

HISTORYtalk

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THE BATTLE FOR PORTOBELLO ROAD



In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* novel by GK Chesterton, Mr Barker describes a battle in the area. Mr Buck consults his map and asks him, "Was that Portobello Road?" Barker replies, "Yes; Portobello Road—I saw it afterwards; but, my God—what a place it was!"

The prophetic story from 1904, set in the future, was inspired by Chesterton's revelation that a row of shops in North Kensington should be preserved and defended from civic interference.

In the early 21st century it seems that barely a week goes by without another small shop on Portobello being forced to close by a rent hike and replaced by a corporate chain store. Even the Travel Bookshop and Samantha Cameron's favourite butchers Kingsland have recently shut up shop.

After the appearance of the All Saints fashion store on the site of the Lipka antiques market, there was the struggle to save the Good Fairy arcade. The current battle of Portobello is against extending the

opening hours of the Admiral Vernon arcade—as this would mean higher rents, forcing out the traders to make way for another chain store.

Yet the spirit of *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* lives on in the Save Portobello Market campaign, embodied in the rebel antiques dealer Marion Gattleson. Earlier this year, after Marion was banned from arcades owned by the landlord Warren Todd, a demo was staged in which protesters wore Marion face masks in solidarity.

History of Portobello Road

‘Costermongers, totters, fly-pitchers and cheap-jacks would arrive at a certain point in the market before 6am, when a whistle would be blown to signal the start of a free-for-all. They would then run with their barrows to get a pitch for the day.’ Audrey Counsell *Portobello Road: Images of a Street Market*

“4 generations of the family have been market stallholders. My husband’s grandmother, Lydia Price, had a stall in Portobello Road and his grandfather Ephraim bought a greengrocer’s shop in Golborne Road which is still owned by the family. The actual stall we’re using is an old one with iron wheels. It was made for my father-in-law years ago. My son David likes working in the market and is going to carry on the business. Some people are pessimistic about the future of the fruit and veg market because of the competition from the big supermarkets, but I’d like to think it will continue and there’ll still be Prices in the market in the next century.” Linda Price

“The lane, as we called it, had stalls either side of the road, right from Wornington Road to Westbourne Grove. The main stalls were Flo and Lily Bartlett’s vegetable stall, Fred Kilroy’s fish stall... On the corner was Cain’s fruit stall. They had a black girl serving at the stall sometimes. I remember the Glasgows too. Outside Marks & Spencer (at 233) was my mother’s cousin, her name was Piper. She had a salad stall... The cats’ meat (horse flesh) stall was outside the Golden Cross (at 240, now Shannon’s Market Bar)...”

“Coming up to the bridge we used to shout out for Mr Pike who had an allotment over the wall at the side of the railway bridge and we would ask him for 2 pennyworth of rhubarb, some spring onions, mint... On the corner of Acklam Road was Jo Green who sold ice-cream in the summer, hot potatoes and chestnuts in the winter. There were lots of Jewish people that had stalls and shops. The brothers Maurice, Nathan and Johnnie Isaacs had a junk stall.” Frances Kilroy



The history of Portobello Road begins with a battle in central America in 1739. Admiral Vernon’s capture of the Spanish stronghold of Porto Belo (now in Panama) resulted in the naming of the farm and consequently the lane/road and market.

The painting of the farmhouse in 1864 depicts an entirely rural scene with the country lane winding its way up the hill. But within 10 years the lane was a road and Portobello market’s ‘general London notoriety’ was established for ‘cheery cries and the surging crowds and heavily laden stalls.’

William Bull reminisced about the market’s early days: ‘Carnival time was on Saturday nights in the winter when it was thronged like a fair... the people overflowed from the pavement so that the roadway was quite impassable for horse traffic...’ The costermongers’ barrows were lighted by naphtha lamps, and the side-

streets hosted patent medicine vendors, conjurers and itinerant musicians.

‘Imagination begins with raffish Portobello Road,’ wrote Monica Dickens, Charles’s great-granddaughter, of her 1920s childhood memories when ‘it was still literally a flea market. All along the gutter rickety stalls and barrows were piled high with rags, torn jerseys, mismatched shoes, chipped china, bent tin trays, 3-legged furniture and malfunctioning appliances from the early days of electricity.’

On the Portobello literary tour, when Monica was going down the lane for a packet of sherbet from the Dickens house on the corner of Chepstow Villas, up the hill through the Chesterton battle scene, George Orwell was setting out from number 22 to go *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

The 20th Century Theatre on the corner of Westbourne Grove (formerly Archer Street) was originally a non-conformist meeting hall, which became a theatre in the 1860s known as the Victoria Hall and then the Bijou. In its heyday, Charles Dickens is said to have appeared there and such theatre and music hall stars as Marie Lloyd, Henry Irving, Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Albert Chevalier trod the boards.

From 1911 to ’18 the Bijou was a cinema. Then it reverted to theatrical use as the Century Theatre of Lena Ashwell’s Players who included Laurence Olivier. The name was changed to the 20th Century Theatre in 1936 when it staged performances by the Eurythmy group. The theatre closed in 1963 and was used as an antiques showroom/warehouse until its 21st century re-launch as a venue of book launches and fashion shows.

Stall Stories: Market Forces



The market started opening through the week after World War 1 veterans set up their stalls in spite of opposition from the shopkeepers and Council. After a long-running protest campaign, Portobello became official in 1927 with licensed stalls and market inspectors.

In her market sketch book, Audrey Counsell pays tribute to the vegetable stallholder Linda Price (at the Westbourne Park Road junction) and the longstanding market trader families, the Cains, Glasgows and Spencers, for giving Portobello 'its sense of history and a continuity of tradition'—as opposed to clinical supermarkets. But she cites the market Tesco's as an exception 'as the character of Portobello has spread inside its doors, giving it that personal, friendly atmosphere of a village store.'

The area's multicultural tradition can be traced back to gypsies making seasonal stop-offs and Irish navvies settling in Notting Dale. As well as Jewish, Greek and Italian communities, all parts of the British Isles were represented. Welsh people ran most of the dairies and butchers' shops—the site of Tesco's was occupied by the Alderney dairy run by John Jones in the 20s.

The Spanish quarter of the market to the north, between Lancaster Road and Golborne Road, was founded in the 30s by anti-Franco exiles at the

time of the Spanish Civil War. The Afro-Caribbean community was established in another battle of Portobello in 1958 when West Indians fought back against white rioters from Totobag's café at 9 Blenheim Crescent. The Spanish were joined in Golborne by Portuguese and Moroccans, and more recently by refugees from conflicts in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia.

The antiques market was established after the Second World War, following the closure of the Caledonian Road market in 1948 when many of the dealers relocated to Portobello. In the early 50s Susan Garth launched the Red Lion arcade: 'London's first antiques market making Portobello Road an international institution,' according to her plaque. In the wake of which, a lot of the old shops between Chepstow Villas and Elgin Crescent were converted into indoor antique markets. The Admiral Vernon arcade was previously Jesse Smith's greengrocers and florists.

'The Portobello Village' between Lancaster Road and Oxford Gardens, the 'alternative quarter' hippy market, as described by Craig Sams, consisted of 'reggae music, soul food, underground newspapers, wholewheat bread, Bedouin dresses, art deco objects, natural shoes, herbal medicines, a free shop, brown rice and a gypsy fortune teller.'

"There were plenty of beggars or buskers of all types trying to get money. There was Silly Henry that had a gramophone on a pram and he used to dance to the tunes that were played. There were barrel organs... Men were dressed up as women. They had straw hats with cherries or flowers, and long silk bloomers which they showed when they danced and lifted up their skirts. There was the man that played the concertina outside the pub doors and the piano player with the singer that travelled along on the back of the van, men that sold matches and bootlaces, children too sold matches or candles... Women with large baskets sold mint, sage, parsley and tyme." Frances Kilroy

"There was a band consisting of a saxophone, trumpet, cornet and banjo that would start out from the Sun In Splendour and walk down Portobello Road, playing all the way to the Gas Works. Someone would walk behind and collect money in a hat. There were also 2 trumpet players. One would stand outside the Warwick Castle and the other outside the Colville." Ernest Bell

"I first visited Portobello Road in 1946 when I was on leave from the Polish Army. There were only about 3 antique stalls then, selling bits and pieces – jewellery, silver, silver plate, some rubbish. But I liked it and I decided when I was demobbed to set up a stall here myself... I dealt in jewellery, Victorian brooches, lockets... I bought the shop here in 1960. It had been a second-hand bookshop and downstairs, a bakery. I converted it into an indoor antique market and covered in the yard behind to give extra space." Wallace Lipka

Portobello: People, Past, Present by Shaaron Whetlor and Liz Bartlett

'Getting hung up all day on smiles, walking down Portobello Road for miles, greeting strangers in Indian boots, yellow ties and old brown suits, growing old's my only danger, cuckoo clocks and plastic socks, lampshades of old antique leather, nothing looks weird, not even beard, or the boots made out of feathers...' Cat Stevens 'Portobello Road' 1966



MURDER IN NOTTING HILL

MARK OLDEN

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HISTORYtalk was founded in 1989 (registered as Kensington and Chelsea Community History Group) to encourage people of all ages and backgrounds to study, understand and contribute to the history of the local area and its varied communities.

Our projects are designed to build bridges between people of different backgrounds and generations, encouraging joint learning and communication as an aid to understanding both the past and the present.

HISTORYtalk new address

With a lot of help from our friends— You will recall from previous issues of the newsletter that HISTORYtalk has been struggling to stay in existence for the past 3 years. Changes in funding criteria and the financial climate that is challenging all our lives at the present time have pushed HISTORYtalk to the brink of insolvency.

With our creditors mounting by the week and staff being paid late, it would have been easy to throw the towel in and admit defeat. But the history of our community needs to be preserved and recorded for future generations. Thankfully others thought so too and have come to our rescue just in time! We are now

looking forward to the future thanks to a generous offer by Kensington & Chelsea Social Council of office accommodation and a substantial interest free loan by a local resident for which we are very grateful. The financial position is still fragile and will continue to be so as we pay off our debts but the important thing is that we have survived. You can help us by renewing your membership now or by sending a donation to help us continue with our work. *Pat Fuller*

From October 3 2011 our address will be Lighthouse West London, 111-117 Lancaster Road W11 1QT. Our telephone number will be 020 7243 9806 and our email remains info@historytalk.org

Notting Hill Roots talks

The Notting Hill Roots autumn 2011 talks—The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: reflections on the past and our future—feature:

Week 1 Thursday October 13
Portobello Roots: the market in the 1920s and 30s with local historians Eddie Adams and Tom Vague.

Week 2 Thursday October 20
Portobello Present and Future: *Stall Stories* film by Colville School pupils and a panel discussion with speakers from the Save Portobello Market campaign and the film maker Matthew Rosenberg.

Week 3 Thursday November 3
Murder in Notting Hill: a talk by Mark Olden about the killing of Kelso Cochrane in 1959 based on his new book.

Week 4 Thursday November 11
Britain at Work: what we've done so far—website progress report—with Jeff Howarth from the TUC Library and Dave Welsh.

All talks begin at 6.30pm in the Methodist Church Community Room, 240B Lancaster Road W11 4AH, side entrance to church, nearest tube Ladbroke Grove, buses 23, 52, 452, 295, 228 and 7.

North African Studies Courses

HISTORYtalk is happy to announce two new courses on North African studies with tutor Jeremy Landor: North Africa from Morocco to Egypt—an introduction to the history, politics and culture of North Africa, free 8 week course starting on Monday October 10 at 6.30pm to 8.30pm and then every Monday evening ending on December 19.

Migration and the Arabic Language—an introduction to the contribution of North African migrant and refugee communities to Britain and Europe, and the Arabic language, free 6 week course starting on Saturday October 29 at 3pm to 6pm and then every Saturday ending on December 3. Both courses will be held in the Methodist Church Community Room.