A DAY AT THE FAIR

MEMORIES OF BLACKHEATH FAIR

COMPILED BY THE AGE EXCHANGE REMINISCENCE GROUP

EDITED BY PAM SCHWEITZER

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This book is launched to coincide with the Age Exchange Reminiscence Centre Exhibition entitled A DAY AT THE FAIR, and the Age Exchange Youth Theatre Show, FAIRGROUND, which plays as part of the Greenwich Festival 1990.
INTRODUCTION

This collection of memories has been put together by the Age Exchange Reminiscence Group. They meet fortnightly at the Reminiscence Centre in Blackheath, and choose a different subject to explore each term. Music, photographs and reminiscence objects stimulate memories and people tell each other stories about their younger days. Each person’s memory sparks off further recollections from other members and the whole process is enjoyable and often hilarious.

People in the group write up their memories in a more reflective spirit between sessions, and the stories in this book are mostly their written accounts of A DAY AT THE FAIR, set mainly in the 1920s and 30s.

Not all the memories in the book are of Blackheath Fair, since some members spent their childhood years in places as far apart as Aberdeen and Plymouth, but we have included their stories too, as the fairs they recall are very similar.

The memories in this book have formed the basis for a play by the Age Exchange Youth Theatre. Young people, aged ten to sixteen, meet every Saturday morning at the Reminiscence Centre to prepare shows based on the stories of older people from the local area. The Reminiscence Group and the Youth Theatre tend to work on related themes, so that the memories of one group can feed the imagination and creativity of the other.

At the Reminiscence Centre, the temporary exhibitions often also reflect the work of the Reminiscence group, so the fairground exhibition runs all through the summer months at the Reminiscence Centre, which we do hope readers will be prompted to visit.

PAM SCHWEITZER

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MERRY-GO-ROUND

The first thing I think of when I hear the word ‘Fairground’ is the giant roundabout, or merry-go-round as it used to be called. Brightly lit with strings of coloured lights, the sound of its noisy cheerful music carries from one end of the fairground to the other, and seems to draw people towards it.

The dapple grey horses with coloured saddles and harness, attached to a brass poles twisted like sticks of barley sugar, move slowly up and down until all the fares have been collected, then the pace quickens. The roundabout goes faster and faster, and the great horses move up and down as if they were really galloping, making hair and skirts blow about in the breeze.

Just when it seems that the horses might actually be about to take off into the air, the music slows down, the roundabout loses speed until it glides to a halt, and the gaily painted horses become again only part of a fairground attraction.

Dorothy Barton,
TIMES GONE BY

Bank Holiday a fair would be set up on Blackheath and two friends and I would walk from Greenwich through the park to the fair, usually on the Holiday Monday. We would only have about two shillings to spend, but a lot of the stalls only cost a penny, like the one-armed bandit.

One of our favourite rides was in a boat-shaped swing. Two people sat, one at each end and pulled a rope alternately to make the swing go higher. If you were lucky enough to win a prize, it would probably be a cheap trinket, sometimes a small celluloid doll with a little feather stuck on the body, no clothes. These dolls were also popular on Boat Race Day. They were sold with either Oxford or Cambridge coloured feathers, depending which side you favoured.

Sometimes there would be a Photograph Booth where for a shilling you could have a photo taken and developed very quickly. But they were more like negatives than prints, very dark.

If the weather was dry, everything would be covered in dust. It got in your eyes, hair and mouth. You felt as though you were eating it. But if it rained, you would be walking around in mud.

I remember I won a 45' record of Steve Laurence with a winning ticket. Today it costs a good amount to go to the fair. It is much more commercialised and not so much fun. But maybe I only feel this because I no longer look at it through the eyes of a young person.

Lil Murrell
A FAMILY OCCASION

My mother actually won a complete tea set at the Blackheath Fair. I’ve still got the bread and butter plate, and it’s hung up on the wall as a family heirloom. It was at a time when things were pretty tough at home, and to go out and buy a new tea set, especially a really nice one like that, would really have set her back a bit.

We always used to go up to Blackheath Fair on Bank Holidays in the early 1930s. We used to walk from Brockley and my father would often give us sixpence to spend which we thought was wonderful. One thing I remember was that where the pond is now outside Greenwich Park gates, the water was much deeper and there were little paddle boats. Going on the water in one of those was what I liked to do most. That and the donkey rides. It was always a family occasion and our parents would be there with us.

Margaret Kippin
HIGHLIGHT OF THE YEAR

Going to the fair on a Bank Holiday was one of the highlights of the year, and we saved our money for weeks in advance. Almost everybody went, some in family groups, or boy with girl or several friends together, because it was no fun going to the fair alone. The noise, the lights, the music, and the continuous movement, of people as well as machinery, generated an air of excitement even before we began to spend our money.

Some of the crowd moved slowly and good-naturedly along the narrow paths between stalls and sideshows, seeing as much as possible that was free, while others made straight for the rides. There were swings of different kinds as well as roundabouts; helter skelters where people hurtled down long winding slides on mats, a covered over Caterpillar ride which rocked and rolled violently making the girls shriek, half afraid and half excited, and the Tunnel of Love where skeletons and other odd things sprang out of the darkness causing more shrieks. It was best to go on this ride with a boyfriend if possible, so that he could be clutch at in moments of terror, real or pretended!

Not so energetic was the Hall of Mirrors, which distorted reflections in every possible way. In one mirror you would be stick-like with an enormous head, and in the next have a pin-sized head on an inflated body, and there were all kinds of variations on this theme. We all found it very funny and came away exhausted with laughter, needing a cup of tea, a beer or an ice cream to restore us.

There were plenty of sideshows with so-called freaks (animals with two heads for example) and while these drew large crowds around them, most of us realised there was some kind of trickery involved, and spent our money elsewhere.

Stalls giving money or goods for prizes were very popular, although in fact it was often very difficult indeed to win anything. On the Hoop-la stalls the rings were never quite big enough to go over the blocks holding the prizes and lay flat on the stall, the pennies on the Roll-the-penny stalls almost always landed on a line instead of in a square, and the coconuts frequently appeared to be stuck into their supports!
Somewhere in the Fairground was usually a Fortune Teller, supposedly of Gypsy origin, and giggling girls pushed their friends into her tent to hear if large sums of money, a husband, or possibly both, would come their way fairly soon.

Boys showed off in front of their girlfriends by trying to slam a heavy sledgehammer down on to a button, which sent a disc racing up to a bell at the top of a machine. The idea was to make the bell ring as often as possible, but few could manage this more than once, if at all.

Above all this activity, the loudspeakers blared out popular music, stopping occasionally to give out messages to the public, mostly about lost children. These were usually taken to the First Aid tent to await collection by their parents before being taken home, often sticky with candyfloss, filthy from the dust stirred up by people’s shoes, and glassy-eyed with tiredness and over-excitement.

At last, our money all spent, we’d walk away into the darkness leaving the noise and bright lights behind us. As we strolled home, we talked about everything we’d done or had meant to do, and promised ourselves that we’d come back next year and do it all again.

Dorothy Barton

Forrest’s 65 key Gavioli organ on the Gallopers at Blackheath
FAIRGROUND TREATS

Looking back to the fair on Blackheath, it always seemed to be hot, dusty, noisy and colourful. I never enjoyed the roundabouts unless I could sit on one of the galloping horses. An alternative was a cockerel or an ostrich.

The gaily painted boat-shaped swings in which two people could sit facing each other went too high for me. I tried it once, and remember feeling scared. There was a circus, which was too small for tight rope walkers and so on, but probably had a clown or conjurer, and I remember a black Shetland pony who trotted round the ring and stopped to nod its head at some lucky girl or boy. How I longed for him to stop and nod his head at me, but no luck.

The treat I loved best was a drive in a horse and carriage around Blackheath pond. Once I sat up with the driver and was able to view a horse’s back and realise how broad and strong it was. As the carriage had rubber tyres, the only sound to my ears was the jingle of harness and clip-clop of hooves.

I remember a lady wearing a bright head scarf and Gypsy earrings, who told your fortune for a penny. She had two love birds who with their beaks would pick a card with your fortune written on it.

A showman’s caravan
There were stalls selling crispy toffee apples, paper windmills on a stick, bright coloured paper streamers on sticks and balloons made from pigs’ bladders! As these were tough and almost unbreakable, boys would buy them to ‘bash’ each other.

We were very tired, dirty but happy children when we did get home, and there was always the next fair to look forward to.

Gladys Barrett

LOST AT THE FAIR

When the Blackheath Fair was on, my mother would send me off with my older brothers, and she would say, ‘All stay together and whatever you do, don’t spend your fare home.’ But we always had to walk home. You always knew when people had been to the fair because you’d see them going home with a little jar with a goldfish in.

Once when I was very small, they lost me. I got fed up with them going on the big rides, so I wandered off. I can remember this big enclosure with a rope round it just by the gates of Greenwich Park and there were all these little children crying and soon I was one of them. It seemed to me that I was there ages, but a lady took me home. My mother was standing at the front door when the others came back and did they get told off.

Ellen Clark

TEARS AT THE FAIR

I wanted to go on this big wheel and none of my sisters would go with me except the littlest one. We got on to a seat and went up and up gradually as the ride filled up. Well there was a little notice on the seat saying, ‘Do not swing the boat. DANGER.’ As it slowly got going, it began to swing, and my little sister was petrified. She started to scream even before the ride had properly begun, so the man brought our car to the bottom, undid the chain and said, ‘here’s your money back. I can’t have that child screaming.’

Lillian Burnett
THE FAIRGROUND BOXING BOOTH

The noise of the fairground was often drowned by a huge hefty ex-boxer calling from a tent to come in and go ‘five rounds for a fiver’ with an unknown pugilist, probably named Two Ton Tommy or Hefty Lefty. They all had frightening names of some sort.

There’d be a few boxers waiting when you went in. You might spot a small young lad and think, ‘Ooh I’ll knock that one out easy.’ But then up would pop a monster of a man, probably bald headed, muscles rippling and that would put you off straight away, and you’d think, ‘Ooh dear, I’ve got to go five rounds.’ Mind you, they couldn’t be too rough or people wouldn’t dare go in for it. It was more or less for fun, and a lot of fellas did it because they thought, ‘Well, I’ll show them I can box.’ You got a lot of brave people. And some who started in the fairground went on to be professionals. I’m not certain but I think Henry Cooper’s father use to do a bit of fairground boxing. Some of the men fought because they really wanted the money.

The boxers would want to show off a bit, because really they were men who were finished. A lot of them used to talk through their noses where they had had their noses broken so many times. One of them that was in the ring had a cauliflower ear.

The tents looked small, but when you got inside you found people were packed like sardines. The ring had to be raised because people were standing all around, packed tight. They kept letting more people in, as it was very popular. Pickpockets were very busy as nobody was sitting down.
When the boxing started, all hell broke loose, everyone shouting for the brave soul who had dared to volunteer for such a contest. You'd get all the shouting from people round the ring, you know, 'Kill him'. At the back of their minds everybody would be thinking, 'Ooh I'm gonna see a fight. Somebody is going to get their head knocked off... plenty of blood. A good old fight.'

Sometimes the boxing booth people let the other fellow win, but mostly they would try very hard not to let sparring partners win, for the simple reason that they could not afford to give away too many fivers.

These sorts of booths were few, mainly because of the seedy side of fixing rounds. If the crowds watching thought they were being duped, then I'm afraid there would be more than one boxing match going on at a time.

Doris Hollands

*Setting up a fairground ride on Blackheath*
A DAY AT THE FAIR

Bank Holiday Monday in early August, as it was then, was always awaited in feverish anticipation.

With my birthday falling around that time, I usually amassed two shillings or so from an affluent uncle, but if not, Grandad could always be relied upon to cough up fourpence for the cleaning of his boots. Another source of cash was returning jam jars for neighbours (grocers would give you a ha’penny for each one), then the neighbours would give you a ha’penny or a penny for running the errand.

With whatever fortune we’d amassed, it was off on the long walk to Blackheath, down the footpath to Kidbrooke, across an open space called the ‘Nine Fields’, down a pretty alleyway where you passed a College. All was silent within these hallowed walls, but the strident music of the roundabout welcomed us with mounting excitement, and we made a beeline for the penny machines. There was money to be made here, by offering to change sixpences or shillings for adults at the change desk. It was the custom to give seven pennies for sixpence, or thirteen pennies for a shilling. Invariably the adult would give you the extra copper, so after a while we would go off to spend, spend, spend, while it lasted.

A ride on a galloping horse roundabout if an older sister was in charge, a go on the Caterpillar which whizzed round and round on an undulating track, with a vast green cover which slowly covered and uncovered you until the ride was finished.

A break from that, to watch the man dive from a high platform into a small tank of water that had blazing oil on top. We watched with bated breath, terrified that he would miss, or at best, come up in flames himself.

The Races was the next stop. A small stand with just room for a man to stand inside and collect the money. In the narrow top of the stand, about waist height was set a ‘track’ for riders to go round in and a knob at each section with the name of a well known jockey at each. I can only remember Harry Wragg. When the race started you wound your
handle round as fast as it would go to speed the miniature horses on their way. My sister won a glass sugar bowl as a prize, which my mother used for many years. Toffee apples were a ha’penny each for small ones, so we had one as we were getting hungry, followed by an expensive four-penny slice of fresh pineapple between us, to quench our thirst. For some reason, we never did have a ride on the donkeys that patiently trod a weary long path outside the gates of Greenwich Park.

Coconut shies, roll down penny boards, boat swings, hoop-la and the lure of the penny machines interested us much more.

Finally money ran out and we faced the long walk home, usually with at least one trophy, feeling hot, sticky and very tired. Mum always pretended to be thrilled with our presents and dutifully put hideous ornaments on display.

A quick wash, a good tea and we were ready to drop off to sleep.

However, there was still one more trip to the fairground, the fair itself having disappeared over night, because the fairground people, in their hurry to move on, didn’t always pick up the dropped money, and a morning of gleaning for dropped ha’pennies often yielded sixpence each. After that it was back to normal for another year until August Bank Holiday brought the fair once again to the solitary spaces of Blackheath.

Doreen Knights
COLLECTING COPPERS FOR THE FAIR

We used to have to ferret around as best we could for money to go to the fair, cadge coppers off our brothers who were working, do little odd jobs, run errands. One of the things we used to do to get extra coppers was to take back empty jam jars to the shop. We would go up to the cemetery at Ladywell and collect jam jars off the graves, take the flowers out, bring the jars home and wash them. Sometimes the people would say, ‘There’s no label on that. It didn’t come from here.’ We used to have a little argument about it, and nine times out of ten they would take them in the finish.

We were helping a lady on one of the stalls and we were asking her questions about her caravan and she said, ‘Well come in and have a look round.’ She took us in and what struck us most, even at our tender age, was how clean it was, absolutely sparkling clean. They liked brass ware and there were several brass ornaments, and all their things like kettles and saucepans which they actually used were copper, and they were all spotlessly clean and shiny. She was really proud of her home. I said to this lady, ‘Wouldn’t you rather live in a house?’ and she said, ‘Oh no, this is our life, on the road, and we wouldn’t change it for anything else.’
There were sideshows which you don’t often see now, like the bearded lady or the man with two heads. In those days Siamese twins were considered an attraction, whereas now you’d feel sorry for them.

There were safety standards at the fair, though not as rigid as today. On one occasion, I remember an incident with the flying chairs. You got into this seat which was on chains and you had a chain across your stomach to hold you in. As the chairs started going round, the faster you went, the more horizontal to the ground they went. On this occasion, the chain which held the chair must have snapped because the chair went flying yards across the heath and landed in amongst the crowd. Several people were seriously hurt, including the girl in the chair, and there was quite a hue and cry about it.

Frank Ball

PRINCE MONOLULU

‘I’ve got a horse! I’ve got a horse!’, was the cry you would hear, and on looking around you would see a very tall African with big protruding eyes and a wide smile. He wore a voluminous grass skirt and was bare-chested, except for a few tribal marks painted on his chest. His short curly haired head held a giant head-dress of feathers, very long and every colour, held by a band around his forehead and fastened at the back.

He had sandals on his feet, and a band of coloured feathers beneath each knee. He was a tipster, and for a few pennies he would give you a slip of paper with the name of the horse on. No one boasted of his success, yet many people paid and obtained the slip of paper. He was very well known by all book makers, turf officials, even royalty and when he died, his funeral was a very grand occasion as he was a genuinely nice character full of wit and charm. I remember seeing him often.

Joyce Milan

_The smallest woman_
DEAD LUCKY!

I went up on the swings with a fella, and we went so high I nearly went over the top. The man had to bring the board up to bring us down and then we were barred, we weren’t allowed in the fairground after that. I knocked down two coconuts once. They called it ladies half way, because ladies were allowed to walk forwards. Well they were hard to knock, and I was a left-handed thrower too. You used to think they were stuck on sometimes. I was ever so pleased because I went home with two coconuts. Fella gave me a funny look, as if to say, ‘Dead lucky!’ We always used to drink the milk from the coconut, cos it was supposed to be good for you. Then there was the Hoopla stall where you had to throw a ring over an article and if you managed that, you won it, things like a plaster duck on a stand. The trouble was that the stand was always too big for the ring, so it was a bit of a con.

The most wonderful thing was the old roundabout, the carousel with the music and horses. It was tuppence to go on it. Of course you didn’t earn much money. Maybe I’d earn six bob a week and I used to give my mum five, so I had a shilling for myself. I used to have to buy everything out of that. I’d go to the pictures for sixpence, might get a tuppenny bar of toffee or a ‘tuppenny and a penny’, that was a
beautiful piece of fish for tuppence and a pennyworth of chips all wrapped up in newspaper, a real treat.

I think the people who worked on the fair were nearly all gypsies, real fairground people. They had beautiful horse-drawn caravans, all spotless inside and you could see a lot of brass inside. They used to sit outside on their caravans until it got dark. Gypsy Rose Lee was a great fortune teller. She's buried in a little church yard in Bromley.

Elsie House

THE HUMAN TORCH

Although I cannot quote statistical facts which seem so necessary nowadays, the sight of the human torch plunging down remains clearly in my mind after many years.

I remember a man beginning to climb a tower so high that spectators' necks were craned as far back as possible to watch his ascent, which seemed to go on for ever as he did not rush, the suspense was electric. He finally reached a platform and for anybody to stand on a small area at that height was awe-inspiring to adults as well as children. On the ground, there was a tank of water. If only I could quote the size of tank and the quantity of water it held, a clear picture would emerge. If I say it was an emergency type of tank, that may suffice. It must have looked awfully small from up high.

There was a partner who helped him prepare for his jump and I wonder if the subdued buzz from the crowd reached them. He donned a special suit which I feel sure he was fastened into, as he seemed to be freeing himself whilst falling with flames, fanned by the downward plunge, covering his body. The nerve he must have required to be set alight before jumping off the platform, to fall all that way in flames, and still feel confident that he would land safely in a not too large tank of water after freeing himself. What a way to earn a living!

The spectators were relieved and immensely impressed when the human torch landed spot on and emerged from the tank once more a man, and once more we could start breathing again.

Edie McHardy
RIDES AND STALLS

We lived in a house facing Blackheath and we saw the fair coming. We could watch the activities going on and it was exciting for us. Mother wasn’t a person who liked a lot of walking, so Father used to take us.

In the middle of the smaller roundabouts for little children, there was a big handle. This was turned when the ride started, and the man who worked it arranged that the ride was a matter of minutes for about three pennies. We enjoyed ourselves riding on these brightly coloured roundabouts, sitting in a type of boat-seat, which could be a cockerel, a lion, a tiger or a duck. We sat on the inside seat, and held on tight as we whirled round.

When we got older we ventured on the big roundabouts, where you sat astride the animals, holding on to the rod which was twisted like barley sugar. The central part of this carousel was worked by a man stoking a steam engine, and on these rides you went up and down as well as round and round. Music was arranged by a type of steam organ with pipes and mechanical figures of brightly coloured oriental women with drums and they moved their arms stiffly up and down to hit the drums. Another type of these larger roundabouts would be on a circular train track. Instead of animals, there were different types of racing cars, which included a steering wheel and motor horn.

‘Uncle Bubbles’ was another favourite of ours. ‘Uncle’ stood in the middle of a circular stand. We were given a limpish pole, which was a sort of fishing rod with a wire mesh basket at the end. When enough players were ready ‘Uncle’ would release a lever and a cascade of table tennis balls would shoot out — the players had to stand still with their ‘nets’ and the first player who was lucky enough to catch five balls in his or her net had a prize.

With Hoop-la, my brother once won a brightly coloured china parrot. It was a marvellous thing, and this bird was kept in pride of place in his bedroom, for many years, as his most valuable of possessions!

I think it was three balls a penny on the coconut shies. They were wedged in their stands very firmly, but Father won one once. We took
it home and didn’t think much of it and I think we hung it out for the birds in the end. We often returned home with a brightly coloured balloon or some streamers on a stick.

I also remember one of the sideshows being a ‘water otter’. After paying to visit this, expecting to find a little animal, we found it to be a kettle! I remember going in to see the fat lady. There was a platform with curtains around it, and when everyone was in, they drew the curtains back and the poor woman just sat there and stared at everybody. I suppose she was about eighteen stone, and she had a spangled skirt on which showed a good bit of thigh or hip. We could see her shoulders too, but it was a bit tame really.

We saw a variety of flame swallowers, Walls of Death, bearded women, and women dwarfs. Barrel Organs contributed to the general noise of festivity. Gypsy Lee’s, hot dog sellers, as well as ice cream vendors also shouted their wares. A snake woman also showed her art in coiling a python around her. Father let us into the secret that the poisonous fangs had been removed.

After the excitement of a morning at the fair, with the horse-drawn caravans of the fairground folk, the roundabouts, swings, sideshows, music and those shouting their wares, we returned home and straight to the bathroom. Father had an obsession that every deadly known disease landed on our hands after a morning at the fair. Washing our hands on returning home from the fair was a ritual for my father, my brother and me. I used to wonder at the change of the deep-purple of the permanganate of potash crystals to pink when mixed with water. As our hands were never inspected by a microscope, we never found out whether or not they presented a field day for all the known germs, but in my father’s view our hands had become ‘purified’ and we had battled with the germs.

In those days infectious diseases went through every strata of society, scarlet fever, diphtheria, measles, whooping cough, often with serious results, even fatal. There were no modern drugs, so many parents worked hard to keep their offspring free of these nasties.

Vivian Prince.
THE FORTUNE TELLER AT THE FAIR

‘One more heave’, said Grandfather Smith, ‘That should do it.’ And up went the small tent. Then he hung on the canvas walls two maps, one of a hand showing the lines on the palm, and the other a large head marked into squares.

In the centre, a card table and two folding chairs one each side of it. The table, covered with a purple cloth, held a Crystal Ball, to make it look authentic. There was a wooden hand indicating that he read the palms, and a small incense burner from whence arose an overpowering smell of flowers, the blue smoke rising upwards. It was all a bit of showmanship. His Tarot Cards at the ready, the customers could take their pick of the Crystal Ball, Palmistry, or Tarot Card reading.

So with Grandfather dressed in black trousers, white blouse, beautiful embroidered waist coat and around his head a red bandana to match the wide cummerbund around his waist, he sat himself at the table, one half of the tent flap pinned back so that he was on view.

Grandfather was ready. The scene was set.

My job at such times was to go around the fairground holding a placard, nearly as big as myself on which were the words, ‘Gypsy Smith, Tarot Cards, Crystal Ball, Palmistry, Psychometry.’

Having got tired of doing this, I would go along to Grandma’s stall where laid out would be her herbal remedies such as dandelion embrocation, buttercup ointment, elderberry cough mixture, etc. and sweet smelling potpourri.
After a while we would go back to Grandfather's tent, only to find it closed and a notice saying 'Back in half an hour.' 'Oh yes', said Gran, 'we don't need a Crystal Ball to know where he's gone.' He'd gone to the local pub for half a pint of Best Burton Ale. Well, it is thirsty work, Fortune Telling, and he was in need of some liquid refreshment.

Margaret Phair

DARTS QUEEN

One day at the fair, while we were wandering round trying to decide what to spend our small amount of money on, Mum suddenly stopped in front of a stall which had playing cards stuck on the back wall, and said she'd have a go at getting three darts into the centre pips of certain cards to win a prize. We were all amazed, because Mum had never thrown a dart in her life before, and after handing her the darts the stall-holder moved well out of range.

Mum pushed her sleeves up above her wrists, bent her arm well back, and threw the first dart so violently that the stall-holder ducked and several spectators stepped back. However, the dart stuck in the right pip of the right card to some applause and calls of, 'Lucky shot Missis', to which Mum paid no attention whatever.

Staring grimly at the playing cards, she hurled the second dart which again struck the right target, while Dad stood speechless with astonishment. Mum took off her hat and handed it to me, hitched her sleeves up a bit more, and after wagging her right arm backwards and forwards several times, threw the dart so hard that the whole spike was driven into the wood through the playing card. It was the right card, however, and she'd won a prize! Pink faced with exertion and delight, she chose a huge metal fire engine for my little brother, and Dad had the job of carrying this home under his arm.

Whenever we went to fairgrounds afterwards, we'd urge Mum to have another go at the darts to win something else, but she always refused, saying she'd never be able to do it again.

Dorothy Barton
ROLL UP! ROLL UP! ALL THE FUN OF THE FAIR

Easter, Whitsun and August Bank Holiday, we children looked forward with joyous anticipation to the visit at Blackheath of the fair.

Having collected a few pennies from our parents, and maybe a kind Auntie as in my case (who always stayed with us at these times, holidaying in rural Eltham from inner London) we skipped and walked happily along the Old Dover Road, through the footpath alongside Morden College and across the heath. Our lunch consisted of bread and jam and an empty lemonade bottle filled with water, which we hastily consumed halfway over the grass, always anxiously led toward the music of the Hurdy-gurdy.

Although the dust from the cinder-laid earth choked us and got into our eyes, we took no heed. I remember the smell was the paraffin of the flares and the smells of the food they made to sell like toffee apples.

Rolling a penny down a wooden slot onto a yellow, black checked board occasionally won an extra twopence or threepence which was always my first assignment. There was a row of sideshows offering wonderful experiences, tents erected, with a loud voiced showman calling out through a megaphone the wonders to be seen within the tents for only twopence and threepence:

'The fat lady, fattest in the world!'
'Tom Thumb and his wife only three feet high!'
'The two-headed baby, the only one in the world!'

I parted with my twopence to see this last phenomenon, only to be bitterly disappointed as layed out on the grass was a clay model (even to my young eyes it was modelled), looking as much as possible like a mummified baby with two heads. I was so astounded that anyone could try to con me into thinking that it was a two-headed baby. No wonder my parents called these booths catchpenny and warned me off them.

The loudest music and centre of attention was the Wild West show
with a couple of dancing girls occasionally coming into the open from the mysterious interior of the tent to shake their grass skirts and do a little dance as a taste of the show. As I never could afford the show I waited for ages just to see the girls come out and dance.

Rides on the roundabout with the horses and animals going higher and lower, the organ playing tunes we knew, and taking a lot of time choosing which horse or rooster to ride on, as we could usually only have one ride, so it was important that we got the best value.

There were shooting galleries, coconut shies, ghost trains, caterpillar rides, often chosen by the older girls and boys as the cover that came over at the end of the ride was a good chance of a bit of secrecy, chair-o-planes and bumper cars.

There was always a smell of humbugs being made, paraffin from the flares, chips being fried over coke-filled containers, sheltered from the wind and dust by a scalloped edged awning, and hot chestnuts. Lighting and roundabouts were driven by a noisy transformer fitted to a lorry.

If luck was on our side, we maybe could win a prize, perhaps getting a ring over a stick on the hoop-la and drew a lucky ticket from a tub, my prized possession was a celluloid doll about six inches high with coloured feathers stuck into it to form a stick and head-dress. I kept it for years, and I think it eventually became a war victim. Once dusk fell, we trekked homeward across Blackheath, always looking back at the magical sight of the lights and flares and the fading sound of the music. The fair! A highlight of our young lives.

Joyce Milan
1937 to 1939: Blackheath Fair came as it still does on Bank Holidays and we young grownups would sally forth in our finery. There were generally several lads and lasses from Evening Classes where we had become acquainted. The Dodgem Cars were a favourite as the girls could be quite helpless, so they could attract the attention of the boys who liked to think even in those days and circumstances that their driving was the greatest. The Helter Skelter was OK and of course the Caterpillar where the cover came over, but never would I go on the chair-o-planes or some of the other things that went round and round.

The rifle range was again another place where the boys could show off their ability as they aimed at moving figures. The girls would of course show their admiration, hoping there would be a prize to collect as a trophy. Although it was not ‘done’ for a girl to shoot, the opportunity would be taken to instruct her in the art of shooting when of course it was necessary for the boy to put his arms round her for the lesson. If he was a favourite the girl would be very dumb, naturally! Coconut shies were similar. The girl, at times, did require help to throw the ball at the coconut, but if the boy wasn’t fancied, she could throw as good as the next one. It was all part of the fun of the fair.

I never hear of ‘The Cake Walk’ nowadays, and wonder if it is still an attraction at a fair. A ‘go’ on that was something that produced lots of laughter and although there was not the excitement of chair-o-planes and so on, it was quite difficult to manoeuvre as one’s legs felt like cotton wool props.

‘The Cake Walk’ looked just like the apparatus used when a patient is learning to walk again after a leg injury especially when having an artificial limb. The floor part, however, moved back and forth at varying speeds and the hand rail also moved, so progress with no control of one’s limbs caused lots of hilarious problems. There were two walkways, so breathing a sigh of relief at reaching the end of the first one, was followed by a deep breath to start on the other that took one back to steady land. The second one seemed to move more quickly back and forth and finally it was possible to stagger off feeling intoxicated and with tears (I believe it was laughter) rolling down
everyone’s checks. A final scream of girlish laughter would be heard as, when passing out of the area, a jet of air would come through a vent causing one’s skirt to be blown up amidst lots of blushes. Very daring and lots of fun.

Edie McHardy

Forrest’s Cakewalk on Blackheath

FORTUNE TELLING

My Grandfather Smith ran a booth at the fairground and I remember one particular time when he wasn’t feeling very well. So Grandma stepped in, and she dressed up for the part with big dangly ear-rings and a shawl. She wasn’t very good at reading the cards which was what he was going to do. But she was good at reading tea leaves, so she popped her head out of the tent and said, ‘Come on everybody, when you’ve had a cup of tea, come over here and I’ll read your tea leaves.’

Margaret Phair
ELTHAM TO BLACKHEATH: BANK HOLIDAY AT THE FAIR

Sounds, sights and smells; the Bank Holiday Fair at Blackheath evokes all of these senses some sixty years later.

The three mile walk from home could not deter my sister, friends and me from going. The added excitement of having sixpence in our pockets, which to us was a small fortune to spend in one day, put wings to our heels.

The noise of the fair could be heard from as far away as Kidbrooke. Hand bells ringing, guns a-popping from the shooting galleries, music from the steam organ urged our weary limbs across the last hundred yards of the Heath. At last we were part of the throng determined to enjoy the day out.

Deafening shouts of the stall holders to, ‘Try your luck dearies’ to anyone rattling change. The smack of the hammer hitting the pin as the hopefully strong armed men tried their strength to ring the gong at the top of a twenty foot pole.

Chattering children begging money for goes on rides or machines, screaming girls shouting delight or fear as they rode on chair-o-planes, the big wheel or bumper cars, hoping to attract the groups of lads always ready to show how manly they were, as opposed to the weaker scared females.

I remember at this time the great dilemma of just how to spend my money. Should I try the games of chance in order to make it last longer? Roll-a-penny was one way, taking the sloping wooden coin launcher, putting the penny half way up or at the top of the slot and letting it go, hoping it would land on a square that would double or maybe treble it. Perhaps I would buy a ticket at the stall with so many delicious prizes and watch the light flash up and down hoping desperately that it would stop at my name or number or team, what ever particular pattern the stall was set for. What a treat for Mum to take home a tea set! Maybe I would take a mat to the top of the Alpine Slide and go round and round ending up in great disarray at the bottom, hoping that no one I knew was standing there watching my discomfort.
While this big decision was taking place, we were uplifted by the sight of the many booths around the perimeter with their gaily coloured awnings, the striped red and white backcloth of the coconut shies seen through the crowds of happy laughing people all waiting to have a go.

Romany caravans of the fair folk, spotless and with familiar artificial flowers in the windows which were gleaming, their brass fenders winking in the sun. China plates and ornaments seen inside as we nosied in passing by, fascinated by this way of life.

Mobile sellers of streamers, whistles and balloons nudged the sandwich men proclaiming doom and despondency, and ‘The end of the world is nigh’, advertised in black and white on their boards.

In a far corner I also remember the heroic feat of a man who could dive into a six foot tank of water through a ring of fire but this successfully took place in the evening at dusk, drawing large crowds that melted away when the collecting box got nearer and nearer.

Smells of grease and oil used by the traction engine, the sharp metallic smell from the bumper cars emitting sparks from overhead contacts, sweet sugar smells from the candy floss and toffee apple stalls, but the overall smell of the ever present dust from the hundreds of pairs of shuffling feet belonging to John Citizen enjoying themselves on the most important of days, an August Bank Holiday.

All of this lingers in my mind. Our pocket money spent to its best advantage, we prepared to return home tired and dirty but happy in the knowledge that the fair would return and hopefully our fortunes would better themselves next year.

The journey home took twice as long, with no excitement to boost the miles, only the thoughts of tea being ready and waiting helped us on our way.

Irene Swanton
A FAIR SIGHT

I liked the side stalls best of all. I’d spend a whole penny on Three Shots with a rifle. I knew the sight had been tampered with, but it took the first shot to find out how. The next two shots were always better, but I could never afford another penny to have a second go. Sometimes I would be given a tiny memento anyway. With my sister’s last penny I remember ‘rolling the penny down the board’. I was flabbergasted when it rolled down and stopped clean inside a square. This meant I had won a prize, but the man refused to pay, saying I was only a child. My sister told me to ‘stay out’ whilst she fetched a policeman. When he saw her ‘returning with a ‘bobby’, he quickly threw me a rag doll. The only time in my life I ever won anything.

The fat lady, a popular fairground attraction
Slightly apart from the hurdy-gurdy, the swings and the stalls, was a line of what seemed to be cages. Just like the zoo! You paid an entrance fee, and walked along viewing the occupants! There was the fattest man in the world, the bearded lady, the smallest lady, indeed these were truly miniature beings. No bigger than a doll, and beautifully dressed. They had dolls house furniture to match their size. My Mother had terrific compassion for these so called ‘freaks’ and would embarrass us by striking up lengthy conversations with them. I felt relieved to get out at the far end, and to hear the general hubbub again.

The Wall of Death always drew crowds. We stood in a circle, high up, (like being in the gods) and we looked down inside a circular wall, and waited. A motorbike appeared, revving its guts out. Sometimes there was a pillion passenger of a monkey. The bike would whiz around this wall, with a terrific roar, climbing higher and higher, whilst going faster and faster. When it seemed to reach the rim at the top, everyone sucked in their breath, and stepped back a pace in case he came over. A similar thing to this, was ‘The Centrifugal Force’. The brave paid their penny, and stepped inside a huge round drum. The majority stood with their backs to the wall, some sat. This drum spun faster and faster, just like a spin dryer. It whipped round so fast that the ‘force’ kept them in the position they held. At its height you see them only as blobs, and their terrified shrieks were frightening. When the machine stopped, they walked away as if they were drunk!

Come night time, the fairground took on a more romantic air. There were fairy lights, young couples carried balloons, and wore ‘kiss me quick’ hats as they disappeared inside ‘The Tunnel of Love’, emerging a minute later looking quite bashful. Some of the braver ones went up in the ‘Chair-o-Plane’ and snatched their kisses near to heaven. Fish and chips wafted on the air, and everyone went home tired, but happy.

Milly Gardner
DODGEMS AT THE FAIR

Sitting behind the wheel of a gaily painted dodgem car was a great thrill, the only controls being the unpredictable steering wheel and a pedal which made starting contact with the steel plated floor. Behind the car was a pole reaching to the wire-meshed ceiling, which emitted crackles and flashes of blue sparks. How we admired the fairground boys, who were like men to us, as they jumped nonchalantly from car to car collecting the fares, even when the ride had begun.

I rode with my friend Joyce. We set off with a yell and a flourish, no right of way observed, but trying to avoid a head-on collision. We bounced on to the side of the ring, where we got stuck. A couple of lads made a beeline for us, creating a great impression of manliness by pushing us off again. Just as the shrieks of being bumped and banged and the excitement of being chased began again, the electric current was switched off and the ride was over.

Joyce Milan and Irene Swanton photographed in a fairground booth in 1937.
Now the introductions were being made, seats were swapped over, and the next ride, paid for by the boys, was a mixed doubles. It was more fun being driven by the reckless males. We were treated to swerves and near misses as we careered around, each boy determined to show his skill at driving, but taking advantage of the situation to put their arms around us for so-called protection.

We had a good evening of harmless fun and they accompanied us home afterwards. We did meet the boys on several dates afterwards, but we did not dare to tell our parents, as it was considered not quite nice to go out with boys one met casually at the fair.

Irene Swanton

THE LATE NIGHT SET

After the tired and dirty stragglers had made their way home down Church Street Deptford after spending hours at the fair, another group would make their way to Blackheath, girls to meet boys, boys to meet girls, the courting couples. I remember getting to bed about ten o’clock and being unable to sleep because of all the noise made by the returning revellers singing, arguing and even children crying. When one group had passed and all seemed quiet, I could hear the distant sound of another group, and that went on it seemed for hours.

The shutters were always up on our shop on Deptford Broadway by eight o’clock, and all was dark. On one occasion, when my father was downstairs, he heard giggling against the shop door. He opened it and a couple fell back on the shop floor. The girl ran off, but the fellow who was slightly tipsy said to Dad, ‘You’ll beg my pardon.’ That was a catch phrase in our family for quite a while.

Gladys Barrett
AGE EXCHANGE REMINISCENCE CENTRE

The Age Exchange Reminiscence Centre opened on 29 May 1987 at 11 Blackheath Village, London, S.E.3. This project has been established in response to a definite demand from the growing numbers interested in the field of reminiscence, either as trainers, as organisers of sessions, or as elderly participants in those sessions.

Pensioners are welcomed at the centre which is a magnet for those interested in talking and writing about their own lives. We offer them a drop-in centre where they can meet and discuss their current projects in a supportive and well equipped environment.

The Centre provides a resource and training centre for all those interested in developing skills in reminiscence work with elderly people in institutions. It also operates as a meeting place for those piloting new approaches to creative work with the elderly with reminiscence as a focus.

We stock the current literature on reminiscence, and life history, mount exhibitions, and offer advice and support to care-workers and nursing staff across London who wish to try using these materials in their own settings.

Oral historians and those producing London life histories (their own and other people’s) have access to our archives and are able to use our photographic and reprographic resources, as well as meeting others engaged in like activity for support and exchange of ideas.

Young people who are interested in volunteering work with the elderly, or those involved in oral history projects, are encouraged to come to the centre, to meet our members and look at our resources. We have also established a Youth Theatre which works on reminiscence shows with local pensioners, in what we feel to be a valuable bridge-building exercise.

We will always be needing reminiscence objects to stimulate recall. By this we mean unusual items which people may have stored in their attics, and no longer have a use for, but which would serve to remind older people about their earlier days. We are also grateful to anyone interested in helping in the centre during the day, on an occasional and voluntary basis.

If you are interested in knowing more about any of these activities please contact us on 081 318 9105/318 3504.
Whit Monday on the Heath, 1930s
A clipping from the Kentish Mercury

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