

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

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The Italian Collection

By Bettina Reiber and Robin Hull

The Estorick, on the corner of Canonbury Square and Canonbury Road close to Highbury Corner, is Islington's only specialist art gallery. We visited on a wonderfully sunny morning in May to talk to art historian Roberta Cremoncini. Roberta leads a small team in curating continuously changing exhibitions together with the main collection of remarkable paintings by Futurist artists such as Balla, Boccioni, Carrà, and Severini. In addition, the Collection contains many other important Italian 20th Century drawings, paintings and sculpture by artists such as de Chirico, Morandi, Rosso, Marini, and Greco.

Michael Estorick, who was living in Highbury, found the Georgian building in a severely run-down state in 1994, but sensed its potential to house a charitable bequest from his parents, Eric and Salome. They owned 79 important Italian works of art having built their collection during travels in Italy after the Second World War. They had made personal contact with the artists, whose work they discovered there and so admired. The house was bought from the sale of a Chagall and a Kandinsky in their collection.

With the help of a Lottery grant for its refurbishment, and the inspiration of the architect Nathaniel Gee, Michael Estorick created six fine galleries, maximising the exhibition spaces on the ground floor by placing the entrance at the back of the house. We approached through new gates inspired by the work of Balla, and through a garden newly laid-out four years ago and now coming into maturity.

The garden is a haven, creating a calming transition between the busy road and the galleries. It also doubles as the outdoor space of the café, which has its regulars coming in for lunch and coffee breaks, in pretty and private surroundings. It serves a range of Italian sandwiches, salads and daily specials all made from fresh produce.

Running a new museum is no easy matter. It has to establish itself in the world, attract visitors and gain professional credibility - none of which comes instantly. Visitor numbers are important and currently there are around 20,000 a year. But this is not the only consideration, especially for a relatively small and particular collection like the Estorick, which has been concerned to develop a reputation for lively and serious shows related to the main collection. Since opening in 1998, the Estorick has established links with many Italian collections and there has been quite some coming and going of art work. The whole of the core collection will be

on a three month exhibition in the Palazzo Ducale, Genoa from this September, while the Estorick will be hosting, "Under Mussolini: Decorative and Propaganda Arts in the 1920s and 1930s". This runs from 2 October - 22 December and shows how two decades of Fascist rule impacted on the arts. It includes painting, sculpture, graphic art, photography, furnishings, ceramics and glassware.



VISITORS CAN RELAX IN THE QUIET OF THE GALLERY'S GARDEN

But before that happens there is "Pasta: Italian Culture on a Plate", from 26 June - 15 September 2002. Stephen Bayley, curator of the exhibition, says, "Marinetti deplored it; Elizabeth David adored it. Pasta is the peasant food that became a world staple yet remains as Italian as Vespa or Fellini. This exhibition shows how your lunch was designed."

The Estorick team is keen to connect with other well known cultural centres in Islington, such as the Crafts Council and Almeida Theatre. Earlier this year, Michael Estorick used the Lilian Baylis Theatre to stage an adventurous concert of music specially written by contemporary composers. This was played upon 'sound sculptures' - new sculptures previously shown at the gallery, which were designed to be heard as well as seen. One of those composers was HCA member Rachel Stott. In the coming season Roberta Cremoncini hopes to work in conjunction with the Tower Theatre to put on Futurist sketches in English and Italian. Local schools and colleges have also been discovering the value of the exhibitions for study projects.

Admission is £3.50, concessions £2.50, and there is a worthwhile Membership scheme costing £20 a year, (£25 for two people), which gives entrance to the Collection and exhibition programme, and to Members' evenings with informal talks. More information is available at www.estorickcollection.com. ■

Out for the Count - HC NEWS sneaks under the security barriers on election night

On 3rd May, the Sobell Centre was the scene of Islington's biggest electoral upset for decades, with the Labour Party reduced to a mere 10 seats out of 48 in the new Council. The mood lacked the drama of the cliff-hanging count four years ago, as it soon became obvious the only question was the size of the majority.

As the evening wore on, the thinning ranks of Labour supporters seemed to merge into the shadows, but everywhere there was the unaccustomed sight of bright-eyed young women, striding back and forth, sporting over-large, yellow rosettes and looking as though Daddy had just dropped them off after a gymkhana in Guildford; and their male counterparts in sharp suits and tinted spectacles were even more scary.

If these were the storm-troops, the candidates themselves were a more diverse and less impressive bunch; but the air of smug arrogance that characterised Labour for three decades seemed to have transferred itself seamlessly to some of their opponents.

Leading Councillors, James Kempton and Paul Fox, looked even more pleased with themselves than usual.



ELECTED FOR MILDMAY, Highbury residents Anna Berent and Graham Hay-Smith will be Chair and Vice Chair of the new East Area Committee



COUNCIL LEADER STEVE HITCHENS ENJOYS THE MOMENT OF VICTORY

They had reason, no doubt - a clear mandate and a new Council structure that means all decisions can be taken by an executive cabinet, whose members receive greatly enhanced "allowances". Total Councillors Allowances are budgeted to cost the taxpayer £700,000 this year.

Of the minor parties, the Conservatives were quietly dignified while the Greens were understandably despondent at their failure to capture their best hope, a seat in the new Highbury West Ward. Admittedly, this was an uphill battle given the swathes of natural Labour territory in the North of the Ward; but the decision not to run their best known candidate here was baffling to outsiders.

The Socialist Alliance were justifiably upbeat at their initial showing. Perhaps they see themselves as the inheritors of a crumbling Labour vote. The Christian Alliance had more reason for satisfaction than they displayed - not a big vote, but a respectable one for a new party. The "Save Arthur Simpson Library" candidate gained a stunning 437 votes and earned one of the loudest and least partisan rounds of applause.

The big question is - Just what happened to the Labour vote? Excuses about the unpopularity of Tony Blair will not wash. More likely, the shock of having to fight a campaign without the backing of the Council machine undermined sagging morale among the party faithful; and the natural tendency to desert a sinking ship of the borough's

army of unprincipled place-hunters may have thinned the ranks of Labour activists.

These things apart, a big factor may have been the perception of thousands of public-sector tenants that life under the Lib-Dems, if no better than under Labour, had proved not much worse for most - which was not what they had been led to believe.

Finally, and most fatally for Labour, it may have been a simple matter of demographics. The "Manhattan Loft" vote, which arose when Clerkenwell's offices and workshops were converted wholesale to soulless but smart apartments, has been swelled by the only slightly less chic "Furlong Homes" effect, as the country's middle-market developers have moved in on North Islington's public buildings and vacant lots. The fact is the population is larger, younger and richer than it used to be. The newcomers are Thatcher's Children and Socialism is not on their agenda. Elsewhere they might well be Conservatives. If they stay here long enough, they probably will be.

For the Lib-Dems, winning was the easy bit. Much harder will be to reverse Labour's legacy of massive public debt and ensure that the Council Tax eventually gets spent on services, not on interest payments. If they can do that, their future looks rosy indeed - and the Daily Mail may never again be able to sneer at Islington's Loony Left. ▣

Exercise is the best medicine

One wintry Saturday morning about 18 months ago I woke up, and could barely get out of bed. My hips seemed to have frozen. It occurred to me, rather irrationally you may think, that maybe the surgeon had snipped more than my appendix when I had been recently hospitalised. Or maybe it was just a consequence of not having been able to do yoga for a couple of weeks since the operation. That seemed even more unlikely.

When I shuffled into the doctor's surgery an hour later, he greeted me with a sympathetic smile and reassured me that it probably had more to do with my general lack of fitness, for understandable reasons. Prescribing painkillers and muscle relaxants, he also recommended physiotherapy.

Some months later, still stiff and unable to touch my knees, let alone my toes first thing in the morning, I resolved to try physiotherapy. Although I did my exercises each day, progress felt slow. During one visit I commented on how unfit I felt, even though I am generally an active person, and asked if I should try joining a gym. The thought of all those young, lycra clad, well-toned bodies confidently lifting weights had



always put me off. The response was, "It's certainly worth a try. I'll give you a Prescription for Exercise!"

And so, after an initial assessment and introductory gym session with a friendly trainer at the Sobell Centre, I embarked on a well-designed programme of exercises. The Prescription is for up to 20 sessions, at off-peak times, which have to be completed within a certain number of months. Each session costs £2. You will now find me at 9am on a Saturday morning together with an assortment of other people of all ages, shapes and sizes cycling, walking, stretching and weightlifting.

Despite the early start and the repetitive nature of the exercises, I love it. We are regularly monitored by the trainers to avoid injury and to get maximum benefit. My aches and pains are gradually disappearing, I sleep more soundly and seem to have boundless energy. I will certainly be joining the gym when my prescription expires. ■

North & East London Food Co-op

HCA member, Grace Rwakeiru-Robinson, knows better than most the trials of living on the margins of society in London. A life-threatening illness in 1989, whilst she was here on a short business trip from Uganda, meant she found herself stranded in London without money, papers or friends, because the doctors said it would be too dangerous to fly home.

During a slow recovery, she struggled to survive with a variety of menial jobs, living in B&B. Working with Oxfam and with homeless people changed the direction of her interests and led to her taking a degree in Youth Work at UNL.

In 1998 she became involved in an international project to raise awareness of Alzheimer's disease in her homeland and elsewhere in the Third World, where the condition is not recognised and no facilities exist to support patients and their families.

Now she is looking for volunteers to help manage a new food project she is setting up. This is aimed at working with local communities and with parents, teachers and pupils in primary schools. The idea is to tackle the problems of food poverty in some of the most disadvantaged and socially excluded people in this area.

The project, which is modelled on a similar successful scheme in Tower Hamlets, aims to give people access to fresh fruit and vegetables, and to foods that reflect their cultural backgrounds, but which are hard to access in the shops, especially for people relying on state benefits and on food vouchers. The idea is to set up food co-ops, breakfast clubs and fruit tuck-shops. Because of the link between poor and unhealthy diets and ill health, an educational programme will be an important part of the project's work.

Local agencies, including Hackney Business Enterprise and Finsbury Park Partnership have been supportive; and Tollington Community Centre has offered the use of their hall for the sale of produce.

To be a fully functioning co-operative, volunteers are needed urgently to become Directors. Knowledge of accountancy, management or law would be particularly useful, but prime qualifications are commitment and the ability to accept responsibility and negotiate assertively.

Grace also wants volunteers for general support, including setting up stalls for the Co-op, pricing and selling fruit and vegetables and running errands. As she says, "*This is a great chance to do something really useful and to meet a wide variety of interesting people from all sorts of backgrounds. I think it is important for people in the community to take the initiative to help themselves, instead of relying on the authorities to do something for them.*"

If you would like to know more, or to become involved at any level, Grace would very much like to hear from you.

Phone her on **7226 2093** or write to: **Grace Robinson, 7 Drakeley Court, Aubert Park, London N5 1TT.** ■

COUNCIL'S 'RED FACES' IN HIGH COURT

Islington Council should not have counted on the Judge finding in their favour over the Arsenal plans on Thursday 30th May...

The legal challenge against Islington Council, regarding the Arsenal planning applications approved last December, had dramatic support from the Courts recently. The judge accepted that the case was a large one and should be properly examined in the High Court. He also applied a new ruling of the House of Lords made only the week before. This extends the time for legal challenges to planning decisions. The case against Islington, being funded by Legal Aid, is that the Council should not have passed any of Arsenal's planning applications.

The new ruling also opens the possibility that there may be further challenges from businesses or others in the next 6 weeks.

The applicants in the present case asked for it to be adjourned to prevent the extra delay and expense of starting new proceedings, which they would be entitled to do under the new rules.

The judge agreed and has gone further, to add that the case can include any new grounds of challenge the claimants want. The case will come before the Courts again at the end of July 2002. □

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Highbury Community Association

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Send letters or articles for next issue to HC News, 10 Stavordale Road N5 1NE or email: pg_lg@hotmail.com