

# Michelle Johansen's Lecture<sup>1</sup>:

## Adventures in the Wild East: The Early Years of the Eton Manor Boys' Clubs

### 1. A Brief History of the Boys' Club Movement

In the late 1860s there were less than 20 Young Men and Boys' Clubs in London. By the late 1880s there were more than 350 – at which point a Westminster Churchman launched an impassioned appeal for more men and women to get involved in the youth movement. He correctly noted that great efforts were being made to assist poor children and poor adults but those in between were being overlooked. Vast sums of public money were at this time being spent on educating boys and girls only to have them abruptly abandoned by the State as young and vulnerable adolescents:

*'the youth of both sexes...' he pointed out 'are yearly turned loose, without aid, without sympathy, without exercise, without amusement, into the burning fiery furnace of the streets of our growing and densely-crowded cities. When they fall into sin and ruin, as so many of them do – when they pass from betting and gambling (a sin fearfully on the increase) into dishonesty and crime, or when they pass from levity and godlessness into the abyss of yet more misery and destruction – many of them might pathetically plead, "I had none to look unto, and no man cared for my soul." The State does absolutely nothing for them, the Church has done but little, and the chief endeavours to help the young have been due to private endeavour.'*

Many years passed before the State did intervene, despite the fact that the so-called 'boy problem' was widely recognised, on both sides of the Atlantic. London and New York, in particular, were seen as hotbeds of gang activity among boys around the turn of the 20th century, with writers and commentators metaphorically wringing their literary hands over how to best deal with this problem ('We seldom take up the daily paper without seeing some example of gang activity' sighed one writer in 1928) and while it was widely recognised that 'gangy' tendencies were natural as a boy passed from childhood to adolescence, the problem of how to manage this tendency remained. If there were, as two US writers expressed it in 1914, a 'gang forming instinct in the soul of everyone's boyhood' what was the best way to manage this? The ideal was to change the anarchic, clandestine 'gang' into a well-organised and highly visible 'club' – and sometimes steps were taken to do literally this: around 1890 a group of New York philanthropists set out to transform the city's gangs into self-governing clubs – with little success.

In Britain, it was only in 1939 when the Youth Service came into existence that the State acknowledged they had an obligation to protect and care for a specific adolescent grouping. The 1944 Education Act led to Local Authorities becoming more involved in running clubs in their areas. Youth work expanded in scope and

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture was delivered at the 'Up the Manor' Project Launch in September 2007. It appears here without the conventional footnotes and bibliography, so, if you would like further information about the sources used, please contact the author.

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became more bureaucratic in organisation but there was never enough public money made available to pay for youth groups and boys clubs. In the 1950s, most clubs were still only able to operate thanks to private or church efforts and individual endeavours, just as in the late nineteenth century. In 1953, the Archbishop of York spelt out the position as follows:

*The voluntary nature of the [boy's club] movement cannot be stressed to strongly. It was a long time before the State recognised that it had any responsibility towards boys and girls who left its schools. Most of the earlier clubs were started or directed by one of the Churches; others were supported by colleges or schools; some came into existence through the initiative and generosity of individuals; most of those who ran these clubs did so in their spare time and without payment.*

## 2. Eton Mission

So – started by churches, supported by colleges and schools, indebted to the initiative and generosity of individuals. All of these apply in the case of the Eton Manor Clubs. I will speak about the individuals involved shortly but in this part of my talk I intend to look at the church and school impetus: namely, the Eton Mission out of which movement the Eton Manor Clubs evolved just before the First World War.

In the late-Victorian period, many schools and university colleges were setting up mission outposts in poor and overcrowded inner city areas. It was believed that what was termed 'the moral force of a gentleman's company' did as much, if not more, than practical and financial assistance to improve the prospects of the poor although probably not regarding road safety (legend has it that the public schoolboys and university men who came into the East End of London in the 1880s and 1890s were conspicuous for their habit of striding purposefully straight up the middle of the road as they went about their business rather than keeping to the sides as the locals did).

According to W.McG. Eagar's book Making Men, on the history of boys clubs in Great Britain, Eton College undertook to staff and pay for a Mission District in East London in 1880. If accurate, this means the Eton Mission appears to predate the famous Oxford and Cambridge College missions of the mid-1880s (Balliol College only established Toynbee Hall in 1884). While it is tempting to announce at this moment that the Eton Mission was 'the original and best,' or words to that effect, this pronouncement is difficult to prove without further, hair-splitting research. The time elapsing between abstract idea and practical realisation may simply have been longer in the case of the Oxford and Cambridge missions, i.e. these famous 'pioneering' schemes may have been quick off the starting blocks in planning terms only 'our' Eton Mission was first past the finishing post undertaking missionary work in the field.

I can state with certainty, however, that Eton was the first of the public schools to set up a mission in London. The area chosen was a region about the size of the Eton playing fields, in between the Hackney Marches and the North London railway, with a population of about 6,000 men, women and children, described at the time as being 'of the very poorest' class.

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Here, a Mission church, Boys' club, choir, men's club and Sunday school were immediately established. The boys' club (the Mallard Street Club) was described as a 'Rough Boys Club' – and in 1883 it was decided to set up a gentler equivalent, for boys who had been members of the Mission Sunday School and choir: this was the Selwyn Street Club. These clubs eventually merged to become the Eton Mission Boys' Club.

One old Etonian who was drafted in to help out with the Eton Mission in the 1880s wrote a lively account of this experience shortly afterwards. E.M.S. Pilkington confirmed how haphazardly the Mission Boys' Clubs operated: existing helpers would write letters appealing for assistance from old school friends or family members; new helpers would turn up entirely ignorant about what to expect, often (as Pilkington) having never previously heard of Hackney Wick let alone visited the area. Here, Pilkington recalls his first visit to the Mission:

*'Having searched diligently through "Mogg's Guide to London and the Suburbs" for the correct geographical position of Hackney Wick, and all the Metropolitan timetables for a suitable train to Victoria Park Station, I duly started off one evening in search of adventures in the Wild East...'*

The Boys' Clubs activities were directed by what these helpers were interested or trained in. Pilkington started teaching drawing classes because he had learnt how to use a T-square working in an architect's office so, as he put it, 'I knew pretty well what a straight line should look like'. He describes one drawing class with the so-called Rough Boys' Club (Mallard Street) as follows:

*'The classroom had two large windows facing the street, and it so happened that this youth suddenly jumped up from his seat upon hearing the voice of a pal in the street, hastily flung open the window, cleared his throat (to speak euphemistically) most violently, and as hastily shutting down the window again, sat quietly down to his work, remarking with a smile that he had 'got him' that time.'*

Pilkington loved the water, so he started a boating club for the boys, using two boats bought with funds raised by 'passing the hat' around his old Etonian friends. He also ran a swimming club with a couple of other Mission workers. These young men established themselves in small houses or rooms close to Hackney Marches (Plover Street was popular) and club members would wake them at 4am by throwing stones at their windows. All would set off for a swimming lesson in the River Lea, opposite the dye works. This was agreed to be an excellent spot – as long as swimmers kept their mouths shut. Another Mission worker recollects:

*'On early summer mornings the men from the dye-works used to stand out on the edge of their wall and look on. They were sometimes a rich blue all over, and they were sometimes red, according to the dye with which they were working at the time, and their appearance was always picturesque.'*

### 3. Eton Manor

The Eton Mission continued to thrive through the 1890s and 1900s. In 1907 another new helper was added to the roster of Old Etonians assisting with the running of the Eton Mission Boys' Club. Gerald Wellesley was 22 years old, and from an illustrious family. At an invitation of a friend, he had come to stay the night at the Eton Mission. He was so impressed by the good work being carried out that he moved into the Eton Mission Clergy house and remained in Hackney Wick until 1922 (the War years aside).

It was Wellesley who noticed the gap in the Mission's scope and endeavour: the needs of young boys and local men were excellently dealt with – but what about those in between? The trouble was, in Wellesley's words, that:

'The Eton Mission was not prepared to commit itself to the establishment of [an] Old Boys' Club, and the alternative which presented itself to the boys on leaving the [Eton Mission Boys'] club, was whether to make the street-corner once again their meeting place of an evening, or whether to throw in their lot with the exiting Men's Club belonging to the Mission. It is not the point to express any opinion one way or the other as to the merits or demerits of the latter institution. It will be seen at once that no organisation of the sort can ever fill the same place in a boy's heart as one limited to old members of his former club.'

The need was a pressing one, [Wellesley went on] 'and in despair at the thought of letting these boys drift back into the ways from which so many of them had been rescued, [I] sought the aid of a few friends, and with their assistance founded the Eton Manor Old Boys' Club. To form its original members a start was made by drafting in some twenty boys then turning 18 from the younger club.'



The old coal shop in Daintry Street – the original home of the Old Boys' Club

In the Autumn of 1909, then, the 'Old Boys' Club' opened in a coal shop in Daintry Street, Hackney. It only admitted boys who had previously been members of the Eton Mission Boys' Club. As an aside, it is important to note that this remained the rule throughout the history of the Old Boys' Club. No boy could be admitted as a new member after the age of sixteen. If he hadn't joined between the ages of 13 years and nine months and sixteen, he could never join at all.

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A four-year period of intense activity and energetic fund-raising followed the Daintry Street opening. From the first, the Old Boys' Club was run as completely distinct from the Eton Mission. Some have proposed a religious element to this split (the Eton Mission parsons were allegedly forever wanting 'people to go down on their knees at inconvenient times' to pray) – and here the testimony of Miss Stanley (the founder of the Soho Club for Girls in 1880) is valuable. In acknowledging how closely club managers became involved in the lives of members, she later described how:

*Club managers occasionally appeared for their members in the police court. They intervened with the police, e.g. on behalf of boys caught playing football in some deserted street, a Sunday offence so frequent that Gerald Wellesley of the Eton Manor Club, mobilised a number of Club men to agitate for the opening of the pitches in the parks and open spaces of London on Sundays.*

So immediately we see why Wellesley might have fallen out with the members of the clergy working at the Eton Mission. Other sources have confirmed that Wellesley thought the Eton Mission suffered from what he termed 'too much parson.'

During this frenetic 1909-1913 foundational period in the life of the Eton Boys' clubs, numerous sub-clubs came into being, attached to – or under the umbrella – of the 'Old Boys' Club'. Many of these were sports clubs (the Otters swimming club with their motto 'Otter than Ever!'; a boxing club; a harriers club) but there was also the short-lived Junior Bachelors Club, which was started in 1911 after the club managers decided that 'mushes' or girlfriends distracted younger club members from taking an active part in club life. Only those under-18s who promised not to 'walk out with young ladies' were eligible to join and by way of a reward or inducement four trips per year were arranged for Junior Bachelors. Partly because it was so hard to prove or disprove bachelor status (and everybody wanted to join in the Junior Bachelor excursions), the club petered out after a few years. It was always run as a tongue-in-cheek venture in any case – as the reports of Junior Bachelor activities in the club magazine, *The Chinwag*, indicated.

Because it is so hard to unravel the complicated and fast-moving developments taking place around the Eton Boys' Clubs at this time, I will simply state here that by the time the Old Boys' Club moved into their magnificent, purpose-built clubhouse in Riseholme Street, Hackney, in July 1913 (of which more shortly), there was not one club but three sharing the premises: the Boys Club, for ages 14-18; the Young Old Boys' Club for ages 18-25; and the Old Boys' Club for boys over 25. The new clubhouse had been built on land next to Victoria Park Station. The Old Manor House and Manor Farm had been falling derelict on this site for some years before the clubhouse was built and the new clubs took their name from these buildings: hence, the Eton Manor Clubs.

Apart from Wellesley, the key figures in the early history of the Eton Manor Clubs were Alfred Wagg, Edward Cadogan and Arthur Villiers. In 1924 this group of wealthy and well-connected Old Etonians set up the Manor Charitable Trust to finance and manage the Eton Manor Clubs. All four men had been involved in work at Hackney Wick since before the First World War – and all went on to

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make important and distinct contributions to Eton Manor club life. Alfred Wagg, for instance, developed an area of land close to his family home in Sussex (the Isle of Thorns) as a first-rate camp site – pavilions, playing fields, open air swimming pool, novelty golf course, football and cricket pitches, wooden blocks of dormitories – then donated it to the Trust for the Boys' Club to use for summer camps. Arthur Villiers, meanwhile, was a City banker with an enviable knack for spotting clever investments. The money he made, he shared generously and unstintingly with the Manor Trust. During the 1920s, both Villiers and Wagg donated over one thousand pounds each every year to the Trust.

Cadogan's belief was 'to whom much is given much is required.' Villiers liked to quote his mother's more cynical philosophy: 'If you have to live in this wicked world you should endeavour to make some contribution to its welfare, however trivial.' The fact was that all four of these men were acutely aware of their privileged status and wished to use their good fortune to help others. Accordingly, they drew on their own wealth and exploited their excellent City and West End connections and school and university networks to remarkable, admirable and enduring effect. The list of donors for the building of the new clubhouse reads like a "Who's Who" of Edwardian society<sup>2</sup>.

The benefits of these connections to the Eton Manor members were both practical and social. They had, for instance, their extraordinarily well-equipped clubhouse. In June 1913, the *Chin-wag*<sup>3</sup> [the Club magazine had been started in March that year] listed the main features of the new club building, starting with the hall:

The Hall. The finest of its kind in the world; it has been admirably fitted up as a gymnasium with various appliances for making you grow taller, shorter, fatter or thinner at a moment's notice, whichever you may happen to wish to be. There are all kinds of parallel bars, ladders, rings, poles, ropes and other devices for hurting yourselves all over, which should prove wonderfully beneficial to the healthiness of the club.

The point to emphasise here is that the hall was described as 'the finest of its kind in the world'. This claim might be taken with a pinch of salt (after all this was the Club's own magazine) were it not for evidence elsewhere that confirmed the Eton Manor Clubs were exceptionally well-funded and provided for. Eagar's 1953 book on Boys Clubs described the 'almost palatial' provision of buildings and equipment enjoyed by the Eton Manor boys – and photographs taken inside Riseholme Street support this statement.

They also give a sense of the diverse range of activities offered to club members. In the mid-1920s, there were 'House' competitions (the Eton Manor Boys' Club was modelled on the public school 'house' system at this time, each boy assigned to either red, green, blue or white house) in: shooting, billiards, ping pong, gymnastics, tug of war, running, swimming, bagatelle, shove ha-penny, draughts, comic recitations, memory drawing, First Aid and essay

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<sup>2</sup> Available in a separate pdf file from our website

<sup>3</sup> To read more about the clubhouse, and get a flavour of the pre-First World War atmosphere in which the Boys' Club was set up, the June 1913 edition of *Chin-Wag* is also available as a pdf file from our website

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writing. The boys were encouraged to compete, excel in or, at the very least, try their hand at as many of these activities as possible.

Everything to do with the Eton Manor was carried out on a grand scale, the emphasis on excellence. Great men of the day or their sport would be invited to Riseholme Street to meet with and inspire the boys – or compete with them. When the Boys' Clubs took part in sporting activities the expectation was that they would be the best. It was an expectation that was often realised.

To attain these high goals, the Eton Manor boys had been provided with a first-rate training ground. In 1923 (using money they had either donated themselves or had lobbied their friends for), our four Old Etonians bought 30 acres of wasteland across the River Lea in Leyton (about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from the Riseholme Street clubhouse) and rapidly turned it into 'one of the most conspicuously beautiful recreation grounds in the metropolitan area.' The Wilderness, as it was known, can best be described as a vast sporting Eden or nirvana, with nine football pitches, 2 rugby pitches, a cricket pitch, 6 tennis courts, a squash court, running track, bowling green and swimming 'plunge' pool for the Eton Manor Boys and Old Boys to share.

In the Eton Manor archive at the Bishopsgate Institute there is a picture of the floodlights going up alongside the running track at the Wilderness. This picture has special meaning because of a story that appeared in Ronald Shaw Kennedy's privately-printed biography of Arthur Villiers. According to Shaw Kennedy, Villiers had no artistic pleasures:

*'He would take people to the theatre because he thought that they would enjoy it. He knew nothing about painting or other visual arts, and said that he only read books on his holidays. Often, at this period [after the Second World War], he would take his car and a chauffeur and drive round some part of the Continent, but no one knew why he enjoyed doing so. A friend of his met him by chance in Pisa, and was surprised to find him looking at the leaning tower and the Campo Santo at night. Arthur explained, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that he had gone there because he had heard how good the flood-lighting was, and thought that it might give him some ideas for flood-lighting the playing fields of Eton Manor.'*

This quote reveals the extent to which Villiers was attached to and preoccupied by Eton Manor. After Wellesley moved out of Hackney in 1922, it was Villiers who replaced him. He settled in East London, eventually building a modest house on the edge of the Wilderness in which he lived until his death in 1969.

When Alfred Wagg wrote to Villiers to congratulate him on his 80th birthday in 1963, Wagg said all he wanted engraved on his tombstone under his name when he died was: "Who first took Arthur Villiers to Eton Manor." Villiers responded in kind, as follows:

*'I owe my association with Eton Manor entirely to a chap called Alfred Wagg! You have done for me something which has made my life – so I am in your debt which I cannot possibly repay. Incidentally Eddie Cadogan felt the same as I do. It certainly has been a gratifying experience to you and to me. In two World Wars the Club meant more to its members than ever it*

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*did in peacetime. So many people knew that when the wars were finished, they had nothing to which to go back. In the case of Eton Manorites it was a different story. Gerald [Wellesley] and I felt exactly as any other members of the Club.'*

In other words, they too felt a profound attachment and loyalty to Eton Manor.

At the Eton Manor General Meeting in 1922, the Boys' Club members were first of all urged to 'patronise the Barber more often in the future.' And then they were reminded that if they were out of work they must report to the Club secretary once a week (1) so that their club subscriptions could be remitted and (2) so that work could be found for them: 'we do our best to find jobs for our out of work members. Keen members who reported stood the best chance if a job came along. Since 1st July the club has found work for 10 of its members.' This was not just a post-war burst of generosity – or pity – for the members. Throughout the life of the Eton Manor Clubs, the founding Trustees – most of all, Arthur Villiers – helped individual members in countless practical ways (finding them jobs, offering them houses at low rents, offering low or no-interest loans and so on). It should also be acknowledged that the Trust did not confine itself to bankrolling Eton Manor; many other local schemes were financed by either The Manor Charitable Trust as a body or Arthur Villiers personally during the mid-20th century. In recognition of his generosity and tireless work for good causes in the area, Major Villiers was created a Freeman of the Boroughs of first Leyton and later Hackney.

For its founding fathers and its members Eton Manor was not a sport or social club but a way of life. Joining Eton Manor meant much more than simply gaining access to a fine sports ground and a well-equipped clubhouse. Taking on responsibilities as a manager or sub-club secretary, for instance, gave boys an invaluable sense of self-assurance and self-worth. Being part of Eton Manor gave boys growing up in one of the poorest areas of East London purpose and structure in their daily lives as well as an invaluable and enduring notion of belonging; the Eton Manor spirit (the sense of kinship and camaraderie) has survived, for many, unbroken for a lifetime.

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