

Dolphin Tavern, 1769:
the Bold Defiance: militant
silkweavers organise



Sit-in against racist attacks, 1978

Fascists in the area: Union
Movement at Kerbela St (1960s),
1960s British National Party
Cheshire St/Brick Lane,
National Front 1970s, BNP
1980s-90s... encouraging racist vio-
lence... but resisted by
anti-fascists and locals

Brickfield, 1826:
hungry crowds stole
food/animals en masse
& held communal
cook-ins

Poilshe Yidel, first
socialist paper in Yiddish,
137 Commercial St



the Arbetter Fräintgroup

Notorious rookery
demolished for building of
Commercial St, 1840s

Christchurch Hall,
socialist, anarchist &
strike meetings;
anti-religious balls!

Spital Square

John Wilkes speaking
to crowds, 1768

Sugar Loaf Pub, 187
Hanbury St, anarchist
hangout 1892-1906
Socialist People's
Restaurant, 3 Princelet St
Princelet St c. 1900

Conservation as
gentrification: the
Spitalfields Trust

Former
Spitalfields
Mkt.

Christ Church,
built to 'civilise'
the mob, 1736

Wilkes St

Brushfield St
Arbeter
Fräint
anarchist
weekly
founded
1885

Chauver's Silk factory
attacks by
silkweavers 1769

Church gardens
homeless crashpad for
150 years...



Bengali squatting 1970s
Heneage St
Chicksand St

Hebrew
Socialist
Union 1876

White's Row
Jack
Sheppard
born
1702



Fashion St
Middle class campaign
against infamous
Flower & Dean St
slum, 19th century

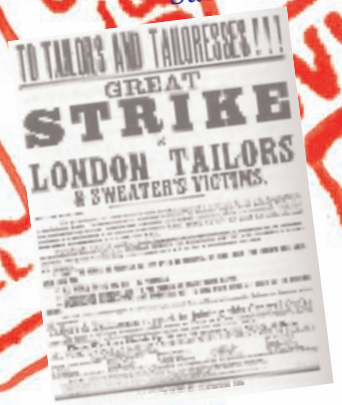
Rebellious silkweavers riots/direct
action, 17th - 18th Centuries

Anti-Irish riots, 1736: Angel &
Crown tavern besieged

Old Montague St
1906 tailors strike
organised from
Old Montague
St.

Historical
Spitalfields:
*Poverty &
Disorder*

between Aldgate & Brick Lane
inhabited by "idle, vagrant, loose
and disorderly persons," 18th Century



Radical Spitalfields

Spitalfields has for centuries been dominated by workshops, slums and the poor. Outside the walls & jurisdiction of City of London, outcasts, the poor, criminals, and the rebellious clustered here. Between Aldgate and Brick Lane was known for "idle, vagrant, loose and disorderly persons" by the early 18th Century; the whole area filled with run-down, over-crowded housing, cheap lodging houses, brothels & pubs. Brick Lane, was described in the 1880s as "a land of beer and blood". But the area was also the City's "first industrial suburb": a large clothing trade grew up, & residents formed a pool of cheap labour for the City,

Docks & in breweries & furniture trades. The relationship between the affluent City and Spitalfields' often poverty-stricken residents has defined the area's history: even today the local clothing trade depends on orders from West End fashion shops.

Disorder has often been a regular feature of life here: poverty, partly caused by periodic depressions in cloth trade, led to outbreaks of rebellion, sometimes to riots aimed at their bosses, sometimes at migrant workers seen as lowering wages or taking work away from 'natives'; but also to radical politics, attempts at collective solutions to their problems.

SILKWEAVERS

Silkweaving was the major industry in Spitalfields for 300 years. The Weavers fought their employers in the 17th/18th centuries, over wages, conditions & increasing mechanization which threatened their earnings. The unstable silk trade brought intermittent poverty, often plunging Spitalfields into desperation. The silkweavers were also famous for idleness & drunkenness: taking Monday off, and slacking off work to drink and hang out. Being relatively highly paid, when trade were good, if the silkweavers could survive on 3 days work a week, they would.

Weavers rioted in 1675 against new machines, & 1697-1700 and 1719-20 against imports on foreign silks. In the 1760s, anger at low pay rates broke out into wage riots, machine smashings, attacks on the ruling class, and cutting silk from looms, culminating in the 1769 'Cutter's Riots', which saw bitter violence, threatening letters to employers, raids on factories, bringing army occupation.

In response to wage cuts, a club called the Cutters, or the Bold Defiance levied a tax on anyone who owned or possessed a loom. Lewis Chauvet, leading manufacturer of silk handkerchiefs, defied the Cutters: as a result, in August, they cut the silk from 100s of his workers looms, and tried to force his workers to join up. Magistrates, Bow St Runners and troops raided the Cutters' HQ, the Dolphin Tavern (in modern Boundary Street): in the ensuing fight two cutters & a soldier died. As a result 5 weavers were hanged. Chauvet's factory at 39 Crispin Street, was attacked by a crowd, who smashed the windows & burned his furniture; over a year later, Daniel Clarke, a small employer who had testified against some of the hanged

men (paid by Chauvet) was chased through Spitalfields streets & stoned to death. 2 more weavers were hanged for his death.

In 1773, further discontent led to the Spitalfields Acts, a paternalist measure to ensure peace: wages were set at a reasonable level by the local authorities, bosses who broke the rate were fined £50. The Acts did push some employers to move elsewhere, but wages weren't reduced to previous starvation levels. But riots and cuttings ended: to some extent weavers were split and diverted from rebellion. Repeal of the Acts in 1824 led to terrible poverty in area. At least some turned to mass social crime: in Spicer St, (now Buxton St), in 1826, crowds met to cook food stolen from shops en masse & seized animals going to Smithfield & Barnet markets. After 1830, the London silkweaving industry went into a terminal decline... to be largely destroyed by the 1860 Treaty with France that allowed cheaper french silks in without duty.

RADICALS AND REBELS

In 1702 Jack Sheppard was born in White's Row; he grew up to become a thief & prison escaper extra-ordinaire, hero to working class people 100 years after his execution. Jack symbolises of the Disorderly nature of this area: poor and rebellious for many centuries; always resistant to authority.

The intermittent poverty and rebelliousness of the weavers led to a tradition of support for radical groups, from the Levellers, through populist demagogue John Wilkes, who spoke to a vast crowd in Wilks Street in 1768; the United Englishmen, physical force democrats influenced by the French Revolution; to the post-Napoleonic

radicals plotting insurrection against a hated government; to the Chartist East London Democratic Association.

Later socialism, anarchism and communism would spread here, especially among the migrant Jewish community. Jewish radicals and trade unionists, especially in the tailoring trades, riddled with bad pay and terrible conditions, built strong unions, & created socialist & anarchist groups. The Hebrew Socialist Union, formed in Gun St, in 1876, aiming to spread socialism among Jews and non-Jews, & support unions, fell victim to religious dispute and repression from the Anglo-Jewish hierarchy. Later the Yiddish socialist (later anarchist) paper, *Arbeter Frait*, founded in Fort St, ran weekly from 1886 to 1914, and was central in building a strong East End Jewish anarchist movement. From 1892 till 1906 the *Arbeter Frait* group met weekly at the Sugar Loaf Pub, 187 Hanbury Street; it was largely made up of sweatshop tailors, men and women, badly paid, and half-starved.

Massive tailors strikes in 1889, 1906 and 1912, in which the anarchists were central, won improvements in pay and conditions, though often they were quickly clawed back by employers. Tailors' support for dockers' strikes in 1911-12 also helped to break down traditional anti-semitism & made links that lasted decades.

The Jewish anarchist workers movement declined with WW1. Later many Jews especially socialists & anarchists returned to Russia after the 1917 revolution. Many anarchos and syndicalists joined the Communist Party in the 1920s.

RACISM & RESISTANCE

This area has always been home to large migrant communities. Successive waves of migrants have made their homes here: often the poorest incomers, almost always dissenters, or identifiably apart in religion or race; sometimes competing for the jobs of the native population... Huguenot silkweavers, the Irish employed to undercut them, Jewish refugees from 19th-century pogroms in Russia, & Bengalis who have settled here since the 1950s. Groups hostile to the most recent arrivals have always targeted Brick Lane, winning support from racist working class people locally, by exploiting fears & whipping up hatred.

By the early 18th Century the Irish were numerous in Spitalfields; frequently poor or destitute. They were accused of working for lower wages, especially in weaving & building; there were anti-Irish riots in Spitalfields in 1736: mobs attacked Irish pubs, killing at least one Irish lad. Later, large-scale Jewish immigration from Russia following persecution there brought 1000s of

mainly poor Jews into Spitalfields between 1880 & 1905. By 1901 many streets around Brick Lane were 100 per cent Jewish. There were fierce anti-immigrant campaigns from local MPs and clergy, rightwing groups like the British Brothers' League, & later Mosley's British Union of Fascists, strong in Bethnal Green and Shoreditch. But Jewish migration was also opposed by East End trade unions.

The Cheshire Street area was a fascist haunt for decades: later Mosleyites the Union Movement in the 1940s, the National Labour Party, c. 1958; & the original British National Party (1960s) who later helped to form the National Front in 1967. During the 1970s NF activity locally contributed to a massive rise in racist attacks and deaths.

Large-scale Bengali migration into Spitalfields began in the 1950s; mainly men came first, arriving in the fifties workers, mostly in the cloth trade. Later, they sent for their wives and families, many leaving extreme poverty, natural disaster and war in Bangladesh. Spitalfields and Whitechapel again saw the growth of concentrated migrant communities, once again mainly poor and facing the same dynamics of racism and resistance, as well as an ongoing struggle between insularity and integration into the East End.

In the 1970s, NF activity & a campaign of racist attacks, including the murder of Altab Ali in Whitechapel, as well as police collusion with the racists, led to the Bengali community organizing, with large demos against racist murders, self-defence patrols, and an 8000-strong strike against racist violence in 1978. Bengalis & anti-racist groups also regularly occupied the National Front paperselling sites in Brick Lane. Mass racial violence calmed down in the 1980s, but into the '90s BNP were still being opposed here, with Anti-Fascist Action & others occupying their meeting points, blockading rightwing pubs & fighting pitched battles with nazis.

Rightwing propaganda is still bearing fruit though: in 1999 Brick Lane was bombed by nazi sympathizer David Copeland, a week after he attacked Brixton; a week later his bomb in a gay pub in Soho killed 3 people.

HOUSING

Spitalfields housing has long been of poor quality. Commercial street was built in the 1840s, partly to break up a notorious area of narrow alleys and dark yards, filled with the poor & desperate. Charity, police, religion and coercion constantly failed to control the area, only demolition would do. 1300 poor people were evicted and, the most infamous streets knocked down. But 30 years later Flower & Dean Street

was still *“the most menacing working class area of London”*. The middle class feared the disorderly poor would rise up and destroy them, if not kept down by charity & coercion. New tenement blocks were built by Model Dwelling Companies, off Commercial Street, sponsored by middle class housing reformers. But rents were set high to exclude the very poor, making sure only the most respectable of working class could afford it; the rest were forced to overcrowd other slums.

Ironically a century later these blocks had decayed themselves & become slums, & the same process was repeated: plans were laid to scatter residents and develop the area for a better class of inhabitant; this time tenants’ resistance would change the outcome..

Into the 20th century it was still overcrowded, with no hot water, no heating, bad sanitation, no baths, no inside toilets. The private tenements and terraces were especially bad, but council housing was also in a state. Tenants got together in many blocks locally to force the GLC to rehouse them in the ‘70s. Tower Hamlets council tenants, many of who had been moved out of slums, also fought to improve the poor quality council housing they lived in. While some wanted to leave the area, others struggled to stay. Campaigns for rehousing in area, & modernisation of existing housing, came up against council plans to sell land off for office developments, for huge profits: a process still going on today.

The growing Bengali community also had to struggle for decent housing. Early settlers mostly crowded into a few houses in Princelet St, Old Montague St, Heneage St, Wilkes St, mainly in multiply occupied private housing (initially council housing wasn’t available to them). Like the (mostly white and mainly aging) residents of the old GLC blocks, the Bengali population, organized

to campaign to be rehoused in Spitalfields, where they worked, not dispersed onto hostile estates elsewhere. But there was also resistance to ghettoisation & creating ‘white’ and ‘asian’ estates. Despite barriers between whites and Bangladeshis, links were created through large-scale campaigns through groups like Spitalfields Community Action Group & Spitalfields Bengali Action Group.

In 1974, Bengalis living in terrible conditions in

run-down and overcrowded private housing, being refused council places, as well as facing discrimination and attacks, effectively excluding them from many council estates, began to squat in Spitalfields and Stepney. The Bengali Housing Action Group, formed in 1976, housed people in blocks around Brick Lane and Spitalfields. At its peak, several hundred Bengali families were squatting in prime development land, in property scheduled for demolition. After much organising and negotiations, many of the rehousing and squatting campaigns succeeded in winning better housing conditions, in the areas people wanted to live in.

GENTRIFICATION AS CONSERVATION

Local residents campaigning to maintain cheap affordable social housing have not only had to fight councils wanting to move them out, and developers hungry to take over land for office building. Conservation has served to increase gentrification: groups like the Spitalfields Trust, whose mission to preserve ‘18th century Spitalfields’; ie formerly posh houses threatened with demolition, and who undertook art-historical activism, of squats, occupations, and sit-ins to preserve Georgian houses in places like Elder St & Spital Square. This has taken houses directly out of public ownership (helped by the council who gave them their houses in some streets, and refused to take over private houses which could have housed Bengali families). They enabled houses they ‘saved’ to be sold cheap to posh Trust members or connections, family, sympathizers etc, some as second homes. Anyone who bought or obtained a house stood to make huge profits, as prices rose astronomically. The process was accelerated by recession in the clothing trade in 80s: buildings with workshops became empty.

Developers, estate agents and financiers followed them, driving up the cost of housing and making it harder for schemes aiming to implement viable schemes for social housing. As in many other such processes, the initial conservationists and the arty types they allied with have since come to oppose further ‘development’ in the area, not sussing that they were part of the thin end of the wedge...

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More available soon in our forthcoming pamphlet about Spitalfields & Brick Lane