

A
Glimpse
into
some *history* of
Spa Fields

Spa Fields: *The summer's evening resort*

These days the London Borough of Islington has less open green space per resident than any other London borough. At one time, though, Islington was well-known for its open spaces, much of it famous for pleasurable gatherings and rowdy political meetings. The fields between Clerkenwell and Angel once teemed with pleasure gardens, resorts and spas; possibly the most famous – and infamous – was Spa Fields.

Exactly 200 years ago, in the winter of 1816, Spa Fields was also briefly the centre of a growing movement for political reform, which led to a riotous attempt at revolution...

Although now only a small remnant of Spa Fields still exists, they were once much larger, and have gone by several names: the Ducking-pond Fields, Clerkenwell Fields, later the Pipe Fields, (from the wooden pipes - hollowed-out elm-trees - which crossed them, dispersing water from the reservoirs at New River Head). The Fields once stretched across what is now Farringdon Road beyond Mount Pleasant (this part was later called Coldbath Fields), and up the hill around modern Amwell Street.

It's been a gathering place for centuries. It was to Clerkenwell Fields, on 15th June 1381, that king Richard II led many of the rebels who had flocked to London during the Peasants' Revolt, after the murder of Wat Tyler at Smithfield - there they were then surrounded by royal troops. After the great rising of the lower orders, looking to change the poverty & misery of their lives, of rebels imposing their will on the authorities, the government now had the upper hand, and executions followed...

Then, as now, open space near the city of London was often used for sports, games, parties, outdoor sex, and just hanging out. According to William Pinks, *"the district... known as Spa Fields... was the summer's evening resort of the townspeople, who came hither to witness the rude sports that were in vogue a century ago, such as duck-hunting, prize-fighting, bull-baiting, and others of an equally demoralising character."*



A market and a fair

The morals of those who hung around the Fields were long suspect, to those in religious and political authority; it was a place of excessive, disorderly, and sometimes violent, enjoyment.

For example: in 1768 *‘Two women fought for a new shift [blouse], valued at half a-crown, in the Spaw Fields, near Islington. The battle was won by a woman called ‘Bruising Peg’...’* In the summer of the same year *‘an extraordinary battle was fought in the Spa Fields by two women against two taylors, for a guinea a head, which was won by the ladies, who beat the taylors in a severe manner.’*

A few years later the Fields hosted what sounds like a cracking day out, although with a dark undertone.

On Saturday, the 28th August 1779, *‘a scene of fun and business inter-mixed took place in Spa Fields, to which no language can do justice. Bills had been stuck up and otherwise circulated, that an ox would be roasted whole, and beer given to the friends of their king and country, who were*

invited to enlist; that two gold-laced hats should be the reward of the two best cudgel-players; that a gown, a shift, and a pair of shoes and stockings should be run for by four old women; and that three pounds of tobacco, three bottles of gin, and a silver-laced hat, should be gurned for by three old men, the frightfullest gurner to be the winner.”

The whole extravaganza was intended to encourage recruitment into the army; voluntarily, or forcibly (press-gangs cruised such shindigs and kidnap the unwary or drunk and haul them off into uniform.)

However, many came who had no intention of enlisting, just looking for a good feed. The *Clerkenwell Chronicle* recounted what happened on the day: “An hour before sunrising the fire was lighted for roasting the ox, which was brought in a cart from St. James’s Market... At seven o’clock came a sergeant and a number of deputy Sons of the Sword. The sergeant made an elegant speech, at which every one gaped in astonishment, because no one could understand it. At half-past two the beef was taken up, slices cut up and thrown among the crowd, and many and many a one caught his hat full to fill his belly.

Instead of four old women to run for the gown, &c., there were only three girls, and the race was won without running; for two of the adventurers gave out before half the contest was over, and even the winner was a loser, for she tore off the sleeve of her gown in attempting to get it on. Only one man gurned for the tobacco, gin, &c. But it was enough...

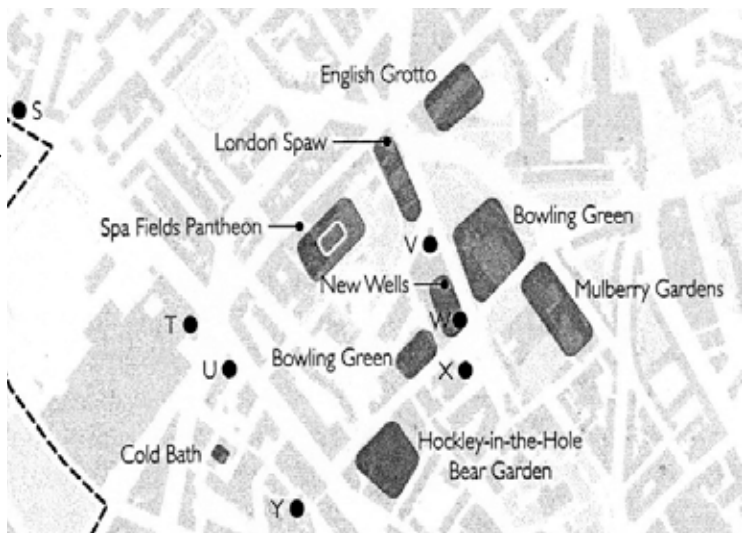
The mob was so immense that, though the tide was constantly ebbing and flowing... 44,000 people must have been present. All the ale-houses for half a mile round were crowded, the windows were lined, and the tops and gutters of the houses filled. The place was at once a market and a fair; curds and whey were turned sour, ripe filberts were hardened, and extempore oysters baked in the sun. The bread intended for the loyal was thrown about the fields by the malcontents. The beer was drunk out of pots without measure and without number... to add to the farce a person threw a basket of onions among the bread-eaters. Some men were enlisted as soldiers, but more were impressed, for the bloodhounds were on the scent, and ran breast-high. If not spring-guns, it might fairly be said that mentraps had been fixed in the Spa Fields.”

Spa Fields became notorious; for centuries it was thought dangerous to cross them *“in the dusk of evening, robberies being frequent, and the persons filched were often grievously maltreated by the villains who waylaid them.”* In the mid-eighteenth century, footpads (an old name for muggers), knocked down pedestrians passing to and from London, and made off with their hats, wigs, silver buckles, and money. The well-to-do visiting the popular local theatre of Sadler’s Wells hired ‘link boys’ to light them home.

Spa Fields also hosted popular fairs, such as the Whitsuntide “Welsh Fair” or “Gooseberry Fair” (a field in old maps is marked as “the Welsh Field”); specialising in horse and donkey racing. This fair was later moved to Barnet, becoming the Barnet Fair (of cockney rhyming slang fame). The Welsh Fair was noted in 1744 by the Middlesex County magistrates (who met at Hicks Hall, in nearby St John Street) as one of a number of places, resorts and events that were guilty of encouraging disorder and should be banned.

The number of spas and resorts that grew up on the Spa Fields area had, by the eighteenth century, multiplied and branched out into an astonishing number of taverns, tea houses and gardens, drinking establishments and places of entertainment (see below).

Location of some of the spas and resorts around the Spa Fields area in the mid-18th century, shown on a modern map.



A tumultuous manner

“In consequence of an advertisement which was placarded throughout the metropolis, stating that a meeting of manufacturers, artisans, etc., would be convened in these fields, to take into consideration the propriety of petitioning the prince regent upon the present distressed state of the country, an immense concourse of people was on Friday assembled.”

Two hundred years ago, Spa Fields, described then as “*a wild uninclosed space*”, was, for a while, a favourite gathering point for radical mass meetings; some of which evolved into riotous demonstrations. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, there was an upsurge in demands for political reform and the extension of the vote. This was also fuelled by the collapse of the war economy into recession and mass unemployment; thousands of soldiers and sailors were being discharged with little prospect of work, many being demobbed with years of backpay owed to them (common government practice at the time).

On top of this a rampant succession of new laws, abolishing old protections for workers and the poor, in the interests of the factory owners, merchants and employers, was introducing unrestrained laissez-faire capitalism, with devastating consequences for the lower classes. Mass radical agitation – for political reform, but also for improvement in the lives of working people, was on the rise. But the growing movement for change was split, between radicals and revolutionaries who were constantly agitating for an uprising of the poor against their masters, and a more moderate wing pressing for peaceful change; this uneasy alliance had fallen in and out for many years, and would continue to tentatively co-operate for decades to come.

On the 15th of November 1816, the famous moderate reformer Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt spoke to a crowd of 20,000 demanding reform, from a window in the Merlin’s Cave Tavern, on the edge of Spa Fields (where Merlin Street now stands). The mass meeting was ‘adjourned’ for two weeks until 2 December 1816; on which occasion the third mass radical protest meeting of the year on the Fields ended in a riot.



Henry 'Orator' Hunt speaks...

“Hand-bills were afterwards diligently distributed, and a large concourse of people accordingly took place on the 2nd December, and is supposed to have consisted of at least 10,000 persons.”

The large turnout on 15th November encouraged the committee organising December 2nd – it led some of them to think the poverty and hardship the working classes were facing could be overturned by immediate revolt. A fair number of leaders and some of the crowd were preparing for a revolutionary uprising; the majority, however, were not.

Rumours had spread that ‘something would happen’ at the rally; with some leaders talking of taking control of the Bank of England, the Tower of London and the prisons. But amid the genuine rage and desperation, government agents were planting weapons & sowing discord. The authorities were out to ensure any attempt at social change ended only in arrests.

“As a prelude to the scene that followed, a coal waggon, filled with persons of mean appearance, was stationed, shortly after 12 o’clock, at that part of the Spafields next the House of Correction. The waggon had two tri-coloured flags borne by its company: on one was inscribed, in large letters, the following inflammatory sentences:

‘The brave Soldiers are our Brothers, treat them kindly.’

On the other were these words:

***‘Nature Feeds the Hungry,
‘Truth Protects the Oppressed, ‘Justice Punishes Crimes.’***

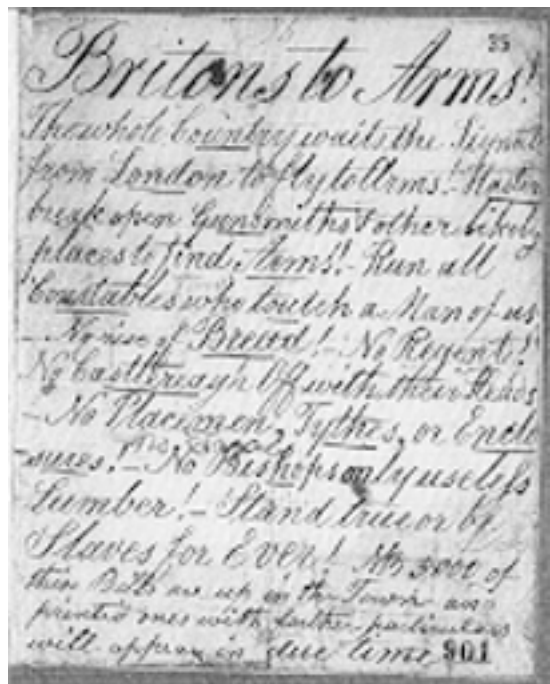
Mr Hunt then came forward amid the most tumultuous applause, and addressing the crowd by the usual title of 'Friends and fellow-countrymen,' exhorted them in the usual joke to keep silence, by holding their tongues, and not by calling out silence. He then harangued them as before for a considerable time, and in the course of his speech read his correspondence with lord Sidmouth, on the subject of the late petition."

Well-known radical James Watson addressed the crowd from the cart, then leapt off, and led a crowd to attack the Tower. *"Those actually engaged in the excesses, about 200 in number, separated from it about or a little before the arrival of the orator, and proceeded in a tumultuous manner through the streets of the metropolis."* Other groups *"surged off in different directions. Several gunsmiths' shops were looted. Some of the rioters reached the Tower and a man... climbed on the wall and called on the troops to join the people. In the Minories there was rioting for several hours..."* But the

government was forewarned by spies, and constables were stationed at prisons and other targets. And the majority of the crowd remained at Spa Fields to listen to Hunt, then dispersed.

Many discharged sailors from the wars took part in the trouble, including a large number of 'blacks and mulattoes' (who made up a large proportion of the navy). Black sailor Richard Simmons

"harangued the crowd for half an hour".



A placard distributed before the Spa Fields riot

Some rioters were later tried for treason, but the trial collapsed, after the activities of government spies infiltrating the crowd and radical were exposed. However William Cashman (who'd been discharged from the navy, destitute, owed 5 years pay) was hanged for taking part in the looting of a gun shop in Skinner Street, (on the edge of the Fields) during the riot. Cashman was hanged in March 1817, at the scene of his crime. A huge popular demonstration gathered in support of him; the scaffold had to be defended by barricades and "*an immense force of constables*".

Mass meetings continued on Spa Fields in February and March 1818, but the riots triggered vindictive government repression; laws restricting the right to gather and suspending other rights were passed. Leading radicals were interned, peaceful demonstrations attacked, and both further attempts to organise uprising and rebellion, and campaigns for reform, were left defeated and demoralised.

Work Is the Ruin of the Drinking Classes

Spa Fields' long reputation for unruliness continues. A tiny part has survived the last two centuries of building. One half has been turned into a brilliant kids' adventure playground. The rest is still a public space, but heavily controlled, subject to an alcohol control order that allows police to stop you from drinking alcohol, on penalty of a £500 fine.

But the urge to gather, to hang out with your mates, get off your head, is older than control orders, temperance movements and moral panics. So much 'public' space is now subject to control, CCTV, and restriction, monitoring our movements, tagging us and following our transactions. Yes, booze and other substances have their risks; but much of the control on enjoyment, on open space, on our movements, is about keeping people in line, obeying the status quo, not challenging the life we're supposed to lead: work hard, don't cause trouble, put off your desires, screw everybody else. The powers-that-be have fought for centuries to reform our immoral urges; by force, through religion, through uplifting social activities...

Still many of us stick two fingers up to all that. and have another drink.

A Glimpse into some history of Spa Fields

Once a '*wild uninclosed open space*', Spa Fields was once famous for rowdy entertainment, excess, violent sports and riotous political meetings. The fields between Clerkenwell and Angel once teemed with pleasure gardens, resorts and spas; echoed to the sound of radical orators, music, and dancing. Immorality was rife, and danger was everywhere...



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