

The Clapham Society

Newsletter



Issue 448 July/August 2022

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. The 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 from 6pm for drinks and snacks – a wonderful place to socialise with other members before (and after) the talk. See you in September.

There are no meetings in July and August.

Monday 19 September

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 (Newsletter 427) about Dorothy Dene, muse of Pre-Raphaelite painter Frederic Leighton and model for his famous painting 'Flaming June'. The latter 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.

Summer Party – have you booked?

We look forward to co-hosting our Summer Party with the Friends of Clapham Common on **Wednesday 20 July at 6pm**. Every member is invited but numbers are limited. Tickets, £20 each, to be bought in advance, include canapés, a welcome drink, live music, and the chance



Richard Roxburgh

to win exciting prizes in a beautiful local garden setting. After the success of last year's party, the proceeds will go again to Wild Clapham (see *Major gifts*, page 4), which still has projects planned such as improving

the wetlands and planting more trees. The party is an opportunity to socialise outside and catch up with friends; warm clothing advised. Tickets are available at bit.ly/SummerPartyJuly2022 (scanning the QR code here on your phone camera until it is in focus will take you to the link), or post a cheque, made out to The Clapham Society,



stating names of attendees, to: The Treasurer, The Clapham Society, c/o 15 Turret Grove, SW4 0ES. In the event of oversubscription, refunds will be given. **If you can help on the night**, too, we would love to hear from you; email events@claphamsociety.com.

Grime and glamour: London's wartime volunteer ambulance service

At our May meeting, the Society was treated to an enthralling talk by Stockwell historian Naomi Clifford about an ambulance driver in the Second World War called June Spencer (no relation to the actress of that name in *The Archers*). After June's death at 97 in 2013, June's daughter, Fenella Gatehouse, asked Naomi if she would be interested in seeing her mother's wartime diaries. Thrilled to accept, Naomi, whose special interest is women whose lives have never before been told, transcribed the diaries and embarked on further research, culminating in *Under Fire: The Blitz diaries of a volunteer ambulance driver*, published last year.



Dana Kubick

Speaking at Omnibus, Naomi told us how she was captivated by her diarist's artistic hand-writing, but on closer inspection found it inscrutable; June was not one of nature's spellers either. Naomi deciphered it, and her book alternates between June's brief but vivid diary entries and her own beautifully written narrative. Naomi gets under the skin of her diarist and brings her to life; in so doing, she shows us a slice of London's wartime history few of us today know about.

The talk covered a range of subjects, from the inception of the London Auxiliary Ambulance Service, one of the branches of Civil Defence during the Second World War, to typical duties at an auxiliary ambulance station – in June's case, a disused motor repair shop in Danvers Street, Chelsea. (Stations nearer us were at Queenstown Road, Bolingbroke School, Honeywell School and Park Hill.) We also heard moving descriptions of bomb scenes to which June was called: 'The walking wounded might be screaming or eerily quiet, unable to answer simple questions. In shock, they might insist on returning to their flats or houses to continue cooking or whatever they were doing when the bomb dropped, or refuse to leave the scene if their children or pets were missing.'

June herself lived in Lindsey House, a 17th-century villa on Cheyne Walk. 'June's colleagues,' Naomi told us, 'included Patrick O'Brian, the novelist, and his lover Mary Tolstoy; women architects, numerous artists, women doctors.' Not surprisingly with all her connections June was a debutante. When the stress of being an ambulance driver became (*Continued bottom of page 2*)



Ruth Eastman

Time for a change

For some while now, we have been unable to know the time when waiting for a bus outside Clapham Common Tube station – except nowadays everyone has a telephone to tell them. But not all of us. A friend recently told me his colleagues were astonished to see him wind up his watch. Well, some of us, including me, do.

To see the Clock Tower at the head of Clapham High Street cleaner and now working is not just a pleasure, but a signal that a piece of Clapham history has been restored, almost, to its former glory. The cleaners of the stone did not seem to have

a long enough ladder to reach the top, nor the equipment to clean the metal plaque at the bottom, but I suppose this could be done.

As the plaque says, the clock was donated by Alexander Clegg, Mayor of Wandsworth in 1905/6, who presented the clock to be ‘opened’ by the Lord Mayor of London on 19 July 1906. The site is referred to as Clapham Cross.

A fellow member of the Antiquarian Horological Society, Mike Bundock, who has made a study of freestanding clock towers, tells me that the movement was made by the firm Gillett & Johnston as a Number 1 timepiece (no strike, so not a clock!) at a cost of £60, plus £15 for an electric switch. The four opal glass dials are said to bear the firm’s name but without that long ladder I am unable to confirm that. Established in 1844 and based in Croydon, the clockmakers and bell founders Gillett & Johnston are still a leader in the field today.

Whether the original movement is still in there we have no idea, but I very much hope that it is. I gather it was an electricity supply failure that had caused the clock to stop, but that would probably have been to the winding mechanism, not to the movement itself. I would need to get my head inside that little door at the bottom to see what is there.

I mentioned that the Clock Tower was a gift to Clapham Parish by Alexander Clegg, Mayor of Wandsworth. Since 1965, this part of Clapham has been in the London Borough of Lambeth, but we can remember that we still owe something to Wandsworth, and if Lambeth could get round to cleaning the plaque and the top of the tower, so much the better! **Christopher Kevill-Davies**

Summer walks

We have several guided walks to inspire you this summer, starting with Mike Tuffrey’s **Abbeville village: The making of an Edwardian neighbourhood** on **Sunday 10 July**. Alyson Wilson will introduce **Ghost signs of Clapham** on **Sunday 31 July**, and Gillian Robinson will take a fresh look at **Clapham Old Town** on **Thursday 4 August**. On **Sundays 7 August** (rescheduled from 24 July) and **14 August** Dr Iain Boulton will lead **Hidden history of Clapham Common – rediscovering lost landscapes and nature** and **Seeing the woods for the trees**, before **Tom Jansz** returns to **The history of Clapham Common** on **Thursday 1 September**. For details and booking visit claphamsociety.com/walks. Walks are free but must be booked in advance.

Our self-guided walks packs are available at Clapham Books (£5 for seven walks) and many free guided walks are listed in the Local History Walks in South London leaflet, available online, at Omnibus Theatre and in libraries.

Well done, new Lambeth tour guides

The graduation ceremony for those who successfully completed the first year-long course in becoming a Lambeth tour guide (Newsletter 437) will take place at Brixton Town Hall on **Thursday 7 July**. Applications are now open for next year’s course, which will start at Morley College (Waterloo campus) in **September 2022**. Visit lambethtourguides.org/lambeth-guiding-course.

Clapham Crooks: Jabez Spencer Balfour, MP and renowned fraudster



Described by *The Times* as ‘One of the most impudent, heartless business scoundrels on record’, Jabez Spencer Balfour (1843-1916) was the youngest of seven children, born of Clara, a temperance campaigner, and James, a House of Commons official. He lived at 100 Nightingale Lane around 1908 and earlier had acquired for development the land now comprising Rodenhurst Road.

Persuasive and disingenuously charming, he was Liberal MP for Tamworth from 1880 and later for Burnley, serving in between as Mayor of Croydon, while living there. Concurrently he founded a bank and took control of the Liberator Permanent Building Society, growing it to be the largest of its day, much favoured by prudent Non-Conformist small savers.

By 1892, however, inflated valuations, false accounting and blandishments reminiscent of Robert Maxwell from our own (recent) times led to the collapse of the whole edifice, with the savers wiped out. Balfour absconded to Argentina, leaving others to face the music. After a public outcry, Scotland Yard’s finest were despatched to find and strong-arm him home. Finally brought to dock in 1895, he was sentenced to 14 years with hard labour.

The bankrupt Liberator’s Clapham estate – acquired nearly two years before and undeveloped – featured in the trial’s account of dodgy dealings. Liquidators later realised the assets and house building began in 1902.

When Balfour died, the *Daily Mail* wrote: ‘Of recent years he was a well-known figure – though his actual identity was never guessed – on Clapham Common, where on sunny days he would sit on a seat and read the newspapers – a quiet, calm, mild-mannered old man, kind to the children playing about him.’ To learn more about this extraordinary man, read *Jabez: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Rogue* by David McKie. **Mike Tuffrey**
Next issue: Watch out for a new local history series

Nine Elms Arts Ministry talk, 7 July

Come to St Mary’s Battersea and hear the **Rev. Betsy Blatchley** speak about an arts community that has been working in Battersea and Nine Elms since 2018. For details and to register, visit batterseasociety.org.uk/battersea.

(Continued from page 1) too much, which it often did in those dark days, ‘June, in her twenties and with scads of friends, partied.’ Favourite haunts were Quaglino’s, the Berkeley, the Ritz and Café de Paris (luckily for June not on the night when the bomb fell, killing 70 people).

Her story painted a microcosm of the war experience for so many Londoners: a bizarre cocktail of normality, duty and terror, with uncertainty the only constant. We salute June Spencer, and we thank Naomi Clifford for bringing June to The Clapham Society’s attention. **Ruth Eastman**
Naomi Clifford’s book ‘Under Fire’, £14.99, Caret Press, is available to order at Clapham Books and from Amazon. It is also available on Kindle and as an ebook.



Behind the scenes at *Albert Herring*

Benjamin Britten's comic opera *Albert Herring*, originally planned for 2020, is the first major production from St Paul's Opera since before lockdown. The title suggests a story about a fishmonger, but not so.

Albert works in a greengrocer's in rural Suffolk under the watchful eye of his controlling mother. Two young friends, Nancy (mezzo **Alexandra Dinwiddie**) and Sid (baritone **Owain Evans**),

hatch a plot to see if they can bring Albert out of his shell. To find out more, I caught up with Alex (*above*) a week into rehearsals with Stage Director Annemiek van Elst. The cast had just finished a month of rigorous work with SPO's Musical Director Panaretos Kyriatizidis.

'I have always wanted to play Nancy,' Alex says. 'She's one of the three young adults in the cast, along with Albert and Sid, whom she's basically dating. Nancy and Sid play take pity on Albert (tenor **Alex Akhurst**, *top*) and try and give him a vehicle to grow up. It's lovely to play a young girl role because, as a mezzo, I am quite often playing boys. Nancy is flirty and fun, but has a sense of responsibility when it looks like things aren't going right.

'Britten has a deft way of presenting different personalities and reflecting them in his music, which is why it has been such a great role to get to know. The score is littered with dots and dashes, which tell you precisely how he wants each phrase to be articulated, so you can clearly see his sense of humour. It was written in the 1940s, but so many of his jokes land absolutely as we would phrase them now.'

Alex loves Britten's music, indeed she did her dissertation on him. 'With many composers it's expansive ideas; Britten puts things under a microscope and exposes people. *Herring* is set in the fictitious Suffolk village of Loxford, and of course Britten was born and bred in Suffolk and lived in Aldeburgh for many years. He has pulled out the people he probably saw walking down the high street every day. I wonder how comfortable it would have been for his contemporaries to watch the opera, but fortunately everybody saw the funny side.

'When you meet Albert, he's very, "No, Mum wouldn't like that." Sid and Nancy sort of parade themselves a bit in front of him and he eventually goes, "Well, hang on a second!"' The Clapham audience is doing just that, hanging on for the curtain to rise. *Ruth Eastman Nancy, Sid and Albert are just three in a cast of 13 along with full orchestra and chorus. On the opening night, there is a cover cast and piano accompaniment. For tickets (£18, Thursday; £30, Friday and Saturday) scan this QR code or visit stpaulsopera.org and choose your preferred date: Thursday 7, Friday 8 or Saturday 9 July. Grounds open at 5.15pm; performance starts at 7pm, with an extended picnic interval – bring chairs and table. St Paul's Church, Rectory Grove, SW4 0DZ.*



Studio Voltaire – Maeve Gilmore private view

Places are still available for the special private view of the Maeve Gilmore exhibition (Newsletter 447) for Society members and friends on **Tuesday 5 July, 2-3pm**. Email events@claphamsociety.com.

New members We are pleased to welcome Ben Gummer and Sarah Langford, and Andrew and Jenny Wall. One of last month's new members is Geoff Foy, not Geoff Roy as printed; we apologise for the error. If you know anyone who would like to join the Society, please encourage them to email membership@claphamsociety.com or visit claphamsociety.com/join-the-society. *Jennifer Everett*

Growth market at Venn Street

On **16 July, 10am to 3pm**, young gardeners – pupils from Clapham Manor Primary and Heathbrook Primary schools – will be setting out their stalls for another Grand Finale of **Clapham Leaf Club**, selling the produce grown from this year's harvest. The market will also be joined by **Urban Wine UK**, a local south London organisation who grow vines and sell wines from their vines. *Kate Greening*

Clapham Library events

There is lots going at Clapham Library that you might not know about, as we discover from its new Library Manager, Liz Buchanan.

Parent and toddler group takes place every Tuesday, 10-11am, story and rhyme time for the under-fives. **The Summer Reading Challenge** for children has a science theme this year. Join at summerreadingchallenge.org.uk/news/general/gadgeteers-intro or at the library from **Saturday 16 July to Thursday 1 September**. On **Wednesday 20 July** Clapham Library celebrates its **tenth birthday**. The day will hold surprises, followed by an evening of live music. Also look out for **English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes** in the autumn.

If you would like to become involved with Clapham Library, and see more author events, live music or topical discussions, you are the perfect candidate to become a **Friend of Clapham Library**. *For opening times and more information about all the activities and initiatives above, drop into Clapham Library, Mary Seacole Centre, 91 Clapham High Street, SW4 7DB, telephone 020 7926 0717, visit beta.lambeth.gov.uk/libraries-0/clapham-library or email claphamlibrary@lambeth.gov.uk.*

Royal Trinity Hospice Open Garden Day

Royal Trinity Hospice will host another NGS Open Garden Day in its award-winning garden on **Sunday 21 August, 10.30am to 4.30pm**. Its nearly two-acre garden on the edge of Clapham Common is based on original designs by the renowned American landscape architect Lanning Roper. To book, and for more information about the garden's history and what you can expect to see, visit royaltrinityhospice.london/open-garden. There is a suggested donation upon admission of £3 for adults (children free).



Dana Kubick

Something to sing about

Clapham Community Choir is looking for new members. No audition is required and you do not have to read sheet music or have choral experience. We rehearse at St Paul's Church, Rectory Grove, on Tuesday evenings, 7.30 to 9pm. Next term starts on **Tuesday 6 September** but you can join up to **19 July** this term. Your first session is free; after that the price is £10 a week (or £9 if you pay termly). To see us in action, come to **Venn Street Market** on **Saturday 16 July**, where we will be singing at **11am**. For more details, visit singclapham.org/join-us; jump to the home page and you will be treated to a virtual concert! *Ellie Masterman*

Omnibus Theatre seeks volunteers

As a registered charity with no guaranteed funding, we rely on our wonderful band of volunteers to help with ushering or serving food to young people during school holidays. We hold social events for volunteers and they can see performances for free. Find out more at omnibus-clapham.org/get-involved/volunteers. If you want to visit and have a chat with the team, pop by during Happy Hour to take advantage of special deals on wine, cocktails and beers from Clapham's local Brixton Brewery. **Happy Hour runs in the Café Bar between 4-6pm on Fridays and 5-7pm on Saturdays.** *Ellie Grice*

Major gifts to the Common and to the planet

Have you noticed the newly planted trees on Clapham Common? They are easy to spot because of the pale wood supports – and because



Ruth Eastman

there are 40-plus of them, all growing in carefully chosen soil conditions. Now that they are in full leaf, passers-by can appreciate British natives such as silver birches, aspens, poplars, oaks and even disease-resistant elms. Each will supply food for insects, pollinators, moths and butterflies, then autumn fruits and berries for local birds. There are also non-natives such as tulip trees, Persian ironwoods (*left*) and shagbark hickory (*below*, as planted last autumn), which we hope

will be well suited to the changing climate in the next century. My favourite is the evergreen cork oak planted near the Pear Tree Café – shall we be harvesting our own corks for English wines?

This Queen's Green Canopy Tree Project has been funded by the **April Trust**, a national charity based in Clapham. It is the Trust's response to the **Wild Clapham** initiative started a year ago by The Clapham Society and Friends of Clapham Common to improve the biodiversity and ecology of the Common. Wild Clapham is now an official working group for Clapham Common Management Advisory Committee (CCMAC) and has a seat on Lambeth's Biodiversity Forum. The Friends' knowledgeable horticulturalist, **Gareth James**, is the lead for Wild Clapham; he is also responsible as for liaising between the April Trust (apriltrust.org.uk) and Lambeth.

Look out for the Tree Trail and tree signage, also part of the substantial April Trust gift – nearly £9,500 – to Wild Clapham, which will enable all users of Clapham Common to appreciate the new and very interesting trees. We will update you as the project continues, but we can assure you it is in the very safest of hands. **Margaret Wall, Chair of Trustees, April Trust**



Gareth James



Diana Kahn (1948-2022)

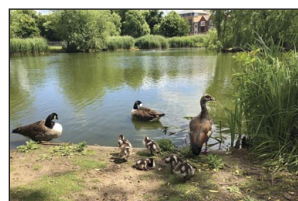
We were extremely saddened to hear of the death of Diana Kahn on 13 May. A Clapham resident for 29 years, she was Chair of Age UK Lambeth from 2011-18, an early member of the Clapham Working Mothers group, an early supporter of Clapham Chamber Concerts, and a member of The Clapham Society and a frequent attendee of our meetings. For those who knew Diana, a Just Giving page has been set up in her memory by Age UK Lambeth: [justgiving.com/campaign/DianaKahn](https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/DianaKahn). We offer our sincerest condolences to Diana's husband, Terence Mitchison, and to their two children, Laura and Mark.

Curiouser and curiouser

One fine morning last month, the Common was alive with enthusiastic young people hard at work in the open air. There were wielders of paint brushes, who spruced up the benches around the Bandstand. Other groups were lopping off branches sprouting from the bearded trunks of lime trees and carefully carrying them off for recycling. A small cluster was tidying up the



hedges near Bandstand Beds. There had been similar activity, apparently, near Eagle Pond, but all we could detect was a satisfied family of Canada geese going for a swim. The young army, it transpired, was a group – some 75 had signed up – from Lloyds Bank who, having contacted the Council, were taking part in Volunteers' Week. As users of the Common we are enormously grateful to them.



The Bandstand team were good enough to let us take their picture; some, to be fair, were on their way to paint other benches, but you can see their enjoyment. The geese posed without prior permission. **Story and photographs: Ruth Eastman**

Latest improvements on Clapham Common

The Society is pleased to report on four important undertakings. First, Lambeth is close to finishing the installation of 37 new lamps across the Common. This includes around Nursery Woods, paths north of the Bandstand, Windmill Drive, the Bandstand to the play area, and around the paddling pool and Holy Trinity Church. The lighting plan was agreed after careful consultation with all stakeholders, including women's safety and environmental groups.

Secondly, new litter bins are being installed with tops to discourage birds and foxes spreading the litter outside the bin. This should help with the general litter problem.

Thirdly, thanks to the sterling efforts of many but in particular of CCMAC member Adrian Darley and his wife, 40 bird boxes have been installed across the Common. Their purpose is to provide a nesting habitat safe from the many crows and magpies that raid nests for eggs and chicks. Fourteen are already being used, which is very promising given that birds typically take two to three years to get comfortable with them.

Finally, discussions on redeveloping the paddling pool (*right*) by Holy Trinity Clapham are well progressed between CCMAC members and Lambeth planners. Local residents should soon have plans and artists' impressions to inspect and comment upon. We are hugely supportive of efforts to improve this much-neglected asset for young families, whilst noting the sensitivity of its location in terms of aesthetics. **Andrew Summers, Common and Open Spaces**



Andrew Summers

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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