

## Agapemonite Church By Julia Lafferty



Georgian Orthodox Church

### Visit to the Cathedral of the Nativity of Our Lord

**On October 14<sup>th</sup> a group of Hackney Society members were to visit the Grade II\* Cathedral of the Nativity of our Lord in Rookwood Road, Upper Clapton which has been a place of worship for London's Georgian Orthodox community since 2011.**

Since its construction in 1892 the Church has served as the London outpost of three very different Christian congregations. The first and most controversial of these was a Victorian religious sect founded in the mid-nineteenth century who called themselves the Agapemonites, a title derived from the Greek for "Abode of Love", but it was the nature of the love promoted by the sect's

founder Henry James Prince which was to scandalize the Victorian public. Prince gathered around himself a group of wealthy followers, predominantly female, who funded the building of the Church in Clapton which was designed by Victorian architect Joseph Morris, and which incorporated statuary by Arthur George Walker.

Apocalyptic imagery from the Bible's Book of Revelation is evident throughout the Church. The main doorway is flanked by large stone carvings of four creatures symbolising the Evangelists - a winged man (St Matthew); a winged lion (St Mark); a winged bull (St Luke); and an eagle (St John). The same four figures, cast in bronze,

look out from the four corners of the base of the spire, under each is the inscription "God is Love". Over the entrance door is carved a quotation from St Matthews' gospel "Love in Judgment and Judgment unto Victory".

On entering the Church, it is the glorious stained glass windows depicting flora and fauna of all kinds and designed by Arts and Crafts designer Walter Crane which immediately catches the attention. When the Church opened in 1896 *The Builder* magazine said of the windows: 'it is difficult to write without superlatives; for richness and magnificence of colour we believe it never has been, and is not likely to be, surpassed'.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has introduced a new element in the shape of a

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## Agapemonite Church *continued*

wooden panel separating the nave from the sanctuary on which is displayed a beautiful collection of icons depicting Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints.

In 2008 Historic England upgraded the building to Grade II\* to reflect both its uniqueness as the only Agapemonite church and the events which occurred during the sect's occupation. So, what was it that made the leader of the Salvation Army, General William Booth denounce the Agapemonite's new leader J.H Smyth-Pigott as presiding over a 'cesspool of sin'. Lurid rumours had begun to circulate about the number of "spiritual brides" which Smyth-Pigott selected for himself from the female congregation, but it was when he

proclaimed himself the new Messiah in September 1902 that an outraged crowd of Hackney residents manhandled him down to a nearby pond with the declared intention of testing whether he could walk on water. Rescued by the local police he wisely decided to retreat to an Agapemonite colony in Somerset, following which the Church lay abandoned for many years until in 1956 the building was taken over by a religious splinter group calling itself the Ancient Catholic Church founded by a former head waiter at the Savoy Hotel. This group was distinguished by its emphasis on faith-healing, catering for both people and animals. Regular animal blessing services were held, and a small altar

adorned with animal miniatures stood in the church entrance.

The last person to lead the declining congregation was Mrs. Pamela Schroder who died in January 2008 leaving an estate of half a million pounds for the "general purposes of the Church". This became the subject of court battles involving both the relatives of Mrs. Schroder and of Smyth-Pigott, who claimed that they should be the beneficiaries of Mrs. Schroder's estate. However, the legal ruling was that the Ancient Catholic Church was defunct, and the money should be used for an appropriate charitable purpose as defined by the Charity Commission.

## Sutton House – What next? A Personal View

By Laurie Elks

**In an article titled *Sutton House – a Campaign remembered (Hackney History 20)* I portrayed the campaign started by Hackney activists in 1987 who over a few years persuaded the National Trust to abandon its plans to sell Sutton House (SH) and to set up a unique partnership model with the local community to take charge of the House.**

Not only was SH re-imagined as an important historic house but also a vibrant programme of community events was established featuring talks, performances, concerts, craft fairs and ceilidhs in the Wenlock Barn; a programme of education for schools and – of course – a licensed café and bar to lubricate things. As

Angus Stirling, director of the Trust at this time remarked, the Sutton House campaign prompted the Trust to re-think the presentation of all its smaller London properties which had become rather dull repositories for static exhibits. SH showed a different way for the future.

SH has receded far from the heady days which followed the launch of the restored House in 1992. The joint committee structure was dismantled in 2004 (having been increasingly side-lined by NT management), and the Sutton House Society, which had organised much of the community programming, wound itself up two years later due to waning active membership. Events programming became difficult as the Trust became less willing to make the Wenlock Barn available,

prompting the Sutton House Music Society to apparently abandon its eponymous venue and decamp to Stoke Newington. Opening hours have been progressively reduced and are currently restricted to two days per week. And the café and bar have long since gone.

Perhaps the greatest loss was the abandonment of the education programme, a decision which I am informed was taken centrally by NT. This was particularly unfortunate for a property such as SH which stands in the middle of a poor and deprived area of London (Hackney cool and gentrification notwithstanding). Schools sessions opened the House to this local community and it was normal in school days to meet Hackney kids careering around the courtyard in historic costume, a contrast

with the core demographic naturally drawn to properties like SH.

As a final indignity, NT offered jobs at other properties to all the SH staff, leaving it closed and unstaffed for several weeks in the spring and inevitably disrupting institutional memory. In a rather bland statement, the NT explained to me that “we always champion career progression and we’re excited that they [SH staff] have been able to use the skills they’ve learnt at the Trust to take the next step in their careers”. To which the appropriate response might be “but still”!

The better news is that there is an enthusiastic young team now in charge, led by the House Manager Ryan McMahon

who has redeployed from Florence House in County Fermanagh. Ryan and his colleagues understand the long retreat that has taken place and are committed to re-energise SH to the extent that resource (and presumably National Trust *diktats*) permit. A hugely encouraging first step has been the decision (going against the national tide) to relaunch the schools programme. It would be great to see more public events in Wenlock Barn, more extended open hours, a re-opened café, and partnership working with other heritage organisations in the Borough. I am persuaded that Ryan and his team would like to support this and, if other community groups reach out to SH, let us hope that helps to make these things happen.

And if any *Spaces* readers have not visited SH recently – or at all – it is a house with great atmosphere and exceptionally interesting history. It has been owned in turn by, among others, a great Tudor Courtier - Ralph Sadleir; by City merchants, a succession of schools, and the church of St John at Hackney; and occupied more recently by a feisty trade union and – briefly – by a colourful bunch of squatters – layers of Hackney history indeed and all enthusiastically explained by the excellent volunteer guides. Let’s not give up on Sutton House.

## Hackney Pubs – an occasional series

### The Elderfield, 57 Elderfield Road, Clapton E5

By Bob Mitchell

**The number of pubs across the country continues to decline and Hackney is not immune to this trend having lost a number of them in recent years. So what is the future for those that remain and can they adapt to the harsher financial world in which we now live?**

The Elderfield, in Lower Clapton is an example of a back street boozer that appears to have survived and indeed, thrived over recent years.

It was built on the corner of Elderfield and Blurton roads in the late 1860s as the rapidly expanding Clapton Pwark estate developed around it. An early reference shows the transfer of its licence from Stephen Stiles to William Stiles in May 1869. Ownership through the 1870s to the 1890s lay with Smyth, Keeble and Co. The 1881 census shows Sarah Bowser as the manageress of the Priory Tavern, as it was then known. She was 52 years of age and supported by two of her nephews, Mitchell Fryer, an 18-year-old barman and William Wade as a potman. Her niece, Alice Clayton, 14, also lived on the premises. A decade later, Arthur Gilbanks Smyth, 30, and his brother and business partner, Walter Smyth, 23, were running the pub with three live-in barmen and a domestic servant. By 1898, a new landlord had been appointed, 30 year old Charles Lovelock and the pub became the Head Quarters for one of the leading professional football



teams of the day, Clapton Orient, now known as Leyton Orient. The club played their home matches in nearby Millfields Road until May 1930 when they moved half a mile to the Speedway Stadium in Lea Bridge Road. By 1902, Lovelock had become the president of the football club and he continued to run the pub until at least 1915.

The Priory was substantially updated around 1935 in art deco style and internally it retains a large circular, concealed lighting feature together with two thirds height wooden panelling and herringbone wood block flooring which reveals traces of the former bars within the pub, including a likely Off-Licence facility. CAMRA (The Campaign for Real Ale) lists the pub as ‘having an

interior of special national historic interest.’ In 2008 the pub was renamed as the Eclipse. However, this led to a dispute with a west London wine bar of the same name and the pub became appropriately, the Elderfield by the end of that year. If you look carefully, you can just make out the fading image of the Priory on the corner of the external brickwork.

Nowadays, this is a popular place for people of all ages, providing a good range of drinks and typical pub food together with external bench seating and what seems like a never-ending supply of extra stools should you need them. Enjoy your local, including this one! Cheers.

## A note from the Editor

# Could you be the new Editor of Spaces?

As of the next issue this Newsletter will need a new Editor. If you love Hackney and its history and buildings, you will be able to commission articles and compile and edit a newsletter ready for its membership.

If you are interested, please contact [info@hackneysociety.org](mailto:info@hackneysociety.org)

## Noticeboard

### New members needed for Central and South Hackney CAAC

One of Hackney's Conservation Areas Advisory Committees (CAAC) needs new members.

A CAAC reviews all planning applications for new buildings and alterations within its area. Central and South Hackney CAAC are looking for people with knowledge of and love for Hackney. You do not need experience of the planning process.

Please contact [centralsouthhackneycaac@gmail.com](mailto:centralsouthhackneycaac@gmail.com)

### 195 Mare Street mural

The former Fry Refuge featured in Spaces 80 has unveiled a new mural by Thiago Mazza honouring the local history of Loddiges Nursery.



### Hackney Museum upgrade

Hackney Council has announced that GuM Studios will be the architects to work on the upgrade to the Museum. The works will provide space for a new permanent exhibition, a community room, and a refurbished shop. It is planned to be completed in 2027.

### Mildmay Club

The club has launched Mildmay Stories: an oral history. Over the past year volunteers have interviewed four generations of club members – there are tales of dressing up on Saturday nights, snooker tournaments, the difficulties of joining, near-bankruptcy, and small-scale corruption.

The launch was at the Club on Open House weekend in September, but it is

also available in the Members bar (on headphones) and to download from their website via this link -

Mildmay Stories  
<https://mildmay.club/oral-history-project>

### Albion Square Drinking Fountain

The restored drinking fountain – originally funded by John Passmore Edwards – has been unveiled in Albion Square Gardens.



## Hackney Society Events

### The South-West Border of Hackney

Sunday 19 November 2023, 11:00am

#### Walk with Lesley Thompson

Parish and borough borders have often evolved over the centuries due to a mix of changing land ownership, parish church catchments, early settlements and roads, and natural features such as springs and ponds.

This walk "Beats the Bounds" of the south-western border of today's Hackney, from De Beauvoir and the Regent's Canal to Finsbury, Shoreditch and the edge of the City in Moorfields. We will pass a varied mix of sites including factories and ironworks, canal basins, WWII devastation, the lost hospitals quarter, a natural swimming pool, the birthplace of Sarson's vinegar and a mediaeval well.

Booking essential, details will be available from a *Spacelets* email or [hackneysociety.org](mailto:hackneysociety.org)

£5 for Hackney Society members, £10 for guests

### Hoxton Hall

Monday 4 December 2023, 6:30pm

#### A visit and pre-Christmas social gathering

A traditional music hall dating from the 1860's, Hoxton Hall then became the home of a temperance society and the Girls Guild of Good Life. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> it has developed community education and arts activities as well as becoming an atmospheric venue for professional shows and heritage events

We will take a look round the hall and have a drink and a chat in the bar afterwards.

Booking essential, details will be available from a *Spacelets* email or [hackneysociety.org](mailto:hackneysociety.org)

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