

Exploring London – Archive File of Group Visits

Here is a record of our Exploring London visits from January 2016 through until October 2016. For most recent visits and future plans, go to our [web page](#)

2016

January



8 January. We held our annual **review meeting** at the Walter Sickert Community Centre. Over 30 members of the group met and talked about the past year's events and made plans for the year ahead. There were many Explorers' suggestions on potential visits. Volunteers are now needed to follow up and support the Coordinator in turning these into reality. It was certainly a lively meeting with much appreciation being expressed for the great 2015 visits that have been enjoyed by many.

Bevis Marks Synagogue. A group of Explorers visited this location in the City of London, the oldest synagogue in the United Kingdom. It is a Grade 1 listed building and the only synagogue in Europe to have had an uninterrupted history of worship for 300 years. Built by a Quaker architect for the Sephardic (Spanish & Portuguese) Jewish community in 1701, the building is a scaled down version of the synagogue in Amsterdam, which donated the largest of the seven candelabras now hanging in the building. Avoiding any bomb damage during the Blitz, the synagogue retains unchanged all of its original early eighteenth century panelling and fittings and even has some older furniture from an earlier meeting place. A member of the congregation spoke of the history of the Jews in England, the Bevis Marks community and the subsequent expansion of the Sephardic community into other parts of London. (Report by Pauline Frost.)



February



The Wellcome Collection. We visited the Wellcome Collection on Euston Road, recently reopened after a £17.5m refurbishment. After coffee in the Wellcome Café we climbed the spectacular new spiral staircase to the 'Medicine Man' exhibition for an introduction by our guide to Henry Wellcome and his Collection. Born in a Wisconsin log cabin, this American/British pharmaceutical entrepreneur and collector amassed over 1m artefacts connecting medicine, life and art, and established the Wellcome Trust, now an £18bn biomedical charitable foundation. We saw the oldest object in the Collection, a 4000

year old skull with evidence of trepanning, and examined an exhibit of prosthetic limbs. Etruscan votive offerings of models of diseased body parts were compared to ex voto paintings offered as thanks to the Virgin Mary for protection. The group were then free to explore the rest of the collection and two temporary exhibitions. (Report by Christine Garrett.)

March

The Royal Society. The story of the Royal Society is 'the story of modern science' — runs the Society's web-site ... and our visit to the Society at 6-9 Carlton House Terrace (the pre-WW2 Prussian Embassy) for members of both the Exploring London and Science groups was so popular that two visits on 3 and 7 March had to be arranged.

The visits combined elements that make this group so successful: a building, lavishly beautified by the Prince Regent and later occupants, and a narrative covering the science and personalities associated

with the Society and its importance in the scientific life of the nation. Treasured items from the library and archives were on display — including ones with local Islington interest — and there was time to visit the temporary exhibition on Robert Hooke and the invention of the microscope. (Report by Pauline Frost & Liz Simpson.)



April



On Thursday 7th April, the Explorers group went to the **Apothecaries Hall**, a magnificent building in Blackfriars Lane in the City. As I knew very little about the Society of Apothecaries I was really looking forward to the visit and it lived up to all my expectations. The Society's Hall was formerly the guest house of the Dominican Priory of the Black Friars and was acquired in 1632, destroyed in the Great Fire of London and re-built in 1672 on the same site where it remains to this day. Our tour was led by Nick Royle, the Society's Clerk, who

kindly stood in for the Beadle (the man who usually does the tour) as he was away receiving a new kidney (we wish him a speedy recovery) Nick started the tour in the elegant hall with a splendid wooden staircase leading to the upstairs rooms. The hall had various showcases in it containing clothes of the period and gifts from patrons over the years. Nick gave us a lot of information about the Society; it was founded by Royal Charter in 1617 as a Livery company and is one of the few City livery companies that is professionally based. The Society also founded the Physic Garden in Chelsea in 1673, as a training aid and centre of research. More than 85% of the membership are medical and the remaining members are pharmacists or from other professions related to medicine. While listening to Nick talk we were all fascinated by the small dog wandering amongst us, obviously quite at home and unfazed by our large group. Nick explained it was his dog, Monty, who he keeps with him during the week and Monty became the star of the show, remaining in attendance for the whole visit. The walls of the upstairs rooms were covered with grand portraits of previous Masters of the Society and other famous men, plus showcases full of items used by the Apothecaries of old. The largest room/hall is used for differing occasions. It can seat 134 people for formal banqueting and is a very elegant setting. It also has a very different function as it can be turned into a "mock hospital ward" so that Doctors can take examinations in various specialties and receive diplomas in subjects such as "Conflict and Catastrophe Medicine" and "HIV and Aids". The Society is very keen to create new educational facilities. We were not able to visit the large library on this

floor, as a film crew were filming scenes from "A Winters Tale" ready for the forthcoming Shakespeare celebrations later this year. I thoroughly enjoyed the visit and learnt a great deal and will now access the website to expand my knowledge. Many thanks to Liz for organising this interesting outing and for providing her usual excellent handout. We really do appreciate all your hard work. (Written by Liz Dare, a member of The Explorers group.



Two Temple Place. We made our annual 'Exploring London' visit to Two Temple Place just before this year's exhibition 'Beyond Beauty: transforming the body in Ancient Egypt' closed at the end of April. Some group members were already inside as we posed in the sun at the entrance for Marion's photo! The exhibition collected together and displayed artefacts from several provincial museums: they were intrinsically interesting but also gave a fascinating insight into archaeological exploration and collecting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Shakespeare 400 walk. This was part of the celebrations on the 400th anniversary of his death. It was a walk along the Thames Southbank to view his 37 plays on 37 big screens. Unfortunately over half of the screens weren't working when we started out! Also, while being a dry day, it was cold - particularly when standing watching the 10 min short films of each play. However some of the viewings were extremely interesting with a variety of famous actors, often filmed in the play's original setting.



May

The Royal College of Physicians. The Royal College of Physicians' building, on the edge of Regent's Park, was designed by Denys Lasdun and is one of the few Grade 1-listed buildings dating from the 1960s. The exterior is clad with tiny off-white marble tiles and slate-grey bricks, chosen to blend in with the surrounding terraces, while the interior public circulation spaces are light and airy. We learnt something of the history of the RCP and were able to see several of the RCP's special collections and the Dorchester Library but the main focus of the morning's visit was the special exhibition about John Dee. Entitled 'Scholar, courtier, magician; the lost library of John Dee', volumes from Dee's collection of books held by the RCP were supplemented by loans from other collections to illuminate the life of this enigmatic figure — the interior photo shows several members of the group exploring the exhibition. The exhibition continues until the end of July and is free to visit, as is the RCP's building. As we 'Explore London', we are learning just how many buildings are actually open to the public and can be visited as individuals or groups!



In the afternoon we returned to explore the RCP's medicinal garden, led by Garden Fellow, Dr Henry Oakeley. Dr Oakeley gave a most informative and entertaining tour of the garden, which features upwards of 1000 plants, each with medicinal connections. The garden can also be visited during the week and I, for one, will

certainly be returning later in the summer, armed with Dr Oakeley's guide, to see the plants as they flourish in high summer. (Report by Liz Simpson.)



Ingram Art Collection at the Royal College of General Practitioners. Continuing our series of medical themed visits, we were given a tour of the current art exhibition at the imposing headquarters of the Royal College of General Practitioners at 30 Euston Square. The impressive green and white-tiled Edwardian lobby which, like the entire building has been imaginatively restored, revealed some wonderful works by mainly British 20th century artists. On display are pieces by major names including Dame Elisabeth Frink, Reg Butler, Dame

Barbara Hepworth and Sir Eduardo Paolozzi. This small but imaginative show, with its emphasis on sculpture, has been selected from the Ingram private collection of modern art, one of the largest of its kind in the country. As this is the home of our hard-working GPs, the pieces were carefully chosen to represent the diversity of medicine and aspects of the human form. Most striking perhaps was the larger than lifesize Riace Figure 111 by Frink inspired by Greek warrior statues and arguably most moving was Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's exquisite small bronze mother and child Maternity (1913). Among the paintings and drawings we admired was A Handful of Tears, a self-portrait by Lucy Jones (2013) specifically chosen to demonstrate GPs' role in dealing with disability and mental health. Lucy herself was born with cerebral palsy. This imposing, yet easy-to-miss, building was originally built in 1906 for an insurance company and was then in government use for many years after the last war. Our visit brought back memories for me of queuing up at a counter there in the 1960s to pay my long overdue National Insurance stamps. Now the GPs and art have taken over and we look forward to future exhibitions there. We continued our discussions about the meaning of the works over tea in the aptly-named Café Caritas which is open the public. Another great discovery by Liz who, luckily for us, keeps her eyes wide open when travelling on the top deck of the 30! The exhibition is free and continues until 29 May. (Report by Martin Thompson.)

June

A group of 18 of us travelled to **Windsor** for a visit to Windsor Castle. As we gathered outside the Visitor Centre, some of us were lucky enough to catch sight of soldiers in their bearskins marching by on their way to the Changing of the Guard. They were followed by a marching band playing a rousing tune. A bonus to start our day! Our guide Barry then took us through the Visitor Entrance to the Winchester Tower where he gave an interesting talk on Shakespeare and the connections of the Bard's work to Royalty and, in particular, to Windsor. We were then taken to the Royal Library exhibition of Shakespeare documents and books acquired by previous kings and queens and now held at Windsor. Very interesting and complemented by Barry's talk. Some of us then popped outside to catch the Queen and other members of the Royal family as they drove off to Ascot for a day at the races, while others watched from the State Room windows ... another highlight of the visit... We then spent the afternoon visiting the other areas of the Castle which included St George's Chapel, Queen Mary's Dolls House and the State Rooms where paintings from the Royal Collection were exhibited. There was a lot to see, but the useful audio guide device which we were given, gave helpful guidance on the exhibits; and our tickets were endorsed so that we can return to the Castle again, for free, for a year. All in all a great day out, but busy! (Report by Brenda Hood.)

July



Marlborough House. For some of the group, the 'exploration' started by walking down St James's Street, passing Alison and Peter Smithson's Grade 2-listed 'Economist Plaza' of 1964, traditional shops such as Lock and Co (hatters), John Lobb Ltd (bespoke boots and shoes) and Berry Bros and Rudd (wine-merchants), and for the sharp-eyed, the site of the Texas Legation to the Court of St James 1842-1846! Behind the discreet black gates on the corner of Pall Mall and to the east of St James's Palace was our destination, Marlborough

House. Marlborough House is now the international headquarters of the Commonwealth, and very much a working building as we were to discover as we made our tour, dodging delegates on their refreshment breaks from meetings! However it was first built as a town house for Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, initially to designs by Inigo Jones and his son but completed by the Duchess by 1711. After the Duchess's death in 1744, it reverted to the Crown and was used by members of the Royal Family until the death of Queen Mary in 1953; in 1962 it came into its current use as the headquarters for the Commonwealth. The outside of the building is quite plain, and the original 18th century two-storey building can be distinguished from the 19th century addition of two more storeys. The adjacent Queen's Chapel of St James's Palace, also designed by Inigo Jones in 1623-25, can be viewed from the entrance and is now separated from St James's Palace by a new roadway. Inside the building our guide took us into all the formal rooms that can be seen by visitors and explained the family tree of the Dukes of Marlborough, the history and design features of each room, and how they had been used by successive residents, up to and including the Commonwealth Secretariat. Images of the first Duke of Marlborough, John Churchill, appeared frequently, especially on the Malplaquet and Ramillies staircases, named after two of his famous victories. After an opportunity to peer into the garden and see Queen Mary's revolving thatched summer-house, our visit ended in probably the most spectacular of the rooms, the Blenheim Saloon — designed to impress visitors with its 'wow-factor'. Decorated with paintings, tapestries and mirrors, the highlights are the ceiling paintings 'The Triumph of Peace and the Arts' by Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1647) possibly with his daughter Artemisia (1593-1653) which were painted for the Queen's House in Greenwich but were installed at Marlborough House in 1713.

August

Bunhill Fields and Museum of London. A large group of 'Local Historians' and 'London Explorers' met at Bunhill Fields at 11am on 17 August, and split into two parties to walk round Bunhill Fields, led by knowledgeable City of London Guides (our photo shows the smaller group of the two groups!). We learnt much about the history and ecology of this Non-Conformist burial ground and were introduced to personalities such as Susannah Wesley (the mother of Charles and John Wesley), Daniel Foe — he added the 'De' himself, William Blake and Richard Price — who has strong links to the Newington Green area where he lived for a time. It was hard to believe that around 123,000 burials were registered in this small burial ground until it was pointed out that bodies were buried on top of each other to save space!



After a break for lunch, the group reassembled at the **Museum of London** for a visit to 'Fire! Fire!', the museum's new exhibition about the Great Fire of London. The exhibition has received some lacklustre reviews but many of us were impressed by

both the design and the way exhibits were shown in context. The atmospheric start of the exhibition was particularly striking as it gave the impression of the dark, noisy and crowded streets of London in the 1660s. Of course, we finished in the museum's café for tea afterwards — an ideal opportunity to share ideas about this visit — and future plans.

September



We had two visits to this interesting building. This report is from the first visit. 25 Explorers joined the 2pm Tour of **The Supreme Court**. This replaced the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords as the highest court in the UK on 1 October 2009, to be explicitly separate from both Government and Parliament. It's housed in a Grade 2* listed building (previously belonging to Middlesex County Council, and then a County Court and a Crown Court). It's currently the only court in the UK where

proceedings are routinely filmed and available to watch online. Members of the public are also free to watch proceedings when they visit. We saw Court 1, with its magnificent ceilings, chandeliers, woodwork and carved bench ends, all restored to the condition they were in 1913. Next we saw Court 2, a modern courtroom, where a large glass panel, carpet and curtains show the Supreme Court Emblem (pictured). We were also shown the triple height law library. The basement contains an exhibition and a welcoming cafe. The latter was converted from what was once an open yard and prison cells. For a blog on the visit click [here](#). For other information from the visit click [here](#).

A small group of Explorers took advantage of the penultimate monthly summer opening of the gardens at **Lambeth Palace**, said to be the oldest continuously cultivated gardens in London. We paid our £5 entrance fees (all proceeds to a local charity), went in, and discovered we'd chosen the same day to visit as Islington's Gardens group! Luckily for us, the Great Hall and Library of the Palace had also been opened, enabling the groups to discover the history of both gardens and Palace, through displays of books, documents and plans.



Most of us joined one of the free tours led by the head gardener: starting at the fig tree planted in 1556 we viewed formal plantings, billowing herbs, Mediterranean species — and the recently re-located bee-hives and bee-friendly plantings. A café and plant sales completed a successful visit — highly recommended if the public openings continue next year.

October



As a complement to the recent visit to the 'Fire, Fire' exhibition at the Museum of London, our group of Explorers met up with Jill, a City of London guide, who took us back to September 1666 and the four days when the **Great Fire of London** raged through the streets, consuming 13,200 houses, 87 parish churches, St Paul's Cathedral, and most of the buildings of the City authorities. Jill led us back along the path of the fire, starting outside St Paul's Cathedral and finishing by the Monument near where the fire

started in Pudding Lane. Along the way she explained how the city looked before the

fire and why it was so devastating, how it might have looked if Wren had got his way in the reconstruction and how the city recovered to make it the city we know now — lots of interesting facts interspersed with eye witness quotes. It was so interesting we overran our allotted time but it was worth it! Adrian Tinniswood's recent book 'By the permission of heaven' was recommended as a lively and authoritative book for further reading. (Report by Elizabeth Mansbridge.)



We met at the **King's Cross** Visitor Centre for a 90 minute guided walk around the developments that extend for 67 acres behind King's Cross and St Pancras stations. This was the very first event for the Exploring London group nearly 3 years ago, and it was fascinating to see how much the area has developed since then. In fact, construction has been ongoing for 9 years, with another 6 years still to go! We particularly appreciated the redeveloped industrial buildings and Victorian features that have been preserved, including the gigantic gasholders that now encircle modern apartment blocks and a park. We were taken up a viewing platform to see the open air swimming pond, which regrettably is about to close as it was only ever intended as a temporary feature. In Victorian times the whole area was a bustling hub of warehouses and transit sheds, where

goods were transferred between rail, canal and horse carts. Now it is being regenerated as a bustling hub of squares, parks, offices, shops, apartments, schools and the University of the Arts London. The area is well worth a visit at any time, and the Visitor Centre in Stable Street has all the information you would need. (Report by Geoff & Joy Redman.)

See next file for November 2016 onwards.