

The Clapham Society

Newsletter



Issue 445 April 2022

This month we bring you: news of our last meeting; local history; a profile of Marie McCarthy – the driving force behind Omnibus Theatre; local cultural events; plus the latest on Wild Clapham and the state of trees on the Common. Finally, if you know about architecture and town planning we would be keen to hear from you.

Third time lucky for St Paul's Opera

Thwarted in 2020 and 2021 because of the pandemic, **Tricia Ninian** was finally able on 21 February to treat the Society to a talk about St Paul's Opera. The co-founder and artistic director of this small but perfectly formed company took us through its journey, from its inception in 2013 as a response to the wish of the then vicar, Deborah Matthews, to bring into the church (St Paul's, Rectory Grove) the wider community who might not be drawn for worship, to its key role today as a firm fixture on the Clapham cultural scene. Tricia has built on the original community impulse with

outreach programmes in local schools; indeed, two pupils from Macaulay Church of England School were given cameo roles in last July's joyous production of *Gianni Schicchi*.

As a trained soprano and formidable coloratura, Tricia has appeared in every opera SPO has staged: *Gianni Schicchi* (2013, 2021), *Turandot* (2014), *Don Giovanni* (2015), *The Magic Flute* (2016), *Orpheus in the Underworld* (2017), *Così fan Tutte* (2018), *Le Nozze di Figaro* (2019). Not only is the company now part of the welcoming church where it was born, but the present vicar, Reverend Canon Jonathan Boardman, moved from Rome to become its incumbent in 2018, attracted by its reputation as an 'opera church'. A mine of operatic knowledge himself, he hosted an SPO Insight Event, *What Do Words Matter?*, last June, with two eminent librettists, Meredith Oakes (*The Tempest*) and Philip Hensher (*Powder Her Face*). Staging operas is just one part of SPO's output!

Tricia's talk segued back and forth from words to music, illustrated by slides of past productions. When *The Magic Flute* flashed up on screen, Tricia broke into the Queen of the Night aria with its famous top F, her music director Pan Kyriatizidis accompanying. Two newer company members, tenor Alex Akhurst and soprano Livy Lewis, joined Tricia at a later point in a rousing trio from *Don Giovanni*.

Livy (*overleaf*) also sang the sublime 'O mio babbino caro' from *Gianni Schicchi* in which the slide projected behind her showed Macaulay pupil Clemmie Wheeler (now at secondary school) playing her part – she (*Continued overleaf*)



Dana Kubick

Our meetings take place at Omnibus Theatre, 1 Clapham Common North Side, SW4 0QW. The talk starts promptly at 8pm and our guest normally speaks for about 45 minutes, followed by 15 minutes for questions and discussion. Meetings are free and open to non-members, who are invited to make a donation. Please arrive in good time before the start. The Café Bar is open specially for us from 6pm for drinks and snacks – a great place to socialise with other members before (and after!) the meeting. Omnibus continues its mask policy so we encourage audience members to respect that, and take a lateral flow test in advance; only come, of course, if the result is negative.

Monday 11 April

William Morris: Arts and Crafts and so much more. The famous Merton Abbey works of the great Victorian designer were just four miles down the A24 from Clapham. **John Hawks** traces Morris's life, his character and the extraordinary range of his activities. After 25 years in advertising, John founded and managed Merton Abbey Mills arts and crafts centre in the abandoned Liberty silk printing works on the River Wandle – just upstream from the site of Morris's works. He is a trustee of the Wandle Industrial Museum, a director of Wandle Heritage Limited, Vice Chair of Merton Priory Trust, and curator of the Chapter House Museum. (This meeting was originally scheduled for 18 April.)

Monday 16 May

Grime and glamour: London's wartime volunteer ambulance service. Debutantes, taxi drivers, First World War veterans, car mechanics, knitwear models, secretaries – all kinds of people signed up to crew the London Auxiliary Ambulance Service during the Second World War. What were their lives like? What was the impact of working night after night during bombardment? **Naomi Clifford**, whose latest book *Under Fire* explores the diaries of a London Auxiliary Ambulance driver in Chelsea, brings some of that world to you, including a look at ambulance crews operating in Clapham.

(Continued from page 1) even had three lines to sing! The live excerpts were a clever way to demystify opera for anyone who was reticent. Sitting at Omnibus Theatre, we felt we were being given a private concert. Yet only 10 days previously, Tricia had put on a 'Big Birthday Bash' at St Paul's (part classical/part show tunes), with two more events, as she spoke, in the pipeline for March: a Masterclass and a Gala concert, both with David Butt Philip, SPO's recently announced patron and world-class tenor. Where does she get the energy?

The centrepiece of the 2022 Summer Festival, Benjamin Britten's comic opera *Albert Herring* (7-9 July), will be SPO's first with full orchestra; and orchestras are not cheap. There will also be the not inconsiderable expense of performance rights, as the composer's music is still in copyright. In running an opera company, Tricia gently reminded us, the finance is as important as the music, and the responsibility for both falls to her.

With boundless enthusiasm, talent and good humour, Tricia Ninian is a force of nature and in St Paul's Opera she has crafted a multi-faceted jewel in the Clapham cultural crown. We thank her for her generous talk as we look forward to future SPO events. Oh, and have we mentioned the *Albert Herring* Insight Event with local Britten expert Christopher Wintle? Tricia did! Save the date of Friday 17 June. **Ruth Eastman**



Dana Kubick



Jim Grover

The exhibition is free and will be accompanied by a book and a catalogue. Both are available to buy on Fridays and Saturdays during the show, and at behindtheshopfacade.com. **1-30 April, Monday to Saturday during library hours (for opening times, visit beta.lambeth.gov.uk/libraries-0/clapham-library).** Clapham Library, Mary Seacole Centre, 91 Clapham High Street, SW4 7DB. **Jennifer Everett**

Did you shop at Jeannette Fashions?

Many members will remember this extremely useful haberdashers, which was in Clapham High Street for over 60 years, until its proprietor, Maurice Dorfman, died in February 2020. The shop and the Dorfman family are the subject of a photography exhibition at Clapham Library, which will be on for most of April.

Behind the Shop Facade tells the story of the Dorfmans, a Jewish family who fled the pogroms in Russia at the end of the 19th century, arriving in London's East End in 1902 and, in the 1950s, in Clapham, where they opened a dressmaking factory that became the haberdashery shop, Jeannette Fashions, at 22 Clapham High Street. Award-winning photographer Jim Grover, who is well known to members for his social documentary exhibitions, has created a tribute show to celebrate Maurice's life and the role Dorfmans played locally. He has assembled a rich collection, covering the family from the 1880s, with reminiscences, interviews and research from over 60 contributors.

Stockwell War Memorial at 100: talk and exhibition

To commemorate the centenary of Stockwell War Memorial, **Naomi Clifford**, Chair of the Friends of Stockwell Memorial and Gardens, will give a Zoom talk in the Lambeth Unlocked series on **Thursday 21 April at 7pm**. She will look at the history and significance of the clock tower, which was a community-led project and unveiled before a vast crowd on 3 May 1922. To register to join, please email archives@lambeth.gov.uk.

An exhibition, **These Were Our Sons: 100 Years of Stockwell War Memorial**, organised by the Friends, includes reminiscences of the stonemason who built the memorial, a short film, newly discovered photographs and details of the competition run by the Royal Academy to find

the most suitable design. Free. **Saturday 30 April to Saturday 7 May (except Sunday). Saturdays, 11am to 4pm; Tuesday, 2-4pm; Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, 5-7pm. St Michael's Church, 56 Stockwell Park Road, SW9 0DA.**



The Wandsworth Historian

In the new-look Spring issue we track down the location of Battersea's 'old workhouse', take stock of the courageous box-makers' strike in Summerstown in 1908, and explore the development of Heathfield Gardens, Wandsworth Common. There is also an account of the Southfields connection with London's much-loved statue of Eros in Piccadilly



Circus, and a chance to reflect on America's treacherous Revolutionary War patriot, Benedict Arnold, who is buried in Battersea Parish Church.

The Wandsworth Historian is published by the Wandsworth Historical Society (WHS), wandsworthhistory.org.uk, for £3 plus £2 p&p. It is available from WHS, 119 Heythorp Street, SW18 5BT, or email 020neil119@gmail.com. Please make cheques payable to 'Wandsworth Historical Society', although online payment (email for bank details) is preferred. **Neil Robson**

New members

We are pleased to extend a warm welcome this month to new members Miriam and Stephen Kramer. **Jennifer Everett**

South London Walks

This popular leaflet, in print again after two years online, is now available in Lambeth and Wandsworth Libraries, at Omnibus Theatre and other local venues. It offers a wide range of walks, including guided tours of Brixton Markets taking in the street markets, covered arcades and high street of Brixton; West Norwood Cemetery; Herne Hill; and Kennington, as well as a downloadable self-guided walk of Literary Streatham.

Laughter in the dark – in conversation with Marie McCarthy

Arts organisations of all kinds suffered badly during the lockdowns, so there will be much to celebrate when a new play opens at Omnibus Theatre on 5 April. *SAD* is the first in-house production in over two years. Despite its title, says Omnibus artistic director Marie McCarthy, *SAD* is tender, fearless and really funny.

Set in the attic of the marital home to which Gloria (Debra Baker) retreats when she 'leaves' her husband, Graham (Kevin N Golding), the play is also the second collaboration between McCarthy as a director, and writer and actor Victoria Willing. Like their previous critically acclaimed production, *Spring Offensive*, *SAD* is a dark comedy dealing with themes of grief, love and the negotiation of relationships in late middle age. It promises to be both entertaining and thought-provoking.

Not that McCarthy and Omnibus have been idle since Omnibus closed its doors in March 2020; in fact, the pandemic created opportunities and new partnerships that are still continuing. Eager to keep a connection with her audiences, McCarthy moved swiftly to put as many activities as possible online, leading to innovative relationships with a theatre in Malaysia and with Age UK. Both projects involved storytelling, cooking and an exchange

of recipes, and the link with Age UK grew to include doorstep food deliveries that must have been a cheerful and welcome break from isolation and empty routine.

McCarthy is quick to stress that encouragement during grim times went both ways, and she and the two members of staff who were able to go on working, thanks to Arts Council emergency funding, were

hugely grateful for the support they received from local people and groups, especially from the Clapham Society and the April Trust.

She has been at Omnibus since April 2013, when it was still a building site, and over the years has loved working with new writers and enabling voices that audiences do not often hear. It is important, she says, to build confidence, and to recognise when a work is not yet ready to be staged. Meanwhile, the Engine Room provides a space where unfinished ideas can be tested and explored in short 20-minute pieces. Writers can even ask the audience to answer specific questions on feedback forms. This simultaneously helps writers to build up their experience and gives audiences a chance to gain a fascinating insight into the creative process.

In the immediate future, McCarthy is focused on building confidence so that audiences are happy to return to the theatre. Following on from *SAD*, there is a vibrant summer season planned. Omnibus's digital offering will also continue and, with the completed development of the Café Bar, which will be open every Friday to Sunday (and for the Society on Monday meeting nights), food continues to play a vital part. McCarthy is confident that the venue's home-made cakes will be a star attraction.

And, for the more distant future, what is top of her wish list? The artistic director's reply proves that the pandemic has not dampened her enthusiasm, enterprise or spirit of creative fun: she would love to see Omnibus Theatre stage a musical. ***SAD* runs on selected dates from 5-30 April. For tickets and details about Omnibus Theatre, 1 Clapham Common North Side, SW4 0QW, visit omnibus-clapham.org/whats-on/. Isabelle Grey** *Isabelle Grey's latest novel, Sisterhood, written as V. B. Grey, is now in paperback, £8.99, from Clapham Books and good bookstores.*



Eleanor Grice

Royal Trinity Hospice The Hospice will host an Open Garden day again, this year, as part of the National Garden Scheme's Open Garden Weekend. Trinity's fully wheelchair-accessible grounds will be open to

explore and enjoy. The gardens, based on original designs by Lanning Roper, span nearly two acres of cornflower and wildflower meadow areas, with mature trees, an ornamental pond, a greenhouse, beehives and mixed flower beds. For information about booking, visit www.royaltrinityhospice.london/open-garden. There is a suggested donation upon admission of £3 for adults (children free).

Sunday 3 April, 10.30am to 4.30pm. Royal Trinity Hospice, 30 Clapham Common North Side, SW4 0RN. Polly Balsom



Clapham Common Film Club

The Film Club delves back to 1967 with Jean Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai*. Previous Melville outings have been hugely well received as his films offer a fascinating mix of American film noir, located within Parisian streets (and in this case the Paris Metro), and French chic. Alain Delon plays the samurai of the title, who is sought all



over Paris by both the police and the underworld, while he puts his own plan into effect. It is a masterclass in creating suspense through only occasional action and spare dialogue – in complete contrast to

current Hollywood fare. Running time: 105 minutes. For details of this season's programme and membership, email Roger Booker at ccfilmrb@gmail.com. **Sunday 10 April, 7.30pm, Omnibus Theatre, 1 Clapham Common North Side, SW4 0QW. Roger Booker**

Clapham Chamber Concerts

We welcome the uber-talented Quartet Menine. The programme is still being finalised, so check claphamchamberconcerts.org.uk for repertoire and ticket details. **Friday 22 April, 6pm and 8pm, St Paul's Church, Rectory Grove, SW4 0DZ. Paul Askew**

Arts Society Clapham Common

Fabergé in London at the Victoria and Albert Museum has delighted enthusiasts ever since it opened in November. The Arts Society's discussion of the House of Fabergé's British enterprise will dovetail with some of the objects at the exhibition. The firm's Russian sales ledgers have disappeared, but those of the London branch, opened in 1903, document royal patronage and a 'Who's Who' guide to Edwardian prosperity. American heiresses and other prominent visitors flocked to the London salerooms, while the branch supplied trunk shows for buyers on the Continent and as far afield as India and Siam. The role of the London business provides us with insight into a society that was forever altered by the world events that followed. The speaker is **Cynthia Coleman Sparke**, an author and lecturer on Russian pre-Revolutionary works of art, and regular consultant on Fabergé for auction houses. For tickets, £10 visitors (members free), email claphamcommon@theartsociety.org or visit theartssociety.org/claphamcommon.

Wednesday 27 April, 11am, Clapham Picturehouse, 76 Venn Street, SW4 0AT. Susan Holder



The Planning Sub-Committee needs you!

The quality of the built environment in and around Clapham has always been an important concern of the Society. Sadly, the pandemic and a number of changes in our Planning Sub-Committee's members' personal circumstances have severely impacted on the operation of our sub-committee over the past year or more, and we are looking for people who care about Clapham to join us and help us in this vital work. The views of civic societies such as the Clapham Society can act as an important curb on the decisions of planning authorities.

A small group of members got together recently with a view to reviving this key aspect of the Society's work post-lockdown. We were joined by a new member with excellent architectural skills and experience, and would welcome others with an interest in town planning and the built environment to help us re-establish this sub-committee.

Important proposals we have considered recently include the remodelling of Holy Trinity Church on Clapham Common North Side, and the contentious proposal to develop the Old Dispensary in Clapham Manor Street to provide a large basement teaching facility for 350 or more children daily. Other schemes we have considered include high-rise developments around the Common, the creation of deep basements for residential and hotel use, and unsympathetic conversions of residential and commercial buildings.

The group aims to sift through and highlight some of the more contentious planning applications received by Wandsworth and Lambeth Councils, and to examine and comment on proposed planning policies. We aim to meet about six times a year to enable reporting to the Main Committee.

If you feel you have something to offer and might be interested in joining us, or would like to discuss this further, please email our Membership Secretary, Jennifer Everett, in the first instance, at membership@claphamsociety.com.

Mark Leffler, Chairman

Battersea Society

In this free online talk **Judith B Tankard**, art historian and author of *Gardens of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, surveys the inspirations, characteristics and development of garden design associated with this movement. She presents a selection of houses and gardens from the era, with an emphasis on the designers who forge a special approach to garden design. Her talk will be accompanied by illustrations and photographs of gardens



from Europe (Dyffryn Gardens in the Vale of Glamorgan, *above*) and North America. Email events@batterseasociety.org.uk for the link. **Wednesday 6 April, 6.30-7.30pm. Sue Demont**

Street parties can help Clapham Common

If your street is having a party to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Pageant on 5 June or during the holiday weekend of 2-5 June, consider using the occasion to raise funds with neighbours for **Wild Clapham**. Clapham's major tree planting initiative, Wild Clapham is the response of the Clapham Society and the Friends of Clapham Common to The Queen's Green Canopy, created to mark Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee.

The Society and the Friends have made a good start on fundraising, with over £5,000 raised at the Summer Party in 2021. We are deeply grateful to Lady Margaret Wall, Chair of the April Trust, for the Trust's very generous donation of £9,500. Wild Clapham has a number of projects underway. With the money from the April Trust we have taken advantage of the dormant autumn and winter months to source and plant 42 trees of a wide variety of species to create a corridor for wildlife, linking Battersea Woods to the wildflower meadows and Nursery Woods. We continue our search for certain tree varieties that are currently in short supply. The recent storms, Eunice and Franklin, caused serious damage (*right*) to at least eight beautiful trees on the Common, making the objectives of Wild Clapham even more pressing.

The new trees have been selected for their resistance to disease and climate change, and also to provide attractive colour, and autumn fruits and seeds to support our wildlife. Some are non-native species and relatively rare in the UK. We are especially pleased to have a Cork Oak and intend to label the trees to help people recognise what type they are.

In future Newsletters we aim to cover the scrubland, completed before Christmas; and the wildflower meadow and 'Eaglet Pond' (the small pond next to Eagle Pond), both of which are at an advanced planning stage.

Many, many thanks again to the April Trust, and to everyone who has donated so far. The contributions mean we can firm up plans for further planting next autumn. If you and your neighbours feel you could donate to Wild Clapham, too, as part of the Platinum Jubilee celebrations, we would be extremely grateful. Just press the 'donate' button on our website, claphamsociety.com. You can also give by bank transfer to account 22217045, Sort Code 60 05 34, reference: Wild Clapham; or by cheque to the Clapham Society, reference: Wild Clapham, and posted to The Treasurer, The Clapham Society, 15 Turret Grove, SW4 0ES.

Enjoy the celebrations! **Annabel Allott and Gareth James**

STOP PRESS On 8 March we learned that the Planning Inspectorate did not grant the application by Lambeth Council for permission for last summer's **Festival Republic** event on Clapham Common. The event having taken place without permission, the Inspector concluded that there was no point in considering the merits of the application. She did note, however, that it had attracted 475 representations: one neutral, three in support and 471 in opposition. If the matter had merited a decision, she concluded that a public inquiry would have been justified.



Gareth James

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

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