

Fairytale of New Addington

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Les Back

This Croydon neighbourhood has been maligned by the tabloids as home of work-shy, cultureless Chavs. The sociologist Les Back, who grew up there, reports on an annual celebration of community.



It is the last Sunday in November. Hundreds of people gather on the corner of Homestead Way and King Henry's Drive in New Addington, south London. We have come to see the switching on the Hopkinsons' Christmas lights. This family home is famed for its electric Technicolor decorations — 10,000 lights, luminous reindeer, choirboys and Father Christmas himself. Every December since the eighties this house has been lit up, a giant beacon of festivity.

By sundown at 4.30pm there must be 500 local residents with their children whose expectation is getting increasingly unruly. "If you step into the road again I am going to take you home," a mother snaps at her little boy. There are so many people in the street that the buses can barely get past. As it happens, the person responsible for this incredible show — Alex Hopkinson — has worked as a bus driver in south London for ten years. As 5 pm approaches the master of ceremonies leads the children in a count down and as the lights are switched on fireworks fly from the Hopkinsons' back garden, exploding over the heads of the crowd. A snow machine blasts fake festive flakes into the air. Kids toss snowballs at each other.

All this is done for free and without any official coordination. Alex has spent £300 from his own pocket on the fireworks, last year the electricity alone was an extra £150 and the total cost was £1,500, no small sum for a man supporting a family on a bus driver's salary.

In the front garden, Santa Claus in his sleigh hands out bags of sweets to the children. This year the proceeds from the sale of teas and coffees and donations will go to the Royal Marsden Hospital and Combat Stress. When the last fireworks have exploded there is applause and a voice from the back of the crowd shouts: "Well done, Alex!"

Alex Hopkinson, now in his thirties, explains how it all started. His father Derek Hopkinson who grew up in Hoxton, East London and as a boy worked in the east London markets, picking up the markets' patter and brogue. "My father was a



real showman. Everyone that met him loved him. He was like a magnet, he never turned anyone away.” In the middle of the technicolor light display there’s a huge picture of Derek Hopkinson mounted on the front of the house.

When I left home over thirty years ago almost no-one outside Croydon had heard of New Addington. Then in November 2011 Addington resident Emma West shouted racist abuse on a tram bound for Addington. Her rant was filmed on a mobile phone. The video went viral, watched by over 11 million people on YouTube. Championed by the BNP and the English Defense League, West became a political symbol.

It transpired that she had been suffering with mental health problems and had taken 100mg of the antidepressant Citalopram, more than twice the recommended limit. According to her barrister David Martin-Sperry Emma West was “deeply depressed” by the far right’s support, and under pressure from the trial she attempted to take her own life on three occasions. In July 2013 West was bound over and sentenced to a 24 month community order. The anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* concluded that the Crown Prosecution Service had exacerbated the situation by failing to take West’s mental health into account.

In the summer of 2012 New Addington was again in the headlines following the murder of 12 year old Tia Sharp by her grandmother’s boyfriend. The Daily Mail described Tia as a “victim of the moral decay that now prevails in parts of Britain. The names may change, they may come from different parts of the country, but all are casualties of the same underclass whose ‘values’ — subsidised in the most part by benefits — are being passed down from generation to generation.” In the media New Addington became a tag for the work-shy underclass, benefit scroungers and cultureless ‘Chavs’.

In November 2013 *The Croydon Advertiser* published ‘well-being scores’ for the borough and the New Addington and Fieldway estates came bottom: the worst places to live in Croydon.

For many working people the estate offered a first real stable home, an escape from slum clearance and post-war austerity. During the seventies home ownership was very low, confined mainly to the oldest part of the estate built in the thirties and named after Charles Boot who envisioned Addington as a ‘garden village’. Thatcherism changed this and the level of home ownership during the eighties increased rapidly, as residents took up the ‘right to buy’ their homes. Families like my own and the Hopkinsons bought their council homes.

I asked Alex whether he thought there was something unique about working-class men of his Dad’s generation. “There is, yeah...” Alex replied. “Oh yeah, enjoying themselves. It’s all lost now, people are too busy now, doing their own stuff now — not caring about no-one else.” Derek Hopkinson died in St Christopher’s Hospice, Sydenham in 2004. In 2013 Alex wanted to rekindle the tradition in his Dad’s memory to mark the tenth anniversary of his passing. This year’s Christmas lights opening marks the continuation of the tradition.

The Hopkinsons were not the only family to celebrate Christmas in this way. By the nineties lots of homes on the estate were decorated in lavish colour, with glowing snowmen and Father



Christmases shining out of the pitch darkness at night. Sukhdev Sandhu writes that houses that stick out from timid suburban conformity appear both “heroic and lonely”. Christmas kitsch in ‘Addo’ has that kind of exceptional boldness. Driving around this year there are fewer illuminated houses than in previous Decembers. Austerity is biting like the cold North Downs’ wind. In recent years two Pawn shops have opened on the estate’s main shopping area, Central Parade. One resident told me, “I was up there last week and I saw someone take their laptop. They offered her £20 and she took it.”

The estate is much more socially differentiated than outsiders would have it. Home ownership on the estate is 38 per cent in Fieldway (known locally as the ‘New Estate’), and 55 per cent for the older ‘red brick houses’ in New Addington ward. This is relatively low when compared with 69 per cent for Croydon as a whole. The homes decorated extravagantly at Christmas are often, although not exclusively, the red-brick ones. The festive illumination of these homes does not simply reflect their economic status or spending power, rather the Christmas lights are a seasonal gift to the estate as a whole.



“You can do a class analysis of London with Christmas lights,” writes China Miéville. In poorer homes “the season is celebrated with chromatic surplus”, while the rich and middle-class “strive to distinguish themselves with White-lit Christmas trees”. A drive to New Addington supports Miéville thesis. In affluent Beckenham, homes are bathed in subtle white light sometimes with a luminous electric stag grazing on the lawn. “Ah good taste, as Picasso may or may not have said, what a dreadful thing,” writes Miéville. He might enjoy New Addington where entire houses are illuminated with multi-coloured electric excess.

I ask Alex if there is a relationship between social class and Christmas decorations. He nods: “I think it’s people who have never had nothin’ who like to give back to people. You always find people who are poor always give and people that are rich don’t... and that’s the reason they stay rich for.” We laugh. “When you think about it a lot of the rich people they sort of don’t give to people and that is the reason why they’ve got money.” Is that why they’ve got their classy white lights?” I ask? “Exactly” he says.

At the heart of this story is an ordinary miracle. In contrast to the glitzy consumerism of the supermarkets and shopping centres that profit from Christmas, this is a spectacle of community — a gift given for free in hard times by a family to the estate. You can see it reflected in the faces of the children, in their laughter and excitement, and come to admire the glowing colours of the Christmas lights. There is no better tribute to Derek’s memory, one of New Addington’s best-loved characters.

A young mother took her kids up to see the Hopkinsons’ Christmas lights. Her story is emblematic of the new situation. She was evicted from her council flat earlier in 2013 for not paying her rent, but it was not just that times were hard financially. Eviction was her way out of the abusive relationship she was in where she had repeatedly been the victim of domestic violence. The council simply viewed her as a bad debtor and issued an eviction notice. A local housing office told me: “There’s not a lot of sympathy out there... if you get evicted then the legislation says you are intentionally homeless. People don’t come back.”

This is how new class divisions work through distinguishing between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. She now

lives with her Nan who, like the Hopkinsons, bought her council house in the 1980s. The atmosphere of class cruelty and widening housing inequalities creates new forms of family, where — as in this case — the old are in need of everyday care and at the same time provide a roof for the young in need of a home.

As a child Kirsty MacColl lived close to New Addington. In her famous collaboration with the Pogues, *Fairy Tale of New York* – the greatest Christmas song of all time – she sings with Shane MacGowan “And the bells are ringing out. For Christmas Day.” For me, the Hopkinsons’ festive decorations recall that stirring refrain.

Notes

Data Blog: Where is the best place to live in Croydon, Croydon Advertiser, <http://www.croydonadvertiser.co.uk/DATA-BLOG-best-place-live-Croydon/story-20164938-detail/story.html>

Sukhdev Sandhu *Night Haunts: A Journey Through the London Night* (Verso & Artangel, 2007) p. 22.

Strategic Partnership Croydon Fieldway Ward Profile (Strategic Partnership, 2009) <http://www.croydonobservatory.org/docs/877820/877871> and Strategic Partnership Croydon New Addington Ward Profile (Strategic Partnership, 2009) <http://www.croydonobservatory.org/docs/877820/877880>

China Miéville *London’s Overthrow* (The Westbourne Press, 2012) p. 29

Les Back ‘Flame Immune to Wind: The Songs of Kirsty MacColl, *City*, 7 (1), 2003 pp. 107-111.