

## UNLOCK WALK 2022

Unlock, an ecumenical organisation which works in deprived urban areas, normally has a sponsored walk each year as its main source of funding. It was not possible to arrange walks in 2020 and 2021, but 23 April 2022 saw us walking around Tower Hamlets. I was able to complete only half the walk as the choral society in which I sing was giving a concert on the evening of that day, so I was due in Carshalton at 2pm for rehearsal. So I started early and arrived at Mile End at about 9am.

First port of call was East London Tabernacle Baptist church just a few minutes' walk from Mile End tube station. I was made very welcome and chatted to a couple of church members as well as to Jenny of Unlock. The church was founded in Stepney in the late 1860s and subsequently moved to a larger building on the present site. This Tabernacle, which could seat 3000 people, was bombed during WW2 and the present building constructed in the 1950s.

The congregation numbers about 200 people on a Sunday morning and about 50 in the evening; it covers about 45 nationalities and all ages and social backgrounds. There is a good youth ministry plus English Language school classes for immigrants, and during the winter the Tabernacle works with other local churches to provide meals and places to sleep for homeless people. A Russian language church meets in the building and there is much other outreach. The stated aim is "Our desire is to reach the local community with the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ as people come to faith in him and become his disciples."

Next was Latimer Church on Solebay Street, across Mile End Park. En route I passed a Primary Academy with lovely murals on the front wall depicting a brief history of the human race. Latimer Church is also a 1950s building, with a previous building having been bombed in WW2. The church worked to build up the hospitality and hosting of visiting groups to the area, and has a number of residential rooms available at low prices. Residents attend a weekly service and there is a well-maintained garden.

The trail then went south and across Shandy Park, where I noticed a number of 19<sup>th</sup>-century gravestones arranged in front of a wall. Past the church of St Dunstan and All Saints, which we visited on a previous walk, and I spent a short time in Stepney City Farm. By this time it was 11am so the Farm was busy; there was a Farmers' Market with tempting breads, cheeses and other produce on sale, and the cafe had plenty of customers. I just looked for animals and found a large black pig, some sheep and two donkeys who came up to be stroked. The goats were not on show as they were expecting kids that weekend. Nearby was a school with a mural display of two Biblical quotes and one from the Quran, plus Mother Teresa's statement that kind words are short but have endless echoes.

Next it was south to Commercial Road and west to find the Roman Catholic church of St Mary and St Michael which has a very interesting history. "Local families, working mostly in the nearby London docks, scraped and saved for 35 years to purchase this site and lay the foundations of a spacious church." When the money ran out boys and girls were sent out to knock on doors and request the gift of one penny. Eventually the church was completed and opened in 1856, at a cost of over £21,000. Today the usual congregation numbers 300 people and the church works with "other faith institutions in dealing with Social issues, food and housing.....A knife bin was installed, as a witness to the Community that we want to live in a safe space."

Time was moving on so I then walked straight back to Whitechapel station and onwards to home. In Sidney Street I saw the bust of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman “the father of Bangladesh” but I did not visit the statues of Catherine and William Booth (founders of the Salvation Army). I had already passed the Ragged School Museum (Ragged Schools were founded by Dr Barnardo) and Whitechapel is close to the old London Hospital building, where my grandparents worked before they married in 1907.

I was sorry not to complete the walk which was so full of interest, and on flat terrain! But I made it back to Carshalton in time for the final rehearsal and later the performance of Bach’s St John Passion, sung in German to an appreciative audience. It is always good to visit churches and learn about the work they do, and it brings home the amount of need that exists all around us, and how much good work is done by Christians and other people of faith. As ever I am very grateful to my generous sponsors and I look forward to the next walk on 22 April 2023.

Juliet Chaplin, May 2022