

People often say one of the best things about living in Waltham Forest is their neighbours. They claim that unlike other parts of London or even beyond, the people on their street seem genuinely friendly and happy to look out for each other. Being friendly brings an added bonus in that once you do start talking, you sometimes discover the most extraordinary stories emerging from seemingly ordinary people. In this new occasional series the E List will share some of these Hidden Lives.

# Hidden Lives

## Fred Boorer - Self Taught Working Class Artist

Jonathan Elliott's much loved neighbour, Fred was not exactly all he appeared. Jonathan tells his quiet but incredible story.

A few days after his funeral, Fred's family told me that they'd found £11,000 in cash hidden behind his old Bakelite radio. They were just trying to figure out how this extremely frugal pensioner and former bookbinder had managed to save such a sum, when they found his savings book. It showed a balance of £250,000. In death, as in life, Fred was full of surprises.

On 23 February 2001 I moved into the flat I live in now with a friend, it was my first home and like all new residents, I was half curious half nervous about what my neighbours would be like. As we unpacked, I heard jazz from the flat below. It was old jazz - Louis Armstrong, it might have been Fats Waller or Jelly Roll Morton, Bix Beiderbecke. Someone was whistling to it. The sound proofing between the two flats was non-existent (and remains so - I can sometimes make out actual words spoken by my current neighbours, who are fortunately very good friends).

I peered out onto the back garden. In my downstairs neighbour's yard there was a shed, painted with so many coats of green, its wooden planks were indistinguishable from each other. The doorbell rang and an immaculately dressed elderly man in thick specs introduced himself. He was proffering a melon.

'The name's Fred' he said. 'Got this at the market, two for the price of one'.

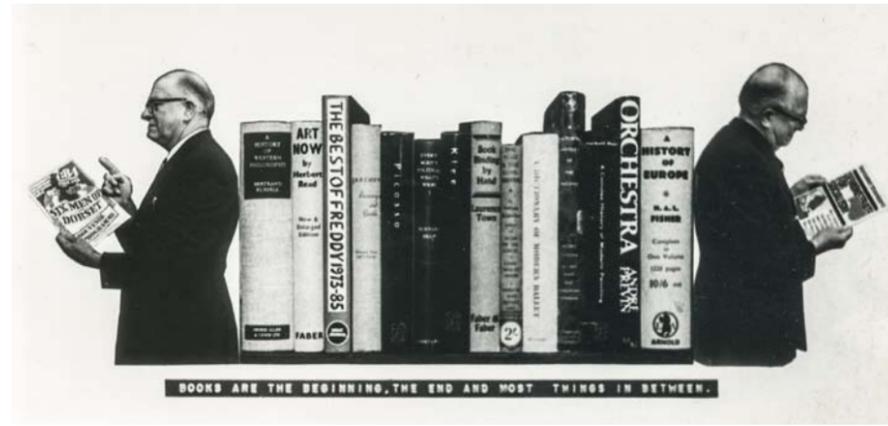
And so I met Fred Boorer, a man who would become a good friend and a kind neighbour for the next two and a half years. He was born in 1920 in the next street and the family moved into the flat below mine when he was 10 years old. He was the only child of a father who was a docker, and a mother who started to lose her sight in middle age. The three of them lived in a flat that had one bedroom, an outside loo and no bathroom. It was standard practice then to wash and do the laundry at the public baths in Bakers Arms - now long gone - once a week. For ablutions in the week, a bucket in the yard would have to do and Fred kept to this regime all his life. When the baths closed down, Les - a friend since childhood who lived opposite, offered Fred the use of his bathroom once a week.

Fred never married, fought for his country in North Africa, and then took early retirement from his bookbinding job to care for his ailing mother. And during the 50s and 60s, he started a life-long love affair with the arts. He was passionate - and knowledgeable - about opera, Russian ballet, surrealist painting, jazz and photography. His living room was packed with newspaper cuttings, books piled to the ceiling, paintings and wacky, beatnik 60s furniture and lighting. The whole place



was completely unmodernised. It still had roundpin plugs, electric cables sheathed in fabric, wallpaper from the 1950s and no central heating. Fred also developed his own artistic output and compensated for his lack of formal training in technique by teaching himself photomontage. He made a few hand drawn copies of surrealist masterpieces and made a series of striking collages but he found his medium in photomontage and produced about 40 works - often featuring himself against surreal and abstract backdrops, with an ironic or witty caption. In one, Fred has superimposed himself over the image of a knight in shining armour, a swooning princess declares "Thanks Fred, My Hero!". In another he is dancing with a 1920s flapper. A crowd of Freds smiles from the swirls of William Morris wallpaper, a Fred stares out from a reproduction of a Joan Miro, beneath is the legend in capitals: 'DADA - CONSTRUCTIVISM'.

Often he is simply posing at home with his ballet and surrealism books, or standing in front of Sadler's Wells in trademark beret, jazzman's cap or the rather formal fedora. He probably didn't think of himself as an



artist manque, because the photomontages never pretended to be anything other than fun things he liked doing. He never exhibited or tried to sell them or called himself an artist. But they are original, sometimes wonderfully funny and sometimes bizarre. He was - and happily portrayed himself as - a self-taught working class intellectual and man of the arts, someone who had seized high culture from the bourgeoisie and made it his own.

In the decades after the war, Walthamstow had a flourishing amateur photography scene as well as a handful of music venues that played live jazz - Fred was one of a gang of local friends that enjoyed photography trips together and toured the jazz clubs at weekends. He was also a very active member of the printers and bookbinders union SOGAT and may well have benefited from the expansion of workers' education after



the war. He wrote numerous articles for the SOGAT journal and was a committed socialist.

Just a few days after my arrival, various deliveries arrived, one, a chest of drawers, when I was out. Fred took it in, and paid for it. I later found out that in the street, he was known for his great generosity and at the age of 83 would take his obligation to 'visit the elderly' very seriously, even if they were considerably younger than he was. In the months that followed, few days would pass that we didn't exchange a greeting, and few weeks passed without an earnest discussion on some topic or other - the causes of the First World War, the state of modern jazz, surrealism and, frequently, the Tories - a favourite target.

On 5 October 2003, Fred died suddenly from a heart attack, until then seemingly in excellent health. His funeral was a grand East End affair. An undertaker in a top hat and tails walked in front of the hearse as it proceeded down our street, families stood outside their houses as a mark of respect. The chapel at the crematorium was packed, as was the memorial service. His family gave me his books and a lot of his photomontages. When eventually they found a will, it instructed that all his money was to be left to Moorfields Eye Hospital, a tribute to his blind mother. The hospital bought a state of the art scanner for the children's unit with the money and erected a plaque to commemorate his generosity.



Now and then, when I look out of the window onto our two gardens and think I can hear Bix Beiderbecke playing downstairs and someone whistling along to it, it's nice to imagine that Fred's spirit might still linger. When we exhibited his work in the Art Trail last year, we had over a hundred visitors. He would probably have been a bit embarrassed at the attention, but I hope a little proud as well.

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If you think you have a neighbour with an extraordinary story and who is happy for it to be told, please email [editor@thelist.co.uk](mailto:editor@thelist.co.uk)



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