

New Exposition in the Lighthouse Poole Reveals the Story of Clerkenwell, a Piece of Italy Hidden in Plain Sight



Little Italy, Harold Steggles

In 2009, several art pieces painted by Harold and Walter Steggles were found in one of the properties of their sister, Dilly. They had never been seen since the 1930s, until Alan Waltham, who is married to Dilly's daughter, was commissioned to take care of the house. He found the paintings and made it his purpose to show the world, once again, the East London Art Group, a very important group that Harold and Walter formed part of, active during the beginning of the twentieth century. Among some of them, and if enough attention is paid, a hidden story about the heart of London can be discovered.

They are being exhibited right now, since the 20th of January and until the eighth of April, in the multi-arts venue of the [Lighthouse Poole](#), Dorset, and they contain a story practically forgotten about the centre of the city, which was, and still is, London's own Little Italy.

"In the day, the group's artists were good enough to be seen among an extraordinary list of contemporary artists, many of whom are still very well known, and yet they were completely forgotten after WWII," says Waltham. He is now 67 and owns Stegglesart, a company that promotes the artists' work. His pursuit for recognition for his family and the other members of the East London Art Group made him dig very deep into the history of their art and the neighbourhood. "They were good enough in their days to be seen alongside the best of their days, so it is my intention to try and get them back to the point and get their reputation reinstated," he says.



Harold Stegges, Gray's Inn Square

He reveals that one of the Stegges brothers, Harold, lived in the Clerkenwell neighbourhood. Looking at the view from his window, inspired by the colourful and lively area, he painted *Little Italy*. Clerkenwell, Farringdon, Rosebury Avenue. All of these were the home to lots of Italians that migrated to London and settled down right here, creating a strong congregation whose descendants still inhabit these streets. According to Waltham, the Italian community at the time would've been a "vibrant" area from a social point of view, and an "inspiring" one from an aesthetic point of view.

Little Italy, the name the neighbourhood received, was given to it when thousands of Italians fled their country and migrated for different reasons. There was a first wave that came here from northern Italy, establishing here a centre for craftspeople, ice cream makers, plasterers, confectioners, restaurateurs, and shopkeepers. But there was a second wave that arrived later during the nineteenth century due to the economic problems within their home country. Therefore, in Little Italy one could find a wide variety of different social classes, lifestyles and perspectives. They all settled down here, and created a high-spirited community full of music, food they were somehow closer to home.



Old map of Farringdon

Built in 1863, the oldest Italian church in the UK is also located in Clerkenwell Road. La Chiesa de San Pietro (St. Peter's Church) was founded by St. Vincenzo Palloti. Father Andrea, who has been working in the church for 9 years now, remembers stories he has heard throughout his time here. He thinks the reason why Little Italy was born is because many Italians are "completely in tears" when they leave Italy. "They had to come to London when it was full of smoke, very rainy and cold. Very different from home, tough period," he says.

Right now, however, it is more than easy to find lots of Italian places around the church. Terroni&Sons, for instance, is a delicatessen shop and restaurant that has been there since 1887, probably the oldest Italian business that remains today.

Even if father Andrea is incredibly grateful for how accepted they feel here these days, it was definitely not always this easy for them. During the beginning of the twentieth century, there were some criminality problems in the neighbourhood that did little to help the reputations of the immigrants coming from the Mediterranean country. Charles "Darby" Sabini was a British-Italian mob-boss that terrorized the streets of Clerkenwell around that time. He was accused of murder, extortion and theft, among others, and he controlled some of the local pubs of the moment. However, these stereotypes should be long gone by now, says 25-year-old Rocco Alessio. "Since my origins are from south Italy, I felt more this kind of stereotype on me. When people hear I come from the south, the first word they pronounce is mafia," he stated.

Rocco's family lives here, and he has heard countless stories from his parents, even his grandparents, about the "old days". "I remember my grandfather going frequently to this bar called Bar Italia before dinner. He would meet his friends there and spend a couple of hours playing some typical cards game like Briscola, Scopa, Tressette..."

St. Peter's Church is the central point where they all meet now. Once a week, Father Andrea organizes a senior lunch and dance, where older people can come and meet up with each other. In fact, last weekend they celebrated a Carnival costume party. "Even if they moved out of Clerkenwell, they still come for important events like weddings. It's considered the main core of Italians here," Father Andrea adds.

As to why the neighbourhood is still the core of Italian people and traditions in London, Rocco likes to think that Italians want to feel like they are still at home wherever they move, as if they were taking a small piece of their country with them when they leave it. "We tend to stay really attached to our traditions and we like to replicate them even if we don't live in Italy anymore," he explains.

Word count: 968

All of the pictures are courtesy of Alan Waltham, who sent them to me by email.

Publication:

Islington Gazette, Heritage section (Lifestyle), because their target is a local public that lives around the area and will surely be interested in the history of their neighbourhood. It will also reach the Italian community that the feature talks about.

Interviewee details:

1) Alan Waltham: alan.waltham@gmail.com

Phone number: 01202 814470

Date of the interview: Friday, 17th of February (Phone interview)

2) Father Andrea, parish of St. Peter's Church: info@italianchurch.org.uk

Phone number: 020 7837 1528

Date of the interview: Tuesday, 21st of February (in-person interview at the church office)

3) Rocco Alessio

Phone number: +39 388 986 9136

Date of the interview: Wednesday, 22nd of February (in-person interview)