

## Sketching Life - from pavement to paper



About eighteen months ago Rosemary (my wife) and I visited London for a few days and stayed in the East End, just off the Whitechapel Road. It may not be everyone's choice, but it suited us at that time, and it opened up many such experiences as this one, that I share with you. It was a typical overcast November day, and Friday Prayers had just finished at the nearby Mosque.

Perhaps you would like to join me on a sketching trip? We are standing in the Whitechapel Road, East London. Here the roadway is tree-lined with a wide distance between the buildings and the thunderous road. As we face this busy gateway into London with our backs to the beautiful Georgian buildings, we notice far in the distance to our left, the familiar underground sign indicating Mile End Tube station. However, we are turning to our right and walking towards the City of London. We pass a Whetherspoons pub housed in what was a Victorian music hall, but after years of neglect, now thankfully tastefully restored to suit its more modern function. On we walk at a steady pace, passed a newly constructed retail park nestling rather incongruously amongst the surrounding older elegant buildings, each one, no doubt, hiding stories of past years. Further on, over by the roadside, we notice a bronze sculpture of two figures facing each other, one a man and the other a lady, both dressed in Victorian attire. A closer look tells us that they represent William and Catherine Booth, who together created the Salvation Army, and worked tirelessly with the poor and needy in this area, to bring physical and spiritual well-being to the population. (Surprisingly just beyond this monument there is a concrete table-tennis table for public use)!! Passing yet more interesting buildings, we now begin to reach our destination — Whitechapel Street market.

My sketchbook for this trip is a small A6 hard bound book small enough to slip into my pocket. The paper is of sound quality and has a gentle 'tooth' to allow me to draw a 'good quality of line' - that is a line which has a story to tell. It contains, for example, emotion, which is shown by various

methods, a subtle lightness of touch perhaps, or a more confident mark to emphasize a feature, but, it is my belief that, only through practice and thus building confidence, can these subtle touches be achieved. Whether using a pen, or pencil, the paper needs to be strong enough to take a light wash if required. The chosen pen today is a black Derwent 01, although I do carry 03. These pens are easier to use in this situation, but 'dip pens' are also part of my 'tool-box'. Now with pen in hand and book at the ready, let our work begin.

This whole area has for generations become a haven for immigrants from other countries — weavers from France and the Low Countries; Jewish emigres from the pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe; Asian families; Chinese; Afro-Caribbean, and Eastern European, people in fact, from all corners of the World and so, armed with our sketchbooks we are visiting the market to capture the faces and postures of the crowds. As we approach the pace of life increases, much busier and with it a kaleidoscope of colour and shapes emerges. My eyes begin to dart from one person to another, from one group of people to a second, to a third, and experience tells me to slow down! — I/we cannot capture everything, nor afford to be overwhelmed by the sights before us. We need to be decisive - choosing one subject and work quickly to record the face, posture or movement of our model. The canvas covering the stalls, we notice, make interesting shapes and create useful shadows that will provide us with a dark backdrop to highlight lighter passages of colour or tone. We need to note that in our sketchbooks, along with other useful facts.

A bearded man hurries towards me. He is a Muslim dressed in a long white robe, partly covered by a black hooded top, and with sandals on his feet, he holds a mobile phone to his right ear, his left arm swinging. Note how the details are registered and locked into my head for observation plays a key part in capturing the characteristics of the subject — bird/animal painters call it the 'jizz'. In a moving subject — he is almost side on to me now - we need to look for the 'action line', and as this gentleman is walking quickly and has a long stride, the action flows down his front and follows the contours of his left leg to his foot. Once this is established his head, jacket and the predominant beard can be added. It is important to remember that when working at speed, total accuracy is not always required for our aim is to indicate a movement, composition, shape, or simply, an idea perhaps. Working rapidly, I manage to capture the main outline and record minimal features of this subject before he walks on. Now another person come into my sight, this time another Muslim lady dressed in flowing robes, the head-dress framing the beautiful features of her face. Again a few delicate lines capture the image. Amidst this ever moving picture other figures appear, a Mullah with white hat and gown; a Muslim lady, this time back view carrying heavy shopping bags, but the whole silhouette makes an interesting shape which I hurriedly draw and block in. Next my attention is dawn to the unmistakable features of a Jewish tailor, working at a sewing machine positioned in the window of his shop, paradoxically, directly opposite a Muslim gentleman manning a marketstall selling clothing. Once the tailor is recorded I turn and begin sketching the second man. This man is wearing a black skull-cap, has a white beard and a western style anorak partly covering his white, well - off white gown - and he is holding a Costa Coffee mug in his right hand. The next subjects are two workmen from the nearby Whitechapel underground station. They work for Crossrail who are in the midst of transforming the station from it's early twentieth-century style, and worn-out building, into a modern reflection of today's world. Standing close together, as they drink coffee, one with his back to me, the other in profile, their positions make an interesting composition completed by the orange coloured workmen's outfits and tools hanging around their waists. Now I turn my attention to the market stall and standing - partly concealed in a doorway - I capture the pile of empty, but colourful boxes upon which stands a display of the stall-holders fruit and vegetables. As we noted before, the overhanging canvas roof casts the shadows providing a useful background, despite the lights hanging from the roof structure; they fail at their attempt to light the inside, yet this adds to the ambience. An elderly lady appears, and begins to choose her fruit the shop man standing-by in readiness to serve, completes the composition. Next to this is a stall selling colourful Sari's, which I hurriedly attempt to capture.

Continuing to work and weave through the narrow, and at times chaotic pathway between the stalls and the shops, it was evident that all Cultures were welcomed here, as shops selling beautiful Sari's, stood next to outlets selling food from various parts of the world, Muslim stood next to Jew, and Asians, next to Cockneys, all creating a harmonious buzz in the air, uncomplicated by politics, or judgements made by humans about other humans. Now since returning home, whenever I scan through my sketchbooks I am transported back to that morning spent imbibing the sights, sounds and ambience of that fascinating place and reflect upon the harmony amongst Nations.

Whatever your skills, whether painter or crafts person, I encourage us all to keep looking at the World and what we see around us, and to carry a sketchbook to either capture what we observe, or to make notes of the 'inspiration' that has just pinged into our head. Here's to happy sketching!!

Roy Billingham 2020

