

“The Leader of the Pack”

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Buttons and The Walthamstow Rockers

It was sometime in the summer of 1965, that whilst walking along The High Street with a mate of mine called Terry, and in the direction of Palmerston Road, that opposite us on the other side of the road strolled Buttons. He later became London's First President of the Hells' Angels. Terry knew Buttons and he walked across the street to meet him, I followed him.

Buttons seemed as broad as the pavement he walked on, Terry walked towards him and Button halted, I said “Hello Buttons” , Buttons long-haired and bearded, stood quietly and with an inner peace. This bloke certainly was not afraid of anyone, he quietly and slowly replied “Hello Mate”. Yet Buttons, real name Peter Welsh still remained in my memory, even though it was only a brief meeting. I would also like to mention with thanks and affection Peter Chisnall, who forty years ago helped get me out a very tight situation in a pub, quite simply he saved my skin! But also in the early 60s, he not only was the leader of the rockers, but also raised much money for the Contemporary Youth Club, run by Mrs Rose Feinsilver. One of the ventures to raise money is that they booked The Rolling Stones at The Walthamstow Assembly Hall in 1963.

“ Rocker Buttons is shot in the chest by a group of Mods with a sawn off shotgun, in a fracas outside of the Bonanza Arcade in Hackney, East London”

This is quoted from the book by Jamie Mandelkau called “ Buttons: The Making of a President” , an essential little book for those who like to research the 60s. As the book makes many references to Leyton Baths, and the conflicts which went on between the mods and rockers in the Baths. This has been useful in writing this article..

At The Leyton Baths during the early part of the 60s, there played many legends of rock history; “The Stones”, “The Beatles”, “The Who”, “The Kinks”, etc etc.

“The Motives” played there (with yours truly playing the harp and singing) in 1965. We supported “Unit 4+2”, who had a hit with “Concrete and Clay”. Often seen walking about the place too was ‘The Colonel’ aka, Ronnie Kray, who I believe managed the bouncers. Another regular was Buttons who led a gang of tough, rough rockers or ‘Greasers’ (whatever). I've selected a few passages form the afore mentioned book called “Buttons: The Making of a President”. Buttons makes several references to Leyton Baths in the book of the many battles between The Mods and The Rockers in the book, that occurred. In and around The Leyton Baths.

Buttons says **“The mods were on one side and the rockers on the other side and no-one else seemed to matter”**. These violent episodes in which many Mods and Rockers were stabbed, beaten and even shot, became a real concern to the police and the local council who ran Leyton Baths. I remember, that one time a colourful character who roamed the floor of The Baths named Lenny Thake, but nicknamed Lenny The Twitch. He had a ‘nervous tic’, and if he said hello to you, it looked like he was winking at you. He wore a pale blue Teddy-Boy Drape, and other times a black drape, drain-piped trousers and crepe-soled brothel creepers with red socks. He was a quintessential Teddy-Boy of the mid-50s. Poor old Lenny got stabbed in the back several times walking along Markhouse Road in 1964, probably by a few mods. Possibly he winked at the wrong men. He then staggered into a nearby café, fell onto a table and cried out “I’ve been stabbed!”. However, he lived.

Buttons explains knowingly, about the division between the Mods and Rockers at The Baths, he states: **“ I became regular at The Baths a system of segregation developed at the Baths between our Rockers and The Mods. We covered the front of the hall near the stage, and the Mods hanged around in the dark at the rear of the hall. There used to be a lot of close quarter fighting sometimes with knives, and people would stumble out of the baths cut and bleeding. I think possibly this was the main reason that the Baths was eventually closed.”.....** *“Bands won’t play here no more, too much fighting on the dancefloor”*. Ghosttown by The Specials sums it up.

This led to the closure of Leyton Baths for a while. Walthamstow also was becoming like a Ghost town. A few years later The Bell public house lost its music license, mainly due to by a lot of violent behaviour by a few prats who couldn’t hold their beer and attacked weaker targets.

Buttons continues **“Mods took to hanging round in large gangs across the road from The Baths, and Pegley , 17 years old and a bit stout , who because of his beard was called Beardy”**. Leaving the Baths could be a harrowing time as these gangs began to build up more and more across the road, best thing to do was to leave Leyton Baths a bit early and get quickly out of the way. Mods could attack anyone who was not a Mod and even at other times, attack other Mods. *“They were the Mods, they were the mods, e I addido, they were The Mods”*. Buttons was later blasted by Pegley in the chest.

Buttons explains **“The fellow was holding a single–barrell shotgun with a hammer or bolt action in front of him. He looked like he was trying to cock the gun and load it”**. Poor Buttons, although severely shot in the chest was saved by the shiny silver buttons, that he had sewed over his jacket, this is how he gained his nickname Buttons by the way.

The Contemporary Youth Club:

I have written here a little about The Contemporary Youth Club that Mrs Rose Feinsilver founded in 1963, for the benefit and enjoyment of the Walthamstow Rockers. In the book " Buttons:The Making of a President" , he mentions the other leader of the gang , Peter Chisnall, who I once knew. Pete was a fairly quiet but friendly bloke, but it was best to keep on the better side of him, because you would not want to meet his other side. Buttons says:" **London for the next few months was fairly uneventful , Pete Chisnall who was one of the leaders of our groups suggested we try and get it together and obtain our own club premises**" Peter got hold of a very popular rock band called The Wild Bunch. Gratefully The Wild Bunch agreed to play for The Greasers, to help raise money for the Contemporary Youth Club, this was given the OK and go-ahead by the committee of the club. It was the funding of the Contemporary Club that caused Mrs Feinsilver to ask Andrew Loog-Oldham if she could book the Assembly Hall and have the Stones play there. The Stones agreed to do it for half-price, which was approximately £150, and on September 27th 1963 , Walthamstow came under attack from the great sonic barrage of The Rolling Stones. The youth of Walthamstow were blasted into the swinging 60s

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