

# THE REDRIFFE CHRONICLE

Newsletter of the Rotherhithe and Bermondsey Local History Society

Summer 2018

Edited by Stephen Potter



History of Stave Hill Ecological Park

Tributes to Stephen Humphrey

Memories of the Surrey Docks 1948-70

## New Committee 2018-19

**President:** Michael Daniels

**Chair:** Michael A Reardon

**Secretary:** Judith Green

**Treasurer:** Mark Parker

**Membership Registrar:** Sheila Taylor

**Committee member without portfolio:** Mick Reardon

**Redriffe Chronicle Guest Editor:** Stephen Potter

### CONTENTS

<i>Annual Report 2018</i> by Michael A. Reardon (Chair of the Society)	3
<i>History of Stave Hill Ecological Park</i> - talk report by Sheila Taylor	4
<i>Rotherhithe 40 Exhibition</i> by Rose Ades	5
<i>Memories of the Surrey Docks</i> by John Lawson	6
<i>Tributes to Stephen Humphrey</i>	9
<i>Grace Kimmins</i> - talk report by Graham Taylor	23
Society News	24

### Editorial Note

This is the first issue of the Chronicle since Spring 2017, due to a lack of a volunteer to do the editing.

Thanks are due to Lionel Wright for assembling the tributes to Stephen Humphrey. Thanks also to Graham Taylor for invaluable advice on editing.

Half of the magazine is devoted to these tributes, given at our packed meeting on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2017. I have included the speeches of ten people, and I wish I could include more. Every one appreciates Stephen's sterling qualities in their own way, and I hope it will put on record how much influence he had. I also hope the sheer variety of Stephen's interests will keep you reading...

I already have three feature articles for the next issue, but please don't leave it all to me or it might be next year before you read them.

**Please note:** All articles in this journal remain the copyright of the contributors.

## 2018 Annual Report by the Chair

Firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mark Parker for giving the Society its first Treasurer's report since I became Chair back in 2016.

Over the last year I and others have strived hard to get a sufficient number of committee members working for the Society. Although more needs to be done, I thank those who have come forward and helped achieve where we are today. This brings me to my next point: although the Society is made up of you the members, and guided by us the committee, and helped by the President, we all need to work for the society as a whole.

Even though at this moment in time I am the current chair, your thoughts and suggestions are key to help with the running of the Society. I am asking you to get more involved. Give more suggestions; talk to the committee more; I have talked to you every month in the bulletin, please do not be afraid of stepping forward; we are an informal organization after all.

Over the last year we have had the honour of taking part in a few local events: 'Illuminate', 'Rotherhithe40' and 'World by the Water'. We took part in the opening of the very first Time & Talents-run Friday Social for the over 60's at T&T2 in the Shopping Centre.

I have begun keeping an Archive stored online of all things Society; we have given support to Debra Watson of Metaplay who is responsible for the film 'Southwark Voices', where we got good recognition with the help of others and from Committee member Mick Reardon by supplying footage of Rotherhithe from 1982. There is also potential for at least a couple of events happening later this year; one of them is 'Spring Open': a Time & Talents-run event happening next month, where I shall be giving a presentation on behalf of the Society. We have also made history of our own by putting forward to you the membership, our second President!

So to finish up, the Society is doing alright, but we need to do more. My vision for the future, if given the chance with the help of the committee and yourselves, is to make the Society sustainable for the future. I strongly believe we can be more engaged with the community and play a larger role in projects and events where we the society take the lead. Instead of others asking us for supporting letters to help their projects, I believe it is time we asked for supporting letters for our projects.

We are Rotherhithe and Bermondsey's Local History Society and we need to make sure we continue 'Keeping history alive in London's secret riverside villages'.

Michael A Reardon



## Stave Hill Ecological Park

**Talk by Rebeka Clark on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

Stave Hill was begun in 1986 by the London Docklands Development Corporation as part of their plans to regenerate the derelict docklands. It was the first ever purpose-built ecology park, totally man-made, constructed from scratch on a flat barren landscape, as shown on Rebeka's slides. An ecologist was brought in, and designs were drawn up for an urban park, with schools and roads linked by green spaces and micro-woodlands. The aim: to promote nature and public access to it.



*Stave Hill, about 1985.*

The old docks were filled in with building rubble, a hill was constructed, trees were planted, ponds were dug and marshland created; growing mediums were distributed, and plants and wildlife began to thrive. In 1988 Rebeka and one colleague, both unqualified, found themselves employed as site managers, reading up each evening what they needed to do the next day.

Today the park is a mature site, embedded in Russia Dock Woodland and the surrounding housing. The staff are no longer involved just in plant identification and endless weeding, but also in managing meadows, felling trees, and – with hundreds of visitors – constantly putting up posters and talking to people, explaining what they are doing, why they are doing it and getting the local community actively helping.

The key issue is habitat management in order to attract the insects and animals, and this has been immensely successful. People regularly see hedgehogs, spiders, slow-worms, butterflies (26 species), dragonflies, bumble-bees (7 species), etc. It has an exceptional variety for a man-made site. And it is getting prettier every year as the flowers increase, with orchids, scabious, a bank of primroses, and bluebells in the woods.

Early on there were problems with untrained urban children! However, that has been largely overcome by environmental education work with schools, youth groups and other local organisations, and getting the kids' positive involvement in 'bushcraft', safe fire-making, supervised den-building, bat walks, workshops on bird-box building, etc. Particularly popular was the 'great worm hunt', when TV presenter Danny Baker visited and they were all asked to bring some worms to inhabit the site.



Fire has sometimes been an issue too. The outdoor classroom got burnt down after only three years. A visitors centre made of straw bales also succumbed. Now they have a brick enclosure, multi-functional for children's use and other events, equipped - at last - with toilets and running water. On the whole, creating a supportive community has meant relatively little vandalism, litter or anti-social behaviour.

Stave Hill is run by The Conservation Volunteers, a national charity which employs Rebeka. Each year some 700 volunteers help out on the site, 600 of them from corporate organisations which pay for the privilege of sending their staff to work there. Total running costs are a mere £50k per annum, most of it from the corporate bodies.

Rebeka concluded proudly that Stave Hill had spread its tentacles throughout Bermondsey and Rotherhithe. It had helped for example with bird-boxes and planting in schools, with the garden at Time & Talents, and with the pond at Surrey Docks Farm. She believes that Stave Hill principles have leaked out around the area and helped create the strong local interest in gardening and wildlife.

Her talk was enthusiastically received by the audience. Steve Cornish praised her particularly for having achieved Local Nature Reserve status through her hard work and dedication!

## Rotherhithe40 Exhibition



*Photo credit: Time and Talents*

Who would have thought that an exhibition at the Old Mortuary of just a dozen pairs of streetscape photographs, taken by two photographers 40 years apart, would have generated so much debate about Rotherhithe in living memory? And what's more, that this debate has carried on prompting us all to question what we think about our community, what we think we know, what we share, what we should treasure about this place which many of us once called, or still now call, home.

Devised by community film-maker Peter Gazey, *Rotherhithe40* is part of a larger body of work of photographic images of Rotherhithe. Started by Geoff Howard soon after the closure of the London docks, and published (2009) in his book *Rotherhithe Photographs 1971-1980*. This was the inspiration for Peter to revisit the same locations and, like Geoff, record on film what he saw after nearly 40 years of redevelopment, using the same format and framing – side by side. Geoff's photographs captured a lost world - a close-knit, working class community that over generations had lived, worked, and grown

up within a single waterside neighbourhood. A place where young children roamed freely and gathered on street corners. Something Michael A. Reardon, Chair of this Society, recalls continued throughout his childhood, coinciding with the first decade of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC).

In some cases Geoff's original locations had altered out of all recognition. Abandoned docks, prefabs and wasteland have been replaced in Peter's photographs by leafy cul-de-sacs. As he says, "With only Geoff's original titles to go on, most of my time, and much of the fun, lay in old fashioned sleuthing. I made extensive local enquiries: Rotherhithe Shed, London Bubble, Sands Films, Time and Talents, the Adam and Eve. In one case I used a triangulation technique to pinpoint a site. I found that most of the kerbstones and kerb lines had, fortunately, been retained unaltered." These, manhole and inspection covers, and drains, had survived the Blitz and were a testimony to the municipal public works programme of the Independent Labour Party during the interwar period. "At last I had the evidence to confirm a good match." And yet not everything is as it seems. In conservation areas heritage-look features have been introduced as part of the redevelopment.

Nonetheless what is clear, and manifestly so, is the change in individual and social attitudes about time. In 2015/6 everyone who is out and about seems to be in a hurry. Time is money. There just aren't enough hours in the day.

In association with **Rotherhithe40**, Café Royal Books have published two chapbooks: *Rotherhithe London* (2017) by Peter Gazey and Geoff Howard; and *Rotherhithe Photographs* (2014, 2<sup>nd</sup> print edition) by Geoff Howard.

They are presently sold together at a special price of £7.

## Memories of working in Surrey Docks between 1945 and 1970

At the age of 15 years I started work as a boy messenger in Surrey Commercial Docks. Like all the other docks in London it was man-made and relied on the Thames tidal waters to let ships in and out.

Surrey Commercial Docks comprised two sections. There was the Timber Department and the General Department. The Timber Department dealt with ships that brought in timber from the Scandinavian countries and Russia. The General Department dealt with ships that imported and exported mixed cargo coming from and going to countries throughout the world.

My work started in Surrey Commercial Docks Main Office. The office housed a row of long, high desks that were situated in the long, rectangular office. Clerical Officers sat at the desks. In front of each Clerical Officer a large ledger was placed. Alongside the ledger was blotting paper, pen and ink. The year was 1948 and biro pens had not come into use. The pens were made of wood with a metal nib to constantly dip in the inkwell.

The Clerical Officers' work was carried out in silence and the Messenger Boys had to observe the silent behaviour. During the weekdays the male Clerical Officers had to wear suits. However, on Saturdays they could wear a sports coat and flannels. Us boys had to address the male Clerical Officers as Mister and the females as Miss or Mrs.

My hours were 8am to 5pm weekdays and 8am to noon on Saturdays. My weekly wage was £2 3s 6d. The large heavy ledgers that mainly recorded payments into the Port of London Authority were locked in a large strong-room overnight. They were taken from the strong-room at 7.30am every day and

placed on a large trolley. The trolley was shunted along the tall desks, stopping at appropriate places and offloaded in readiness for the Clerical Officers to start work at 8am.

From the Main Office the messenger boy delivered varied documents to the yard offices throughout the Surrey Commercial Docks. These included North Side Offices in Redriff Road, Acorn Yard, Finland Yard, Brunswick Yard and Russia Yard. In the South Side there was Station Yard, nos. 1 & 3 warehouse, no. 8 shed and the Dock Master's Office.

On our rounds we cycled past crudely built toilets. Some were designed for use by Lascar sailors and some for the dock labour. The dock labour toilets were communal in so much as there were holes in a long plank with no doors for privacy.

At the age of 18 years I was conscripted into National Service. Two years later I was demobbed and returned to Surrey Commercial Docks as a Clerical Assistant. My job involved tallying cargo to and from road vehicles and from ships. At no. 8 shed they dealt with Russian vessels. The first ship I boarded was called the *Beloostrov*. The ship discharged expensive bales of skins. It was very much a time of the cold war between Russia and the West. On a couple of occasions Russians were seen being forcibly taken on board one of their ships. It was noticeable that members of the crew were never allowed to leave the ship one at a time. Instead they came ashore in groups with a "minder" in charge.

In the early 50s, forklift trucks had not come into general use. Two wheeled hand barrows were used to carry cargo to and from transit sheds. After a year at no. 8 shed I was transferred to Finland Yard.



*Finland Yard: copyright Museum of London*

Stevedoring companies and other dock employers sent their foremen to the "call on" on the cobbled Redriff Road. On this road, dockers and stevedores congregated en masse in the hope of being called on for a day or half a day's work. Men who were not employed had to report to the nearby National Dock Labour Board (NDLB) to get a "bumper". The "bumper" was a rubber stamp that stamped the docker's book to show that he had attended but not been able to obtain work. Each docker and stevedore was issued with a book by the NDLB and the book comprised of perforated tear-out pages that were handed in to that organisation at the end of the working week. For each "bumper" received on the page, the dock worker received a fall-back payment.

During the 1950s and 60s, conventional cargo was plentiful and ships from all over the world used to line up to come into London's enclosed docks. The container age had not yet arrived and the docks were very much labour intensive.

At Finland Yard, a lot of the work was performed by stevedores and dockers employed by Furness Withy & Co. Ships from the west coast of America landed large consignments of canned fruit and fish products.

Ships from the Middle East came in loaded with fresh oranges, lemons, grapes and apples.



*Finland Yard warehouse: copyright Maersk Line*

Although the horse and cart were still seen in 1955, they were almost totally eclipsed by motor vehicles.

Piecework was the order of the day and the increased tonnage the dock work handled was reflected in high earnings. Unfortunately, along with the speed of piecework came a high degree of accidents both to cargo and personnel, with the latter came fatalities.

Unrefined sugar used to be unloaded into barges somewhere in the River Thames and the barges were unloaded at Finland Yard. In the summer the spillage from the bags became very sticky. Some men protected their footwear with sacking. Some say the expression “toe rag” originated from sugar work. Other old expressions such as “a greenacre” was used when a case fell and got smashed. How true it is, nobody knows but it was said that “Greenacre” brought down the scaffolding when being hung for a crime.

Petty theft was rife at this time, particularly when cartons of whisky were handled. If a policeman appeared in a shed, a cry of “cabbage” would go up to alert any wrongdoers - not only committing theft but smoking which could result in a fine. I’ve never heard an explanation for “cabbage”.

In the 50s and 60s, the Trade Union shop stewards were very powerful. If they said ‘Stop working’ to the labour, then work would stop immediately. Owing to the money lost during the stoppages, the management would often give in to demands.

By the 1960s, fork lifts had taken the place of hand barrows. Hydraulic quay cranes sometimes became iced up during extreme cold weather. To get them started, fires had to be lit at their base. These were replaced by electrically operated cranes in the late 50s.

The Health & Safety at Work Act brought about all round improvements for the dock labour. Accommodation blocks were built for the labour to use when not actually employed. The blocks had lockers and vastly improved toilets.

By the early 60s, I had been promoted to the rank of Shed Foreman. I was transferred to No. 1 & 3 warehouses on the South Side of the docks. These warehouses could be seen when in Plough Way.



Slowly, one by one, the other London docks closed. Containers could not be handled. The wise old heads were of the opinion that Surrey Commercial Docks would not close because it was the only dock control south of the River Thames. How wrong they were. The docks closed in 1970. I was 38 years old. I am now 84 years old.

**John Lawson**

## **Tributes to Stephen Humphrey from 31 May 2017**



*All speakers photographed by Lionel Wright*

**Michael Daniels** (above) welcomed Society members and guests to a packed Time and Talents centre, and told us why the date was particularly fitting to pay tribute to the life and work of our first President.

First it was six months since the awful news of Stephen's death became apparent, and secondly, 31st May 2017 was the first London History Day. Museums and attractions across the capital had been holding special events designed to inspire an interest in our city's rich history. Michael emphasised how appropriate it was for us to remember a man who had inspired so many, and who surely ranked among the most knowledgeable historians that London's most historic borough had seen.

Although Stephen had given talks for us since our inception, it was in 2010-11 that his involvement really took off. Stephen and Southwark Local History Library had recently parted company, and Michael remembered how he and many members felt this represented the ideal opportunity to involve Stephen more directly - before he became too busy elsewhere.

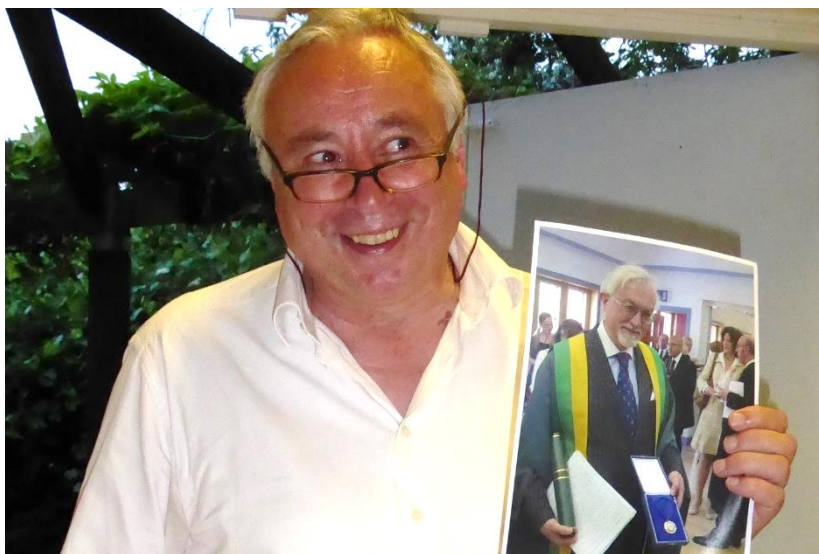
Michael was in the process of converting us from the local history group of Time and Talents into the independent society we are today- and of course, societies have Presidents. Michael discussed the proposal with Stephen over tea at the Museum of London, and Stephen's reaction had been typically self-effacing: he reeled off a series of names who he felt were far better qualified, but Michael insisted we wanted Stephen!

Michael explained that Stephen's role could have entailed as little or as much involvement as he wished, and how delighted he was that Stephen chose the latter. Stephen led highly

enjoyable and informative walks for us - Elephant & Castle and Bermondsey being particularly memorable - and regularly attended monthly meetings and almost every committee meeting.

But it was the Annual General Meetings which saw the real difference: before Stephen's involvement these were quiet affairs with maybe a couple of dozen members, but as part of his role Stephen was invited to give an annual Presidential Address. This was a talk on a local history subject immediately after the formal AGM - and numbers attending grew beyond all recognition. Any meeting at which Stephen was speaking was usually 'standing room only', and looking around the crowded hall, Michael concluded that tonight's packed Time and Talents Centre was testament to Stephen's enduring pulling power and popularity.

### **Stephen Potter:**



I first met Stephen when I started at the Local History Library in autumn 1991. He was a patient and encouraging mentor, as he explained the ancient authorities which had come together to form the present Borough of Southwark. His manner was rather formal, but you could sense his genuine delight in history. All letters were answered with great care, and readers at every level were warmly welcomed.

Stephen was reticent about his personal life, and hardly ever aired personal opinions. When the 'Daily Telegraph' came out in the staffroom, I could see they were very different from mine. But by avoiding religion and politics, we got on very well.

I found it was quite normal for him to be working after hours, going out to places like Farnham or Walthamstow to talk about Southwark. He knew archivists at the other London Boroughs and at Surrey History Centre. He knew archaeologists, businessmen, journalists and local politicians.

In fact, half the readers seemed to be Stephen's personal friends. Many of them were regularly going on coach trips he organised. So were a lot of library staff. And this was ostensibly to visit old churches; could that really be so interesting?

I began to realise there were no professional relationships in Stephen's life: they were all personal. Stephen used to reminisce about his early days, when the Chief Librarian would drop in to all the libraries and make a point of having a chat to every member of staff. Stephen knew everyone, especially the porters; he had come from a working-class background and appreciated Cockney humour.

Stephen was intrigued by the articles called 'I Remember the Elephant', published in the South London Press in the late 1950's. Here again was a lively community which he was too young to remember personally, but not too young to memorialise. And while the closure of the Docks wasn't anybody's

fault, at the Elephant there was a villain: the LCC planners and the inhuman scale of their ambitions. Stephen was definitely of the generation led by John Betjeman, who deplored widespread redevelopment; and there was more than a trace of the ‘Young Fogey’ conservationist style in his dress sense.



*Stephen in Webber Street, 2008: photo copyright ©Graham Harrison.*

Certainly by the time he left Cambridge, he had formed an ambition to be an architectural historian, specializing in churches. He seems to have been the main actor in re-invigorating the Ecclesiological Society in the 1980's. This was work on a national scale, which we in Southwark know little about. That it was a priority for Stephen was proved when we had to clear out his flat; we found a few dozen local history books, but about two thousand books on churches. He must have travelled all over England in the 1980's, collecting information.

All this culminated in 1991 with the publication of the two-volume ‘Blue Guide to English Churches and Chapels’; he was the general editor and a major contributor. These books were not a popular success due to the lack of pictures, but they are so detailed that they are still kept at the enquiry desk in the British Library Reading Room. More commercially successful was his book ‘Churches and Cathedrals of London’, published in 2000. This is a lavishly illustrated guide to the capital's

‘Top Fifty’ churches, now in its third edition. Stephen seems to have studied City churches since he was a teenager, and Lionel Wright tells me how impressive his knowledge was.

All this was a labour of love; for his daily bread he was working with Mary Boast in Southwark Local Studies Library, applying the same meticulous scholarship to the Borough's archives.

Need I say what a thankless task an archivist can have? The records of a local authority are voluminous and mundane. Sewers and drains have to be built and maintained. Roads have to be swept, rubbish must be collected. Staff are paid, accounts compiled... The basement of Newington Library was packed from floor to ceiling with ledgers and minute books from the three old boroughs. Tin trunks held thousands of deeds to council properties. And a few times a year someone, usually someone within the council, would want something; Stephen had to be able to find it.

Also during the 1980's, new archives were being deposited. Many old riverside businesses closed or left London. Family tree research was booming, and that led to hundreds of small deposits of family papers. Stephen listed all these ‘Unofficial Archives’, and provided each one with an exemplary introductory essay giving the history of the business, club or family. These will be a huge resource for future local historians.

One such deposit was the West Estate papers. As some of you know, in the early 1960's the West family of Alscot Park sold large areas of Bermondsey to the council. But the records remained at Alscot until the 1990's, when one of the Wests realised they were worth money.

Stephen had to organize an independent valuation of the papers, and then raise a fair amount of money to buy them for the borough. The result is that any of you can go to the Local History Library and ask to see the West Estate maps. They are large coloured plans of Bermondsey in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were featured in the TV series called ‘The Secret History of Our Streets’.

While these things were happening behind the scenes, Stephen also took part in high-profile projects. The 'Southwark News' started its scheme for local blue plaques, and Stephen had to check the facts, write the texts, and find suitable buildings for the plaques to go on.

Stephen was enthusiastic about the 'Neighbourhood History' booklets published by the library. Mary Boast had had secondary school children in mind, the booklets proved popular with family historians and tourists. Stephen was keen to produce enlarged versions, and in 1997 he got the opportunity to set the standard himself, with 'The Story of Rotherhithe'.

Eventually the library was selling enough publications for the previous year's takings to be able to fund the next year's publication. So we were able to publish a more specialized booklet, 'Southwark in Archives', which is Stephen's presentation of the Borough's most interesting manuscripts.

Then the Museum asked him to write 'The Cuming Family and the Cuming Museum'. Stephen had been involved in archaeology since his schooldays, and had spent many happy hours in the Cuming, so he was delighted to write this.

In the 1990's Alan Sutton started a national series of local history picture books, and Stephen contacted him. He went on to write five such books, in a personal capacity. The borough was paid for its photographs by getting free copies to sell in libraries. These books are greatly valued by people who grew up in Southwark, but now live elsewhere. For instance, 'Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Remembered' is reviewed on Amazon as 'Blinding' and 'Blooming marvellous'.

Later, Stephen started writing fortnightly articles in the South London Press. When you work in a Local History Library, you tend to pick up knowledge in fragments, according to the questions that are put to you by researchers. In these articles, Stephen found a way to focus these snippets around a photograph, and so pass them on.

Another feature of his writing was his sense of perspective. Having studied a History MA at Cambridge, he was able to see Southwark history as a microcosm of English history. Even the life of a particular person, which a family historian might bring to the library, could be fitted in to the schools, shops and factories of his or her particular neighbourhood. So a reader might mention an event in an ancestor's life, and he could instantly respond with appropriate background information.

Stephen had of course done his own family tree, and found that his great-grandfather had come to London from Petworth in Sussex. This had a practical application when his mother died in 2002. He had been absolutely devoted to Grace, and it was some consolation that he found her a beautiful resting place in the churchyard.

Another thing I discovered at that point was that Stephen was a Catholic. Apparently his mother had been a Catholic, and when his father died, the nine-year-old Stephen converted. He never attended a local church, but attended a church specialising in converts: Our Lady of the Assumption in Warwick Street, Soho. Over the years he built up a wide network of friendships among that congregation, and did countless acts of kindness for its older members. He gave to Catholic charities, and tried hard to live according to the tenets of his faith.

In 2010 Stephen was made redundant. He had served the Borough selflessly for thirty years, and I think he felt terribly betrayed. He was able to get by, and when he came to the library as a reader he never mentioned his position. (*Richard Buchanan adds: Stephen's car ceased to be mentioned from this point.*) But things were not the same; the library abandoned its publishing programme, and archive space was created by sending into storage seldom-used books, many of which Stephen had treasured. Then the Cuming Museum caught fire, and never re-opened.

Despite this, Stephen worked on, giving walks and talks, writing for the South London Press, and starting a local history group at the Pensioners Centre. He did get some acknowledgement from Southwark when he was successfully nominated for Freedom of the Borough in 2012.

The next year, he published 'The Elephant and Castle: A History', which showed his abilities as a historian. The new developers even bought copies - I hope it made them think.



Stephen was always generous in paying tribute to others. His Christmas cards would come with a personal message of thanks, and when my own turn for redundancy came, he stood up at my leaving do and made a speech. So I certainly owe him this one.

When I heard of his sudden death, I was as shocked as anyone. Then it dawned on me that he just must be buried with his mother. Advised by Len here, I wrote to 'The executors', care of Stephen's flat. His nephew, David Humphrey, replied and agreed with me, although there was no will. We both understood the grave was at Petworth. But the undertakers, Alfred Smith and Co, reported that it wasn't. David was able to get a description of the place from a cousin now living in Gibraltar. Alfred Smith's then rang a contact in Petworth, who drove around the neighbouring villages until they found the grave at Tillington.

When the undertakers spoke to the vicar, they found Stephen's mother had been buried at double depth; this confirmed our hunch that he wanted to be buried there.

Finally, last month a small group including David Humphrey, Bernard Nurse, Len Reilly and myself, helped to clear out Stephen's flat. We were able to donate his collection of over 1500 church guidebooks to the National Churches Trust, which runs a website called 'Exploring Churches'.

We deposited several boxes of local history papers with the Local History Library. They will need to be sorted and listed, but my impression is that most of them are just notes for South London Press articles.

I think the heartfelt messages of appreciation in the Condolence Book, and the number of people at the funeral, show what a nice man he was, and an inspiration to us all.

## **Diana Cochrane:**

I'm Diana Cochrane and I'm here to speak on behalf of the Walworth Society.

The Walworth Society was constituted following a failed campaign to save Carter Place Gardens. In 2012 this was the only remaining Georgian garden and green space fronting onto the Walworth Road. We learnt this from A Story of Walworth written by Mary Boast with archivist Stephen Humphrey.

I'm a committee member and largely responsible for the Historic Area Assessment of the Walworth Road which we compiled over two years starting in 2013. This document was used by Southwark Council as the evidence base for the Conservation Area (CA) designation in 2016 of the entire length of the Walworth Road from the old Town Hall running south to Burgess Park.

That there was so much information that could be easily mined is purely down to Stephen and Mary Boast writing the Story of Walworth (with its thorough bibliography) and the contents of the local archive.

Our journey starts some time before 2012 when the Walworth Society Chair Jeremy Leach and I, who didn't know each other at that time, attended one of Stephen's magical talks about the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens. We were so entertained, inspired and frankly gob-smacked by





the story that I decided to try to find out much more about this place Walworth I had moved to ten years earlier.

Of course Jeremy and I didn't get to tell Stephen about this pivotal moment, and we are only two of very many people who have been directly inspired by his expert and unparalleled knowledge, passion for the history of the area and precise yet entertaining delivery. The local research work I have done consequently, and the people I have met as a consequence of bumping into Stephen, have so enriched my experience of living in Walworth that I now call it home - instead of Ireland.

When working at the archive I used the incredible Tradesmen's Advertisements - simple shop receipts from late C18th and C19th, each revealing more about the story of the Walworth Road through purchases made there, often by the Cuming family. I was humbled that this flimsy precious information was kept safely by Stephen and the archive team for so long - and by the fact that the same information doesn't exist for other - perhaps some would say more architecturally 'deserving' - streets.

Stephen often came in when I was at the archive, and on a number of occasions quietly pointed me towards information stored 'out the back', that was instrumental to my research. One example was an 1840s map he had had restored when working at the archive - tattered and faint. I couldn't believe that this was an actual, surveyed, hand-drawn map of the area I was studying. Another was 100 copies of 'Walworth Inprint', neatly bound into one glorious chronicle of Walworth in the 1970s and 80s.

I guess I've observed a number of important things about the process of researching local history from Stephen that I'd like to share - although some of this observation admittedly was from a respectful distance because I was - and still do remain - in awe of him.

Firstly, - his absolute generosity in sharing his unparalleled expertise and knowledge - with narratives and information that really enthuse and affect people in the most profound ways - the gasps and whoops one hears at the archive or during talks, as people explore and discover tip bits of information- are audible, and form the most surprising but welcome breaks in the silence.

Secondly - that research, although a rewarding academic experience in itself, is more valued and best communicated and shared through talks, walks and wonderful books - one might even say musicals - that reach out to more popular audiences.

Thirdly, and more personally, - that historic research is such a powerful tool in not only understanding the complexity of Walworth and other London neighbourhoods - but also that this knowledge has an important role in helping to shape the future.



*Music Hall songs at the funeral reception, by courtesy of Frank Taylor from the Royal Oak.*

## **Roger Squires:**

I joined Stephen on various walks around his ‘patch’. He was a man noted for his sartorial style. Often he would appear with a straw boater carrying a cane stick. This defined him to the group as its leader. Although, on first meeting, he appeared serious, he had a whimsical nature. It was not unusual for him to render songs from the local music halls to make his point. He was a mine of local knowledge. This was shown in the way he answered questions from the group. He had all the detail at his finger tips and would always add that extra point of context. His work at the Southwark library ensured local documents were valued and local records kept in order. He was a man who really cared about the history of the borough, and freely shared his knowledge with others. Southwark has lost a man who understood the value of its past history.

## **From Stuart Rankin in Portugal:**

I very much regret that I was unable to say “Goodbye” to Stephen, my old friend and mentor for 25 years. It is no exaggeration to say that without Stephen’s help and guidance, my booklets, guided walks and academic papers dealing with Rotherhithe’s maritime heritage would never have seen the light of day.

My training as a writer was as a technical journalist in a British Railways Press Office. Apart from crucial help with research, his comments on manuscripts helped steer my literary style away from ‘The Daily Mirror’, and more towards ‘The Independent’.

Some of my best memories of Stephen are of his dry, gentle sense of humour. His pleasure in finding a minute in a Parish Vestry minute book to the effect that ‘Mr Blank leaves office as Scavenger, as it is now Buggin’s turn.’

When researching the history of the Beatson shipbreakers, I spent some afternoons going through the surviving ledgers of the firm. After the first session, Stephen asked me if I had found anything interesting.

“Well, I can prove they were fiddling their income tax for 1825-1826”.

Stephen looked at me over the top of his glasses. “Oh! You are a bit late if you are hoping for a reward from the Inland Revenue!”

I moved to Portugal over ten years ago, but we kept in touch by e-mail two or three times a month, exchanging information, helping each other with queries –the last time only about a week before his death.

He was a good, kind and knowledgeable friend and I will miss him very much.

## **Hilary Blanford, of East Surrey Family History Society:**

I first met Stephen Humphrey at the Society of Genealogists when he gave a lecture on industry in Bermondsey. The talk was followed by a walk some weeks later, and as those of you who have been on one of Stephen’s walks will know, a one-hour-walk rarely finishes in less than one and a half hours. By the time we reached the burial ground for St Mary Magdalen, my legs had given out and I remember sinking onto the grass in quiet desperation! When I became the secretary of the Southwark Branch of East Surrey Family History Society I gently insisted that his walks were arranged around a suitable half way stop for tea and toilets.

Those of you who were at his funeral may recall the Mayor of Southwark alluding to Stephen’s ‘facts per metre’, and that day was no exception. I think Stephen’s brain operated some kind of Google multi-layered mapping system because he always seemed to know what bit of wall or railing had

belonged to some previous structure. He eventually led us to an area known to him as the Isle of Ducks.

After the walk, he sent me an email in which he said "Some people must have wondered during the walk in the Borough what historical authority I had for referring to 'The Isle of Ducks'." (As if we would!!) "I now send a copy of an entry from an old St. Olave's and St. John's charities' book, in which the name is given, in relation to a transaction of 1790. The rent-charge of £15 which is mentioned ranked as a parochial charity. In due course I shall draft some notes on the area, and see what further information I can find, maybe from Magdalen College, Oxford, itself." Sadly, an uncompleted project.

I discovered that he was also interested in Thames sailing barges as he had travelled to Faversham to see and photograph the *Lady of the Lea*, built in Rotherhithe in 1931, braving a 'Beware of the bull' sign to do so. Fortunately, it was the bull's day off.



*Lady of the Lea: copyright Clem Rutter.*

Another of his schemes was to host a Pickwick Papers dinner, in period costume, with a trial dinner at the George in Borough High Street. He also organised coach trips to churches and places of historical interest and one of our members recalls holidays that he arranged.

Another project in which Stephen was involved, in his capacity of Secretary to the Surrey Record Society, was the production of extended notes to the Surrey entries in the Gentleman's Magazine. I took my list of queries to the Woking Family History Fair, which was the last time I saw him. The email that followed was typical: 'It was agreeable to see you on Saturday, and to have a long chat about various subjects. This message is merely intended to give a precise definition of *nonjuror*. The word is used in English and Anglican history to refer to Anglican clergy who refused to swear an oath of allegiance to King William III and Queen Mary II in and after 1689' - and so on.

He ended by promising to write more about my other queries – sadly they remain unanswered. Like many others I feel that Stephen's passing has left huge holes in our knowledge and I don't know that his like will be found again.

## **Stephen Humphrey and SLAS:**

### **Richard Buchanan, Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society**

Stephen had an interest in archaeology at Westminster City School – where he founded its archaeological society. He revived his interest in 1970s when he joined SLAS after completing his studies in Cambridge and settling in Southwark. In 1993 he was elected President, continuing as such in 1994 and 1995. This entailed three Presidential addresses, on: “The Marshalsea Prison”; “The Elephant & Castle” (the book already in gestation); and “Who Owned Bermondsey & Rotherhithe?”

At the time of his death Stephen was about to be formally elected Secretary of SLAS – a job he had already taken on after the death of Brian Bloice. Let no one say that being secretary is less prestigious than president – or less onerous.

War Elephants: Six years ago Stephen spoke to SLAS on the History of the Church – a talk he may also have given to you. In it he introduced the Normans as impressive church and cathedral builders, either building or updating Saxon churches in a more durable style. The style came from France. At Caen they built two big churches, St Stephen’s and Holy Trinity, each with twin west towers and another over the crossing. In Holy Trinity Stephen photographed a capital carved with an Elephant and Castle. Here was an elephant as the ultimate war horse, the castle (in place of saddle) as a fighting platform. Forecastles and sterncastles on early naval vessels have some similarity. Stephen Humphrey has a substantial chapter in his Elephant and Castle book on the name of the area, and gives an excellent history on the use of elephants in war – including a picture of a 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC carving of an elephant and castle from Syria. That led Stephen and I to ponder which came first – war horses or war elephants?

And when? Horses can be ridden bareback, but are more easily controlled with a harness. Horses are faster and nimbler. Fitting out an elephant would be easier. Elephants are stronger. In some wars both were used. We decided there was no answer.

‘The Elephant and Castle – a History’: One of Stephen’s exercises when compiling the book was to advertise in the local press for people’s memories of the area. This brought replies from people not just in the area, but others who had moved out. This was in the 1990’s before many people, particularly in the age group he was addressing, had a computer. He visited those within reach and was fascinated by what they had to say. Stephen’s greatest attribute was his ability to speak easily to anyone, of whatever level of intelligence or social standing.

### **Steve Cornish:**

I was approached in 2012 by the Surrey Docks councillors asking if there were any historical names that would be fitting for the new Loop Road which is sandwiched between Downtown Road and Redriff Junior School.

Barratt Homes were close to completion of their new residential development site, and were seeking to reach out to the community for relevant names. I had previously badgered them not to forget the site’s history and heritage in its final naming.

I had read many of Stephen’s books, and remembered ‘Cow Lane’ as being on, or close to, the land in question. I immediately contacted Stephen by email, asking for some information on the Cow Lane naming, and its relation to the land.

Stephen phoned me the very next day, full of enthusiasm and genuine excitement at the possibility of having a local street name reused. He told me he was very busy with a massive workload, but would get back to me with some facts.

I thanked Stephen for getting back to me so promptly. After putting the phone down I realised I’d been talking to him for almost an hour. The very next day I was amazed when I turned on my computer to



find Stephen had sent me written accounts and historic maps, showing Cow Lane and the immediate area of Rotherhithe, being ‘the Place for landing Cattle’.

I presented the name and documentation to Barratt Homes at our next ‘Construction Meeting’, only to be told that “‘Cow Lane’ would not be appropriate for our new development.” We were given one more week to come up with a different name. I contacted Stephen again, telling him of the developers’ decision: needless to say he wasn’t impressed. I then asked him the historical facts about Surrey Docks porters having the nickname of ‘Blondins’, after the famous acrobat, Charles Blondin. (The deal porters being able to balance while running with planks across the timbers.)

Stephen clarified the nickname and gave me a historical rundown of its origins, to be presented to the developers. We presented our new name, and I’m pleased to say it was accepted. Blondin Way is there to this day and forever more, thanks to the help and enthusiasm of Stephen Humphrey. I’m pleased to say that ‘Cow Lane’ has also now been incorporated. It’s a small pathway behind Redriff School, leading down to Globe Pond from Salter Road.

Thank you, Stephen Humphrey.



### **Jason Brooks:**

I first met Stephen in the late summer of 2007 at a Victorian Society walk he was hosting, on the history of industry in Southwark. We had communicated for a year previously via emails, over our shared passion for coalhole covers. As some readers will know, his emails would always reflect his intelligent personality, with well-researched thoughts along with his unique humour.

It was at the buffet of that walk that I suggested to him that it would be great to recreate the old ironmongers’ sign of the Dog and Pot, a London Landmark from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century on Blackfriars Road. The sign was featured on a Victorian coalhole cover we both admired. From this discussion we embarked on six-year journey to bring back the sign. After many trials and tribulations it was unveiled on the same spot as the original: on the corner of Union Street and Blackfriars Road, opposite Southwark tube station.





*Vision: Stephen in Nelson Square*

I know that without Stephen's initial enthusiasm, knowledge and support this old/new landmark would not exist today, and thus it stands as an embodiment to our friendship, as well as providing a tangible connection to Southwark's industrial heritage.

I am very grateful to have met Stephen and still miss him very much, but when I look up at the Dog and Pot, I often think of our audacious plan, originally hatched over Scotch eggs in his favourite public house, The Royal Oak. RIP Stephen Humphrey.



*Achievement: new Dog and Pot sign*

## ‘Rotherhithe’s Revenge’:

**Michael A Reardon**

When I was about 26 years old I took my first trip to the Southwark Local History Library with my dad, and I was like a kid in a candy shop. I had the history of Rotherhithe ingrained in me from a young age, so I started to collect as many photocopied photographs as I could afford, one of which was a photo of a plane called “Rotherhithe’s Revenge”, that was in the Second World War.

The History Library is where I came into contact with Mr Stephen Humphrey who I had been told wrote the book “The Story of Rotherhithe”. I couldn’t help feeling like I had just met a celebrity. So much so I bought another copy of his book and timidly asked him to sign it, which of course he agreed to.

Around 2009 I was reading another book by Stephen Humphrey called “Bermondsey & Rotherhithe Remembered” and I saw two photos of the plane. One of them was the same picture I had to get my hands on when I first saw it at the library: in the book Stephen explained that Rotherhithe’s Revenge had been the latest addition to three other planes that were part of the U.S Eighth Army Air Force: the other three were named ‘Bermondsey Battler’, ‘London Avenger’ and ‘Bermondsey Special’. (*These planes were paid for by donations from the residents of Bermondsey borough.*) All this got me thinking about ‘Rotherhithe’s Revenge’:

- Ø Did the plane survive?
- Ø Is the plane in a museum?
- Ø Is the plane in one piece?
- Ø Where do I start?

I started on the internet with an open mind and searched Google. All I typed was ‘Rotherhithe’s Revenge’ and to my astonishment a search result produced the name. I clicked on the page titled “1942 U.S.A.A.F Serial Numbers” and I spent about three quarters of an hour scrolling through inch by inch.

Then I found the name of the plane and serial number and all that was written was **31761 (381st BG, 533rd BS, “Rotherhithe’s Revenge”) returned to USA Jun 1945**. So the next step was to search ‘381st BG’ and then I found a website dedicated to the Ex - service personnel of the 381st BG and that opened the doors for more information. It said *The 381<sup>st</sup> was part of the First Air Division and received two Distinguished Unit Citations. It had two planes which successfully completed over 100 missions.*

I couldn’t believe I had found a website talking about the plane I had a picture of. It went on to say *297 missions were flown up to the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1945 and 133 B17’s were lost in action, the 381<sup>st</sup> returned to the U.S.A in June 1945, leaving Ridgewell to the RAF Maintenance Command.*





The present day Ridgewell has now been turned into farm land. “Rotherhithe’s Revenge” flew 122 Successful missions.

I found a link that took me to a Forum called ‘Army Air Forces’, so as a guest to the forum I asked the dreaded question: ‘Is Rotherhithe’s Revenge still around or has it been scrapped?’

I was waiting and checking back for my question to be answered; eventually the answer had been given-

*“Michael, She was scrapped in Kingman Arizona on November 28th, 1945. Our crew, the Goldin crew, flew her several times including our 2nd mission to the heavily defended Cologne, Germany. She was really beat up from battle damage but very tough, which made her a good representative of the tough Brits living in London at that time. As I remember her she was usually lagging the rest of the formation due to her slowness caused by so many patches and repairs.*

*Bob Gilbert S/Sgt, 35 missions Ball Turret Gunner, Goldin crew 381st Bomb Gp., 533rd Bomb Sq. US 8th Air Force”*

I was shocked but not really surprised. Over time I was still thinking about the reality that Rotherhithe’s Revenge had been scrapped, and that got me thinking of a new journey. I decided to commission a professional model of ‘Rotherhithe’s Revenge’ and I now have my very own model.

Bob Gilbert has helped me a huge amount. I owe this project to him for his patience, and to Stephen Humphrey who started me on the path to find out more.

Stephen was a huge inspiration to me, but meeting him and for him to sign my book made me feel amazing, and to top all that, working with him as President of the Society as a Committee member and as Chair was just short of being out of this world.



*Stephen’s nephew, David Humphrey, leaves the graveside, watched by William Choo from Our Lady of the Assumption church.*

## Germander Speedwell, Surrey Docks Farm:

I'm going to read you a few paragraphs from Stephen's emails, as his messages were always thoughtfully and elegantly worded, and there's enthusiasm and humour in these. They are about a subject he was researching – river stairs and landing ways, i.e. the different access points to the river, many of them used for centuries, by people working on or travelling along the river.

At Surrey Docks Farm, we've been doing extensive research about the site's history, but there was one particular mystery we hadn't been able to solve – an old stone along the pathway leading to the river stairs. Only the top of the stone was visible, peeking above the paving, and we could make out two dates beautifully carved on it, 1886 and 1834, but no wording or other markings. Eventually, when the paving got broken after some roadworks, we were able to dig down to see the rest of the stone that had been hidden under the earth – however there was nothing but a plain unmarked surface.

I asked Stephen what this might be, and he offered to look into it. I had several emails from him, with detailed reasoning as to why it could or couldn't be various different things. I'll read just a few extracts from his conclusions:

*'Many thanks for your message, to report the momentous excavation. The two dates of 1834 and 1886 certainly relate to recorded perambulations of St. Mary's Parish...*

*I conclude, though without complete proof, that the stone at Acorn Stairs is a relic of 19th-century perambulations of the boundaries of Rotherhithe parish. It is clearly stated that boundaries were marked with a metal plate or with a stone.... Perambulations took place in 1834 and 1886 – the dates that you quoted... Perambulations took place about seven years apart.*

*Perambulations were events of great fun by all accounts, often involving a band, a great many children and a considerable number of adult parishioners... Long willow sticks were used to 'beat' the bounds.*

*One day, I shall get up a revived perambulation. We would have to have a marching band, I think, and have the churchwardens with their staves in attendance. I am afraid the party would probably descend on the farm for tea!'*

Interestingly, this seems to be the only such stone remaining – a 19<sup>th</sup> century Ordnance Survey map shows stones marked at most river access points. Mike Reardon, your own Chairman, went investigating a few years ago, but couldn't find any others, except maybe one alongside the Mayflower, but it's so heavily overpainted that you can't make out any inscription to know whether it was one of these.

I continue with what Stephen Humphrey wrote about his research on river stairs:

*'I have collected material on river stairs all the way along Southwark's waterfront, that is, from just upstream of Blackfriars Bridge to the boundary with Deptford, but it is the Rotherhithe examples, plus the landing ways, which I intend to publish as a list with extensive annotations...*

*I shall write a full article about river stairs and landing ways in due course. I had been studying that subject long before the matter of your stone came up... Maybe the subject could be made into a talk to the Rotherhithe society one day. There would certainly be enough material to send the hearers to sleep for the evening.'*



## Grace Kimmins

**Talk by Ros Black on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2018**

On January 31 this year the Society talk was on Grace Kimmins, one of four great women who in the early 20th century lived at one time or another in Rotherhithe and worked at the Bermondsey Settlement. All four (Grace Kimmins, Eveline Lowe, Anna Martin, Ada Salter) knew each other but contributed in completely different spheres. Grace championed disabled children, Eveline became one of the leading educationalists in the country, Anna championed women's rights in Rotherhithe, and Ada campaigned against the slums. We were fortunate indeed that this talk was delivered by Grace's biographer, Ros Black. Ros had previously written a biography of Lady Isabella Somerset, the charismatic patron of the Settlement, who in 1914 was voted the most popular woman in Britain.



Ros spoke authoritatively about Grace's work as a Sister of the People in the slums and about her decision to dedicate the rest of her life to disabled children. Her Guild of Play, to teach traumatised slum children how to play, and her Guild of Brave Poor Things, to teach disabled children how to notch up achievements which neither others nor they themselves thought they were capable of, swiftly brought her national recognition, and the astonished involvement of everyone from educationalists to the royal family. The Chailey Centre in Sussex which she founded was the first centre for disabled children in Britain. But Grace's story did not end there. In the First World War she astonished the country again by inviting to Chailey soldiers who had lost limbs in battle and getting the disabled children to teach them how to eat, walk and dance.

Ros pointed out that Grace never lost contact with Bermondsey and Rotherhithe. In the 1920s she brought over to England a Swiss doctor who had pioneered the use of sun-lamps to treat those disabled by tuberculosis. Useless limbs were brought back to life by Rollier's solariums. Her former flatmate, Ada Salter, now Mayor of Bermondsey, had married an energetic doctor, Alfred Salter, and he soon introduced the same sun-lamps into Bermondsey clinics with phenomenal results.

Those interested in Grace Kimmins should read Ros's book, 'Grace Kimmins and her Chailey Heritage' (2017), and see the article by Seth Koven in the ODNB. Her biography of Lady Somerset is called 'A Talent for Humanity'.



## Forthcoming Society Events

Our meetings take place on the last Wednesday of every month, except for August (no meeting) and December (which is mid-month and a bit different!). The usual venue is the Time & Talents Centre, The Old Mortuary, in St. Marychurch Street, Rotherhithe, London SE16 4JE.

**September 29<sup>th</sup>:** ‘The Gruesome History of Bodysnatching’, by Robert Stephenson.

**October 31<sup>st</sup>:** ‘What about the Workers? The staff of Southwark Park 1869-2018’, by Pat Kingwell from the Friends of Southwark Park.

**November 28<sup>th</sup>:** ‘Albert McKenzie V.C.’ Paul Keefe tells us about a local hero of the First World War.

**December 12<sup>th</sup>:** ‘Biscuits, Chocolate, and Jam’ History of Bermondsey’s food industries, by Jennie Howells.



For the meetings, please arrive at Time & Talents from 7.15pm for a 7.30 pm start. We usually take a refreshment break midway and end around 9.30pm. For information about joining the RBLHS, please consult the Society’s website at [www.rbhistory.org.uk](http://www.rbhistory.org.uk) or email [membership@rbhistory.org.uk](mailto:membership@rbhistory.org.uk). Membership currently costs £12 per year and this includes both free access to meetings and receipt of this journal. Visitors are welcome to all meetings but are asked to donate £2.00. A list of RBLHS events for 2018 is on our website [www.rbhistory.org.uk](http://www.rbhistory.org.uk) or on our Facebook page or on Twitter @RBHistory. If you have ideas for future events or comments you wish to pass on, please contact the Chair via [chair@rbhistory.org.uk](mailto:chair@rbhistory.org.uk).