

Islington Pictorial



The *Islington Pictorial* was an 8-page magazine produced by the Islington Communist Party. It is undated but text inside suggests early-1945 as it notes that both the Red Army and the “Allies” are pushing the Germans back.

The Islington of the time was very different to today. It claims that “*Ninety-five per cent of the houses are over 100 years old. Thousands are hopelessly damaged by bombs. It is time there was a clean sweep. Time the dismal slums, the dirty schools, the grimy factories disappeared.*” It was also quite heavily industrialised. Some quite large factories such as the TV company, Cossors, at the time heavily involved in radar development, and Potter Rax but also a mass of small enterprises. It states that there were nearly 2,00 such in the borough in 1938. Although hardly devoid of such small industry, recent data suggests that there were less than such 450 plants in the borough in 2013 ¹ with around 3,200 jobs.

It is not surprising that the key campaigning demand throughout *Pictorial* is for the reconstruction of Islington after the war particularly housing. The emphasis on housing is understandable as public housing had had little pre-war impact in the Borough with just 3,633 municipal flats being built up to 1939 in a borough with a population of over 300,00. The journal notes that the Council has plans for 1,050 new flats but it criticises this as barely a “*nibble at the problem.*”

The change wrought in Islington in Islington housing post-war can be registered in one statistic: the Borough Council now claims that social housing forms “*just over 40% of the borough’s total housing stock of around 99,000 homes.*”² Just how much housing policy was influenced by such as the *Islington Pictorial* is, of course, doubtful but the emphasis is interesting. Certainly no one would now claim that Islington is full of dismal slums.

¹ <https://www.islington.gov.uk/~/media/sharepoint-lists/public-records/democracy/qualityandperformance/statistics/20132014/20130603islingtonlabourmarketbriefing>

² <https://www.islington.gov.uk/~/media/sharepoint-lists/public-records/publichealth/information/factsheets/20132014/20131121socialhousingfactsheet>



The second emphasis is, as one might expect, on trade unions. *"ISLINGTON'S LABOUR MOVEMENT IS ON THE MARCH"* writes Len Huddleston, secretary of the local engineering union. *"Trade Unionism has increased by leaps and bounds resulting in better wages and conditions and increased production"* The assertion that increased unionism results in high production is a constant theme. Allegedly, signing up 40 workers making ammunition trays in a small factory caused production to increase by 600% ! Perhaps so but it is clear that it is necessary to emphasise that production for the war effort is a priority.

The whole magazine is very readable and has the hallmarks it being done by people who knew how to reach out to ordinary people. In the main feature, we are introduced to the Edwards family at tea. Two of the family are in the services and George is still in Italy. Nineteen year-old Elsie is the most outspoken. *"Do you know how long it took us girls to get the rate for the job? Eighteen months! But we got it because we stuck out for it, and had good Shop Stewards"*. She rejects the slightly pessimistic views of her father. The local Communist municipal candidate, a woman, makes a rousing plea for action and she says *"There you are, Pa. No more pessimism from you. We made the stuff to win the war. We can win the fight to get something better at the end!"*

One feature is that, although the pages are full of proposals for more housing, schools, playgrounds and health-care, the word 'socialism' never appears. Perhaps the closest to a workers' state is in the final declaration of Arthur Prior, Secretary of Islington Party when he asks for a *"movement of the ordinary people which will rapidly sweep away the power of the rich landlords, the great bankers and industrialists who for so long have brought poverty and suffering to the people."* Well said, Dad, for yes he was the father of the young man on the front cover, presumably why this long-ago piece of local political literature was tucked away in the papers of my parents, both active Communists.

Just how influential the local Communist Party was in Islington is unclear. It did not stand candidates in general elections though in the Hornsey constituency just to the north, the Communist candidate, George Jones, took an astonishing 10,058 votes in 1945, the highest figure ever recorded for a Communist in England whilst in nearby Stepney, Phil Piratin actually won the seat. The Party did stand in local elections but without success. The emphasis throughout is on collaboration between Communists and Labour though this met with little response. Most of this London support evaporated quite quickly. Piratin lost in Stepney and Jones' vote soon diminished to not much more than a thousand.

One final point. The young child does look very healthy, certainly well-fed. Pictures of children of this age in Europe at the time would mostly have looked very different. Food in the nurseries where young Michael went from an early age was good. My mother had a favourite story of the time when, waiting outside the nursery to pick up their children, one mother complained about the trays of tomatoes being taken in. "*It's for the children*" Mum said and got a little round of applause. I think us children of that time should give a round of applause for those who did struggle to make Islington and the whole country a better place and who succeeded. Not quite got rid of the landlords, bankers and industrialists yet, Dad, but we are still trying.