

The Demolished Cambridge Road Estate

The Boundary Road Estate was built in the mid 1960'S and a number of local roads were demolished to make way for the estate. When built, it comprised three high rise tower blocks and some low rise shops. As was quite frequent at the time in Walthamstow, the blocks were named after three former Walthamstow worthies who were all Labour Party activists. They were the : *Ernest Richards, James Dixon and Walter Savill* towers.

Tower Blocks

Tower blocks were built in the UK after the Second World War. The first residential tower block was 'The Lawn' in Harlow in 1951. It is now a Grade II listed building.!

Contrary to popular belief, tower blocks were not built to gratify the whim of architects who wanted to build 'streets in the sky'. The real reason for tower blocks was because the government laid down the required density of people per acre for new municipal developments. Government subsidies toward the cost of building were only given to those who met this target. The most effective way of achieving this objective was to build estates that were a mix of low and high rise buildings.

Quick Fix Solutions v Intolerable Living Conditions

In many cases, tower blocks were seen as a 'quick-fix' to cure problems caused by crumbling and unsanitary 19th-century dwellings or to replace buildings destroyed and badly damaged by German WWI bombing. At the beginning, they were welcomed as they provided good-sized modern accommodation and their excellent views made them popular living places.

Unfortunately, there were a number of design and construction problems and many of the buildings deteriorated and created intolerable living condition for many of the residents.. They acquired a reputation for being undesirable housing and many tower block residents experienced rising crime levels that further increased their unpopularity.

A House Of Cards Named Ronan Point

The problems of many of the tower blocks were dramatically highlighted with the partial collapse of 22-storey Ronan Point in Newham on 16 May 1968. This occurred when a gas explosion in a flat demolished a load-bearing wall and caused the collapse of one entire corner of the building. Four people were killed in the incident and 17 were injured.

It was discovered that the construction of the building was similar to that of a 'house of cards' where the prefabricated walls predominantly are held in place by the weight of the walls above them. *The Ronan Point* gas explosion had blown out a wall and the walls above it collapsed like a pack of cards.

Following this disaster, there was a UK wide survey of all municipal high rise housing. Gas systems in high rise blocks were removed and replaced by electricity. Many blocks were strengthened and many inherently unstable blocks were demolished.

The Cambridge Road Estate.

The bulk of the estate consisted of three tower blocks that were built between 1965 and 1968 between Colchester, Boundary and Markhouse Roads. The works were completed just before the Ronan Point tragedy. Each block had 22 stories and they were 64 metres tall. They were prefabricated panel constructed buildings and were inherently unsafe. The three blocks were demolished in 2000. After demolition a new low rise estate was created.

The three Labour Party activists that gave their names to the blocks were:

Ernest Richards Tower

Ernie Richards was born in Walworth in 1878 and married his wife Eliza in 1902 in Peckham. Ernie died at the age of 76 years in 1971. The Labour Party was formed in 1906 and Ernest and his wife Eliza were great political activists and stalwarts of the Party until they died. Alderman Eliza Richards, J.P was the Mayor of Walthamstow during the war from 1942-1943.

Interestingly, Ernie Richards was the grandfather of Keith Richards of the 'Rolling Stones'. My sources are from a biography of *Keith Richards* called '*Satisfaction*' by *Christopher Sandford* and from *Keith Richards* himself in his autobiography called '*Life*' that was written by him and co-authored by his friend *James Fox*. This is what he says:

'His father, my grandfather Ernest G. Richards, known locally as Uncle Ernie, was not just a Labour Party stalwart. Ernie was up in arms for the working man, and when he started there was no Socialist movement, there was no Labour Party. Ernie and my grandmother Eliza were married in 1902, at the very beginning of the party--they had two MPs in 1900. And he won that part of London for Keir Hardie, the party's founder. He would hold that fort for Keir come what may, day in, day out, canvassing and recruiting after the First World War. Walthamstow was fertile Labour territory then. It had taken in a big working-class exodus from the East End of London and a new rail commuter population--the political front line. Ernie was staunch in the real meaning of that word. No backing down, no retreat. Walthamstow became a Labour stronghold, a safe enough seat for Clement Attlee, the postwar Labour prime minister, who'd put Churchill out in 1945 and who was the MP for Walthamstow in the 1950s. He sent a message when Ernie died, calling him "the salt of the earth." And they sang "The Red Flag" at his funeral, a song they have only just stopped singing at the Labour Party conferences. I'd never taken in the touchiness of the lyrics. Then raise the scarlet standard high, Within its shade we'll live and die, Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer, We'll keep the red flag flying here.

And Ernie's job? He was a gardener, and he worked for the same food-production firm for thirty-five years. But Eliza, my grandmother, was, if anything, saltier--she was elected a councillor before Ernie, and in 1941 she became the mayor of Walthamstow. Like Ernie she had risen through the political hierarchy. Her origins were Bermondsey working class, and she more or less invented child welfare for Walthamstow--a real reformer. She must have been a piece of work--she became chairman of the housing committee in a borough that had one of the biggest programs of council house expansion in the country. Doris always complained that Eliza was so upright she wouldn't let her and Bert have a council house when they were first married--wouldn't push them up the list. "I can't give you a house. You're my daughter-in-law." Not just strict but rigid. So it's always intrigued me: the unlikelihood of somebody from that family getting together with this other lot of libertines.'

Although, understandably, out of his love for his grand-father, the above account 'over eggs the pudding' and ignores the massive contribution of other contemporary Labour Party members, it is substantially true and demonstrates the huge work and high moral commitment of the couple.

James Dixon Tower

Although James Dixon, MA, OBE was never a Councillor, he was a long term Labour Party member and activist. He was known as Jimmy or 'Taffy' Dixon and loved by thousands of Walthamstow children who knew him as a teacher, Headteacher and Youth Club organiser. He was a teacher and later the Headteacher of George Gascoigne and Chapel End schools and while at Chapel End started the Chapel 38 youth club for boys and later the Chapel 43 youth club for girls. In 1931 he founded the Athan Boys Club in Grove Road (Later called the Cameron Athan Club) and the Athena Girls club. In 1966 he got an OBE for the work that he did with Athan Boys Club. Sadly, the club closed in 2008.

His early work as a politician was remembered on the old Monovians website;

<http://www.oldmonovians.com/old-monovians/memories/robert-barltrop-s-memories.html?showall=&start=7> that gives us a flavor of lost political hustings:

*'Nevertheless, I still listened to the Communist meetings on Saturday nights in High Street. They usually finished about half past eight and were followed by Labour Party meetings: on the corner of Cleveland Park Avenue, opposite the library, with crowds of two or three hundred. Winmngton spoke most Saturdays in his drawling, autocratic voice. (He was a journalist for the Daily Worker. In the early 1950s, when he was in Korea to report the war there, the British government removed his passport; later he went to East Germany. His brother Richard was the film critic of the News Chronicle.) Another speaker was Jack Rogers; there was a scrawny, humorous young man with lank fair hair and glasses; and several others. The most popular Labour speaker was **Jimmy Dixon**, the Central School teacher who later became headmaster.'*

This is what some of his ex pupils have written:

Bob Edy writing on the *Walthamstow Memories* site in 2005 wrote:

*'I attended **Wood St School** for a couple of months, then after the summer vacation went to **Chapel End School** where the Headmaster was **Mr James Dixon MA** - a wonderful man. In the evening he was in charge of **Chapel 38 Club (Boys)**, later on the **Chapel 43 Club** was founded under his chairmanship, this was for girls. We knew him as 'sir; at school, but Jim outside. Ah memories....'*

Roger Tapson writing on the site: <http://www.walthamstowhistory.com/ym2006.htm> wrote:

'I also remember St Athan House a youth club in Grove Road where ones adolescent was developed and guided to giving young people a good grounding in life along with I adventures.'

Jane King wrote on the: <https://www.facebook.com/walthamstow.times.7> site:

'I remember - The prefect's concert with Mr. Dixon's magic shows..... After two hymns and the Lord's prayer Jimmy (taffy) Dixon would often keep us entertained with a half hour speech on various subjects, only interrupted by the ringing of the school telephone, (the extension bell being in the hall) and off Mrs. Hughes would rush from her piano to answer it in the office..._The school tuck trolley kept in Mr. Dixon's office, came out at playtimes, potatoe puffs, cheese biscuits, drinks etc'

When the Cameron Athan club was closing, Jonathan Moyes wrote an article/obituary on the 16th September 2008 in *Where I Live*, he said:

WALTHAMSTOW: 'Way of life' to end with boys' club closure

A WAY of life is coming to end with the sale of a building used by a long-established boys' club.

Over the years, thousands of Waltham Forest families have used the Cameron Athan club in Grove Road, Walthamstow, founded in 1931, to play football, basketball, take trips and relax.

Lorna Dodd, a committee member, said the trustees can no longer afford to keep it running and the building is being sold for £1.6 million to become a school for Muslim girls.

She added: "Generations after generations of families have come here. I was taken here when I was a baby and now I help out."

Club member Herb Johnson said: "It's a piece of history. It's an absolute disgrace it is closing when it provides activities for our young people at a time when the council and the Government are saying there is nothing for young people to do."

Cameron Athan chairwoman Gay Sparks, 43, said: "It's really sad. Twenty youth football and basketball clubs who used the indoor and outdoor pitches.

"The Scouts met here and there were also several church groups who used the building as well. They are all going to have find new places to go."

Former England striker Teddy Sheringham played football for one of the boys' club teams. David Beckham also played there when his team, Ridgeway Rovers, took on a Cameron Athan team.

Long-standing member Tony Prestedge said: "I first came when I was eight to box and have been coming to this club for 35 years. I will be very sad to see it close. It will be missed by the whole community."

Sam Carroll, 14, said: "I'm concerned I won't have anything to do when it closes."

Five jobs will be lost and numerous clubs will either fold or have to find new premises.

These include the Woodcraft Youth Club, a Scout troop, a pensioners' group and the Victory Church Group.

Nick Barnes, 44, Woodcraft co-ordinator, said: "We have been using the hall for the last two years but because of the uncertainty, we're going to move."

Raja Mohammad Khan, Waltham Forest Islamic Association president, said the mosque in Lea Bridge Road is in negotiations with the club's trustees to buy the building.

He said: "Our current premises is not big enough so the centre would be ideal. At the moment our girls school is part-time but if we move into the hall it could become full-time."

Jimmy Dixon was a first class educationalist and one of the 'good' guys and I met him in the early 1960's. Shamefully, I don't know anything at all about when and where he was born and died or about his family.

Walter Savill Tower.

Walter (Wally) Frank Savill was born in 1899 at the Crescent (Now part of High Road near St Ann's Road) in Tottenham . He was the son of Frank Savill, a bus driver and former tram car driver, and of Emily Savill nee Ford a former Parlour maid. By 1901, the family had moved to 170, Leucha Road, Walthamstow. In 1911, the family had moved again and were living at 10, Hamilton Road in Higham Hill. Frank was a self employed Green Grocer and fruiterer and Wally was the oldest of four children and a schoolboy.

When I first met him in the early 1960's, he was living at Barnabus Road, Walthamstow. This was very close to the tower block that was later named for him. As far as I know, Wally was a life time batchelor. He was a manual worker, a staunch Trade Unionist and a indefatigable worker for the Labour Party. He served as a Councillor and as a Justice of the Peace for many years and became Mayor in 1952 after he became the longest serving Labour Councillor. He died at the age of 90 years in Waltham Forest.

Bill Bayliss
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