

The Clapham Society

Newsletter



Issue 455 April 2023

Norwood & Brixton Foodbank: A port in a storm

As a nation and as a community, we know it isn't right that anyone should be left hungry or to live in extreme poverty. But while we work for long-term change, Norwood and Brixton Foodbank provides emergency supplies of food, advice and compassionate, dignified support to local people locked in crisis.

The foodbank, part of the Lambeth Foodbank Partnership, is based in St Margaret the Queen, Barcombe Avenue, SW2 3BH. Non-perishable, in-date food is donated by the wonderful community of Clapham at schools, churches and businesses as well as at supermarket collection points. It is then sorted into emergency food parcels by more than 150 volunteers drawn from all quarters of the borough.

Care professionals, such as health visitors, staff at schools, social workers, councillors and faith leaders, identify people in crisis and issue them with an electronic foodbank voucher. This means that people can receive a foodbank parcel of three days' nutritionally balanced non-perishable and fresh food from their local foodbank. It is fantastic that we are able to provide fresh fruit and vegetables – even pet food – given by businesses and markets in this exceptional community.

Norwood & Brixton Foodbank also provides support to help people resolve the crises they are facing so that, hopefully, they will not need to use a foodbank again. This includes advice on housing, debt, benefits guidance and mental health support.

This is a difficult time for everyone but donating food or money to your local foodbank truly makes a difference to people in crisis. Norwood & Brixton Foodbank relies on the support of the community to feed the community and we are so grateful for all that has been received over the past years. As we go forward, we welcome that continued generosity. Feel free to visit norwoodbrixton.foodbank.org.uk to find out more and to see the many ways you can help and – if you have an hour or so to spare – volunteer. *Alison Inglis-Jones, Trustee and Volunteer*



Our meetings (talks) are inspiring and fun. They take place at Omnibus Theatre, 1 Clapham Common North Side, SW4 0QW. The talks start promptly at 8pm and our guests normally speak 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 Omnibus Café Bar opens from 6pm for drinks and snacks – a great chance to socialise with other members before (and after) the meeting. Hope to see you there.

Monday 17 April

Florence Nightingale's London. Florence Nightingale was a legend in her own lifetime, but the Crimean War was just two years in the career of a woman who lived to the age of 90. When she returned from the Crimea in her mid-30s, she spent the rest of her long life living and working in London. **Julie Chandler** is the co-author of *Florence Nightingale's London*. Drawing from her book, she explores the places where Florence Nightingale lived and worked, where she wrote her own book, *Notes on Nursing*, even where she bought her perfume. Julie, a London Blue Badge Tourist Guide, works in partnership with the Florence Nightingale Museum and, as part of Team Flo, regularly gives talks and leads walking tours.

Monday 15 May

Aren't bees brilliant? Dr Paul Vagg introduces us to the world of honey bees: what they do for us and how we can help them. The holder of a PhD in beekeeping, there is little he doesn't know about his subject. He will look at how we manage bees in a city environment and what it would mean if we were to lose them. We will also learn how a colony is set up and about the life cycle of our honey bees. Everyone can help these important pollinators.

Clapham Society (and other) walks: The new season gets underway

It's time to banish the winter blues and dust down your walking shoes or boots, depending on the weather. Our guided walks start at the end of April with **Tom Jansz** leading his **History of Clapham Common Walk** on **Friday 21 April**, followed the next evening, on **Saturday 22 April**, by the **Spring Bat Walk** led by **Dr Iain Boulton**. If you haven't yet been on a bat walk, don't miss this – it never fails to fascinate. The full programme of Clapham Society walks for 2023 is on our website at claphamsociety.com/walks.

Another series of walks, offered by local organisations, is shown in the 'Local History Walks in South London' leaflet, now available at libraries, Omnibus Theatre and many other south London venues. You can also find it at claphamsociety.com/news/sthlonhistorywalks2023.

Maybe you prefer walking at your own pace? Try 'Clapham Walks', our pack of self-guided walks leaflets (£5 for 7 leaflets). The pack is available at Clapham Books, 26 The Pavement, SW4 0JA, and on our website at claphamsociety.com/publications.

Maurice Dorfman: Behind the Shop Facade

Social-documentary photographer **Jim Grover** (*below*) attracted a large audience to our February meeting when he gave his talk on Maurice Dorfman, a much-loved shopkeeper who ran Jeannette Fashions at 22 Clapham High Street shortly before his death in February 2020. Jim had staged a popular exhibition on Dorfman at Clapham Library last spring, but his talk for us delved deeper.

Hyman Dorfman, Maurice's grandfather, was a Russian Jew who emigrated to London's East End and became a journeyman tailor.

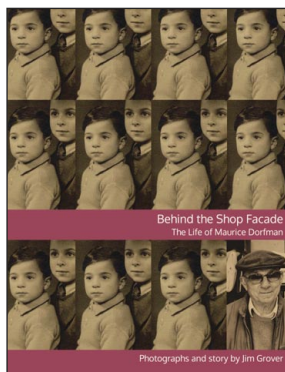
There, Maurice was born to Hyman's third son David, also a tailor, and his Australian wife Jeanette (née Levy), whom he met in 1928 after sailing to Australia, returning with her and their two-year-old son Harry (Hyman), Maurice's older brother, to London three years later.

Jim first met Maurice in 2016 while working on his photo-story *48 Hours on Clapham High Street*. He discovered that Maurice's life spanned so many elements worth unpacking: Jewish migration and the London rag trade c.1900; British social history – one of the happiest periods in

Maurice's life was when he was in National Service (1950-53); leisure activities in the 1960s-80s – Maurice was both a keen dinghy sailor and trials and motocross rider; the role of the haberdasher in the community; even interior design – his flat above the shop, still there today (just), is a masterclass in mid-Century style. The extra 'n' in the shop's name, by the way, may have crept in when it opened.

Jim employed a genealogist to assist him in his research; he also launched an appeal for stories from those who might have known him. 'Maurice?' one respondent said. 'I knew a Murray.' Anti-Semitism in the late 1940s may have prompted Maurice to hide, temporarily, behind a pseudonym. One question the talk answered for me was: why 'Jeannette Fashions' for a shop selling fabrics and sewing notions? From 1960-73 it was a thriving, family-run dress factory.

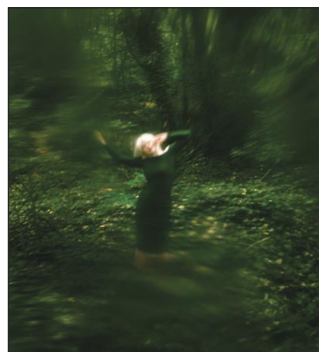
Jim Grover's book of the same name as his talk (*right*) sheds degrees more light into this local legend's life story and times. Filled with intimate accounts and stunning, evocative photographs, it is a highly readable trip down Clapham's – and East London's – memory lane. For a signed and limited edition, £40, visit jimgroverphotography.com or email jim.grover@mac.com. **Ruth Eastman**



Mark Leffler

Omnibus Theatre

Don't miss the world premiere of *The Woman Who Turned into a Tree*, a powerful play by **Lisa Langseth** (*Love & Anarchy*, Netflix) that explores isolation, identity and the dangerous obsession with



the opinions of others. This timely tale follows the story of Daphne, a young woman who is desperate to reinvent herself in a world dominated by masculinity and judgment. With no support network and plummeting mental health, she gradually loses touch with reality. Featuring original music, live sound and movement, this is a gripping and thought-provoking performance not to be

missed. **Selected dates, 4-22 April, Omnibus Theatre, 1 Clapham Common North Side, SW4 0QW.** For more details and tickets, visit omnibus-clapham.org/the-woman-who-turned-into-a-tree.

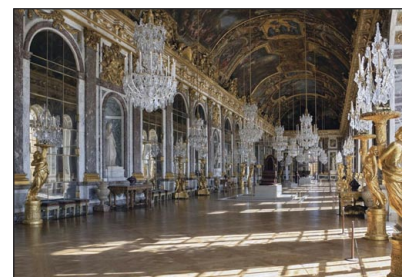
St Luke's Music Society

The penultimate concert in the 2022/23 season is a song recital by the inimitable **Dame Sarah Connolly**, accompanied by **Joseph Middleton**. One of the best-loved mezzo-sopranos in the world, Dame Sarah will sing a programme including Schumann, Brahms, Duparc and Kurt Weill. **Saturday 22 April, 7.30pm, St Luke's, Ramsden Road, SW12 8HQ.** For tickets and more information, visit slms.org.uk.



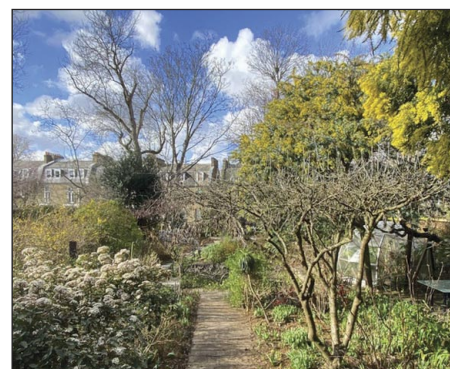
The Arts Society Clapham Common

In her talk *The king who created Versailles*, the writer and art historian **Dr Marie-Anne Mancio** will put the spotlight on Louis XIV (le Roi Soleil). A patron of Molière, Racine, Jean de La Fontaine and Charles Le Brun, he founded the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, established the Gobelins Manufactory and commissioned the stunning Palace of Versailles – the envy of Europe. You can hear more on **Wednesday 19 April, 11am, Clapham Picturehouse, 76 Venn Street, SW4 0AT.** Doors open at 10.30am. Tickets cost £10 (visitors and non-members); members free. To join The Arts Society for free entry to this and future events, email claphamcommon@theartsociety.org. **Susan Holder**



New plantings (and established) at 51 The Chase

Our garden will be opening twice this month for the National Garden Scheme, the 15th year we have taken part. We have planted 2,300 tulips from Bloms, which we hope to be in full bloom. *Camellia japonica* 'Lady Vansittart' and 'Contessa Lavinia Maggi' are dripping with buds. *Acacia baileyana* (grey-leaved mimosa) – the shorter yellow tree in the photograph – has been in flower since the beginning of January, with a few flowers showing before Christmas. The taller, west-facing *Acacia pravissima* (square-leaved mimosa) has been in flower since early February. At the front of the house, its east-facing counterpart has yet to bloom but will be a blaze of yellow by April if not before. Across the main garden, looking across the beds of tulips and alliums, is *Chaenomeles japonica* (ornamental quince maybe, but still good for jam). Wander the path of railway sleepers and beyond to see more. **Sunday 23 April, 12-5pm, and Tuesday 25 April, 5.30-8pm, 51 The Chase, SW4 0NP.** **Charles Rutherford**



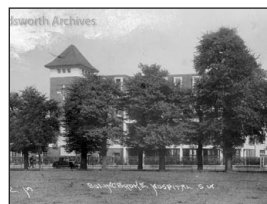
St Paul's Opera enters double digits

Ten years ago, St Paul's Opera was born when two short operas, *Gianni Schicchi* and *Der Schauspieldirektor*, were performed at the Clapham church bearing the group's name. If the trio who made the staging possible – the then-vicar of St Paul's, Deborah Matthews; former international opera singer Jennifer McGregor; and Clapham-based soprano Tricia Ninian – thought St Paul's Opera was a working title, they were mistaken. Since those early days, SPO has grown in size and reputation. It is now a registered charity and, as well as entertaining people – more than 5,000 tickets have been sold for their events in the last decade – it has given a kickstart to many young singers embarking on their professional careers.

To celebrate its 10th anniversary, SPO is presenting a fund-raising gala concert on **Friday 21 April, 7.30pm, at St Paul's (of course), Rectory Grove, SW4 0DZ**. The evening will feature favourite arias and scenes from SPO's back catalogue: a kind of 'greatest hits' compilation from operas staged over the years. For tickets, £25 which includes a celebratory drink, or £35 for the concert and after party, visit stpaulsopera.org. **Tricia Ninian, Co-Founder and Director**

Battersea Society

'East Side Story': A walk along Bolingbroke Grove from the cradle to the grave. Local historian **Sue Demont** leads



a walk that takes in the sites and buildings that span every stage of life – homes, hospitals, play spaces, schools, places of worship, burial grounds and memorials. Learn why this small stretch of road and common land

became the go-to location for architects, builders, educators, philanthropists, religious leaders, politicians and campaigners from the 1770s onwards. **Sunday, 23 April, 2.30-4pm**, starting on Wandsworth Common opposite Thurleigh Road and ending on Battersea Rise. Free, but booking essential as numbers limited. Register via batterseasociety.org.uk/events.

Friends of Windmill Gardens events

- **Saturday 1 April, Easter Baking Workshop with the 'Italian Baker' Fabio.** Join Fabio for a full day's class to learn three traditional Italian recipes. This has been designed for a very small group and includes a delicious lunch and a tour of Brixton Windmill. Booking essential.
 - **Saturday and Sunday 8-9 April: Open Weekend.** Windmill tours and guided walks. Booking essential.
 - **Sunday 9 April: Easter Family Day, 1-5pm.** Treasure hunts, craft workshops and chocolate treats at Windmill Gardens. The shop and café will be open.
 - **Thursday 13 April: Bat Walk.** Join Dr Iain Boulton for a free walk around Windmill Gardens to discover local bat life. **7.50pm for an 8pm start.** Booking not required.
 - **Monday 1 May: Beer and Bread Festival, 1-5pm.** Live music, Morris dancing, local craft beers, hot food and bakery stalls. Craft workshops for children. Millers will be on hand to answer questions on flour milling.
- Brixton Windmill, Windmill Gardens, Blenheim Gardens, SW2 5DA.** Visit brixtonwindmill.org for bookable events.

Membership news

We are delighted to welcome Juliet Moss. The Clapham Society is an amenity society for local residents and businesses. You are our future and subscription rates are low. Email membership@claphamsociety.com to join.

Royal Trinity Hospice Open Garden Day

Explore the hidden Clapham oasis that is Royal Trinity Hospice gardens, opening for the National Garden Scheme's Open Garden Weekend. Maintained by the head gardener and volunteers, they are an important space



for Trinity patients and their families. Take in the pond, shrubs, shrub roses, fruit trees and sculptures in this tranquil two-acre setting. Book at findagarden.ngs.org.uk. **Sunday 2 April, 10.30am to 4.30pm, 30 Clapham Common North Side, SW4 0RN**. For details about further Open Garden Weekend events at the Hospice, visit royaltrinityhospice.london/event.

Looking ahead, **Wednesday 24 May is the Wandsworth Friends Summer Garden Party** at Royal Trinity Hospice. Details next month.

David Singmaster (1938-2023)

Members may remember entertaining talks David Singmaster gave to The Clapham Society about scientists who have lived in and around Clapham (NL 320, 410). David, a long-time member of the Society and distinguished mathematician, died at his Clapham home on 13 February.

He was born in Missouri and educated at Cal Tech (California Institute of Technology) and the University of California, Berkeley, where he received

his PhD in 1966. He taught mathematics at the American University of Beirut and then at South Bank University from 1970, where he became a professor, until his retirement in 1996. His specialism was combinatorial number theory.

In the picture you see David scanning his study wall, lined with his huge collection of Rubik's Cubes. He was a very early promoter and published a standard notation for solving the Cube in 1979. This was an example of his passion for recreational mathematics. There are hundreds of mechanical puzzles and books on the subject not just in David's study but all over the house. In 2022 he published *Adventures in Recreational Mathematics*. Chapters have headings such as 'Monkeys and Coconuts', 'How to Count your Chickens' and 'The Bridges of Königsberg'.

Another of David's wide-ranging interests was the Three Rabbits illusion. This involves three rabbits, each drawn with only one ear, but each seeming to have the normal two. David included this in his talks, and people from China to Devon and places in between shared with him where the symbol has been found – in caves, engravings, stained-glass windows and illuminated manuscripts.

In 1970, volunteering on an archaeological exploration in Sicily, David met his wife Deborah, who was cooking for the expedition. Their daughter Jessica was born in 1976. The family home has been the scene of many puzzle parties, where people shared their puzzle curiosities with other guests. Wider gatherings saw David and Deborah host people from Clapham and beyond who enjoyed the company of this polymath who was interested in everything and delighted to share his knowledge. He was a genius. The breadth of his knowledge was amazing. **Harriet Hall**





Short change on the High Street

In February, residents, businesses and groups including The Clapham Society received a letter announcing the closure in April of the High Street branch of NatWest Bank. Clearing banks, once a major feature of our high streets, have been closing their doors for a decade. An advertising campaign by NatWest a few years ago trumpeted the fact that it retained a large branch network compared with its rivals. That too, of course, is history.

The closure of bank branches accelerated as a result of the pandemic, which dramatically changed shopping patterns. Few shopping transactions now involve cash, and many take place online. On our own High Street, Nationwide and Barclays closed, and Lloyds transferred its premises to TSB.

Many of us lament the loss of being able to bank locally, for good reason. A separate issue is the impact of business closures on the public realm and amenity. It is now considerably easier for premises to undergo a change of use since the Town and Country Use Classes Order was changed in September 2020. Premises used by banks and other enterprises can switch without seeking planning permission. Change of use and subsequent alterations to the building, however, remain a matter of concern.

The former Barclays Bank (*above*) on the corner of Venn Street, one of our most elegant buildings, is locally listed and at the heart of the Conservation Area. We learn it is intended for use by a hamburger chain, and fitting out is underway. Whether Clapham 'needs' another burger joint is questionable, given the proximity of three others, and odours from the tucked-away air conditioning and extraction plant are likely to prove unpleasant. The one consolation is that only the signage on the building, not the architecture itself, will be affected. And over the road at NatWest? Another hamburger, anyone? **Mark Leffler**

Unbuilt Clapham (Common): The railway that never made tracks

Anyone who is familiar with Wandsworth and Tooting Commons will know the devastating impact of the railways that slice across them. In 1852 Clapham nearly suffered the same fate. That year, the proposed relocation of the Great Exhibition's 'crystal palace' to Sydenham triggered plans to build a line from the West End south-eastwards, eventually to reach the coast.

Ten years earlier, Samuel Morton Peto, the Victorian civil engineer and the impetus behind the scheme, had buried his first wife and infant son in the graveyard of St Paul's, Clapham, their prominent tomb standing to this day. No touching sentiment, however, deterred him from plans to decimate the neighbourhood. The line was to enter the Common on North Side coming from Battersea, run through a 30-foot cutting, and exit at Cavendish Road heading onwards to Streatham Hill.

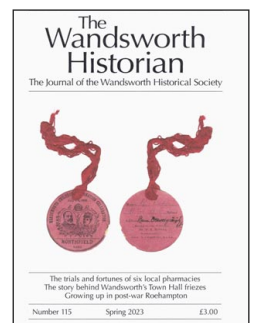
The railwaymen had reckoned without the notables of Clapham, whose grand houses surrounded the Common. Protest meetings were convened, one helpfully chaired by Henry Atkins Bowyer who, as Lord of the Manor, legally controlled the land. He noted it would 'disturb the quiet of the neighbourhood and interfere with its respectability'. Others more directly said it would 'greatly depreciate house and landed property' and destroy many noble trees. A proponent, however, saw merit in the destruction of bad property in Battersea Fields – 'a nest of cholera and a den of thieves'.

The railwaymen rapidly backed down. Thomas Alers Hankey, West Side resident and banker, door-stepped their board meetings twice to make sure they adopted an alternative route. In Wandsworth the Lord of the Manor, Earl Spencer, suffered no qualms at taking the railway money, and so construction began. In time many of the big Clapham house owners sold out too, albeit of their adjacent estates, to developers of suburban villas whose occupants today enjoy the Common unspoilt. **Mike Tuffrey**
Next issue: A mini prison for Clapham Old Town?



The Wandsworth Historian

In the run-up to Charles III's crowning, the front cover of the Wandsworth Historical Society's Spring issue carries two fragile mementoes of Wandsworth's official celebration for Edward VII's coronation in 1902. Features inside include the beautiful carved stone friezes on Wandsworth Town Hall, growing up in post-war Roehampton, the varied fortunes of six Wandsworth pharmacies and more. Published by the Wandsworth Historical Society, wandsworthhistory.org.uk, copies are available (£3 plus £2 p&p) from WHS, 119 Heythorp Street, SW18 5BT, or email 020neil119@gmail.com. Please make cheques payable to 'Wandsworth Historical Society', but online payment preferred; details when you email. **Neil Robson**



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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Previous Newsletters and details of our meetings, activities and publications can be all found at claphamsociety.com

