

## An Imaginary Stroll in 1912 <sup>(1)</sup>

To complete the nostalgic memories let us capture the atmosphere of a hot summer Saturday afternoon in 1912. We will meander from Bakers Arms to St James Street, with no desire to hurry. The activity and noise of the costermongers does little to drown the clang of the trams, where mysterious destinations appear high up on the top deck. The West Ham, brown fronted with a red diamond in the centre, in cooperation with the resplendent green Leyton Fleet, which sport curtains as an embellishment, are destined for the Docks. The sleek eight wheeled brown L.C.C. are bound for Bloomsbury, Liverpool Street and Aldgate.

Our own open deck "light railways" are decorated in bright red and cream and parked on the bend toward Whipps Cross. They are destined for the hazardous journey to Chingford, and are too near the stockholders for comfort. Whatever the colour, all trams have one thing in common, all the seats are of hard cane and tend to bruise one's bottom.



Picture 1 - Bakers Arms ca. 1930



Looking along Hoe Street from Baker's Arms, c.1912. The man on the left is a Westminster Council car and the other one an L.C.C. car.

Picture 2 – Hoe Street from Bakers Arms

vie for hire, for trips to Epping Forest.

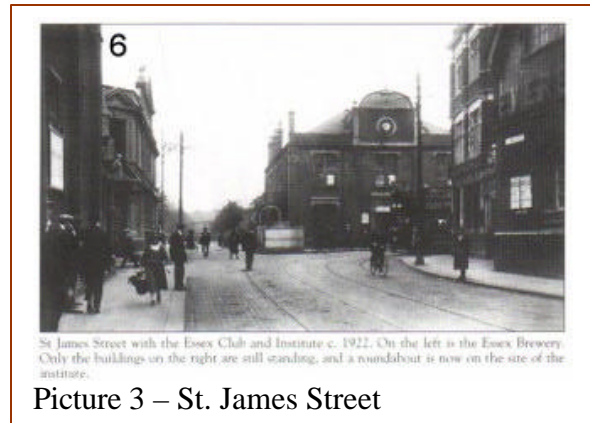
"High Beach a Bob" is the familiar cry of the drivers, who later are to find opposition and eventually extinction, in the form of a fearsome new petrol driven invention "The Charabanc", generally called "sharabang". This was a high open coach bereft of shock absorbers, and mounted on solid tyres. The cobble stoned surface of Hoe Street is left behind, as we enter Boundary Road, a more quiet but dusty thoroughfare. An occasional breeze stirs the sandy surface which causes us to shade our eyes from the

On the island, where the conveniences are discreetly placed underground, the newsboy vociferously announces the sale of "Westminster", "Pall Mall Gazette" and "Globe". Beside him sit the rubicund faced flower sellers, as philosophical in appearance as Buddha, and equally as colourful as their wares. At least three policeman are in evidence, with an ever watchful eye. In spite of the clamour a sense of orderliness prevails. On the forecourt of the public house itself horse brakes

flying grit.

Thankfully, a water cart appears, drawn by the well kept horse. The large tank of water serving the massive rear perforated bumper is making some effort in laying the dust and also causing the fragrant smell resulting from this action. The huge brick crushing plant in the builders yard also draws our attention and the wording on the open bates of "Goode Bros," reminds us of the present cinemas of Walthamstow built by them. "The Queens" "The Be11", "The Scala" is yet to be.

A train rumbles overhead, as we pass under the Midland Railway Bridge bound for Southend-on-Sea. Visions of this exciting town, with its salty air and its fivepenny cockle teas bring memories of the sea and its row of bathing an machines, strictly separating the sexes. Why are they termed "Machines"? No mechanism is involved, apart from the old horse to pull them wherever required. Our thoughts are distracted by a gang of navvies, intent on making holes in the road. These weather beaten, formidable men all appear in a self imposed uniform. A thick red and blue striped Oxford shirt with a red handkerchief with white spots tied at the neck. Brown corduroy trousers, held up with a heavy leather belt, buckled dangerously near the navel. In general the stomachs overhang the belt, quite comfortably.



Picture 3 – St. James Street

Two smaller straps are closely fitted below their knees, for what purpose? Is it for protection against rats when working in sewers or for ease in bending - or both? Four of them are engaged in swinging heavy sledge hammers following each other in perfect order. Their objective being of driving the chisel with intent of starting another hole. Their skill and accuracy, accompanied with the "Anvil chorus", is far more pleasing sound than the pneumatic drill of to-day. The hurricane lamps, both red and clear, are being filled with oil, at the side of the watchman's sentry box hut, where on a coke fired brazier a blackened kettle is steaming merrily - tea is on the way! This fire will be a welcome sight to the old watchman arriving later to protect the site against an almost unknown risk. "The Dotchies" tire mainly attracts children, drawn by its warmth and curiosity. Although the obstruction in the road is quite considerable there is no traffic hold-up. At present the two solitary cyclists, looked at us with some asperity, while impatiently ringing their bells, both considering our presence in the road unpardonable. The appearance of "Richardsons" delivery van reminds me of an awful weal on my face, resulting in my foolish escapade in "whipping behind". The temptation to hang on the rear of vehicles was always present and on that occasion, I was lucky not to lose an eye. The driver had had expert practise in slashing his long corded whip, to the rear, as well as to the front. I never repeated that form of "whipping behind" again, although in later

life, I was foolish enough to kneel on the bumper of a Walthamstow tram. By holding on to the projecting central lamp participated in the thrill of an hair raising ride, which on this occasion ended rather abruptly. It was during World War I, that the "conductress" neatly snatched my cap whilst I was looking sideways, showing off to my friends. The passengers rocked with merriment at the sight of me chasing the tram being appalled at the thought of returning home hatless! I was aghast. My weakness for this dangerous pastime was by now definitely and truly cured.

A Russian Jew, who had fled the pogroms of the Czar and raised his talented family in this country has a tailoring business on our right, Mr. Goldberg, a fellow dabbler in gee-gees with father, greets us at his front door.

His accent is as amusing as his stories are of Russia and the soldiers who persecuted him. They apparently eat nothing but sauerkraut "vich make them sheet und vort so terrible". This puzzles us for a while, but not his wife, who upbraids him unmercifully while looking skywards and requesting "Got vorgeeve heem".

The open acres of scrubland on our left, has not yet been exploited successfully by the speculative builder. We little realise this vast dump of old iron and general rubbish will be converted to allotments in a short two years.

It was an exhausting task for the cultivators, who dug for victory in the cause to win "The war to end all wars". Now we have a clear view of Lea Bridge Road, where the LCC trams glide noiselessly, so far is the distance. Passing the Congregational Chapel, one of the many Sunday schools that I attended there is a terrace of Victorian cottages with extremely long front gardens, all well tended except for a few keeping a brood of fowls and one sporting a pigeon loft. The pigeon fancier is not very popular with the gardeners. No planning permission was needed for Mr Todd to convert his parlour into a barbers saloon. It was to this emporium I eagerly accompanied father on Sunday morning for his weekly shave and occasional snip of his wiry hair.

We carefully avoided tripping up, by treading gingerly on the well scuffed oil cloth, as we enter the narrow passage and turn left to view the scene. This haven was almost a club among the regular attenders. The smoke laden air to which father contributed in no small way, and the babble of conversation, which consisted of profane political discussions, interspersed with risque stories, was quite free of any foul language. I always made a bee line to the corner where back numbers of a tattered collection of comics and weeklys were in abundance. Pearsons Weekly and Answers were passed over in favour of Chips, Butterfly, Funny Wonder, Fester, Comic Cuts, Chuckles, whichever of these that were available. They all contained exciting interest and fun. As a diversion from the comics I was always fascinated by the operations of the master barber and his youthful assistant. The former, being a tall thin pale faced man, clean shaven, with a decided stoop, his balding head denied him the chance of recommending "Harlenes Hair Restorer". While sporting a long white coat, he proceeded to tie a none too clean towel to the front of his victim fully reclining in the chair, who was then subjected to the lathering by his assistant. Mr Todd then proceeded

to complete his operation on the customer in the adjoining chair. The ceremony of honing the razor followed by the expert slapping on the shiny leather strop and the final application to the week old stubble of the customer. The rasping sound of the razor, travelling over the victims face, could almost be felt by the onlookers. I particularly was distracted from my perusal of "Weary Willie and tired Tim", and winced at the sound. Next to the strop, stood a steaming kettle sitting on a gas ring being fed by a length of rubber tubing, attached to a gas bracket projecting from the wall. The young schoolboy assistant was never without a task, and when not occupied in lathering or sweeping the fallen hair into a convenient corner was cutting newspaper into 6" squares, and threading them on string. When first observing this, I imagined they were for the convenience of toilet hygiene, but no! They were placed on the shoulder of the customer, and used as a depository for used lather. After Sweeney Todd had skillfully flicked the lather into a much used sink, he would wipe the blade of the razor clean on the paper so conveniently placed. The patiently waiting clients would still be continuing the conversation of the highest order, the recent National Health Act by Lloyd George still came into criticism, or the latest murder. The latter always conjured up a morbid imagination, mainly because the felon always ended up with a hanging. This was considered by all a fitting climax, and gave satisfaction to many except the one at the end of the rope.

Eventually it would be father's turn as I catch the whiff of Mrs Barber's Sunday joint being prepared in the adjoining room. This aroma with the burning shag, beery breaths, and a faint smell of escaping gas, in this tight little room made a peculiar mixture. Having paid his 2d for the services rendered we leave the rendezvous to the cries of "So long George", that is now lost in time.

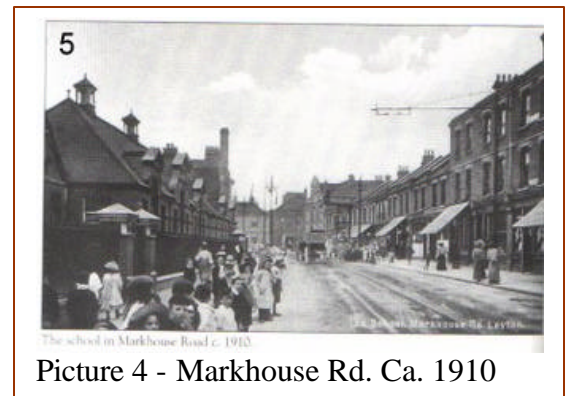
Crossing Chester Road, we observe a shop, which has passed now for ever. This is "Buckmasters", with its oil sodden, wooden floor, which houses a working bench, littered with nuts and bolts and other paraphernalia connected with his calling. "Mr Buckmaster"! A tolerant and genial personality, spends almost his entire life clad in a greasy blue boiler suit, tinkering with his mechanical stock. The window display of cycle pedals, bells etc, commands an undying interest. On the right of the shop is a collection of the most sorry sight of bedraggled cycles, for hire at the cost of 2d per hour. Within a few years of our stroll, I became one of the hapless hirers, to enjoy the opportunity of escaping to Whipps Cross, and careering up and down the sand hills, which had been left years before, from the gravel production. If one was fortunate enough to make the return journey unscathed, or without a broken chain, brake failure - or, most common of all, a puncture you would be extremely fortunate. The fish shop next, which attracts all at night with the tempting smell of its fried products mixed with hot chips and vinegar. This is such a contrast from the morning when the horrible aroma of gutted fish is being prepared for the evening trading with boxes of residue awaiting disposal. So we have one stop satisfying the adventurous spirit, another satisfying ones hunger, whilst further on the "Duke of Cambridge" never satisfying the besotted wretches that frequented it.

Of all the public houses that I knew, this one held me with a peculiar fear. Its sawdust floor complete with spittoons, the doors open during summer days, the stale smell of beer and tobacco penetrating even the outside air. Its ox-like proprietor's strength was at times put to the test by ejecting brawling semi-intoxicated customers, who invariably completed their bout of fisticuffs on the Boundary Fields opposite. "Fight up the Cambridge" was a common enough cry to hear at quite regular intervals. This broadcast resulted in a concerted rush to the venue, to obtain a front line view of the bloody contestants, slogging each other. Of all the indescribable types who frequented this establishment, none were more revolting than the individual who would volunteer to bite a rat's head off for the price of a pint. He carried his stock in trade with him. I feel it was this facet that finally completed my detestation of this particular pub. On the opposite corner was another beer house, that absorbed the residue of those who had caused trouble in the former and larger drinking house. The fights and the obnoxious drunks finally finished up in utter ignomy and disgrace by being strapped on the police hand cart, which appeared eventually with two burly coppers, and trundled off to Lea Bridge Road Police Station. Remember, the police in those days were specially selected for their height and physical prowess, and no one dared to intervene. Law was Law.

Passing on, the next narrow turning, Markhouse Place, was definitely an isolated slum into which I never ventured at any time. It was here the family mentioned in the Gamuel Road School episode, resided, or rather existed. The end of this road terminated in what was known as "The Back Field". There were several places of waste land in this vicinity and all were used as playgrounds, or old iron depositories. Here the urchins had a peculiar hobby of digging large and deep holes in the hard baked earth, covering them with sacks and building fires in tins on the edge of the hole. They then proceeded to make cocoa filched from their respective houses, in actual fact emulating a form of Trogolytes.

The next two shops are Richardson's, previously mentioned in the scene of the "Great Bakers Robbery". Here oval dog biscuits were stolen in great numbers and distributed to whoever required them.

Beaconsfield Road is the next turning to observe in which I resided between the ages of one and six and has been described earlier. Next of course is Gamuel Road, housing the seat of learning, without which I would have been unable to pursue this narrative. Alexandra Road, the last of the turnings, has one particular character interest. A most peculiar little unique dairy set back from the road painted a vivid green with a flat counter over a small door on which a wind up bell is fitted. On pressing same, an old lady would emerge from the darkened interior and proceed to till one's jug from a large





milk can. I often wondered why she did not use the huge china bowl in the window on which a picture of a bonneted milk-maid is seated on a three legged stool, milking a placid and contented smiling cow, with a herd in the background. The words "Pure Milk" were imprinted above the picture. My thoughts were directed to who were the lucky persons to be served from this bowl, surmising of course that it contained a superior substance mentioned to that in the urn. However, now one considers how pure the milk was prior to pasturisation. We enter Markhouse Road, which has a written history, although few of the populace are aware.\* St. Saviours Church which nowadays we see stands out complete with a convent administering relief and succour to the very poor by the Sisters of Mercy. It also boasts a church school, which was at constant war with Gamuel Road Council School. This dominant church suffered the ravages of fire at one time, but has been restored almost to its usual splendour.

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*\*The Manor of Marks, once standing in this area was the property of the Priory of St. Helens, Bishopsgate, and the rents of this ecclesiastical property prior to Henry VIII' reign was £376.6d yearly. The Manor House was occupied by various ancient families and gave its name to Markhouse Lane, latterly to Markhouse Road. Thomas Nelson of Markhouse resided from 13.3. 1799 to 16.5. 1883 and concerned himself with the rights of Epping Forest. It is little known that, thanks to his perserverance and litigation, he played a large part in acquiring the Forest for the common man, by exposing unlawful enclosures of 3,000 acres, plus two ponds, and some waste land. For this and sundry beneficial act: he was knighted on 21.4.1880 at Windsor Castle by Queen Victoria, and subsequently died on 7th February 1885, and was buried at Teddington. This grand Manor was demolished in 1898, thus did Walthamstow lose one of its most historical houses. For further historical information I recommend Vestry House Museum.*

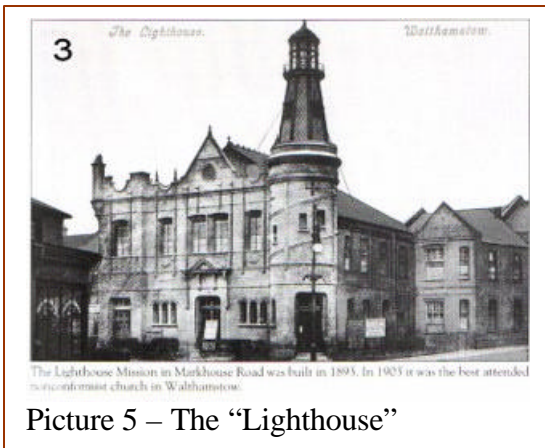
The first row of shops on the right incorporates the inevitable fried fish shop that revelled in the name of "The Dripping Shop" as all fish was fried in dripping which came in huge casks. My parents had dubious thoughts about the animal from which the dripping was extracted. With meaning glances horses were mentioned. However, we never purchased from that catering establishment, mainly because it lacked the usual aroma allied to shops of similar nature. Now we see a row of cottages similar to those in Boundary Road with extremely long front gardens, one or two carrying on business as jobbing builders or scrap merchants.

These were followed by another parade of shops which opened and closed with monotonous regularity excepting one in particular. This was a barbers owned by a German family, "Schmidts", who suffered the awful rioting which broke out during the First World War. Even in those days, there was an element of brainless vandals who took the opportunity of looting, under

the pretence of patriotism. I see even now the smashed fittings and wash basins actually torn from the walls and remember the sad sight of the family cowering in the back room of which the door had been wrenched off its hinges. They in turn were rescued eventually by the intervention of the stolid old English Bobby.

A similar occurrence happened in High Street to a German pork butcher, by the name of "Muckenfuss" this was often termed by some as "Muckingface" or other various names,

assisted by the addition of further consonants, which can be left to your imagination. This type of behaviour was general in most districts where German immigrants were living and I suppose it was inevitable, especially as the propaganda used to stir the patriotic fervour was prolific. Posters of bayoneted babies by "The Huns" and paperback books of atrocities were many. "Murder Most Foul" was the title of one of these particular paper-backs that my parent caught me reading. This was hastily torn from my grasp and destroyed with the false idea of keeping the horrors from me, which proved quite fruitless.



Picture 5 – The “Lighthouse”

Returning to our stroll we gaze at the Methodists unique chapel, known as "The Lighthouse", a veritable building deserving of that name. Built as its title suggests and whose beam circles from its tower, a beacon of goodwill and was only extinguished when the enemy made its initial air raids in the First World War. I, too, went to the Lighthouse Sunday School when the family moved to Byfield now Campus Road. During this war I have a clear recollection of "The Rev. Coll" or Cole, the preacher at the time, who exuded Christianity

and was loved by all, especially the children. The P.S.A.

"Pleasant Sunday Afternoon" was far in advance of its time with its recitals an attraction, enjoyed by many. Opposite this Christian edifice stands the "Common Gate" with a large sawdust floor taproom, interspersed with the usual iron spittoons. The open door exudes its fetid atmosphere which is in contrast to the wholesome smell of newly baked bread from the bakers known as "Sextons" on the opposite corner. It is worthy to note the Lighthouse still stands and is operational whilst the "Common Gate" has only just reopened after being closed many years and is known as The Sportsman.

Dunbars the chemist was the only pharmacy in the area by a chronic arthritic, a Mr. Dunbar, whose counter which he served his drugs. The rest of the shop was taken up and obscured by high glass display cabinet.

The butchers opposite Dunbars are great friends proprietors. Mr Westley, a kindly cadaverous tall moustache, was a true butcher garbed in a long rough popular blue and white striped apron. He had graduated



Picture 6 – The “Common Gate”

bought his cattle at Romford and with assistance drove them to the slaughter house in Hoe Street. He then killed and skinned and prepared his merchandise for public consumption. His wife, a jolly, rosy cheeked, dark haired Irish colleen of ample proportions, whose generosity was almost a fault, while the gambling habit of her

husband definitely were. In later years, party's given by this delightful couple were a great success enhanced by three attractive daughters.

On one occasion the usual "knees up" dance caused part of the shop ceiling to fall and distribute itself over our breakfast prepared sausages. Fortunately the meat was away in the cold store, kept at freezing temperature by one hundred weight blocks of ice supplied by the United North Pole Ice Co.

Delivery of these were made by horsedrawn carts, and carried in on the shoulders of burly carters, the ice being wrapped in soaking sacks and pulled from the cart by vicious looking hooks. Urchins would gather to purloin pieces of broken ice to suck with evident enjoyment "such taste" when one is young. However, as my calling was a plasterer, it behove of me to repair the damage. For this I was pressed to accept half-a-crown for the work in question, such was his nature, even though I had assisted in the cause of the catastrophe.

Our interest is taken by the last two shops before Ringwood Road. One sells gramophones, while the corner one is "Claydens". This unique dairy had their own cows which were kept in the field opposite, and milked in the shed in the mews at the rear of the shop by Mr. Clayden. He, also, is another immense dark man with an equally large black moustache. His windows displayed polished milk cans and china swans carrying an array of eggs between their resplendent wings. At the end of the marble counter is a well constructed trellis work holding "Nevill's Bread". This unique flour bedecked "Coburg" loaf with a quality of its own, baked in steam ovens, possesses a tempting and delicious appearance with a compensating flavour.

There is no equivalent of this unique loaf today. The tinny-strains of "Ragtime Cowboy Jo" or "Alexanders Ragtime Band" can be heard from the shop next door being relayed from the recently improved horn gramophone, embellished in a variety of colours. On the opposite corner stands "Watsons Lino Emporium", displaying a huge notice stating "No connection with the shop next door". The offending shop in question was one trading in the same merchandise. The stock here was of such a meagre variety that I am sure Watsons need not have been unduly concerned by the opposition as at most times all one saw was a meagre stock of lino. This was mainly used to obscure a regular card school from the prying eyes of the law. A short distance from Searls on the opposite side one can see across a large enclosed meadow, on which the cows of Claydens Dairy contentedly graze and stare with typical curiosity at the trams that clank on their way to Higham Hill.

Further on we approach a distinguished house on the corner of Camden Road, bearing a highly polished brass plate on which was inscribed Dr. Moore M.D. Hours 9-11 and 6-7.30. This we regard with great respect and carefully remove our headgear should we enter his waiting room for medical attention. The most unique shop next of note is Strutts. This extremely old Walthamstow family have handed down their skills of sweet making for many generations - They are most famous for various flavoured rocks, coconut candy and ice, manufactured on the premises. All of their products are



deliciously pure, and cut up by a fearsome pair of pincers, or broken by an all steel hammer. Mrs Strutt a buxom pleasant-faced lady presides over brass bowled scales that are thickly lined with residue of the sweetmeats. Although the scales were always tipped in favour of the purchaser, they would not have passed official inspection.

We may gaze in Reads newsagent opposite for a short period to absorb the adventures of the comic characters portrayed on the front pages of the Firefly, Rainbow and Puck which among others are hung up in the side window, with the object of enticing one to buy and enjoy a further feast of clean fun.

I trust you will not object to crossing the road once again, making sure that you are not run over by "Prices" horse-drawn bread van, in which the driver is vainly endeavouring to free the thinly steel shod wheels, which have been caught in the tram lines. The van is being dragged at a rather dangerous angle by a somewhat scared horse experiencing the painful end of the whip being used rather unnecessarily.

Here is "Lankshears" the "in and out shop", which is actually a pawn shop. The title has two origins, one, the pawning operation - "In and out" the second the whole front was wide open, enabling a person to enter and leave at will. They also deal in rough working clothes, hob nailed boots, Oxford shirts, aprons etc. Next door is a mysterious shuttered premises, bearing no sign for its purpose. Its only entrance is in a dimly lit side passage. It is known as "The Club", a low drinking den of iniquity. As a child I looked upon it with fear, mainly as a result of mother's adherence and veiled remarks, which may have been because it was strictly "men only", and appeared to hold hidden and secretive activities.

However, did you notice the small corrugated iron building known as the South Grove Mission Hall whose principal was the Rev. Mr. Robbins. It is situated just before Lankshears and lays well back from the main road. In fact it has a secondary entrance in Arkley Road at the rear.

Here again I was occasionally "ordered" to attend on summer Sunday evenings with two of my cronies, to assist in swelling the dwindling congregation. The choir was extremely vociferous and excellent in quality. Two of my sisters, Winnie and May, were regular members who not only enjoyed the hymns taken from "Gospel Bells" but also were attracted to and by the opposite sex. This particular choir sat on a rather high platform surrounded by a wooden rail, very reminiscent of the type seen in Madam Tusauds Chamber of Horrors, whereon the felons all stand against the background of the gallows. I hasten to add this remarkable resemblance is in no way meant in a derogatory manner, or to even suggest the choir had any relationship to the Victorian and Edwardian criminals. It was only the plain and cold looking platform high and aloof from the audience, that struck me as unique and peculiar.

Below this platform sat Mr. Robbins, an immaculately dressed, white haired bearded man, facing his worshippers, crossed legged with an evangelical smile to all. Just behind

him was the organist, whose solemnity was only surpassed by his rendition of Handels Largo with variations. It will be noticed to-day this little Christian oasis has been re-built and refurbished beyond recognition, by another denomination of a more forceful and persistent character. Often after Sunday Evensong the enthusiastic ones would bring a little harmonium out into Arkley Crescent at the rear, which was by no means the select of roads, and proceed to sing the praises, of the Lord and inviting sinners to repent. Such was the fervour which I witnessed, not fully understanding the whole matter of approach.

We are nearing the end of Markhouse Road. A few more steps will give us the opportunity to look into "Kendals Gown and Mantle Shop" displaying the latest models with hobble skirts and braided costumes. The high necked lace blouses are surmounted by atrociously large hats, some displaying doves in full flight, and others resembling a small flower patch, interlaced with artificial mouth watering cherries. The price of these articles were far beyond many pockets. "Fancy paying 19/11d for that costume? Almost next door and the last building in Markhouse Road opposite the "Brewery Tap" public house stands the large construction of the Essex Club, later to become Sherry's Billiard Hall, whose dark interior was not conducive or inviting. I have no doubt the minor criminals and tearabouts found it an ideal rendezvous for the hatching of plots criminal or otherwise. The centre of the road you may find convenient - it is an underground convenience now demolished.

I invite you to meet me here shortly, as I would like to continue our stroll and my story along other thoroughfares. BYE BYE!

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<sup>(1)</sup> Chapter 13 of "Mainly Memories, 1906-1930" by Harold W. Walker  
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