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Birkbeck Boozers

Richard Clarke r.clarke@bbk.ac.uk

Abstract.

Birkbeck Boozers – not the occupants of the Birkbeck College Bar after classes on a Friday evening, but the pubs established by the Birkbeck Building Society and Bank ('The Birkbeck') in the second half of the 19th century – provide a window on the history of Birkbeck College (which The Birkbeck helped sustain) and also on the suburban development of London and the complex relationship between 'self-help' and alcohol.



'Birkbeck' Taverns identified to date: a) Birkbeck Tavern, Archway, N19, now flats, b) Birkbeck Tavern, Leytonstone E11 saved from conversion by a community 'Birkfest' and now a lively local, c) Birkbeck Tavern, Dulwich SE21, now residential, d) Birkbeck Tavern, Highgate N6, renamed the Shepherd's Tavern in 1897 now a popular licensed music venue, the Boogaloo, serving good food and still with its 'Birkbeck' mosaic (inset) in the threshold. Photos by author.

Evidence of other Birkbeck Taverns remains to be discovered.

Birkbeck Boozers

Richard Clarke r.clarke@bbk.ac.uk

Visitors to Stratford East who venture beyond the confines of University Square and wander past (or into) the Birkbeck Tavern a mile or so north may wonder what, if anything, the pub has to do with Birkbeck College, now part of the University of London. The answer is – a lot!¹

On the corner of North Birkbeck Road and Langthorne Road, E11, the Birkbeck Tavern is part of the Leytonstone Birkbeck estate, a development financed by the Birkbeck Bank which was established in the premises of Birkbeck College's forerunner, the London Mechanic's Institute (LMI) in 1851. The Bank grew out of the Birkbeck Land Society and Building Society (BLBS), one of the first of the 'permanent' building societies formed after the collapse of Chartism and the Chartist Cooperative Land Company and the brainchild of Francis Ravenscroft whose bust rests on a window ledge in Birkbeck's Council Room today.

Ravenscroft (later to become half of Ede and Ravenscroft, the gown-makers) entered the LMI as a student in 1848 and a couple of years later was elected to chair the Institute's governing body. The LMI's minutes (now part of the College's archives) record that he initially rented a cupboard in the secretary's office. By 1866 the Bank had taken over the whole of the LMI's ground floor and in 1885 it funded the Institute's move (as the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institute) to purpose-built premises nearby.

The Bank collapsed in 1911, was taken over by the London and Westminster and is now part of the Royal Bank of Scotland. In the sixty years prior to its collapse, however, the BLBS and its bank played a significant role in the late Victorian suburbanisation of London.

The earliest BLBS estates were laid out in the mid 1850s in Highgate, in Archway and in East Dulwich. All three had taverns, the fabric of which still stands today.



Figure 1 The Birkbeck estate shown (with the line of the proposed Highgate and London Railway entered in red) on Stanfords map of 1865 and (inset) a photograph looking south showing the newly erected Birkbeck Hotel above the railway tunnels following the opening of Highgate Station in 1867.



Figure 2 The Highgate Birkbeck Hotel (top, c. 1870), later simply 'The Birkbeck' (1963, bottom left) and subsequently 'The Shepherds' (1980, right).



The first was erected around 1860 on the BLBS' small Highgate estate. The land had been purchased some years before authorisation of the new Edgware, Highgate and London Railway in 1862 which truncated the estate to the east. Opened as the Birkbeck Hotel, the tavern had stabling and appears to have been built to catch passing road traffic at the top of Archway Road, and also to attract passengers from Highgate Station, opened in 1867.



Figure 3 The Highgate Birkbeck Tavern was renamed the Shepherds (right) in the 1970s and then in 2002 became the Boogaloo (bottom) a popular music and comedy venue. The original Birkbeck mosaic (left) is still on the entrance threshold.

The rest of the estate was developed piecemeal around Birkbeck (now Holmesdale) Road and Dudley (now Orchard) Road. Some time after the 1880s the pub's name was changed simply to The Birkbeck and then, in the 1970s, to 'The Shepherds'. In 2002 the pub was sold and renamed the The Boogaloo, now a popular licensed music and comedy venue. The Birkbeck mosaic survives (in dire need of protection) on the threshold of its entrance.

Other Birkbeck Taverns appear to have been designed as community facilities integral to the fabric of the estates. The East Dulwich Birkbeck Tavern in the triangle of Birkbeck Hill (previously Birkbeck Road), Thurlow Hill (previously Birkbeck Street) and Birkbeck Place SE21 is now residential with an architect's office on the ground floor.



Figure 4 The Birkbeck Tavern SE21, on the corner of Birkbeck Place is now offices and residential. Unlike the Highgate Birkbeck Tavern there is no stabling and the pub appears to have been designed to serve the local community.

A plot for a public house was included in the estate design of the Holloway Road (Archway) estate and offered by ballot in the 1855 distribution along with the house plots.² In the event the BLBS itself built the tavern (and obtained the license for it), subsequently advancing money for its purchase.³

Unlike several Birkbeck estates (for example Acton) which retain their 'middle-class' character today, the Birkbeck Archway estate became a notorious slum prior to the Second World War — 'one of the worst examples of urban decay in London'⁴ — and the subject of a sociological study⁵ prior to its clearance and redevelopment in the early 1970s by the Greater London Council. The fabric of the Birkbeck Tavern was left however and now flats, the façade survives, together with some of the original BLBS terraces nearby.



Figure 5 The Birkbeck Tavern, in Elthorne (previously Birkbeck) Road Archway N19 (above), just before the demolition of the Birkbeck Estate in 1970 (left) and (right) as residential units today. Below; the area in 1862, 1870 and 1910. Development was incremental with the Tavern (arrowed) amongst the first structures to be built.

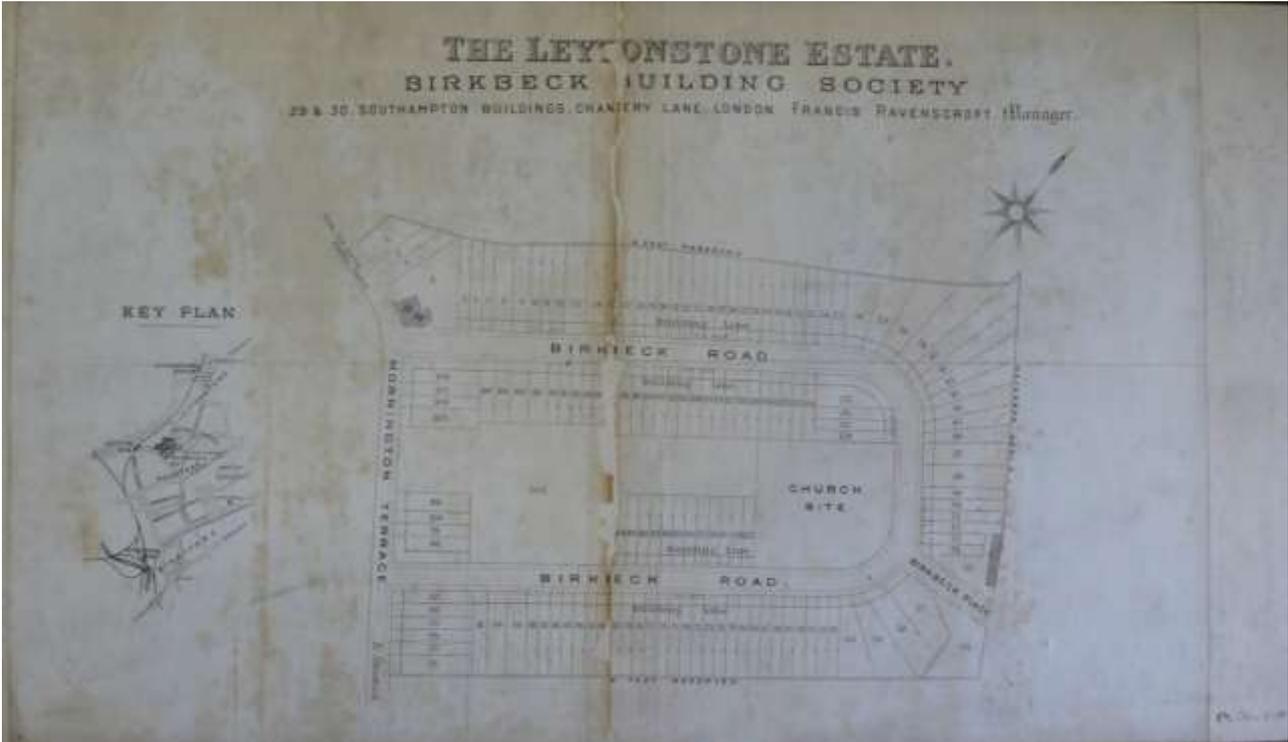


Attempts were made to establish taverns on other locations, for example in Beckenham, where BLBS applications for licenses for a public house to be erected near Birkbeck station were refused in 1889 and again in 1896. No public house was ever built on the estate.⁶ It is

designed for white-collar workers that appeared in middle-class areas of London from the 1890s.⁸



Figure 7 The Leytonstone Birkbeck Tavern E11 (above), saved from conversion in 2013 by a community 'Birkfest', and now a vibrant local free house and music venue. (Below) Estate map (undated) from the BLBS, located at 29 & 30 Southampton Buildings, the address of the LMI.



In 2013 the Leytonstone Birkbeck was threatened with conversion to residential use but was saved from closure by a vigorous community campaign - including a one-day 'Birkfest' of live music, ales and barbeque.⁹



The story of the Birkbeck pubs — and of the BLBS estates in which they were built — is more than just a curiosity in the history of Birkbeck College. The foundation of the LMI in 1823 was characterised by bitter disputes between the champions of workers' self-education (represented by the LMI's radical instigators¹⁰ Thomas Hodgskin and J C Robertson) and Benthamite Liberals (in particular Henry -

later, Lord - Brougham, Francis Place and William Ellis); these had long since been resolved in favour of the latter. By mid-century an individualist model of self-help had come to dominate the ideology of the College (and of 'polite' society more generally) in opposition to the collectivist vision of the LMI's founders.¹¹

By 1851 – ten years after George Birkbeck's death, the LMI was also in financial crisis. Ravenscroft's use of the LMI's premises (as well as George Birkbeck's name) for the BLBS was not merely promotional. The BLBS offered a vehicle for realising the promised rewards of self-advancement to the LMI's students. It also provided much needed financial support. In addition to rent, the BLBS funded the LMI's prospectus, printing its own prospectus in the same booklet.

Ravenscroft was keen to distance the BLBS from the taint of Chartism. BLBS promotional material also emphasises the virtues of sobriety. The presence of pubs on the Birkbeck estates raises a number of questions. At least some of the taverns appear to have been planned into the designs of the Birkbeck estates as social facilities, but if so they were the only such facilities to be provided. This contrasts with the designs of quasi-philanthropic working-class housing estates, several of which included schools, meeting rooms, baths or wash-rooms (though these were frequently never built) but never pubs. There is no evidence of the Birkbeck estates having restrictive covenants on the sale of alcohol, unlike those developed by temperance societies of the period.

The presence of (or proposals for) taverns on the Birkbeck estates challenges a widely held view that abstinence (at least in public) was associated with respectability. Harrison, for example, asserts that by the 1860s 'the respectable classes were drinking at home, or not drinking at all.'¹² He suggests that an absence of pubs was associated with status and, in

some developments, with enhanced property values.¹³ The example of Beckenham, where Ravenscroft's applications for licenses were refused, suggests rather that attitudes to licensed premises varied from place to place.¹⁴ The estates of some other Land societies also included licensed premises.¹⁵ Nor was abstinence universally associated with respectability or, according to Kneale and French, with well-being, at least on the part of the medical profession and insurance offices (who sometimes charged higher premiums to teetotallers).¹⁶

Either way, the presence of taverns further distances the BLBS from temperance as a movement and suggests a degree of market differentiation with the Birkbeck societies addressing constituencies broader than those targeted by competing temperance building societies.¹⁷ The LMI itself was determinedly secular and the presence of pubs underlines the commercial nature of the BLBS, distancing it from temperance and from the quasi-philanthropic provision of working class homes as a movement. By the 1870s the 'British' model of private saving and speculative private building mediated by the building society (and pioneered by The Birkbeck) was being advocated widely (as it is today) as a solution to the housing crisis, homelessness and overcrowding.¹⁸ At the same time, for The Birkbeck's investors, a home and a mortgage provided a physical and financial complement to the ideological message of the LMI (and its successors) that individual self help rather than collective action was the best route to personal and societal progress.

Birkbeck College was, if not conceived, then certainly delivered in a pub¹⁹ and it is fitting that pubs should figure in its history. A focus on 'Birkbeck Boozers' — beyond the occupants of the Students' Union Bar after class on a Friday evening — provides a window on the College's origins, on the suburban development of London and the complex relationship between 'self-help' and alcohol.

Notes and references

¹ This paper draws on material published in R.Clarke, 'Self-help, Saving and Suburbanisation - the Birkbeck Land and Building Societies, their Bank and the London Mechanics' Institute 1851 – 1911' *The London Journal* 40, 2 (July 2015) 123-146. Comments, corrections and contributions are welcome, richc@gmx.com

² F.Ravenscroft, *Birkbeck Freehold Land Bonus Distribution Society*. (London Mechanics' Institution 1855).

³ Commissioners on Friendly and Benefit Building Societies. *Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into Friendly and Benefit Building Societies*. (HMSO, 1872), 229.

⁴ T.Baker, C.Elrlington, A.Baggs, D.Bolton and P.Croot, Islington; Growth: Holloway and Tollington. In *A History of the County of Middlesex Volume 8: Islington and Stoke Newington Parishes* ed. T.Baker: (1995), 242-60.

⁵ J.Rowland, *Community Decay*. (Harmondsworth,1973)

⁶ *Bromley Journal*, 7 September 1889 and 3 November 1896.

⁷ Robert Wilkinson, *Behind the Bar. The Licensed Trade in Waltham Forest* (Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop, 2010)

⁸ J.Kneale, "A problem of supervision': moral geographies of the nineteenth-century British public house'. *Journal of Historical Geography* 25, 3 (1999), 333-48.

⁹ <http://savethebirkbeck.wordpress.com> [Accessed 3 January 2013].

¹⁰ The ODNB is technically correct when it describes Robertson and Hodgskin as 'founders' of the LMI which George Birkbeck 'inaugurated'. M.Lee. 'Birkbeck, George 1776-1841' In *Dictionary of National Biography*, eds H.Matthew and B.Harrison (Oxford, 2004) 5:832-837.

¹¹ Friedrich Engels had already written off mechanics' institutes as useless 'organs of the middle classes', designed to make students 'subservient to the existing political and social order' (adding, hopefully 'Of course the vast majority of the workers will have nothing to do with these institutes'). F.Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. 1844 trans. by W.O.Henderson and W.H.Chaloner. (Oxford, 1971), 271.

¹² B.Harrison, 'Pubs.' in *The Victorian City. Images and Realities. Volume I*, eds. H.J.Dyos and M.Wolff: 161-90. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 166.

¹³ The example of the Birkbeck would appear also to be an exception to Home's assertion that freehold land societies 'created their own building regulations, set building lines and controlled the numbers of shops (prohibiting public houses completely).' R.Home 'Peri-urban informal housing development in Victorian England: the contribution of freehold land societies' *Planning Perspectives* 25, 3 (2010) 365-373

¹⁴ The variation in local attitudes to the sale of alcohol and proposals was a significant concern not just to brewers and licensees who with others opposed the proposed transfer of licensing from Justices of the Peace to elected bodies – e.g. I Gunsberg, *Local option: an argument against teetotal tyranny* (Liberty and Property Defence League 1888).

¹⁵ Beggs complains that on an estate of the National Freehold Land Society 'the first building occupied happens to be a beer-shop.' T.Beggs, 'Freehold Land Societies' *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 16, 4 (1853) 338-346; 345. A beer house was also provided in the Chartist Cooperative (subsequently the National) Land Company's settlement at Heronsgate.

¹⁶ J.Kneale and S.French, 'The Relations of Inebriety to Insurance': Geographies of Medicine, Insurance and Alcohol in Britain 1841 - 1911.' in *Intoxication and Society*, eds J.Herring, C.Regan, D.Weinberg and P.Withington. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2012), 91, 96. Throughout the 19th century, alcohol widely used as a medical cure, stimulant and anaesthetic. Partly because of this, 'the relationship between medicine and temperance was strained until the 1870s [...] mutual suspicion between teetotalers and doctors reflected their rather different class and denominational backgrounds'.

In 1840 Robert Warner, a successful Quaker businessman applied for insurance, and was told he would have to pay a higher premium because he was a teetotaler; 'the directors consider teetotal lives are worse than ordinary lives'. He was so incensed that he set up his own insurance company, the United Kingdom Total Abstinence Life Association.

¹⁷ As does the Birkbeck Tavern in Highgate — now a licensed music venue, the Boogaloo, but still with its 'Birkbeck' mosaic, recently damaged, on the threshold — which seems likely to have been planned as a commercial venture to capture passing traffic on the Archway Road.

¹⁸ A quarter of a century later after his attack on mechanics' institutes, Engels chose the BLBS as the focus of a denunciation of those who saw building societies as a solution to the problem of inadequate housing, arguing that they were relevant only to those who already enjoyed financial security. Quoting extensively from a widely placed BLBS advertisement in which buying a house on mortgage

is likened to the hire-purchase of a piano 'with which most persons are familiar' he declared: 'These building societies are not workers' societies, nor is it their main aim to provide workers with their own houses. On the contrary, we shall see that this happens only very exceptionally.' The bigger societies in particular may be 'sometimes formed under political or philanthropic pretexts, but in the end their chief aim is always to provide a more profitable mortgage investment for the savings of the petty bourgeoisie, at a good rate of interest and the prospect of dividends from speculation in real estate.' F.Engels, *The Housing Question*. 1870 (Moscow, 1970), 58-60.

¹⁹ At the Crown and Anchor Tavern — a well-established meeting-place for political groups — in London's Strand. A major public meeting on 11 November 1823 was attended by 2,000 people and the LMI was founded at a General Meeting held three weeks later on 2nd December. A.L.Macfie *The Crown & Anchor Tavern, the birthplace of Birkbeck College* (Birkbeck College, 1973).
