

MONTHLY MEETINGS 2015-16

Every month except August and December, Islington U3A holds a monthly meeting to which we invite a high profile, interesting and entertaining speaker. We have been very fortunate indeed with the speakers who have agreed to give talks - as will have been evident, even to those unable to attend, from the reports on our website following each meeting. We've decided that we should not simply let these reports disappear into history but gather them together to form a record that members might like to re-visit. The meetings noted below are for the iU3A year which started in October 2015.

What appears below is exactly what appeared on the website immediately after each meeting. It has not been updated except for the odd typo that slipped through first time around. That means that a few bits of detail in some of the talks may not be fully up-to-date (for example Margaret Hodge appears to have been successful in persuading Starbucks to behave better as regards tax whilst others have come newly under the spotlight.) But all of the talks remain highly topical overall and well worth a second visit...

John Raftery, 22 October 2015

What is the point of universities?



John gave a very interesting talk about the challenges facing universities today as well as some of the specific issues facing the London Met. All students face considerable financial worries in undertaking tertiary education but funding is still much better here than it is in other European Countries and in the USA. London Met students generally come from more disadvantaged backgrounds than other university entrants and more than 50 per cent are over the age of 22. The university's mission is to enable them all to achieve their full potential.

This is somewhat of a vintage year for the University as there are more black and disadvantaged students taking up places than ever before. Nowadays 40 percent of young people are continuing in education as opposed to about 6 per cent in the 1980s.

This is good news for many of us as research carried out globally has shown that adults who have been through university are happier by 18 percent over those who have not had that opportunity. Graduates are more likely to participate in voluntary and community work and in voting. A university education enables people to better appraise information, to find answers to hard questions, to meet deadlines, to work with other people and to organise themselves. They also apparently live longer!

Professor Raftery concluded by describing the plans to concentrate all the teaching and resources in the Holloway Road and closing the city campus. This will have considerable impact on local business and will hopefully enliven the area.

To finish off we were treated to a look in to the archives with some amazing photographs from the very early days of the London Met, some dating back 150 years, when, amongst other things, there were very popular classes for making musical instruments and a flourishing operatic society.

Elain Harwood, 26 November 2015

Space, Hope and Brutalism?



Elain Harwood works with Historic England, formerly English Heritage, with a special interest in post war architecture, and her enthusiasm for buildings of this period was evident in her talk. The title she had chosen for her talk deliberately referenced Sigfried Giedion's book 'Space Time and Architecture' published in 1941 and regarded as a bible of modernism

and the new spatial forms that non-traditional building materials such as concrete offered. Elain explained that the post war period was a very innovative period for architecture, partly driven by necessity as materials and other resources were so scarce after the war, but also by the need to rebuild Britain's war damaged physical infrastructure and to create a new modern Britain with homes and public buildings 'fit for heroes'.

She showed us many examples of innovative buildings that used materials such as concrete and steel. Concrete was cheap and available after the war, unlike stone and brick, and offered unprecedented flexibility in architectural design and spatial form, for example allowing huge spans and domed or conical roofs, such as those at Terminal One at Heathrow, Stockport bus station and the Commonwealth Institute. The form of traditional buildings such as churches could also be rethought, as shown in the concrete Ronchamp chapel designed by Le Corbusier and Liverpool Catholic Cathedral. Theatres also benefited from new approaches to spatial form, being designed for performance 'in the round' at Chichester Festival Theatre, the Crucible Sheffield and the National Theatre in London. From the 1960s, the use of steel framed buildings drawing on the influence of Mies van der Rohe also enabled new approaches.

The 'Hope' of Elain's title referred to the optimism and social reconstruction of the later post war years, when new towns such as Stevenage were designed, new schools built for the post war baby boom (Hertfordshire needed 10 new schools each year to cope with population growth), new tower blocks rose up over the smog from 1951, and new universities such as Churchill College, Cambridge and St Catherine's College Oxford were built. Much of the design of this period was influenced by Scandinavian and Californian models, with 'flat pack' prefabricated design solutions in housing and schools.

Elain was asked which post-war buildings in Islington she considered the best examples of innovative architecture: these were Berthold Lubetkin's modernist Spar Green Estate and Bevin Court. She also liked Highpoint in Highgate.

Steve Richards, 28 January 2016

British Politics from Corbyn to Cameron



Steve Richards, Chief Political Columnist for the Independent, opened this year's programme of monthly meeting speakers in front of a record audience of members. We were treated to his thoughts on the current and future position of the Labour party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, delivered in an insightful and entertaining manner. We'll not quickly forget his impersonations of past and present political figures including Tony Benn, Tony Blair, Harold Wilson and Boris Johnson.

His contention was that the scene had been set for the rise of a figure in the Labour Party such as Corbyn, in part by the electorate's irritation with the "banal waffle" of people such as David Miliband: "Over the last 5 years we have turned the page backwards. It is now time to turn it forward" and Tony Blair: "The future has to be our comfort zone", following the 2015 election defeat and by the nation's "aching for security", often focused on issues such as migration. If people are looking for certainties in a world of disillusionment, then politicians such as Corbyn with his apparent straight talking and adherence to strong principles, generate interest. However Steve cited examples of political figures who, having risen to power on a wave of popularity, have had to face the prospect of "built in disillusionment" spilling out on to those who elected them when they fail to live up to often unrealistic expectations. President Obama is a notable example of this.

Corbyn's position is fragile because of this built in disillusionment and the obvious fact that he leads a divided party with shadow ministers arguing publicly and even speaking against him in the House – Hilary Benn and the Syria speech. However, Steve contends that though seemingly invincible, the Tory government is also fragile. There are many examples of leaders whose authority falls away after years in power; Cameron's ministers are making some very public mistakes e.g. the behaviour of Osborne over the issue of the tax settlement with Google and the shift to devolution, meaning that the government does not have the range of power it once had over the whole country. In addition, Europe is a divisive issue for the Conservative party. Looking back to the 1975 referendum under the Labour Government, Steve pointed out that the experience of senior ministers such as Roy Jenkins and Tony Benn virulently opposing each other on public platforms undermined the unity that Harold Wilson had so successfully maintained in his cabinet of leading figures of right and left, and this set the scene for Labour losing the subsequent election. The impact of a similar experience on the Conservative Party will also be one of the factors leading up to the 2020 election.

All this means that the outcome of the 2020 election is by no means a certainty and that we face an interesting 4 years in politics.

Steve Nallon, 24 February 2016

Satire



Another very good turnout of members came to listen to Steve Nallon, actor, lecturer and writer, who gave a very entertaining talk on satire. Among Steve's many talents, he has been a contributor to and a voice in 'Spitting Image' and more recently starred in Dead Sheep at The Park Theatre, where he played Margaret Thatcher to hilarious effect. He

also does a brilliant impression of Roy Hattersley.

Steve explained that satire brings together political truths and comedic ideas and contributes to the debate on free speech in society. Today there are still countries, sadly, where that freedom is denied.

Steve gave us a brief history of satire, which dates back to the Ancient Greeks, who had a strong sense of civic duty as well as a healthy interest in debate and analysis of what was wrong in society. Satire was an important tool for them in offering insightful understanding of wars, taxes, the legal system and their fellow men.

It is important that satire should be widely enjoyed by the whole of society and not just the political elite. The success of 'That Was The Week That Was' was due to its ability to reach the whole public and similarly 'Spitting Image' became an unmissable show in which everyone was able, at some level, to engage in the political processes. At its height more people watched 'Spitting Image' than voted in the general election.

Satire doesn't necessarily change anyone's political views but it can "re-arrange the furniture in your head". Satire does attempt to create a kind of alternative world by the use of various techniques including the use of animals to represent people, e.g. journalists are often represented as vultures or pigs; the inversion of influential people from positions of power to positions of inferiority; men being seen as women and vice versa. A certain amount of anger is necessary for a true satirist. They need to 'have a go' at fighting back and challenging the accepted view.

There is an argument for saying that nowadays satire has become a much more sophisticated and complex art form. In many ways it was easier to mock Margaret Thatcher as it was very clear what she stood for. Amongst

many current political figures, there is a lack of ideas and maybe no fixed moral viewpoint. Satire may have lost its way because of the Internet and constant feeds on Twitter and Facebook about the latest exploits of Donald Trump. Today, too, one has to be much more aware of political awareness and of presenting a balanced picture.

However, there is no doubt that satire can be elegant, witty, visceral, juvenile and effective. It can also be extremely funny and laughter is always good.

John Hare, 24 March 2016

Religion and Revolt: A Historical Background to BoKo Haram



In 1957 John was the last recruit to the British northern administrative service of Nigeria. He stayed on after independence and had a detailed knowledge of the area of the country across which Boko Haram is active today. Boko Haram means roman script is forbidden; in other words, western culture is forbidden. Northern Nigeria has had a long history of violent conflict. For centuries Arab slave traders from north Africa raided the area for slaves and tribal groups attacked each other for cattle and for women to sell as slaves. In the nineteenth century Muslim warriors and holy men waged violent jihad against the tribes of northern Nigeria seeing them as corrupt, and violent slave raids continued even after the British came to power in Nigeria in 1900. From the history John described it was clear that the roots of Boko Haram's violent jihad had a long history in northern Nigeria, exacerbated by the large numbers of young men, with some education but little hope of employment, who are consequently politically and socially disengaged and living in poverty in a very harsh environment.

A highlight of John's talk was the many historical photographs he used to illustrate his talk, particularly those taken in the late 1950s of the different tribal peoples in the area and their cultural practices – including warriors wearing chain mail, a custom that derived from the crusaders and the dramatic landscapes of desert and mountains.

John concluded by telling us about the foundation he has set up to protect the wild camels of Mongolia and Western China. By 1995 their population had reduced to only 900 but he set up a breeding centre in Mongolia and a reserve in China which receive scientific support from zoos in the USA

and in the UK and numbers are now increasing. He encouraged anyone interested to look at the website here.

Vanessa Harding, 28 April 2016

London Between Plague and Fire



An ever increasing number of our members are attending monthly meetings, and, at April's meeting, 114 of us enjoyed a riveting, fact-filled presentation by Vanessa Harding. In 1660, the country was emerging from two decades of war and London was experiencing great disruption to commerce and an influx of refugees from Scotland, Wales and other parts of England. There was extreme political instability, republicanism was still alive at the same time as efforts were being made to restore the monarchy. There were continuing clashes with the Dutch over trade in the Colonies.

In May 1665 Samuel Pepys noted that nine people were dead from a sickness and there followed a fairly rapid rise in the number of fatalities up to 267 by mid-June. Pepys, though optimistic about the outcome, took the precaution of sending his wife to the relative safety of Woolwich and writing his own will. At the height of the epidemic in September, 7000 deaths were recorded in one week, including 66 in Islington. The death rate began to fall after that but the plague continued until the autumn of 1666. The total mortality rate was said to be about 100,000 (although we know this to be an underestimate) and about one in six Londoners died. Even today the cause of the plague is unclear and it seems unlikely that it was bubonic plague caused by rats. It was seen by many as divine judgement.

The summer of 1666 was long and hot and a fire, which started in a bakehouse in Pudding Lane, began to spread rapidly. Attempts to extinguish it were in vain, and within four days it had spread for a mile. Pictures at the time showed the whole of the city burning. Crowds of people fled or took to the river in small boats. 13,000 properties were destroyed, though, surprisingly, very few lives were lost. Again, many viewed the fire as a divine judgement while others saw it as a foreign plot.

Whilst the fire and the plague can be seen as two separate entities, they are clearly intertwined and

most Londoners viewed them as a single event. God, they concluded, had had a hand in both. Work on the re-building of London was not without its problems and the fire did not entirely clear the city of the plague. Furthermore, the fire hindered attempts to discover the causes of the plague. Records were lost and the city's population was dispersed. A large number of the city's administrators had died in the plague. The economic effects of both the fire and the plague, as well as internal unrest and the continuing costs of clashes abroad with the Dutch and the French were all to take their toll. But Londoners did not despair, London's irrepressible commercialism meant that rebuilding was quickly under way, helped by numerous enthusiastic planners and the King himself.

Essie Viding of UCL, 26th May 2016

Why do some children develop severe and persistent anti-social behaviour?



Professor Essie Viding began by reminding us of society's fascination with psychopaths, such as Hannibal Lecter in the film 'The Silence of the Lambs' and in books such as 'We Need to talk about Kevin', and with such real life cases as the serial killer Ted Bundy, who murdered more than 30 women in the 1970s and 80s.

Research has identified a number of characteristics of people with psychopathy, such as lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, a superficial charm, a grandiose sense of self worth, pathological lying and manipulation of others. The question for much current research is what makes some people more at risk of becoming a psychopath than others, and this has been investigated looking at environmental, behavioural, psychological and neurological factors. From the research it appears that some children show early behavioural warning signs of 'high callous-unemotional traits' indicative of developing psychopathy and that their brains process information from the environment differently. Although both genetic and environmental factors seem to be at work in producing these differences these children do seem to be more genetically vulnerable. But as Essie reminded us, genes are not destiny, and research shows that therapeutic interventions with families and these children can have a positive effect, although there remain many unanswered questions about why some people become psychopaths and others do not.

Michele Hanson, 23rd June 2016:

Why do we (older people) get such bad press?



Another full house to hear Michele's very funny talk on how we older people are perceived by the media. As the only 'old lady' at The Guardian she is not allowed to swear in her columns, and she is invariably asked to cover topics such as incontinence and loneliness, neither of which is the exclusive territory of older people. There's an assumption that older

people are not interested in discussing or writing about the wider world and topics such as war, the refugee crisis or (the unmentionable topic) sex. We are seen as stay-at-homes and tend to be viewed as a uniform group whether we are 65 or 90. We are not portrayed as people who enjoy drinking wine, going out to restaurants, undertaking new challenges or having interesting hobbies. We are viewed in turn as obstreperous, grumpy, selfish (using up resources, and therefore depriving other groups), burdensome, grey, smelly or in need of stair lifts. Older women are often portrayed as pastel wearing, lovers of bingo and war time sing songs. Rarely are our contributions to society, such as looking after our grandchildren, very old parents (which Michele did for 10 years and whose mother was a great source of amusing material for her weekly column) or other voluntary work considered.

As we age we are viewed by society as 'bed blockers' whose care is too expensive and there is a ridiculous amount of bizarre research undertaken to provide assistance from robots to help older people overcome loneliness, or remember to take their medication when simple human contact and conversation would be so much better. We are not a different species and should be valued individually for our intelligence, skills and experience.

Lewis Dartnell, 28th July 2016

Post-apocalyptic thinking



Lewis Dartnell is Professor of Astrobiology at the University of Westminster, where he researches, amongst other things, the possibility of life on other planets. Today's presentation was an imaginary one where we were told to consider a doomsday event where all humanity (apart from us) had

died and the world as we know it, had collapsed. What would be the most useful knowledge for us in this post apocalyptic wasteland and how would we re-build society from scratch, given that we would need to do this quickly and being aware that it had taken us about 10,000 years previously to get to where we are?

What followed was a series of ingenious tricks to get us back on the road to civility. We learned how to make water safe and drinkable, how to make fire, how to search out seeds, how to navigate the world around us, how to extract resources from the natural environment, how to make a simple cooking device, how to run a car using wood for fuel, how to re-invent the printing press, and how to make a solar- powered kindle that could recharge itself indefinitely. All this was done with helpful illustrations and with great panache and wit. The presentation was riveting and amusing and the enthusiasm of the presenter was infectious. We all left with a repertoire of survival skills which we hoped we would never need.

Jeremy Taylor, 22nd September 2016

Making babies the way evolutionary biologists do it



Jeremy Taylor, a former BBC Senior Producer, introduced his talk on evolutionary biology by renaming the talk 'Making Babies the Way Evolutionary Biologists Do' : it is a great biological mystery how making babies is even possible, as the foetus is biologically as foreign as a virus infection to the mother, with 50% of its genes coming from the

father. This raises the questions of why the foetus does not excite the mother's immune system into action and how the mother's body learns to tolerate the 'foreign' foetus. Biological mechanisms have also evolved which allow the mother to choose which embryos to allow to embed and grow, and 70% of embryos are rejected at a very early stage.

Surprisingly despite having a large percentage of genetically abnormal cells the embryo can still become a healthy baby – of 23 embryos only 2 will have entirely normal cells, so there is little evidence that the current practice in Fertility Clinics of pre-implantation genetic screening of the embryo leads to a better chance of having a healthy baby.

Jeremy emphasized how, in evolutionary terms, the genetic interests of the father and the mother are in conflict. Evolution favours indiscriminate fertilisation and implantation mechanisms (the more embryos the better) for the father's genes regardless of quality, whereas for females, biological mechanisms have evolved that allow her to choose only the better quality embryos for successful implantation, growth and survival - hence the large proportion of embryos which are spontaneously aborted as the mother 'chooses' to keep only those embryos most likely to be capable of normal growth and development. Biologically speaking, babies are 'on probation' from fertilisation, implantation and foetal growth until birth.