

Going Out

Teacher's Background

Time off

When Walthamstow first began to grow, there was little in the way of organised public entertainment. Until the 1860s the only public spaces were churches and chapels, which were only open to their own members, and pubs, which were open to all. Public meetings were generally held in pubs and hotels, and impromptu entertainments were often in the same places. By the 1850s, music hall was coming into being – performances, originally held in pubs, during which the audience could eat, drink and smoke as well as listening to music and watching dance and comedy. The first purpose built concert hall in Walthamstow opened in the 1860s, but proved short-lived – the town was not yet really big enough to sustain a professional music venue. But in the 1880s a local stockbroker, philanthropist and amateur composer, J F C Read, built the Victoria Hall in Hoe Street (this section was then known as Greenleaf Lane). Its inaugural concert, in 1888, included music by Read himself.

After only a few years, the Victoria Hall was remodelled and renamed the Victoria Theatre – it reopened on August Bank Holiday, 1896. The first show was called “On the Frontier” and was described as “A Stirring American melodrama performed by Hardie and von Leir’s no. 1 company and Warwick Buckland’s orchestra – parade of Indians through the local streets to publicise the show”. By this date Bank Holidays had become important dates in the calendar for working people, in Walthamstow as in other places.

In the earlier years of the nineteenth century working hours were long and there was no right to paid holidays. For example, most domestic servants were expected to work from early in the morning until late at night with a few hours’ respite on Sunday afternoons, but no time to do much other than sitting and chatting. But in the 1870s bank holidays became a legal requirement, and this gave all working people at least a few days a year when they could go out and have fun. This coincided with the expansion of cheap railway fares, and it was then that many Londoners could spend a day enjoying themselves – going to the theatre or having a day out, in the country or at the seaside. It was also then that bank holiday crowds became notorious.

Theatre

The Victoria was Walthamstow's first theatre, but it did not long remain the only one. Only a few hundred yards away, the Palace opened in 1903, and was to operate until 1960. It was Walthamstow's dedicated music hall, and flourished for as long as this very specific form of entertainment remained popular. The Palace hosted a different variety bill every week. The acts included an assortment of music, from the romantic to the comical, jugglers, contortionists, comedians and acrobats. Admission varied from 2s 6d for what were termed "fauteuils" - comfortable, padded seats in the front rows - to 3d for a place on a wooden bench up in the "gods".

Cinema

The Victoria Hall was used for film shows almost as soon as cinema was invented. And within a few years there was a purpose built cinema, the Carlton, in the High Street. It was soon joined by others, including the St James Electric and the Queen's Cinema at 324 Hoe Street. And by the early years of the twentieth century cinema-going was hugely popular. It was also relatively cheap - in 1914 the Carlton was charging between 3d and one shilling for a seat, so many people could afford to attend often. Films were shown only for a few days, and it was common to go to see every film.



Down the Road

For anyone without the time, money or inclination to go further afield, there was plenty of entertainment close to home. In Walthamstow High Street, the market offered street food and drink and music. Impromptu bands often played in waste ground by the side of the road. In the 1890s, a circus often visited, setting up on a site off Markhouse Road, and a dancing bear was led through the town centre to publicise the show.

It was accepted that children would play in the streets around their homes. In the early 1900s. Arthur Spencer remembered impromptu sliding on the ice in patches of waste ground near his home in Longfellow Road, helping the coal man to carry sacks in return for half pence, and lying in wait on a hot day for the cart that delivered fish to the shop in Queen's Road so that he and his friend could snatch up the ice that was dropped - the nearest they usually got to ice cream. When they had the money, they would go to one of the High Street cinemas on a Saturday. In a very good week, they could manage an additional 2d for sweets from one of the market stalls.



The Hollow Ponds

A century ago, as now, the ponds were a favoured destination for anyone wanting a couple of hours off. Picnics, fishing, courting and general hanging out happened in summer. And in cold winters, Walthamstow people went there to skate. With the cold weather there appeared vendors of chestnuts and hot drinks, and hirers of ice skates. Children went there in all weathers - those who could, went by bike.

The Seaside

After railway travel became cheaper in the 1870s, trips to the seaside became possible for a wider range of people. Some limited themselves to bank holiday days out; others began to take weeks, or even months, by the sea. Churches, chapels, clubs and Sunday schools organised annual days out for their members, and charities were set up to provide “treats” for the children of what were regarded as the “deserving” poor and for those with disabilities.

In Walthamstow, visits to easily reachable destinations on the Essex and Kent coast were popular. The local papers and “Kelly’s Directory” were full of advertisements for places to stay, places to eat, cheap train tickets and things to do in resorts such as Southend, Clacton on Sea, Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs. The attractions of the late Victorian seaside included the pier in all its glory - the one at Clacton opened in 1871, and proved so popular it was lengthened in the 1890s. Sea bathing was extremely popular, and beaches also offered donkey rides, Punch and Judy shows and the chance to be photographed with an assortment of exotic animals. In the beach side cafes there was fast food from fish and chips and whelks to ice cream, candy floss and sarsaparilla (a tonic drink, then very popular). And there were pubs and off licenses offering alcoholic drinks.



In the bigger resorts, there were summer theatres – at Clacton, a group of actors and musicians set up the London Concert Company in 1894. This occupied an open space just outside the town; thousands of visitors walked up the muddy, unmade roads, paying 2d each to sit on planks in the open and watch scenes from plays and listen to music. After a few years the company had made enough money to build a semi permanent marquee so performers and audiences had some shelter and shows could continue on pouring wet days. For many years the theatre’s founder commuted daily to his job running an oyster restaurant in London, returning to Clacton each evening in time to go on in the current s



Children's Activities

It's around 1910. You live in Walthamstow, and are planning three different treats.

One is a day trip to the seaside.

The second is an evening at the music hall followed by supper.

The third is a walk and a picnic within reach of home. You are planning a trip to the market first to buy some food to take with you

Using the information and the pictures, write a description of each of the days. Begin with getting up, who you travelled with, where you went, what you saw, what you ate and drank, what the weather was like, how much money you spent.

Imagine there was Trip Advisor in Edwardian times. What would you write in a review of one of the above days out?

Using the information, and the pictures, make plans for the three days. What are you going to do, where are you going to go, and how much will it cost?