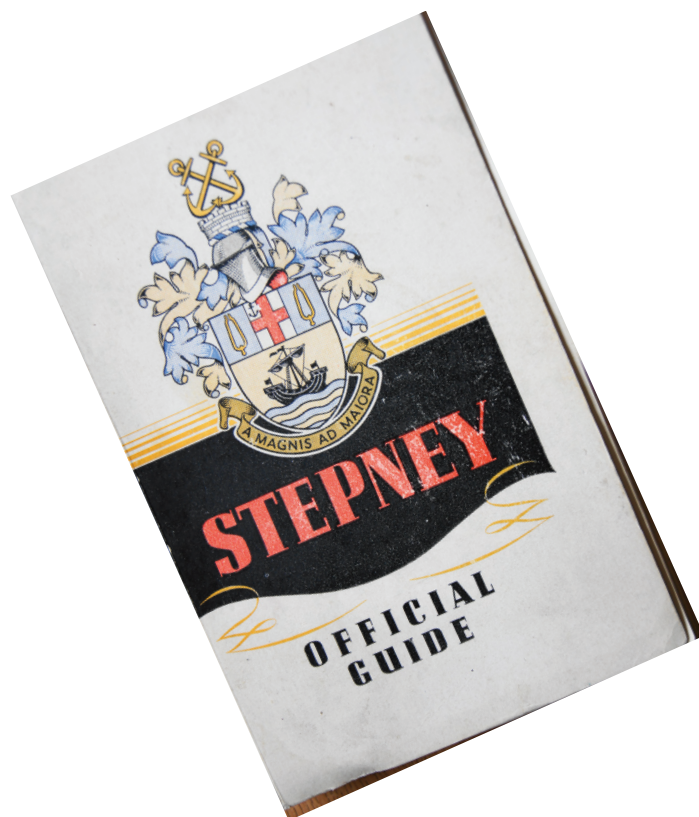


My Stepney

by Dr Samantha Bird

An idle moment on eBay and I find myself putting in a search for 'Stepney'. Will it bring me a great historical find? I have learnt two things from my initial search: one, that there was a footballer called Alex Stepney, a goal keeper who played for Manchester United between 1966 and 1978, when they became the first English club to win the European Cup; two, that there is an engine called Stepney in *Thomas the Tank Engine*.

After almost giving up, I find my gem of Stepney history. I place my bid and hope that I win. I do. I now own a tiny little piece of Stepney Borough history. I have purchased a copy of *The Metropolitan Borough of Stepney – The Official Guide* 7th edition (c. 1950). I find my mystery seller contacting me after the auction to gingerly enquire whether the old book that I have purchased, which has had a poor, sorry life - the binding is broken, is of interest to me and of some use. If only they knew. I quickly respond that I have done a PhD based on Stepney Borough and that I am looking forward to my purchase arriving. I eagerly await the arrival of that small package. Although I have seen many editions of the guide before and know exactly what I should be expecting, it still does not take away the excitement of my own piece of history arriving at my doorstep. My book arrives and is full of everything I know should be there – the many, many pages of quirky local advertisements at the front and back of the book, the history of the borough and a contemporary look at what the borough has been able to achieve in the post-Second World War period, and a very fragile pull-out map of the borough, as you can see.



Stepney, as shown in the map below, was bordered to the west by the City. To the north it was bordered by Bethnal Green, to the east by Poplar and to the south by the River Thames. The new borough of Stepney, which was created in 1899, consisted of 20 wards with 60 Councillors and 10 Aldermen.



The motto for Stepney: *A magnis ad maiora* (from great things to greater), featured on the front cover of the book, has somewhat intrigued me. One's initial thoughts about the area are poverty and slums. Stepney is an area with very many well know associations and images, from the horrifying murders of 'Jack the Ripper', to the soaking up of the heavy bomb damage during the Blitz, from the classical confrontation between Mosley's fascists and the socialist left at the 'Battle of Cable Street', to the dramatic 'Siege of Sidney Street' when Liberal Home Secretary Winston Churchill rooted out an anarchist cell. Beyond these dramatic episodes Stepney witnessed the perennial struggle for subsistence among the many poor, the rise and fall of the great local docks, the immigration of large numbers of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the growth of the Labour Party and the surprising local ascendancy of the Communists, the desperate drive to improve public housing, the evacuation of a large proportion of its children at the start of World War Two and much more besides.

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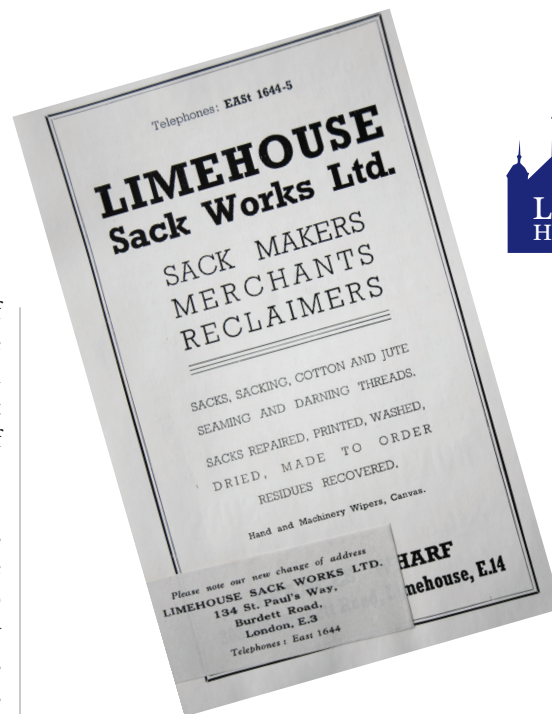
My Stepney (cont.)

The advertisements in the book give an indication of the variety of businesses thriving in the area in the late 1940's from the Limehouse Sack Works to Dennison's who is 'Noted for Irish and Danish Bacon Cooked Ham,' according to the advertisement. The advertisement for the Limehouse Sack Works catches my eye, with the change of address added at a later date, as one can see.

Also, one word jumps out of the advertisement – Jute. It reminds me of an episode during the First World War in Stepney, where 'alien' men were interned. For those in Stepney, the nearest camp was Ritchie's Works, Carpenter Road, [Stratford], a jute factory which had not been in use for several years. Up to 400 civilians could be held at this camp. It was reported by Mr Jackson in his report on camps in the United Kingdom on 27th February 1915 that 'confinement on bread and water for 24 hours' was 'the most severe punishment which had been given.' This camp was only for men of fighting age as 'there were no boys under 17 and no men over 55 in this camp'.

The names mentioned in the advertisements, also provide links to Stepney's political diversity. There is L. Frankel, the Kosher Butcher and Poulterer. During the period 1914-1951 there was a prominent political figure: Dan Frankel. In the post-First World War housing crisis there was a major political fracas between Councillors Miriam Moses and Dan Frankel. Moses suggested that the council faced difficulties in accommodating residents whose homes had been pulled down. She wanted to use her influence as a person of Jewish origins to ask the 'wealthy people of the Jewish race to interest themselves in building houses in Stepney for the working classes'. This proposal was met with opposition by Councillor Dan Frankel, also Jewish, who argued that it would bring a racial element into the housing problem. The re-housing of residents was to become an ongoing issue as it continued to dominate local politics well into the post-Second World War period.

Shapiro, Vallentine – Leading Anglo-Jewish Booksellers – another name with political associations. In the General Election of 1945, Phil Piratin won votes through his popularity and effectiveness as a borough councillor. He was interested in the problems of the people: housing was a key issue. Piratin was active in the formation and continuation of the Stepney Tenants' Committee. Father Groser, the Chairman of the Stepney Tenants' Committee and a keen Communist, aided the election campaign. The party also sought



actively to encourage tenants to start making their needs known to the authorities. Michael Shapiro suggested in *How to Speed up the Repairs*, that the people should:

Come together with your neighbours and go along to see the responsible officers at the Council. Don't just let them know what you want, but find out from them what they believe to be the obstacles that are holding things up.

At the beginning of the period covered Stepney was far from being a great or good place. Too much development had taken place too quickly during an era of rapid industrialisation. The area was squalid. It was to take the bomb damage of the Second World War and the redevelopment of the area that followed, for Stepney to become an example to others of the form that modern development and building could take. Although structurally, architects have tended to criticise the area for not living up to the planners' promises, development did resolve one crucial problem for Stepney: the issue of overcrowding. Living conditions for the people improved thanks to the new developments. Throughout the period 1914-1951 housing conditions were one of the council's main targets, but it took the considerable destruction of the area during the Second World War to enable their aims to finally be achieved. For Stepney, with the Festival of Britain choosing the Lansbury Estate as a part of the display of Britain's 'contribution to civilisation, past, present and future' according to the Festival's pamphlet, Stepney was seen – perhaps only temporarily – as being part of a great national event. Stepney finally had a sense of living up to the motto *A Magnis as Moiora*.



About Samantha Bird

Samantha L. Bird studied for her first degree at Anglia Polytechnic University (now Ruskin University). She then furthered her education with a Masters and PhD at the London Metropolitan University. Now as a graduate she was first published in the BBC History Magazine (October 2010) and has now broadcast twice as a consultant on BBC London radio's Robert Elms show.

Samantha's first book, Stepney: A profile of a London borough from the outbreak of the First World War to the Festival of Britain 1914-1951, was published earlier this year.