

# Camberwell Green Tour

by Paul O'Kane June 2010

If we describe McDonalds at Camberwell Green as South of the Green, and the direction towards Peckham as East I would therefore place the little war memorial on Camberwell Green in its North-East Corner (it's important to establish this otherwise we will get lost as we go along.)

If you make your way to that North-East corner and the war memorial you may be surprised to find just how small the war memorial is. An odd little bricked path leads you in, flanked by several young palm trees which seem a little incongruous and exotic in a site marking an event of such local and national importance. It is also odd to find, not only one very small memorial but 2 or perhaps 3, and fascinating to see the story of a particular tragedy that occurred right here at Camberwell Green in 1940.

If you are at the memorial and now look North you will see the *Parkside Medical Centre*, originally quite a daring piece of architecture. However, a couple of decades seem to have reduced its initial sense of self-worth and today it arguably reveals the expense spared in its design and construction. Nevertheless, any patient registered at *Parkside Medical Centre* will be pleased to utilise its excellent walk-in service which opens promptly at 8 a.m. 5 days per week, when courteous staff welcome those with ailments to a fine example of the UK's world famous NHS public service.

Still standing at the memorial but now turning your head to look directly East you will notice a row of 4-storey flats that shelter that side of the Green. Most of these are 'Peabody Homes' (some have small plaques to prove it) and these are, or were, originally examples of a great British philanthropic spirit according to which wealthy and enlightened persons have done their best to care for those less fortunate than themselves. Before the welfare state and NHS were formed in the post WW2 era, organisations like Peabody evolved from the kind of charitable Victorian organisations *Cameroonian*

conservatives today (ever Victorian) seem keen to encourage and revive.

If you leave the Green through the little gateway directly opposite the medical centre and cross the bending road (being careful to look both ways for traffic) you can venture on a little so as to leave the *Medical Centre* on your left, walking towards the red brick wall facing you. If you stop at the little row of concrete bollards, and perhaps sit on one (they are quite comfortable) look up and you will see a row of trees ahead and a little further East, just behind them, the looming form of *Camberwell Green Magistrates Court*. This is a modern building, earlier than the *Medical Centre* but still clearly post war, probably 1960s while the Peabody buildings are surely pre-WW2. The court's modern grids and careful positioning on a large pedestrian-ised precinct gives it a sense of public service as well as authority. Depending on why you are visiting the court its appearance might fill you with pride, respect or downright fear. On the roads around the Green and the court you can frequently see small buses and trucks with tiny dark windows going back and forth. These are used to ferry prisoners to and from the court and to and from

cells and prisons to hear their cases, their appeals and ultimately their sentences. While training, briefly, as a journalist I once had to spend a day in this very court, watching and learning, how things work and how to report on them. I was warned at the time not to be shocked or too depressed by the fact that, throughout the day, almost every defendant in this court -as in courts all over the UK, America and parts of Europe- is a young black male. Such courts are open to the public and so you can witness this powerful political hidden fact about our society for yourself.

Now, turn back towards the Green, walk again past the Medical Centre leaving its curve of windows on your right and go on towards the main Camberwell Road. Note that you pass by a care home and, on sunny days, you might see a few of the residents parked outside on the patio enjoying a glimpse of the life they once knew as freewheeling citizens like our younger, healthier selves.

As you reach the main road, a converted pub on the corner stylishly announces its name as *De Nollywood*. But if you step back and look up (being careful of traffic here as you may

have to step into or even across the road) you can see at the very top of the building the original name carved into the plaster - *The Father Red Cap*- which I believe was once a thriving gay bar. Now, if you turn into the Green again, through its main double gates immediately opposite *De Nollywood* (noting the *Jobcentre Plus*, resplendent in lime Green just across the road on your right) you soon come to the official sign on which Southwark Council welcomes you to Camberwell Green. If the two glass panels of the sign -for current events- are empty then the central panel will enlighten you regarding the history of the Green and immediate surrounding area. Here you will find references to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century as well as the Second World War, there are also illustrated details about the magnificent trees that offer shelter and splendidly decorate the Green.

Walk on now so that the *Jobcentre* passes away across the road on your right and you come to the popular children's playground which has a strangely dead and cropped tall tree at the centre of all its colourful, fun-filled paraphernalia.

Moving on a little you reach the most magnificent, central London Plane tree and if you look up you will see that it is strapped all over with a web of lights which create quite a spectacle at night. Athletic Southwark Council employees (or outsourced specialists) must have risked life and limb to bring us this particular entertainment as you can see that the lights travel right to the very topmost branches.

At this point you can either fork left or right (South-East or South-West we might say). I suggest that you take the right fork and, noticing now the wonderful baskets of overflowing Geraniums and other flowers billow from each of the ornate lampposts, head up to the South-West corner of the Green. This is clearly marked by the kind of modern, automated public toilet into which the public always seem very reluctant to enter. Note however, that to reach it you must duck (depending on your height) under an imposing branch sweeping low down from another of the Green's wonderful and majestic old trees. If you stand under or near this branch now and turn to look back Northward, taking a final view across the Green, you should notice a slight mound in front of you, capped with some rather demonstrative rose bushes. For some

reason that seems difficult to explain, this slight mound attracts lunchtime sunbathers and snack eaters as well as slightly less smart and less professional beer-can swillers. I suspect however that this mound is the remaining evidence of the War time bomb shelter referred to in the tragic incident described at one of the little memorials where we began our brief tour.

But if this is a slightly depressing note on which to end, peer further across the Green and notice, just South of the South-East corner of the children's playground, a new, permanently open-air Ping Pong table has been recently installed -presumably to occupy some of the wasted hours of the unemployed who's numbers are likely to swell soon as a result of the dubious logic of our new Conservative government.

Enjoy the rest of your time in Camberwell