

Church Times, 4 July 2008

Inside the skin of a slum

The Old Nichol, in the parish of Holy Trinity, Shoreditch, was one of England's worst slums. **Sarah Wise** tells a story of philanthropy, Ritualism — and boxing

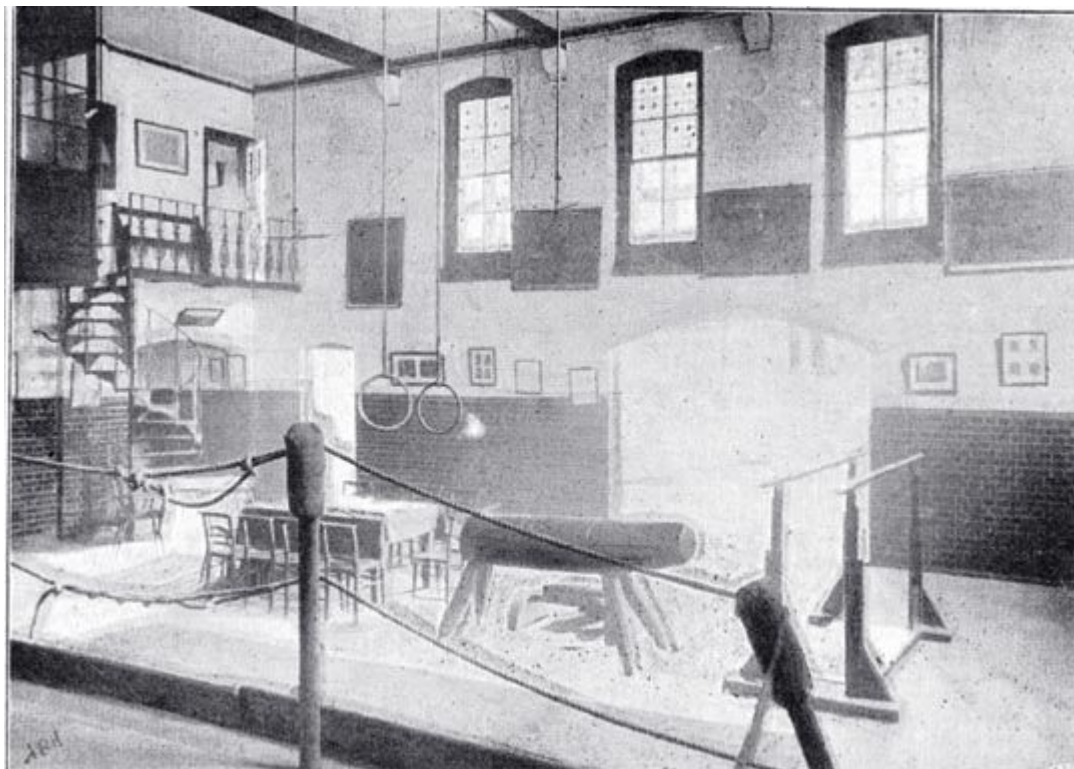


In Fr Jay's parish: a photograph taken off Boundary Street, Shoreditch, in 1890. Three years later, the London County Council began slum clearance, and the area was transformed into London's first council estate CITY OF LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES

“NOTHING will ever rouse the people of that part, save the last trump, and then they will respond too late.” This gloomy forecast was given to the Revd Arthur Osborne Montgomery Jay by a bishop on his appointment as Vicar of Holy Trinity, Shoreditch, in late 1886. This tiny parish lay at the centre of one of the nation's blackest spots of deprivation: the Old Nichol district, just behind St Leonard's, Shoreditch, in east London. Some 5700 people lived in the Nichol's decayed, early-1800s terraces, in conditions that the local medical officer of health had condemned repeatedly over the years. Here, the unskilled, the aged, those who had fallen into drink, and those incapacitated by industrial injury or chronic sickness came to settle in rented rooms that were among the cheapest in London.

The shipping magnate and amateur statistician Charles Booth would condemn the Nichol, in his 1889 survey *Life & Labour of the People in London*, as “a district of almost solid poverty and low life, in which the houses were as broken down and deplorable as their unfortunate inhabitants”. The Nichol's death rate (at 40 per 1000 people per year) was double the London (and national) level; while the toll that its conditions took on its infants was among the highest in the land. In England and Wales in the late 1880s, 160 babies per 1000 under one-year-old would die each year; in the Nichol, the figure was a horrific 252. Less quantifiably, many non-residents who came into the maze-like streets of the Nichol felt that there was a moral contagion raging there, too. “The whole moral tone was inconceivably low,” wrote a School Board attendance officer, John Reeves. “The life of the people was chiefly occupied in deception and concealment. There was scarcely a family but appeared to have some reason for fearing the police and many of the men were on ticket-of-leave [parole].”

When Fr Jay was finished with it, the Nichol's reputation would be even more tattered. Fr Jay had been the third choice for the Holy Trinity post, despite his later claims to have been handpicked by the Bishop of London for the task of redeeming the Nichol's outcast population.



Anglo-Catholicism with muscle: the men's gym at Holy Trinity, Shoreditch, was on the ground floor, beneath the church *LONDON MAGAZINE*

The Bishop had been advised that Fr Jay, though educated at Cambridge, had, in his brief career in the Church, already forged some potentially lucrative links with Magdalen College, Oxford. Fr Jay was, indeed, able to harness the Magdalen good will. He was also able to tap a few of the illustrious contacts made by his father, the Revd William Jay, who had been chaplain to the exiled King of Punjab, Maharajah Duleep Singh. Singh formed a bridge to the aristocracy, as well as new-money heirs and heiresses, who were to play a large part in the story of Holy Trinity, Shoreditch.

The parish was just 19 years old when Jay arrived. It had been so starved of funds that services were still being held in a hayloft above some stables. It smelt of manure, and snorts and whinnies regularly interrupted worship there. Just 14 people turned up for Fr Jay's first service, on New Year's Eve 1886. Later, Fr Jay expressed horror that so many Nichol residents did not know even the basics of worship. "I remember once seeing an old woman rise when I did at the Absolution, and not to be outdone by me in external devotion, raise her hand as I did at the Blessing. . . I do not find one person here who can find their place in the Prayer Book," he wrote.

Fr Jay's interest and talent was in helping men; he delegated all his mission work for Nichol women and children to two bodies: the broad-church Mildmay Deaconesses, and the Anglo-Catholic Kilburn Sisters, whose enemies accused them of being crypto-Romanists, employing, at their seven orphanages, "hairshirts, steel whips, knotted scourges, and crosses with sharp points that wound the wearer". Within a year, Fr Jay had raised £5000 of the required £6000 to build a proper church in Old Nichol Street: the society ladies Miss Betsy Dash, Lady Edith Heather-Bigg, and Miss Vivian Shuster had contributed large sums. "I have always got on better with men than women," Fr Jay would later tell an interviewer. Many lady philanthropists would have been devastated to hear it.

Tall, well-built, and with an animal magnetism that would go on to inspire three novels (two of them romantic), Fr Jay's physicality and earthiness may have been a fertile source of funds. One (male) observer

described him in these ambivalent terms: “Behind the almost brutal exterior there must lie a vein of the most sincere religious sentiment: no other motive seems adequate to account for the extraordinary devotion displayed in his life ... Yet ... one is perhaps more conscious of his less admirable qualities, his pugnacity, his want of tact, his coarseness, even his brutality.”

Fr Jay was convinced that the very poor never felt quite so poor as when they went to church. He believed that the cold, cavernous spaces of so many Church of England churches in the East End had contributed to the dreadful statistics seen in the 1886 Bethnal Green religious census, which showed Anglican churches at only half-capacity, while the Nonconformists were packing them in. Homeliness, warm colours, candles, flowers, and pictures would attract the poorest into the house of God, Jay believed. Unfortunately, in the late 1880s and 1890s, these were the very items likely to trigger the hostility of those who loathed Ritualism. An eyewitness at Holy Trinity, on the evening of Sunday 6 March 1898, noted: “the church is more like the chapel of some great Catholic house . . . highly ornamented with pictures and figures — ‘Images’ they might be called. The altar is railed off with a high ornamented iron railing, and as Mr Jay stood at the altar and raised his hand to bless the people there was nothing that looked other than Catholic, except that his dress was a little different from that of the RC priest.”

A few years earlier, these phenomena could have caused Fr Jay as much trouble as they had caused such high-church vicars as Henry Nihill of St Michael’s, Shoreditch, who was denounced to the Bishop of London in anonymous letters for his “shameful” vestments and for holding the chalice too high. The East London Protestant Defence Association undertook surveillance of slum priests, hoping to clamp down on practices that led to the prosecution and imprisonment of some priests under the 1874 Public Worship Regulation Act.



Father Jay

It wasn’t just accusations of popery that plagued Fr Jay. His church had in its basement a gymnasium, complete with boxing ring, in which many an East End pugilist would get his start, along with music hall acts and trapeze artistes such as Levano, Artellem, and The Unrivalled Tricolini.

Fr Jay was far from the first to introduce boxing as part of East End mission work to the poor: by the late 1880s, it was becoming a regular offering among charitable and university settlement outreach workers, who had come to realise that the best way to engage poor men was to formalise an already existing passion; so street prize-fighting — often, horrifically, undertaken with bare knuckles, and leading to serious injury — was transformed into a disciplined, structured, and therefore more “moral” pursuit. What seems to have irritated Fr Jay’s opponents most was that boxing was taking place on sanctified ground; and that the most passionate

of his pugilists were drawn from the very roughest class of the poor.

Fr Jay's boys included such Nichol luminaries as Scrapper, Donkey, Jack the Bender, Lord Dunfunkus, Facey, Old Squash, and Tommy Irishman. This was a strata of society that Lambeth Palace knew little about. Jay later wrote: "The narrow bigotry of some religious minds must find vent, and it usually does so in spite and ill-will. . . The abusive stories circulated about my so-called sporting proclivities affected me not at all. . ."

In retaliation, he preached a sermon at Holy Trinity, called "May a Christian box?" It was packed out, and many of his critics had come along. In the pulpit, he described boxing as "rational exercise and healthy recreation". The first hymn was *Hold the Fort* ("Ho! my comrades, see the signal"), and it was roared out by his hard-men's voices "in a manner that those who have never heard the pugilists of Shoreditch sing cannot understand".

Fr Jay's coup had been to remove boxing from the pub and the saloon bar, thus breaking the association between the sport and alcohol. He wrote: "Such scenes, no doubt in taverns and low clubs, conducted as they usually are on Sunday mornings, may become little else than traps for Satan himself; but on the other hand, properly carried out, nothing can be more orderly or decorous than a real honest club competition. "A large hall filled with 500 or 600 men; judges appointed by themselves; a referee whose decision is final; a suitable cup for the competitors; coffee or lemonade only for sale; myself standing near the door to shake hands with all coming in or leaving; — such a scene only suggests how, if rightly managed, even bodily exercise may serve to GOD's glory and His creatures' welfare."

He won the day on the boxing front. But as late as 1904 he was still being pursued — in submissions to the Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline — for his candles, his incense, his olive-green-and-gold maniple, and his embroidered alb and amice, all considered to be too Romish by an informer.

Fr Jay always claimed that he was battling alone in a godless region. In fact, the Nichol was heaving with religion: St Leonard's, Shoreditch, and St Philip's, Mount Street, were Anglican churches with outreach workers. A huge Baptist tabernacle, Congregationalists, and the London City Mission were also all doing excellent, selfless work. Each of these "rivals" had severe doubts about just what was going on at Fr Jay's very popular Men's Club and Gym, at which drink, gambling, and swearing were banned. Fr Jay was accused of harbouring known criminals from the police, of "breaking mothers' hearts" by encouraging their sons to take up the Noble Art, and, when a huge boxing tournament (at which the Mother Superior of the priory in Haggerston cheered on the bloodied lads doing battle) made it into the pages of the national sporting newspapers, the Bishop of London asked Fr Jay to please be less attention-seeking in his very unusual pastoral work.

But attention-seeking was a large part of Fr Jay's make-up. Not only did he pen three books about his life and work in Shoreditch: he asked the budding novelist Arthur Morrison to use the Nichol as an artistic source. Morrison's infamous 1896 novel *A Child of the Jago* put the final nail in the coffin of the Nichol's already bad reputation. A huge fight broke out upon the book's publication; one side said that Fr Jay and Morrison had dreadfully libelled people who were poor but essentially good. Others condemned the entire Nichol with its 5700 residents as irredeemable scum.

But the brand-new London County Council had, in any case, without reference to either Fr Jay or Morrison, taken steps to put an end to Nichol misery. The slum was torn down between 1893 and 1896 for the building of London's first council estate: the beautiful (and now Grade-II* listed) Boundary Street Estate. Only 11 of the Nichol's evicted inhabitants were able to afford a flat on the estate.

Fr Jay, like many of the other holy men of the region, now found his congregation depleted by the evictions; for many of the new artisan or lower-middle-class flat-dwellers felt no need of religious or charitable assistance. But Fr Jay continued to work hard in his parish, and his loyal (and still very poor) club members now travelled from slightly further afield to visit his premises and train as boxers, circus acts, and music-hall performers (the comedians Rich & Rich got their start at Holy Trinity).

Between 1910 and his retirement in 1921, Jay seems to have converted a number of the Boundary Street

Estate's large Jewish population to Christianity. Sidney Wolfe and his wife were two such conversions, and became Jay's devoted chauffeur/butler and housekeeper. They left London with him when he retired to a mansion in Great Malvern.

The source of his considerable wealth in his later years remains mysterious. His brother's descendants have two theories: one is that one of Fr Jay's Jewish converts made a huge bequest; the other is that his devoted society ladies were determined that he should have an earthly reward for his years of selflessness.

There is a rather ugly footnote to Fr Jay's career. Even his fiercest critics could not question his utter devotion to his often-challenging flock. In the mid-1890s, however, he joined in with the eugenics craze, claiming that a large proportion of his parishioners were condemned by heredity to criminality, "conceived in sin, and shapen in iniquity, inheriting defects of the blood and taints of will", as he put it. The answer was to confine anyone convicted of a second or third crime of theft to a gender-segregated penal settlement for life, where they would have no chance to breed, and thus a whole section of society would die out.



A place for men: Fr Jay broke the link between boxing and the illegal street fight, and boxing and drink, by opening his club (above), where alcohol was banned and weekly membership was a penny. Pictures of Christ crucified and photos of top fighters, stripped to the waist, were on the walls. Music-hall entertainers got their start there. *LONDON MAGAZINE*

It is not easy to square this biological determinism with a belief in the redeeming power of Christ. Perhaps it is kindest to say of Fr Jay that, as a tireless seeker of funds, he was willing, temporarily, to embrace any fashionable political or cultural fad in order to draw attention to the Holy Trinity mission work. Certainly, this richly complex and contradictory individual devoted his life to saving certain Nichol individuals, even as he abhorred the huddled Nichol masses.

Sarah Wise is the author of *The Blackest Streets: The life and death of a Victorian slum* (Bodley Head, £20; 978-0-224-07175-8).

Church Times, 8 August 2008

Inaccuracies in the story of Fr Jay and the Wolfes

From Peggy Jay

Sir, — The article about my great-uncle Arthur Osborne Jay by Sarah Wise, “Inside the skin of a slum” (*Features*, 4 July), has been brought to my attention. I would like the opportunity to reply to some of her assertions.

It is unlikely that the Bishop of London would have told Jay that he was a third choice for the parish, but very likely that he told him that he was “handpicked”.

The Maharajah Duleep Singh was not the “King of the Punjab”. His father had been the last Ruler of the Punjab, and as a small boy he had been brought up by an English family in India. To their surprise, he expressed a desire to become a Christian, and was eventually baptised by my great-grandfather, William Jay. By the time the latter returned to England and became his chaplain, Duleep Singh was chronically short of money.

As he was a bachelor, it was appropriate that “Jay’s interest and talent were primarily in helping men,” and that other resources near by run by women could have been expected to do the mission work with women. His brother, my grandfather, was Vicar of Christ Church, Watney Street, from 1883 to 1889, and my grandmother ran a mothers’ group in the parish, surely not something Jay could have been expected to do. Building a boxing ring under his church was a brilliant idea, even if others had done this before, and could well be copied to get knife-carrying boys off the streets today.

Why would lady philanthropists have been “devastated to hear” that Jay felt that he “always got on better with men than women”? Most men then, and some now, prefer doing business with other men, and raising money is business.

Attention-seeking may have been “a large part of Jay’s make-up”, but, as he himself wrote, “I can truly say that I have literally and figuratively bawled myself hoarse in calling attention to the plain needs of God’s poor: but though my throat is not what it was, I still have my pen.” It worked: he got the money to build both a church and a boxing ring.

Arthur Morrison, who wrote *A Child of the Jago*, was born in Poplar in the East End of London, the son of an engine-fitter. He became a journalist and published a best-selling volume of short stories, *Tales of Mean Streets*. Subsequently, Jay invited him to visit Old Nichol, and he then decided to write the book. H. G. Wells, reviewing it, wrote: “this admirably conceived and excellently written story”. How was it “infamous”?

Where is the evidence that Sidney and Lillian Wolfe were converted Jews?

Jay did not retire to a “mansion”. He lived in a detached house on a street of detached houses. Many vicarages would have been bigger. It is now a small hotel, although more like a guest house. In 1921, this would have been considered a suitable-sized residence for a single, retired clergyman with an elderly couple to look after him (and perhaps some younger help). At that time, it was possible to live very comfortably on a small income. My father’s cash book supports this.

Jay did indeed advocate sending the most desperate and deprived characters to a penal settlement, but it is unscholarly to judge the attitudes of people in the late 18th and early 19th century in the light of what is politically correct today. In my lifetime, it was generally acceptable that gay men were sent to prison and murderers were hanged. Before that, there had been a long tradition of sending people who had committed petty crimes to Australia (some of whom built a better life for themselves there).

There is no evidence that Jay “was willing, temporarily, to embrace any fashionable political or cultural fad in

order to draw attention to the Holy Trinity mission work”.

Jay chose to work in the East End of London as both his father and his brother had done for shorter periods. He could have had a much easier life elsewhere. If “Even his fiercest critics could not question his utter devotion to his often challenging flock,” how can Wise conclude: “this richly complex individual devoted his life to saving certain Nichol individuals, even as he abhorred the huddled Nichol masses”?

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From Mr Antony S. P. Wolfe

Sir, — I was delighted to see the article by Sarah Wise about the Revd Arthur Osborne Montgomery Jay, and thought: “At last someone has recognised his calling.” Unfortunately, it painted an incorrect picture of his wonderful work.

I must be one of very few people left alive to have known Fr Jay, because my grandparents were the so-called Boundary Street Estate Jews whom, the author said, he converted to Christianity. What utter rubbish!

In 1890, my grandfather was 12, and was sent by his family from Quy, Cambridgeshire, to Shoreditch with a letter of reference and introduction from the village squire. Fr Jay gave my grandfather Sydney Wolfe a position in his household as a boot boy. He never worked for anyone else, and was with Fr Jay when he died 57 years later. He worked his way through the house, and was by this time his butler, but also, as Fr Jay called him, his constant companion and friend.

My grandmother Lillian Wolfe was born in Bristol to a Church of England family. Her father moved to London for work. He was a wheelwright (a very highly skilled profession). She met Sydney at Holy Trinity, Shoreditch, where she worshipped and was a teacher at Sunday school. After a time, they walked out together, and were married in 1901 by Fr Jay at Holy Trinity.

My grandmother was a seamstress and talented cook. She joined Fr Jay’s household as his housekeeper, and also never worked for anyone else.

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