

Extract from:

A Journey Through Ruins: the Last Days of London

First edition by Radius, 1991

Paperback by Paladin, 1992

Expanded paperback edition by Flamingo, 1993

From Chapter 1, 'Street-Corner Vision'

Among the under-estimated attractions of Dalston Junction is a street corner full of forgotten municipal services. The public lavatories are of the attended Victorian variety with wrought-iron railings, descending steps and lunettes in the pavement; and, on good days at least, they still function as originally intended - unlike many of their equivalents in more right-thinking and fortunately placed London boroughs, which have been sold into private use as wine bars, pool halls, and design consultancies. There's a distinctly village-like Public Notice Board provided by the council but now only used by the fly-posting militants of the Revolutionary Communist Party and the exiled Turkish Communist Party. Proudest of all, however, is the 'Hackney Town Guide', which offers to orientate the enquirer with an apparently unambiguous message: 'You are here'. Displayed inside a glass-fronted 'Town Guide Cabinet', the map is perforated with little holes harbouring tiny light-bulbs: the visitor is instructed to identify his intended destination by the 'appropriate title' and then press the button below it to 'illuminate place/s selected'.

Made by the Paramount Publicity Service of Manchester, the 'Town Guide Cabinet' is an example of the kind of street furniture that might more normally be expected to grace seaside resorts and historical towns, but the one at Dalston Junction has been confidently adjusted to its inner-city setting. Light-bulbs peep out beside such municipal 'places of interest' as the labour exchange, the cemetery and the sewage works, and the twenty-four available buttons have been labeled according to appropriate themes, such as Tennis, Cricket Grounds, Public Utilities, Football Grounds, Cinemas, Town Halls, Fire Stations, Libraries, Railway Stations, Hospitals, Police Stations, and Courts. Nowadays, however, this careful differentiation comes to nothing: the buttons slide in and out with well-exercised ease, but the London Borough of Hackney refuses to light up.

A stray tourist (and they do sometimes end up here after falling asleep on the bus) may not realize it immediately, but Dalston Junction's vaguely streamlined Town Guide Cabinet is a rare period piece left over from a bygone age. The 'GPO' still has a tenuous hold on reality, but the button labeled 'LCC & HBC Flats' has been out of date since 1965 when the London County Council was replaced by the Greater London Council and Hackney Borough Council was merged with Shoreditch and Stoke Newington to produce the London Borough of Hackney. The town guide shows the Hackney that Nikolaus Pevsner surveyed shortly after World War Two (remarking that 'a general leafiness' was still 'pleasantly noticeable over large areas'), but it is plainly deficient in its attention to more recent detail.

The southern part of the borough, the area that used to be Shoreditch, is simply missing. Many of the stations and hospitals (the German, the Metropolitan, the Eastern, the Mothers, the French) have been closed and replaced. Swimming pools have come and gone. The sponsoring businesses that were granted lights and a place on the map (activated by the button designated 'Advertiser's Highlights') have long since given up the ghost. As for the street plan, this looks plausible enough, but a person who tried to follow it through Hackney as it is today would keep bumping into vast and unanticipated council estates. Those modest 'LCC & HBC Flats' notwithstanding (and for Pevsner they had already 'altered the appearance of Hackney decisively'), the real monuments to post-war comprehensive redevelopment - high-rise estates like Nightingale, Holly Street, Trowbridge, and Clapton Park - were all built after this time-warped town guide was completed.

In most places a town guide like this would long since have been adjusted or disposed of as a broken relic, but at Dalston Junction it can stand unnoticed for forty years and then find new life as the map of a world on which the lights have gone down. I must have fallen into a reverie as I stood there musing on this curious fact, for suddenly a dark-blue Bentley, which was flying two pennants (one marked with the letters 'CPS' and the other with the word 'Bovis'), pulled up and deposited two gentlemen of advanced years on the pavement. One of them was carrying an old soap-box in his hand, while his comrade struggled awkwardly with an ungainly roll of canvas the chauffeur had fetched out of the boot and dumped rather ungraciously into his arms. I recognized this phantasmagorical pair as they approached. The man in front was Sir Alfred Sherman, former resident of Hackney, former Marxist and volunteer with the International Brigade, former adviser to Margaret Thatcher. His assistant was instantly recognizable by the distracted look in his eye as none other than Lord Keith Joseph of Portsoken, former intellectual and moral force behind Margaret Thatcher's government, former Secretary of State for Education, former Minister of Housing and Local Government, former Chairman of Bovis Ltd, former Chairman and co-founder with Margaret Thatcher of the Centre for Policy Studies - the influential right-wing think-tank with which Sir Alfred has also been associated.

After glancing round uneasily at the nearby council estates, Lord Joseph unrolled a banner on which were printed the words 'How Hackney Went to Hell', shook it out, and then hung it up, with a little help from Sir Alfred, on the ornate iron railings of the Gentlemen's Lavatory. He then handed Sir Alfred an extended lecturer's baton - the sort preferred by true think-tankers that folds like a telescopic car aerial and can be fitted into a Savile Row breast-pocket - and stood back to survey the unmarried mothers while his companion mounted his soap-box just next to the Town Guide Cabinet and launched into the speech that would inaugurate this unsuspecting visual aid into its new function as a guide to the abyss.

Sir Alfred whacked the glass of the Town Guide Cabinet and told the gathering crowd that, while it certainly provided some valuable clues, the map inside wasn't really old enough to teach them more than part of the story. As he had known it before the Second World War, Hackney had been a 'socially mixed area, attractive in many parts, with good solid residences built for City gents and smaller houses for artisans and clerks'. It had been a place where local-government officials were happy to live themselves, and though there had been hardship - Sir Alfred paused to stress that he himself had suffered from rickets as a child - the immigrant communities of that time recognized that British values were worth emulating, and got on with assimilating themselves as quickly as possible. Elementary schoolteachers were paid far more than skilled manual workers, and 'enjoyed correspondingly higher prestige', and the borough had been blessed with a rich cultural and social life. Unsatisfied by the paltry collection of cinemas and sports amenities indicated on the broken town guide, Sherman went on to itemize the superior facilities of his own day; he remembered 'a whole range of lectures, concerts, charities, well-attended churches, chapels, synagogues, masonic lodges, the British Legion and Territorial Army, Salvation Army, Scouts, youth clubs, and Jewish Lads Brigade'. There were, it had to be admitted, some rough streets and a relatively small 'underclass' in the borough, but for the vast majority 'Respectability was the watchword' and, as Sir Alfred stressed to a vigorous nod of agreement from His Lordship, the community was, by and large, 'self-policing'. The streets and parks were safe for women and children, and in the few cases of illegitimacy, there were 'communal pressures' that generally 'brought about marriage, and kept it going'.

V

While the map in Dalston Junction's Town Guide Cabinet helped Sir Alfred to demonstrate the decency, even the modest nobility, of old Hackney, it also offered him a chance to expatiate on the no less romantic theme of 'What Went Wrong'. Lord Joseph's eyes widened in anticipation as the man who had pulled himself up by his bootstraps prepared to treat those who hadn't to a description of their own miserable plight. Lesser orators might have backed off at the challenge of putting such an awful reality into words but, as a seasoned think-tanker, Sir Alfred was well equipped with the rhetorical devices that would help him to get a grip on the situation. He was adept with the anti-communist stereotypes that would enable him to identify the Town Hall with Stalin's Kremlin. He was also well versed in the demonic Victorian imagery of London's East End, and it was from this source that he drew such stock devices as the Road to Ruin and the quasi-medical theory of the slum dweller whose degeneracy had been symbolized for the Victorians by the monstrous deformities of the Elephant Man.

Sir Alfred was in no doubt that the first steps down the Slippery Slope had been taken during the mid-Twenties when rent controls, introduced during the Great War to relieve the hardship of soldiers' families, started to yield the inevitable fruit of 'blight and housing shortage'. This issue was quickly dwarfed by the council housing that was built in a misguided attempt to solve the problem. The new council estates only became 'costly slums': indeed, some were so bad (and by this time Sir Alfred had the confident look of a speaker who knows that the imaginative truth will always override the odd detail that may be wrong) that 'desperate people would not live in them rent free'. Meanwhile, as Sir Alfred knew for sure, every acre of council estate meant ten blighted acres all around it. By the mid-Thirties, the Jewish migrants who had come to Hackney from Whitechapel and Bethnal Green - 'Hackney was a step up' in those days, as Sir Alfred reminded his audience - had moved on to such places as Hampstead, St John's Wood and Golders Green. Things went from bad to worse after the Second World War; there was more council housing, and the 'more intelligent working-class families' were 'decanted', at considerable cost, into the new towns, thus depriving East London of still more of its 'social leaven'.

By this time, Sir Alfred had warmed to his theme. He cast an unforgiving eye over the crowd - so mixed, so unassimilated, so alien - and thrashed once more at the forgotten Town Guide Cabinet. The next disaster came in the Fifties when, 'on the pretext of a fictional labour shortage . . . our masters' - and Lord Joseph of Portsoken, who had been among the masters at that time, looked a bit sheepish as Sir Alfred charged into this well-rehearsed part of his exposition - brought in the Afro-Caribbeans and 'speeded up the exodus of the leaven, downgrading the social composition' still further.

The audience was beginning to look a bit restive at this point. The slur on the Afro-Caribbeans hadn't gone down quite as well as it would have done elsewhere (better to keep that for the rural voyeurs of the Sunday Telegraph) and the metaphoric loaf of unleavened bread didn't look as if it was going to make the distance either. Undeterred, Sir Alfred switched clichés, bringing his theme of 'further downgrading' into the more recent past of the 'permissive society' and 'the Welfare State', which had, as he explained, combined to produce a 'dependent single-parent subculture' in which 'fatherless children provide a source of income for their welfare mothers'. As for the future prospects of the lucrative brats who were the offspring of this subculture, our sloganeering knight didn't need a sociologist or a magistrate to know that 'by the time they are ten these children have

graduated from vandalism to street crime and burglary' or that they are all 'thrown out on to the streets' when they reach the age of sixteen and their child allowance and other benefits terminate. These children are a worry to us all, but Sir Alfred is quite sure that they are 'not just wild': in many cases, as he pointed out, they are both 'mentally disturbed' and 'neurologically impaired' as well. Such is the hideous legacy of child-benefit allowances. They have filled the borough with mental defectives, and the schoolteachers probably wouldn't stand a chance even if they weren't all Marxists devoted, like their trade union, to 'demi-literate fads like anti-racism, anti-heterosexism, black consciousness, class consciousness, Third-Worldism - anything, that is, but reading, writing, and arithmetic'.

To begin with, Sir Alfred Sherman's audience appeared to relish this account of their plight. Many of Hackney's schools are in a shocking state. Basic services don't work. Appalling crimes take place. Some of the inhabitants of the borough are as idle and resourceless as any think-tanker could wish. But though Sir Alfred must have felt he was standing on safe ground declaring Hackney to be 'a picture of a blind alley', his litany was too blithely delivered, and some faces in the gathered crowd were crossed with growing irritation. People around here are familiar with visiting artists of the inferno, but they are not always happy to be used opportunistically, whether it is to confirm the Tory prejudices of the Sunday Telegraph or the more liberal ones of the Guardian. Indeed, as Sir Alfred wobbled rather hesitantly on his soap-box, I was reminded of an occasion in the early Eighties (well remembered in local lore) when the radical film-maker Mike Leigh encountered the wrath of the people on exactly this basis.

A packed public meeting held at the Rio Cinema, just up the road from Dalston Junction, had watched one of Leigh's television films from that time (if local memory is correct, it traced the activities of a drunken and zombified youth who spent his days vandalizing the lifts on his high-rise council estate), and then launched into a bitter attack on the man who presumed to show Hackney in this way. The same audience also rounded on their other visiting speaker. Paul Harrison was there as author of *Inside the Inner City*, a book that started off with a view of Hackney's tower blocks as seen from Parliament Hill in Hampstead, and then used the borough to show that, thanks not least to monetarism, conditions to rival those in the Third World could be found at home. People had read his book and were insulted to find their home - which, as everyone admits, is far from perfect - being presented to the wider world as a leading contender for the title of 'The Most Awful Place in Britain'.

There comes a point where a person should put up or shut up but Sir Alfred, when pressed to suggest some practical solutions to the problems on which he had expounded at such length, merely started to falter. After muttering, in apparent praise of his own performance, that 'an essential ingredient of any cure must be frankness', this notoriously outspoken man suddenly looked lost for words. He glanced in his companion's direction, but even though he had once written an influential tract called *Reversing the Trend*, Lord Joseph would now only stare fixedly at his own feet.

So our speaker tried again by suggesting, in a roundabout sort of way, that further cuts in public funding would probably help: 'We must demand that the "caring society" cares more about the ravages it has already caused instead of using these very deformities in order to mulct yet more taxpayers' money for swollen budgets which go on to perpetuate these ills while feeding the "caring professions"'. This didn't go down too well either, and Sir Alfred turned once again,

waving his baton at the mute figure of Lord Joseph and shouting that the 'plea to preach morality instead of socialism', which had cost poor Lord Joseph his chance of the Conservative leadership in 1974, must once more become a political demand: 'organized state dependence' must give way to a new system of public administration that would 'embody the parable of the talents'.

But Sir Alfred was floundering. He had run out of rhetorical tricks and had no choice but to resort to the think-tankers' last wheeze: the idea of Britain's perestroika. We must, as he yelled into the crowd, take on the 'Welfare State nomenklatura' or else Hackney will 'continue to slide' while 'the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe move forward into the sunlight'.

By this time the audience was taking over: somebody was reciting a list of senior officers from the council who actually lived in the borough: Chief Executive, Director of Finance, Head of Legal Services, Head of Works, Director of Education . . . An unwashed character was even tugging at Lord Joseph's sleeve, demanding that he explain how, if Hackney was really so bad, the Town Guide Cabinet had survived forty years without being vandalized: was this just another example of the borough's idleness? Some social-worker type - perhaps a radical vicar's wife - broke in to correct Sir Alfred in one of his many areas of ignorance, remarking with undisguised contempt that the Welfare State had been a Christian State in inspiration, or a 'social-service State' as it had been called by Lord Beveridge, and that it had never had anything at all to do with communism. Others were just standing back and roaring with mocking laughter at the whole sorry performance.

For a while the situation looked dangerous, but suddenly a man broke in with the news that, after eleven years as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher had finally been deposed. Rude cheers went up from the crowd; then Lord Joseph started to mutter into the silence that followed: 'I came into politics thirty-five years ago to improve life for the majority of the British people, particularly the poor and downtrodden. I shared these aims with Margaret Thatcher.'

The poor, the downtrodden, and the not-so-badly-off-at-all of Dalston Junction stared back in amazement, but the stricken Lord Joseph was in a world of his own. As he continued: 'We all share some of the blame there. We knew what we rejected in the post-war economy and society, but we never worked out clearly enough our disengagement strategy . . .' There would have been more in this remarkable vein, but the Bentley had pulled up again (the chauffeur at least was a master of timely disengagement) and, in a second, our two adventurous think-tankers had sunk back into seats of English hide and were speeding away towards the more easily adjustable futurity of the City and the Fortress of Portsoken, the towers of which loom up only a mile or so to the south. In the words of a neglected expatriate poet, the thing to remember about the kind of 'upland vision' favoured by Lady Thatcher's think-tankers, is that its 'clarity depends on distance'.