



Extract from:

## A Journey Through Whitechapel and Spitalfields

By  
John Bennett

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*If you went up to them and said, “Hey you, what are you?” They might tell you they’re Muslim first or “We’re not British we don’t like being called British” or “We’re British Muslim”. I don’t think that when you ask people necessarily what they are they necessarily know! It’s very difficult to label people and it’s difficult to ask them to label themselves.*

Tarquin Hall, interviewed for *Icons — a portrait of England*

Brick Lane runs from Whitechapel High Street, through Spitalfields to Bethnal Green and is a conspicuously vital place. Its southern section is actually Osborn Street as far as the junction with Wentworth Street, this brief section deriving its name from the Osborn family of Chicksand Priory in Bedfordshire who owned much of the land around here in the early 19th century. It is a lower-key affair than its more famous continuation, which enables places like The London Recording Studios to exist there with relative anonymity. The small sign outside still displays its former name, *Sarm*, a studio steeped in rock music history. Once owned by legendary record producer Trevor Horn, former member of progressive rock band Yes and the man who created “Video Killed the Radio Star” (the song/video that launched MTV in 1981), it has been used by many prominent names in the popular music industry such as The Clash, Madonna, Grace Jones and Frankie Goes To Hollywood. It is hard to imagine that in this unassuming, now somewhat scruffy building, Queen recorded sections of “Bohemian Rhapsody” and “The Prophet’s Song” in 1975 and filmed the video for “Somebody To Love” the following year, all pivotal tracks on the band’s first two number one albums.

This end of Wentworth Street was once the southern boundary of land owned by Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Cleveland and Lord of the Manor of Stepney. In 1640, he sold some of this land to Henry Montague, Earl of Manchester whose name is commemorated in Old Montague Street, a pretty unremarkable thoroughfare today, but once the heart of the East End’s Jewish community.

The arrival of these “strangers” from eastern Europe was the largest of its kind the East End had ever witnessed, brought about by the instigation of Pogroms (meaning “to demolish violently”) in Russia following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Jews were blamed and thus followed mass persecution from which thousands fled, many with the intention of settling in the USA. However, 120,000 did not make it so far and by default settled in the areas around their disembarking point by Tower Bridge. For these newcomers, the East End was to be their home for over half a century. Looking at a 1930s street directory for Old Montague Street shows just how dominant the Jewish population had become by that time and although any list for any other street would have read similarly, the directory for Old Montague Street is a superb indication of its

centrality to this Jewish community. In 1938, the surnames of owners of commercial premises on the north side of the street (Nos.5 to 73, no gaps) read thus: Jacobson, Bloomstein, Green, Reuben, Minsky, Marks, Finklestein, Cohen, Goldman, Pizar, Putter, Marks, Tilevitch, Landau, Greenstein, Wiseman, Cohen, Solomons, Muschel and Rinkoff. In fact, it appears that the *entire* street was Jewish.

Naturally, it was home to a synagogue, the Chevrah Shass, which first appeared in the *Jewish Yearbook 1896-97* and closed in the 1950s. The building, once strangely numbered 36 and-a-half Old Montague Street, remained unused for many years before being demolished in 1972.

In 1889, East End tailors went on strike, the first major industrial dispute in Britain to affect mainly immigrant workers. At this time, Jewish tailors were working at less than fair rates of pay for back-breaking periods of time — one of the

demands of the strike was to have working hours *reduced* to twelve hours a day. With the Jewish population's dependence on the clothing trade, it seems appropriate that the strike headquarters were based in Old Montague Street. With this in mind, the corner of with Brick Lane was the site of the first Bloom's restaurant and "Bloom's Corner" (as it became known) was where local residents would come to speak publicly and animatedly about issues which bothered them — it was such a popular spot that speakers would arrive increasingly early to secure their pitch but such heated competition often ended in quarrels.

Until the late 1960s, Old Montague Street was lined with creaking, weatherbeaten shops and narrow passageways, visually arresting but essentially run-down and long overdue for the redevelopment that finally came in the early 1970s. King's Arms Court and Green Dragon Yard are the only remaining alleyways from days gone



Brick Lane

by, but once there was also Regal Place, Prince's Place, Eagle Place, Easington Buildings, John's Place, Montague Place and of course, Black Lion Yard. In the late 19th century, Regal Place (which just about exists in the form of Regal Close, part of the new housing that sprung up in the 1980s) was the site of the district's only mortuary facilities, linked as they were to the Whitechapel Union Workhouse. Little more than a dilapidated shed, it was where corpses would be taken for washing and post-mortem examinations, obviously under less than ideal conditions. In September 1888, *The Times* reported one surgeon's dissatisfaction:

*He now raised his protest as he had previously done that members of his profession should be called upon to perform their duties in these inadequate circumstances. There were no adequate conveniences for a post-mortem examination; and at particular seasons of the year it was dangerous to the operator.*

The bustling nucleus of Jewish life in Whitechapel had been on the wane since the Second World War as communities began to move to the London suburbs of Golders Green, Hendon and Stamford Hill (cheekily nicknamed the "Bagel Belt"). This resulted in many abandoned premises and the appalling state of Old Montague Street at this time is apparent in the recollections of David Moffatt who, as a Jewish pupil at the Davenant School, used the street as a cut-through to Canon Barnett School in Gunthorpe Street where they served kosher lunches:

*We were told to walk quickly and not stop and talk to anyone because it was populated by meths drinkers and prostitutes. It was very, very run down — it wasn't a place you'd want to live in. It looked as though a bomb had landed on it the previous day! There was rubble, pockets of rubble all over the place. When they pulled houses down they just put barbed wire fencing up and left it like that... and there wasn't any talk of something being built in their place, just a feeling of "thank God that's gone".*

It kept this somewhat desolate, transient feel until the 1980s, by which time it was a random mix of old squats, newer housing and bare land waiting for development. Today it is reasonably quiet

(there are now no shops on the street), but its new-found modernity in the form of some very unimaginative architecture, has left it with an air of mediocrity that reveals nothing of its past as an important part of a once thriving community.

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After Petticoat Lane, Brick Lane is arguably East London's most famous street. But whereas Petticoat Lane bursts with life on a Sunday and becomes a redundant, litter-strewn gash down the side of the City most other times, Brick Lane seems to be a street that rarely seems to sleep, though on weekday mornings one will find it comparatively, albeit briefly calm. Over the years it has increased in status as the melting pot of all the different racial and social communities in the area to the point where it has now acquired symbolic status. It therefore seems appropriate that one of the East End's most perplexing, if indefinite characters is said to reside here.

In the 1970s, an enlightened being (a Bodhisattva) known as the Maitreya allegedly left the Himalayas to settle in London with the purpose of living and working within the Bangladeshi population and Brick Lane was an obvious place to settle. In 1984, a journalist claimed to have spotted Him in the street whilst dining in a restaurant, seeing a man dressed entirely in white and claiming that the vision had bathed the inside of her head with a golden light. A year later, media interest in the Maitreya persuaded a group of journalists to descend on the Clifton curry house at No. 126 with the intention of meeting him. While they waited for the appearance of the Great One, they held a lager drinking competition, only to leave the Clifton hours later, Maitreya-less and quite inebriated. As *The Guardian* put it at the time "I am afraid God did not show".

In Danny Wallace's biographical bestseller *Yes Man*, a chance meeting with a charismatic man on a bus leads him to a brief life of postivity, where he forces himself to say "yes" to everything. Wallace, a resident of Bethnal Green, attended a meeting of believers in the Maitreya, hearing that He works 24 hours a day for the benefit of planet Earth from his base in Brick Lane, as well as a bizarre taped message allegedly from the deity

himself (“I am the stranger at the door... I am he who knocks... Those who search me out are those who *will* find me...”). At this point Wallace begins to wonder if the man on the bus had been the Maitreya himself.

Brick Lane has come a long way since the mid 16th century when it was little more than a track through fields where clay was dug to make the bricks that give it the name we now associate with so much. Now heavily populated by different generations and descendants of Bangladeshi immigrants who first settled here in the late 1950s, the section from Whitechapel to Spitalfields is now known officially as “Banglatown”, the East’s answer to “Chinatown”, a name that was bestowed upon it in the 1990s. It features in Monica Ali’s novel *Brick Lane* which was published in 2003 and was heavily criticised by “community leaders” at the time who claimed it depicted Bangladeshis as backward, uneducated and unsophisticated. They also believed that it reinforced “pro-racist, anti-social stereotypes”, containing “a most explicit, politically calculated violation of the human rights of the community.” The news that a film version of the book was to be shot in the area did not go down too well. Brick Lane also appeared in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, a work that generated far reaching controversies of its own.

The labelling of Banglatown as a distinct entity seemed to coincide with a massive increase in restaurants as well as a noticeable sharpening of image, as if the shop owners had received business loans to install attractive new signs — a decorative metal archway was erected at the Osborn Street end in 1997 — and when one walks through Brick Lane today and takes notice of how many “curry houses” there are, the density is astonishing. It is little surprise that the nonchalant passer-by is frequently propositioned by waiters on the street, offering special deals, any way of securing custom from their competitors.

There is little to remind us of the Jewish community that once thrived here save one old shop at No. 92 which has the words “CH N.KATZ” quirkily painted over the arched window. Katz sold string, twine, cord, paper bags and waterproof tissue and managed to survive until the 1990s, though the little shop is now a venue for art instal-

lations. Immortality of a more assured nature is signified by the street names around Brick Lane and the silent legacy of the Osborn family survives here for that very reason. Heneage Street is named after Heneage Finch, wife of Sir George Osborn (Hopetown Street was once called Finch Street) and Chicksand Street commemorates the priory they owned in Bedfordshire. In Bram Stoker’s most famous novel, *Dracula*, No. 197 Chicksand Street was used as a storage place for one of the Count’s many boxes of earth, the temporary shelters he distributed at various locations around London which allowed him to sleep safely by day. Much of the street was redeveloped in the 1930s to make way for the Chicksand Estate.

On 24th April 1999, David Copeland, a member of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement left a nail-bomb in Hanbury Street as part of his one man terror campaign against Britain’s black, Asian and gay communities, having already made one attack in Brixton the previous week. His original intention had been to leave it in the middle of Brick Lane’s busy market, but planted the bomb on a Saturday when all was comparatively quiet. Realising this too late and reluctant to reset the timer, he left the bag containing the bomb in Hanbury Street instead where it was found by a passerby who, rightly suspicious, put it into the boot of his car before parking near the junction of Brick Lane and Chicksand Street. The bomb exploded just before 6pm, sending the roof of the car 100ft into the air, breaking shop windows and sending people running in all directions. Incredibly, there were no fatalities and the London Hospital reported treating no more than half a dozen people for minor injuries. The Bangladeshi community had been expecting some form of attack for a while as anonymous phone calls had been received by local businesses in the weeks prior to the Brick Lane bombing, supposedly from racist group Combat 18, but Copeland worked alone. This bomb was immediately linked to the Brixton attack and though Police were already on Copeland’s case, he had time to commit one more atrocity, namely the bombing of the Admiral Duncan, a gay pub in Soho (where three people were killed) before he was eventually arrested. On June 30th 2000, David Copeland was convicted of murder, receiving six life sentences