

UNLOCK WALK 2013

Unlock, an ecumenical organisation which works in deprived urban areas, has a sponsored walk each year as its main source of funding. It's always interesting to explore another part of London, visiting churches of different denominations. This year the distance was seven and a half miles and was in Eltham – “Estates posh and poor”. Quotes below are from factsheets issued by the churches we visited – seven this year.

The weather was glorious and I started at Eltham Station (via Worcester Park and Waterloo), going on to Eltham High Street and the Christian Church of God (Pentecostal). The building was previously a warehouse, unused for several years. “Our objective is to be like Jesus Christ and to be able to pray, walk, look and love like Jesus.” The church does much community work, donating clothes and food items to charities caring for the homeless and other disadvantaged people. The congregation is multinational and there were some impressive African drums in the church as well as electronic instruments.

The route then led towards Eltham Palace, an English Heritage property dating from medieval times; one of Edward II's sons was born here. The Palace itself is closed to the public on Saturdays but the grounds are open and the route led through them so I strolled along King John's Walk, enjoying the birdsong and the sight of horses grazing in the fields – with the London Eye, the Shard, and Canary Wharf clearly visible in the distance. It was a magical place! Then it was on to St Saviour's Church, a large Anglican church dating from 1933. The building was awarded the Bronze Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects; it “has a domineering exterior and is no aid to mission” but the inside is more attractive with fine stained glass and an impressive statue of Christ. In fact the outside reminded me of Sutton Baptist Church. The parish is the sixth most deprived parish in Southwark diocese, and the church's mission statement is “hope, hospitality, humanity and healing.” There are strong connections with schools and outreach to the bereaved and other groups. The parish includes the Middle Park Estate where 63% of the population rent from the Council, compared with 13.21% nationally. The estate has a high level of serious violence including street robberies, and “a thriving secondary economy in drug dealing, and children as young as 10-11 earn money from networks run by older men, delivering mainly cannabis and returning a cut to suppliers.” St Saviour's and the Eltham Green Community Church support the Superkidz Community Trust, a Church Army initiative. Children of around ten years old are a priority in this scheme because of the risk of gang and drug-dealing involvement.

Next was the Eltham Green Community Church, which started in 1975 in a private house. By 1978 over 120 people were meeting on Sundays, and it acquired the present building which was for sale at £50,000. There were other bids, but the church established a day of fasting and prayer; the other bids were withdrawn and the Community bought the building for £32,000! “We provide services for mums and toddlers, Food Bank and CAP Courses; we also provide clubs for the older generation and a regular coffee drop-in.” And lots more! The church is in the middle of the Page Estate, one of three estates (the Brook estate is the third) built to accommodate workers at the Royal Arsenal and in various industries which have now died out. The area is in the worst 6% for deprivation and worst 5% nationally for crime. The route led through the Page Estate, which seemed pleasant and well-kept, under the railway line and the A2 and along to another Anglican church, St Barnabas. This building, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, was originally a garrison church for the Royal Marines

in Woolwich, but the Marines moved to Chatham in 1917. In the 1930s the church was dismantled and re-erected in Eltham to serve the new housing estates, but in 1944 it was bombed and only the four external walls remained. It was rebuilt and Hans Fiebusch, who had been a POW at Thamesmead, painted an impressive mural. The church building was peaceful and welcoming, and there was no piped music so I had my picnic lunch here! "We define our mission as being to 'worship the living God as a diverse community in the power of the Holy Spirit.'" The congregation is multinational and the services friendly. (Subsequent research on the internet reveals that there was a distinguished painter and sculptor called Hans Feibusch, a German-born Jew who converted to Anglicanism and then back to Judaism, who died in 1998 at the age of 99. It seems that this is the same man).

It was a short walk to the next church, a Roman Catholic church situated in the Progress Estate. It was built in 1936, the gift of a lady who had prayed to the martyrs John Fisher and Thomas More for help. The help came, and she kept her side of the bargain and had a church built and dedicated to these two saints. It is a lovely church with a stunning garden, beautifully kept and containing plenty of flowers, memorial plaques and a grotto to Our Lady. I enjoyed my visit here very much, particularly the coffee served in a china mug rather than the disposable cup I expected! "The community is very welcoming indeed and seeks to bring the love of Christ to every member of the community by its witness". Across the road from the church a plaque in the pavement, with offerings of flowers, commemorates Stephen Lawrence who was murdered there in 1993.

Next, in the busy Westmount Road, was Eltham Park Methodist Church. The original chapel was built after Sergeant Rudd, a serving soldier and a preacher, secured funds from local people. The present church, dating from 1906, is a centre for community activity. "Children and youth work continues with Boys' Brigade, Guides, Brownies, Rainbows, and the Toddler Church." The Church is also involved in the Greenwich Food Bank, West London Mission and other causes. Further down Westmount Road, past the Yellow Fever Centre, was Eltham Park Baptist Church which invited passers-by to "Come in for a Faith Lift". The motto is "Faith to Share and Care" and there is "a busy weekly schedule of activities offering something for the youngest of children, through youth, and all ages right up to our valued Senior Citizens." They even have a British Sign Language interpreter at most of the main services. Church members are involved as Street Pastors, feeding the homeless and supporting families of prisoners. "Many events are hosted on our premises, bringing large numbers of non-Christians coming for Playwell pre-school, Chess club, Boys' and Girls' Brigades, breakfast and homework club, Pop Choir and Lunch club." Indeed, something for everyone. Here I encountered Bishop Peter Hall, previously Bishop of Woolwich, who with his wife Jill plans the walk every year and draws the map for walkers. I have met Bishop Peter before and it was good to have a chat.

This was the last checkpoint so I then made my way back to Eltham station, visiting the "Pleasaunce" a nearby park which was also on the route. This holds a restaurant, the Tudor Barn, which was built around 1525 for Sir Thomas More's daughter Margaret and her husband Will Roper. Later Edith Nesbit, writer of "The Railway Children" and other famous books, lived in a house (now demolished) in The Pleasaunce; she enjoyed punting on the moat with her friends who included G B Shaw and H G Wells. The grounds are now a public park, and a very attractive one, so a lovely end to an enjoyable walk visiting so many welcoming churches doing excellent work.

As ever I am very grateful to my generous sponsors and I look forward to the next walk on 3 May 2014.

Juliet Chaplin, April 2013