

## Walthamstow's Spion Kop

In 2003, the *Walthamstow Memories* site published an Email from local resident , *Derrick Bettiss*. He wrote:

**“Small world, I like your web-site. Live in Bungay for 30 odd years born in Walthamstow 1936. When a small boy had whooping cough, my grandmother one Sunday said the best thing would be a walk up to Spion Kop (1942) to get fresh air, it was top of Higham Hill and looked out over Tottenham etc. Have never seen mention of name. Any of your contacts Know of it? ”**



*British soldiers firing artillery at Boer positions on Spion Kop*



*British dead at Spion Kop*

Although this rang a faint bell as I had heard reference to this before, at the time, I didn't know enough to answer it properly. I knew that Spion Kop was a hillside battle in the Boer war in 1900 where the British were defeated and that it was somehow connected with the siege of Ladysmith. I also knew that it was commemorated at a number of football grounds (the most noted being Liverpool FC) where parts of the terraces were called 'the Kop'. I also knew that, like a lot of places in the U.K , several Walthamstow Roads had been named after other Boer war battle (Rensburg, Kimberley Roads) What I didn't know then was any specific connection to Walthamstow but I do now.

In 1953, the Walthamstow Antiquarian Society published a book of reminiscences about Walthamstow. It covered a period from about 1860 to 1930 and was edited by Annie Hatley. It was called '*Across The Years Walthamstow Memories* 'and is an analogue version of the *Walthamstow Memories* digital site. In a chapter about Higham Hill I found:

**“On Higham Hill there was a natural mound of about half an acre with a steep gradient. The residents gave it the name of Hilly Field which was altered to Spion Kop at the time of the Boer war for there on the hillocks, a local school master used to hold forth on the current South African war news”.**

This explained very well why the locals would have called it Spion Kop (that in the Afrikaans language means Spy Hill) Anybody who knew the area before the Council built the new estate around Gurney Close would have been well aware of the incredible views that there were across the reservoirs and Tottenham Marsh. It was also a natural place to hold an open air meeting. At that time, there were large

numbers of workers employed in building Banbury Reservoir (completed in 1903) who were lodging in the Higham Hill area and would have made a good audience.

## Opposition To The War

What particularly interested me was the bit that said:

**"a local school master used to hold forth on the current South African war news".**

This was almost certainly one of my favourites, Walthamstow radical activists, a man named *James McSheedy*, who, at that time, was teaching at the nearby *Winns Boys School*. In 1901, he, along with a roll-call of British labour and Trade Union leaders that included: *Kier Hardy, George Lansbury, Will Thorn and Pete Curran* signed an open letter to the British public denouncing the British Government for their involvement in South Africa.

In a detailed and reasoned analysis of British involvement, the letter said:

**"THE REAL OBJECT OF THE WAR**

**"You have been led to believe that the war against the Boers was waged to secure justice and freedom for industrious Britons. That was the pretence.....It was not for humanities sake that we forced the Boers to fight. The real object was to get bigger dividends for the millionaires by the substitution of black for white labour."**

It went on to point out that native labour was cheap and the big financiers thought that they could vastly increase their profits for their lucky shareholders by use of this labour. In the end, the British won and imposed control over South Africa. The big financiers then did exactly what the letter had foretold and for almost a hundred years South Africa was ruled by their representatives.

Bill Bayliss

September 2014

Principal Sources:

<http://www.boervolkradio.co.za/boekstoor/LABOUR%20LEADERS%20AND%20THE%20WAR.pdf>

***Across The Years Walthamstow Memories published by Walthamstow Antiquarian Society in 1953, Editor Annie Hatley.***