

BOOK REVIEW

The War on Our Doorstep: London's East End and How the Blitz Changed it Forever

Harriet Salisbury, Museum of London Group.
London, UK: Ebury Press, 2012.
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The War on Our Doorstep is a history of the East End of London covering life there from the start of the 20th century to the late 1950s.

The author writes "the question that fascinated me was not what happened but who did it happen to". She has transcribed narratives from the Museum of London's archive to create a vivid account of those indomitable people.

The book records their stories of growing up, working and living in the East End. They saw and experienced poverty, discrimination, exploitative working practices, aerial bombardments in two World Wars, fragmentation of neighbourhoods, the birth of trades' unions and the death of industries and, ultimately, of the East End that they knew.

There is much of interest to health care practitioners in chapters covering home life and ill health before the National Health Service (NHS). Medical officers recruiting for WW1 found that 37.4% of Londoners had either a physical disability or a weakness due to past disease. This was not surprising since in the early 20th century more than a million people in the

East End lived in crowded buildings often in extreme poverty. Home for a typical family would be one or two rooms of a shared house with a cooker on the landing and a shared outside toilet and cold tap. Lighting and cooking was by gas on a shilling meter and if you "ran out of shillings or ran out of money then you just couldn't have any light or gas for cooking".

Children were vulnerable to the effects of cold, dirt, pollution and malnutrition. Many died from the diseases of childhood and a visit from the doctor was unaffordable for most families. The Spanish influenza of 1918 affected nearly every East End household. Prior to antibiotics, infectious diseases patients would be taken by the "fever cart" to hospital, often for prolonged stays in isolation wards where rest and better food allowed the immune system to recover.

Parasites were also inevitable; bed bugs, fleas and lice were a part of daily life. When rooms needed cleansing a highly toxic sulphur candle would be burned. The practice of sitting out in the street on a warm summer evening chatting with the neighbours was in part to avoid the bed bugs indoors. Clothing moth was also a major problem: it does not harm human health but could destroy a family's only asset; a good suit that could be pawned for extra cash.

Large families remained the norm in the East End in the early decades of the 20th century, especially in Jewish and Catholic areas. There was very little publicly available information about family planning. The disinfectant Lysol was

discreetly advertised as a vaginal douche for postcoital contraception. Abortion was illegal but "of course you got it all over London" from "the Harley Street abortionist charging God knows how much money to the backstreet woman in Kings Cross with her knitting needles".

Condoms were available – when certain boats came in "the docks were full of French letters and the dockies used to hook 'em out and put them on the chains hanging like a lot of flags" – as was the Dutch cap, but children were kept surprisingly ignorant about the facts of life. "Parents wouldn't tell you because it wasn't proper decorum to talk to children about sex so you learnt it on the streets." "I didn't know anything till I was quite old – babies just appeared." "My mother didn't even know how I arrived – she had me under chloroform and as far as she was concerned I came down the back passage."

Despite the many hardships, the East Enders remained cheerful and stoical with a great capacity to enjoy life, even during the horrors of the Blitz. "Although there was poverty everyone could make a joke, everyone could make light of life." Their stories are moving, eye-opening and sometimes very funny and I recommend this book.

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