



Grays Inn Rd, 1 Nov  
1932: Unemployed  
demonstration  
attacked by police

Battle of Coldbath  
Fields, 1833: police  
attack National  
Union of the Working  
Classes rally: one  
policeman killed



Coldbath Fields Prison, pioneering penitentiary

Spa Fields  
Congregational  
Families, Owenite  
Commune, 1821-4

1817: radical *Black Dwarf*  
paper based at 99-119  
Rosebery Ave; 1983 Peace  
Centre Squat on same spot.

Spa Fields: gather-  
ing point for rowdy  
crowds, especially  
1816-18. Riot started  
here 2 December



Clerkenwell House of  
Detention, Sans Walk:  
Stormed by Bawdy  
House Rioters, 1668, by  
London apprentices,  
1688, by Gordon rioters,  
1780; bombed by  
Fenians, 1867.

St John St: infamous for robbers attack-  
ing travellers to City, till 19th Century

Clerkenwell Bridewell,  
Woodbridge St,  
prisoners freed by  
Gordon rioters, 1780.

Sekforde St: Red  
Bull Theatre famous  
for satirical plays  
and stropky  
audiences, 1630s.



133 Goswell Rd: c. 1902-7:  
Guy Aldred holds free-  
thinking, anarchist and  
communist meetings in  
basement of his mum's  
house.

Clerkenwell Close:  
home to Feminist paper *Spare Rib*  
and lefty printers *Black Rose Press*,  
1970s.

37a Clerkenwell Green: centre of  
radicalism since 1860s: London  
Patriotic Club, SDF printing press,  
Lenin, and Marx Memorial Library.

1794: Recruiting  
offices at Mutton  
Lane attacked in Crimp House Riots.

Warner St Temperance  
Hall: Eliza Sharples  
secularist Literary &  
Scientific Institution,  
1840s.

Old Holborn Town Hall:  
lots of leftwing events,  
including ILP Mayday  
socialist carnival, 1895.



44 Grays Inn Rd: socialist  
20th Century Press, till  
1893.



Hopkinsons  
Coffee House,  
Saffron Hill,  
1848: physical  
force Chartists  
met here to  
plot rebellion.

Saffron Hill Rookery:  
overflowing with thievery and  
crime. Home to Gordon Rioters  
and other rebels.

St Johns Priory, 13th  
June 1381: sacked by  
revolting  
peasants.

Baptists Head, St  
Johns Lane: meeting  
place for radicals  
c. 1800.

Wrestler in the  
hoop tavern,  
c.1414: haunt of  
the Lollards.

London Lesbian &  
Gay Centre, 69  
Cowcross St,  
1980s/90s.



Smithfield:  
heretics and rebels  
executed here for  
centuries... Wat Tyler  
killed; defeat of  
Peasants Revolt



Black Boy Alley Gang  
fought the law c.1744.

Field Lane/Union  
Court rookery,  
18th/19th centuries:  
warren of slum tenements &  
alleys. Escaped prisoners  
sheltered here during  
Gordon riots.

Burning rivers of gin,  
1780: Langdale's huge gin  
distillery burnt out by  
Gordon rioters



At Langdale's Distillery

Snow Hill, 1848:  
Utopian communists  
held conference in a  
hall here.

BARTHOLOMEW FAIR: THE  
MOST PROMINENT LONDON  
FAIR FOR CENTURIES: A  
TEEMING RIOTOUS  
OUTPOURING OF POPULAR  
CULTURE, FEARED BY  
THOSE IN POWER.

# CLERKENWELL

*“the Hub  
of the Radical  
Wheel”*

# CLERKENWELL: the Hub of the Radical Wheel

Clerkenwell is one of London's oldest suburbs, a working class area for centuries, teeming with slums and rookeries, many of which sheltered criminals, rebels, and rioters. But it was also an area of artisan industries and small workshops. As a result of its working class and industrial character, Clerkenwell was a stronghold of radical movements and later socialists.

Clerkenwell has also acted as a focus for national events, movements and struggles.

- **The Peasants Revolt:** the 1381 rebellion, sparked by the heavy new poll tax, but in fact an expression of many grievances of a complex mix of social classes, came to its climax in Smithfield and Clerkenwell. As rebels from Kent and Essex poured into London, they & the London poor attacked symbols and centres of power. On June 13th the Clerkenwell Priory, HQ of the Order of the Knights of St John, in St John's Lane, was stormed and burned - partly because the head of the order, Robert Hales, was also Lord Treasurer of England, responsible for collecting the poll tax (they chopped off 'Hob the Robber's head the next day!'). But on the 15th, after the Revolt had won concessions from the king at Mile End, another negotiation at Smithfield ended with the murder of rebel leader **Wat Tyler**: the king persuaded the crowd to move to nearby Clerkenwell Fields, where they were surrounded and disbanded. Executions & repression followed.

- Thirty years later, the area was a stronghold of religious rebels the **Lollards**, reformers fighting for a more democratic and personal church. Smithfield's **Wrestler-in-the-Hoop** tavern was one of their meeting points, around 1414, when they were being repressed by the church; the following year, **Sir John Oldcastle**, their main leader, whose house was on modern Rosebery Avenue, led a rebellion, which was defeated. Several Lollards were executed for heresy at Smithfield (as were later protestant and anabaptist preachers a century later).

Clerkenwell being just beyond the old walls of the City of London, it came to house not only folk avoiding the City authorities' control, but also dirty and disruptive industries, and several institutions of social control and punishment.

- **Industry:** Neighbouring Smithfield, a leading cattle market, and parts of Clerkenwell, housed many butchers. But other local industries included

watch and clockmaking, and later lockmaking. As printing became widespread from the 16th century the area hosted numbers of printers and later publishers: this fed into the local reputation for freethinking and debate.

- **Networks of control:** from the twelfth century several prisons were built in or near the area. Not only were London's largest jails, **Newgate** and the **Fleet**, just down the road, but just north of Clerkenwell Green stood the **Bridewell**, and the **Clerkenwell House of Detention**. With the **Clerkenwell Workhouse**, the **Quaker Workhouse**, the madhouse and the charity school all on neighbouring sites, this area formed a nexus of coercion & repression of the local poor. Another harsh reminder of state power (till 1783) was the '*Heavy Hill*', the old road up Holborn Hill before the Viaduct was built, part of the ritual route taken by the cart carrying condemned prisoners from Newgate to be hung at Tyburn.

Later **Coldbath Fields Prison** was built on Rosebery Avenue, on ultra-modern lines for its times.

But resistance was strong in all these institutions; at times of disorder the prisons were all attacked & prisoners freed; and escapes and riots were common. The most famous escaper was **Jack Sheppard**, who in 1724 broke out of the House of Detention, the Fleet, and Newgate in turn.

- **Rookeries:** The Clerkenwell area, especially around the banks of the Fleet river, became well known for its slums, or 'rookeries', notorious streets of overcrowded garrets and lodging houses, haunts of the poorest, inhabited by criminals, rebels, prostitutes... These areas sheltered outcasts and provided solidarity and unity against authority. The largest Clerkenwell rookery was **Saffron Hill**; neighbouring infamous streets like **Union Court**, **Field Lane**, **Chick Lane** and **West Street** were also infamous, and **Turnmill Street** was also a well-know redlight district.

These areas were feared by the authorities, not least as they provided havens for thieves, and rioters and escaped prisoners during uprisings like the Gordon Riots of 1780. Through the 19th Century campaigns of moral reform and slum clearance targetted the rookeries: notorious streets were demolished to build new roads like Farringdon Road, Charterhouse Street, and Clerkenwell Road, and new Model Dwellings were built to house and discipline those inhabitants considered worth saving.

- **Radicalism:** Clerkenwell has been called '*the hub of the radical wheel*'. Movements that grew up for parliamentary reform & working class representation, agitations around work, wages, unemployment, and social or political issues which working class organisations took up, could all be found focussed here. The French Revolution helped to inspire a movement for parliamentary reform in the 1790s. The **London Corresponding Society**, a working class organisation, initially working for reform, was strong in Clerkenwell, meeting in the *Jerusalem Tavern*. The authorities repressed the reform movement viciously, which led to radicals plotting a revolutionary uprising - groups met in local pubs, like the *Baptists Head*, in St Johns Lane, or the *Bleeding Heart* in Hatton Garden.

After the Napoleonic Wars, in a climate of recession, there was a new upsurge of agitation for reform; mass meetings were held on **Spa Fields**, off today's Rosebery Avenue; in December 1816 one led to a huge riot. Once again, government repression led to plans for revolt. Meanwhile, there was a flowering of radical publishing: the *Black Dwarf*, a leading radical paper, was published from Rosebery Avenue, and local shops spring up selling radical literature, like **John Cleave's** shop in Shoe Lane, off Farringdon Road. These shops serve as meeting points for local troublemakers and as distribution points for the numerous 'unstamped' radical newspapers. Another local meeting place was the **Literary & Scientific Institution**, founded by female secularist **Eliza Sharple**s in Warner Street in the 1840s for anti-religious discussions and scientific lectures & classes. These were all part of a strong artisan tradition of self-education.

- Later, the **National Union of the Working Classes** was strong here in the early 1830s; in May 1833 a NUWC demonstration on **Coldbath Fields** was kettled (yes even then) by the new Metropolitan Police, leading to a pitched battle in which a policeman was stabbed to death. The inquest (held in the *Calthorpe Arms* on Grays Inn Road) concluded this was justifiable homicide, since the 'peelers' had attacked the rally!

- The NUWC fed into the the **Chartist** movement (1830s-40s), the first great self-organised political movement of the British working class. Both moderate

Chartists (such as the **London Working Mens Association**) and the 'physical force' wing (eg the **London Democratic Association**) met on the Green, in local coffee shops like *Lunts*, on the Green, or *Hopkinsons*, in Saffron Hill. Local Chartist meetings were often attacked by police, and one occasion the resulting battle spread to the rooves of Clerkenwell houses. In 1848, Chartists disillusioned by the futility of petitioning for 'their rights' were planning an uprising: 300 of their ball cartridges were dug up by police in Clerkenwell's **St James Churchyard**. Later, the First International, the **International Workingmans Association**, met at no **37a Clerkenwell Green**: a building that has been a focus for socialists, trade unionists, & communists for 150 years. Later the **Social Democratic Federation** (Britain's first Marxist grouping), its marxist-anarchist offshoot the **Socialist League**, and several anarchist groups all held public meetings here between the 1890s and World War 1. The Socialist League's HQ stood on Farringdon Lane, while the SDF's printing press was housed at 37a Clerkenwell Green, which has since become the **Marx Memorial Library**.

- **Mayday** has been celebrated here as International Workers Day since its origins in 1890, when the first Workers Mayday was attacked here by police; trade unionists still march annually from the Green on May 1st.

But the area hosted subversion even into the 1980s: the **London Workers Group**, a forum for communists, anarchists & other non-party revolutionaries regularly met at the now-demolished *Metropolitan* pub, at the junction of Clerkenwell Rd and Farringdon Rd.

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Lots more on the radical history of Clerkenwell can be found in our short book, *Reds on the Green*, available from us for £5.00