significant than that. Shops reflect the changing needs and tastes of their customers, and the history of shopping in Brixton mirrors the history of the whole area.

### Monday 15 March

**St Paul's Opera – how did that happen?** In the short, dark days of January 2013, a plot was hatched to put on an opera at St Paul's Church, Rectory Grove. The mad minds involved (for you'd need to be mad even to consider staging an opera from scratch) were the then vicar, Deborah Matthews; parishioner Patricia Ninian; and Patricia's singing teacher, international soprano Jennifer McGregor. Puccini's one-act

opera *Gianni Schicchi* was chosen and the performance, just one night, was a sell-out; the die was cast. For this talk, **Patricia Ninian** will explain how St Paul's Opera has grown. It now stages an ambitious opera over three nights every summer (2020 being the obvious exception), gala concerts and an annual masterclass given by tenor David Butt Philip.

### Monday 19 April

**The House on the Hill.** Journalist and author **Christopher Impey** will tell the story of HMP Brixton, London's oldest prison, which was 200 years old in 2019 and is told in his eponymous book. It began as the Surrey House of Correction, infamously popularising the brutal treadmill. Later, it became the first convict prison for women and, during the 20th century, the remand prison for London. By the millennium, inspectors rated it as the worst prison in the country, but in recent years it has been transformed and now boasts enterprising rehabilitation schemes such as The Clink restaurant and [Clink@Home](http://Clink@Home), a food delivery service very busy during lockdown. (*Meetings continued overleaf*)



Dana Kubick. Published with permission

### 'A joyous child brings hope'

Asked to choose a picture that reflects the Society's optimism for the new year, photographer Dana Kubick has selected this uplifting shot, taken at Somerset House.

## Monday 17 May

**Flaming Dene – A Victorian stunner, actress and nude model.** Journalists **Eilat Negev and Yehuda Koren**, a couple in life and work, will introduce their book (reviewed in Newsletter 427) about Dorothy Dene, muse of Pre-Raphaelite painter Frederic Leighton and model for his famous painting *Flaming June*. The painting was found behind panelling during the restoration of a Clapham house in the 1960s, and sold for a mere £50 at a time when Victorian art was seriously out of vogue. There is a blue plaque on the house in The Chase where Dorothy Dene lived with her family in the 1880s.

## Monday 21 June

**The life course of health – we can't start soon enough.** This talk by **Professor Lucilla Poston**, CBE, Head of the Department of Women and Children's Health at King's College London (KCL), will update us on pregnancy research at King's College London – Guy's and St Thomas' Trust. Illustrating the 'Developmental Origins of Health and Disease' hypothesis with examples from scientific literature, it will show how this is influencing public health advice about parenthood and the management of common complications of pregnancy. Professor Poston holds the Tommy's Charity Chair of Maternal and Fetal Health. Her research team aims to improve the health of women and their children in the UK and, globally, by better understanding the processes which lead to complications in pregnancy, particularly premature birth, gestational diabetes and pre-eclampsia.

## Monday 20 September

**The man who made an Edwardian suburb.** In the 1880s and '90s the large mansions around the Common were being demolished and new roads laid out. In his talk, local resident **Mike Tuffrey** will recount how the neighbourhood around Abbeville Road, with a church, school, police station and shops, came to be built by 1910. He will reveal the decisive role played in the development by an elusive land agent – a linen draper from Tottenham and sometime felon, later a cinema proprietor – and discuss what this tells us about how Clapham continues to change.

## Monday 18 October

**Annual General Meeting**  
Speaker to be announced.

## Monday 15 November

**Dr Sue Demont**, author of *Battersea's First Lady – The Life and Times of Caroline Ganley MP*, will introduce us to this remarkable but overlooked public servant who lived at Thirsk Road off Clapham Common, from 1910 until her death in 1966. Ganley's work spanned this entire period and comprised an astonishing range of roles at local, national and international level. These included serving as a borough and county councillor, sitting as MP for Battersea South from 1945-51, and becoming one of the earliest women magistrates and the first female President of the London Co-operative Society.

## Let the festive season begin...

### Handel's Messiah

St Paul's Opera will perform best-loved arias and choruses from this most popular work on Thursday 10 and Friday 11 December, with solos by SPO principal voices and accompaniment on organ (Michael Hodges), violin (James Widden) and cello (Alison Holford); Panaretos Kyriatzidis conducts. Concerts on consecutive evenings (in the week after Lockdown Two is lifted – we hope!) mean more of you can enjoy the music in the socially distanced, reduced audience space.

Admission is free, but donations are welcome. To book, email [info@stpaulsopera.org](mailto:info@stpaulsopera.org) after 26 November. Doors open at 6.45 pm for a 7 pm start. Please wear a mask throughout. You can check in with the NHS Track & Trace app, otherwise you will be required to log in manually; we would also ask that audience members refrain from gathering in the church for socialising. There is no interval, and the concert is expected to last around an hour and a half; we regret there will be no access to the loos in the church hall. *Tricia Ninian*



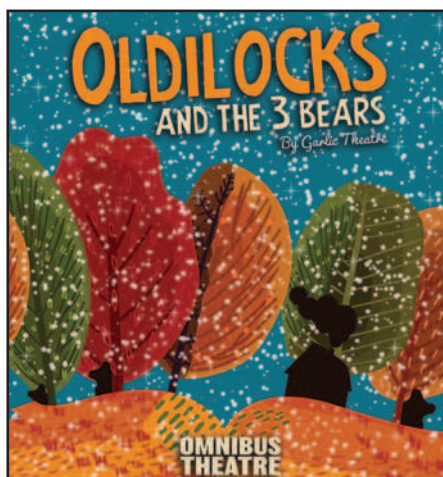
### Christmas Carol tour

**Richard Jones** (*far left*), Blue Badge guide and author of *Walking Dickensian London*, will be dressed in his Victorian finery for a virtual walk through the locations that feature in *A Christmas Carol*. You can follow Richard on a journey back to Christmas Eve 1843 as he leads you, ghost-like, through the snowy alleyways of London where you will pick

your way through the narrative of Dickens's timeless classic. The virtual tour, on Thursday 17 December, starts at 6 pm and lasts for one hour with questions and answers at the end. To book, email [events@batterseasociety.org.uk](mailto:events@batterseasociety.org.uk). Zoom login details will be sent out 24 hours beforehand. *Sue Demont*

### Pop-up performances at Omnibus

Omnibus Theatre is presenting a handful of pop-up performances this winter. The dazzling line-up includes *Oldilocks and the 3 Bears*, a magical family adventure for all ages from award-winning puppetry theatre company Garlic Theatre; *Hell Yeah!* (Newsletter 431); and *Rising of the Black Sheep*, a powerful solo debut from internationally recognised sword swallower MisSa Blue (*below right*). To find out more and book, visit [omnibus-clapham.org](http://omnibus-clapham.org).





## Friends united

Clapham Common is ‘Clapham’s most precious asset’, to borrow a phrase from The Clapham Society’s website. Just how true this is has been revealed to us all as we struggle to cope with lockdown. It is precious for its beauty, so important to our physical and mental wellbeing.

As many of you will know, we have been tested recently by plans to introduce a whole series of scrapes (depressions in the earth to catch water), which would have been totally out of keeping with our wooded landscape. Having successfully countered this project, we are facing a critical time in the management of our woodlands, which sadly have long been neglected such that we are now having to deal with the consequences of invasive False Acacia (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) out-competing and threatening our native species.

*Robinia* is a stunning tree, indigenous to the Appalachians. It has colonised much of Europe and is grown commercially for the quality of its wood and because it is quick to grow. However, it is rapacious in its spread and reproduction, and needs very particular management; if you just cut it down, it produces multiple suckers. To learn more about *Robinia* and how to manage it successfully, go to the article on the Friends website at [claphamcommon.net/woodland](http://claphamcommon.net/woodland).

If you walk into Battersea Woods today, you will be struck immediately by how clear they now are, such as the volume of *Robinia* and sycamore suckers that has had to be removed. Lambeth has been working very closely with the Trees, Landscape and Ecology (TLE) members of CCMAC and the Friends of Clapham Common, and we agree that the woods need to be replenished; we have a paucity of species in there, something we must address if we are to improve biodiversity. Trees and shrubs that we want to see include hawthorn, blackthorn, guelder rose, maple and holly, underplanted with ferns, sedges, bluebells, foxgloves, primula, snowdrops and wild garlic. Watch this space!



Photographs Adrian Darley

**Nothing wasted: mulch pathways enrich the soil for future planting, while felled logs (*below left*) delineate natural pathways to channel footfall.**

First, we need to cover the woodland floor with mulch to feed the soil before we plant and we are creating pathways like these (*shown*), created from the wood chippings of the felled branches. This is the beginning of the regeneration of the woods and it is very exciting! If only we could solve the problem of litter and unsavoury paraphernalia in the woods. It’s not something we are going to be able to stop, therefore we have to manage it. The Friends are urging Lambeth to have the woods cleaned up first thing in the morning, every morning, so that our beautiful woods are safe for our children and a pleasure for us all to enjoy.

No one will have missed the ‘restoration’ project of what Lambeth refers to as the events site. We are not happy that this huge area has been fenced off, particularly at a time when people need open green space more than ever; nor, more importantly, are we happy about how common land has been ploughed up and is being re-seeded as if it were a sports field, using a tough rye grass. The grass is not a problem in itself but we would at least have hoped for white clover, daisy and buttercup to be included. Watch *Kiss the Ground*, a documentary on Netflix, to see why we shouldn’t be ploughing land at all. We are facing an ‘insect armageddon’ and a green desert is not going to help.

This is a common, our Common, and we must do everything to protect our flora and fauna. The Friends are passionate about nature – rewilding the Common, where it is appropriate. David Attenborough’s *A Life on Our Planet* (do watch, if you haven’t seen it yet) makes it clear to each and every one of us that we have to put nature first. And that is exactly what the Friends are all about; it is the core of our mission statement.

Join us if you haven’t already. If you have any questions, please get in touch at [friends@claphamcommon.net](mailto:friends@claphamcommon.net). *Shirley Kermer, Chair, The Friends of Clapham Common*

## Lockdown diaries and local history talks

In our May/June Newsletter we mentioned that one of the many activities undertaken by the Lambeth archivists during lockdown was collecting material to keep a record of this historic year for posterity. The project is still ongoing and photographs, drawings, poems, videos and recordings are welcome – anything that might be of interest to



Dana Kubick

future generations which recalls the extraordinary year 2020. It could be rainbows in windows to show solidarity with the NHS whose staff were at the front line, or memories of the 75th anniversary celebrations of VE Day on 8 May, when street parties were socially distanced front-garden affairs (*left*) but at least they took place. Contact [archives@lambeth.gov.uk](mailto:archives@lambeth.gov.uk) for more details and to submit materials.

From March to August, many members enjoyed the local history talks given by the archivists. If you missed any or would like to see one again, a selection is on the Lambeth History Forum website. Visit [lambethlocalhistoryforum.org.uk/talks](http://lambethlocalhistoryforum.org.uk/talks), where you will also find several talks from the Lambeth Heritage Festival. *Alyson Wilson*



Ruth Eastman



## Larkhall Rise Rail Bridge – will common sense prevail?

In November, we asked if Covid was 'an excuse for covert changes to the public realm'. The abrupt closure of Larkhall Rise Rail Bridge was one of the new measures that Mark Leffler, Roads and Transport, brought to our attention. This month, we bring you an update on that from **Vadim Jean**, Chair of Larkhall Rise Rail Bridge Action Group. Photograph by Vadim Jean

The sudden closure of Larkhall Rise Rail Bridge to vehicles by Lambeth Council on Friday 2 October took local residents by surprise. Larkhall Rise has likely been a Clapham public thoroughfare since the Domesday Book, hence the bridge when the railway cut through



**Bemasked, bothered and bewildered: Larkhall residents bemoan the closure of the bridge in October.**

Clapham around 1860. Today, the route relieves some traffic pressure from Wandsworth Road and Clapham High Street, part of the delicate balance of local demand for different transport modes. When the bridge first closed in 1998 (supposedly for safety reasons, although there were no real issues), local chaos ensued. A long fight to reopen it, even in one direction, then commenced. As locals know, since reopening one-way eastbound for light vehicles only, the bridge has done a pretty good job of relieving those two main roads, keeping local roads as relatively low-traffic neighbourhoods.

Most residents are supportive of shifts in travel modes that are healthier and reduce carbon emissions. Under Covid-19 legislation government funding was available to local authorities, but strictly to make walking and cycling safer, as these modes were expected to increase. But the sudden imposition of traffic schemes without any local consultation may result in unforeseen difficulties (and strong feelings) amongst local people. This is what the closure of Larkhall Bridge to all vehicles inevitably caused when arbitrarily imposed.

Designed as a safer route through Lambeth, cycle Quietway 5 now passes along Larkhall Rise, including the bridge. Locals have for some time known it to be a safer alternative than, for example, Superhighway 7 along the A3. But we discovered that Lambeth's data claimed the morning peak as more than 200 cars per hour along Larkhall Rise, above which 'rules' should categorise the bridge as dangerous and unhealthy for cyclists and walkers. Those who use the bridge every day (by bike, in my case, with my eight-year-old son) know the bridge remains perfectly safe for all transport modes. So, the problem Lambeth wanted to solve by closing the bridge didn't exist. To make matters worse, the displacement of eastbound traffic onto Edgeley Road, Voltaire Road and/or Clapham Manor Street would actually turn some of our local roads into high-, not low-, traffic neighbourhoods. Closure would also force vehicles onto both the congested Wandsworth Road and Clapham High Street, at well-known pinch points around North Street and Gauden Road.

As the short-notice (around two days') notification of the bridge closure became clear, many residents from local roads got together at the bridge with Florence Eshalomi, new MP for Vauxhall, and Clapham Town and Larkhall councillors, to explain why this was felt to be the wrong idea at the wrong time. With local solidarity, Mrs Eshalomi's careful listening, encouragement of councillors to engage, plus a residents' deputation to the full Lambeth council and support from Larkhall Councillor Andrew Wilson, the opportunity to explain properly to Lambeth finally came.

This took the form of a tour of the area with Lambeth's lead on these current traffic restriction schemes, Councillor Holland, on Saturday 7 November. We were able to show her, with Councillor Wilson also, around the local roads and point to the adverse closure effects. We were also able to show the councillors that Lambeth's own data for peak vehicles actually passing over the bridge before closure was significantly less than 200 vehicles per hour. So even the council's own data backs up our local knowledge and view that it is perfectly safe for the bridge to remain open one-way eastbound to light vehicles – thus continuing to keep Clapham reasonably connected. This is a bridge, after all.

We now wait to hear if Lambeth will accept that the compelling arguments for keeping the bridge open and the sum of hundreds of years of local knowledge on the part of Larkhall residents are correct, in order to preserve the low-traffic neighbourhood we already live in. If they do, it will be a small victory for common sense and the local democratic process for those who live and use the Larkhall Rise bridge.

## Techie help needed

As part of Lambeth Heritage Festival, our September meeting on Peter Jefferson Smith's book about the I'Anson family of Clapham architects and the Ghostsigns online walk were both recorded so that they would be available to be watched later. I have now received the recordings, which need some editing to be put on YouTube. But this needs technical expertise which I do not possess. Is there a member out there who might help, or be able to suggest the appropriate person? In the future it would be good to have a Clapham Society YouTube page to spread knowledge of Clapham and the Society. Please email me at [alysonwilson.sw4@gmail.com](mailto:alysonwilson.sw4@gmail.com) if you can help or have any suggestions. *Alyson Wilson*

## New members

This month, we welcome two new members: Gareth James and Jenny Nicholson.

## A great time to join The Clapham Society

Founded in 1963, we are local champions of Clapham's history, architecture and natural surroundings. The more members we have, of all ages, the more talents and minds we can draw on to ensure Clapham continues to be a wonderful part of London to live in. With Christmas coming up, why not give a friend or relation Gift Membership of the Society, or join yourself if you're not a member already. We would love to have you. For further details contact the Membership Secretary (*below*).

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](http://claphamsociety.com)

