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The Story Behind the Pictures:

A TALE OF FOUR CITIES - LONDON STREET ART - THE ROUNDELS OF SPITALFIELDS

In this PhotoMail, some shots of Art commemorating History in an unusual and creative way.

London's East End is something of a global Street Art centre with distinctive art painted in almost every street, including some by the world's top street artists. There are even guided tours of the street art of the Brick Lane area, around the very streets that Jack the Ripper terrorised. (Note: The events in the Matchgirls story below look place in the very same streets and just one month, July 1888, before the terror of the Jack the Ripper murders.)

A feature of a lot of street art is that it is transient, often being replaced, painted over, removed, or even defaced. This PhotoMail features some fascinating but enduring street art that commemorates the diverse history, culture and people of the East End's Spitalfields area. So here's the story behind the pictures.

When walking on Brick Lane, a friend pointed out to me some intriguing cast iron plates set into the pavement, each with a design or motif. I went back, looked for more and found a few, each of them quite different. I researched a bit, thinking at first that they may be some of the decorative coal hole covers that were used in the 1800's and early 1900s as cellar access for deliveries of the coal used to heat London's houses. Wrong - they are in fact modern street art, each with a story to tell.



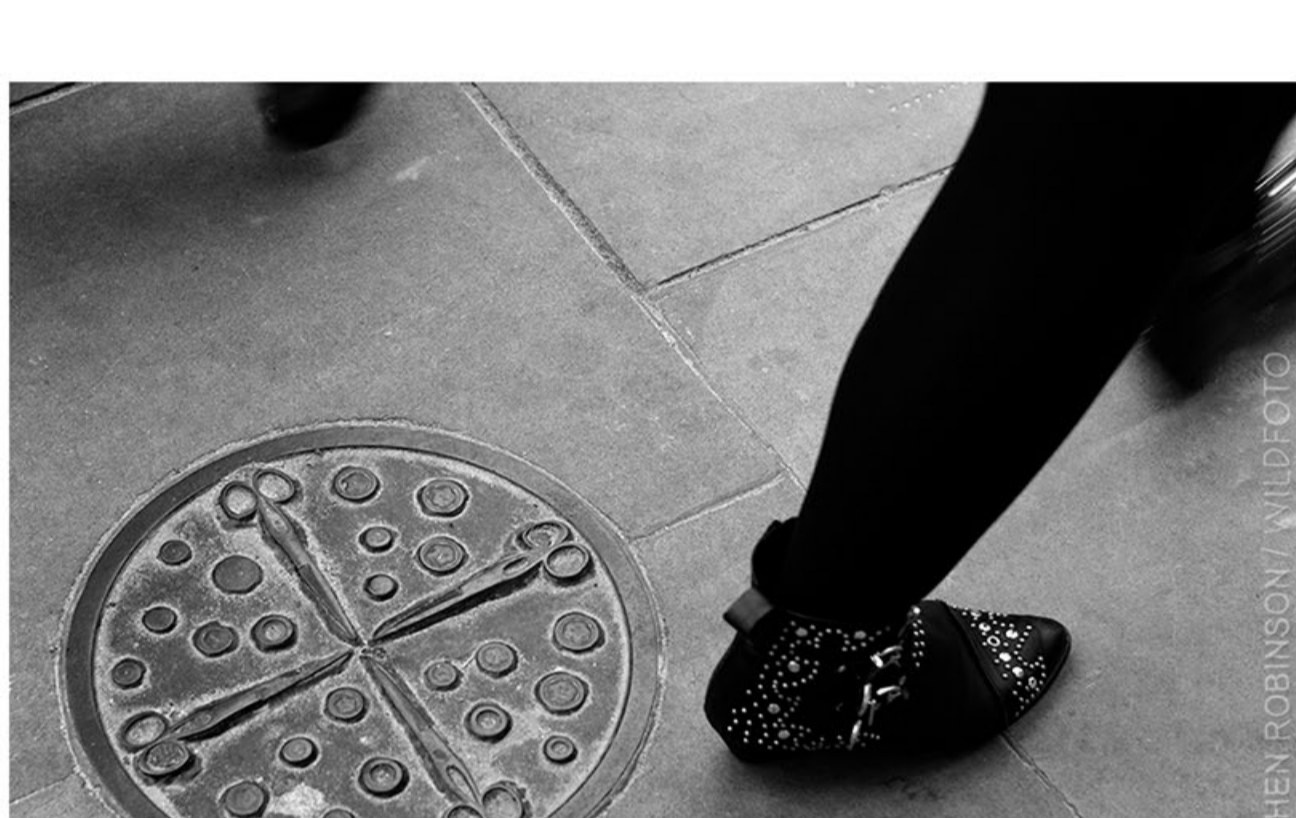
Roundel, Brick Lane, London (Artist: Keith Bowler 1995)

Every day, hundreds of people rush by or walk over these without noticing. They should slow down. In 1995, local artist Keith Bowler was asked to produce a set of 25 of these cast iron plaques or "roundels", which were then installed by the local council in various of the streets of Spitalfields, to commemorate the history of the area. This one of beer tankards is outside the Old Truman Brewery (previously the The Black Eagle Brewery) on Brick Lane. Brewing activities at this site can be traced back to a Joseph Truman in 1666. The Truman Brewery and its owners were referred to (disparagingly) by Mrs Micawber in Charles Dickens' novel "David Copperfield" (1850). The Old Truman Brewery is now a very popular arts, fashion, events and business centre, with many trendy shops, restaurants and bars, attracting visitors from all over the world.



Roundel, Brushfield Street, London (Artist: Keith Bowler 1995)

At the corner of Brushfield and Commercial streets is this roundel with an apples and pears motif. It commemorates the past glory of the City of London Fruit and Wool Exchange which was housed in a fine and grandly designed building in Brushfield Street from 1929 until 1991, when the exchange operations were moved. Since then it has housed local business offices. But, sadly, this elegant building is now to be lost to 'redevelopment as modern office and retail space'. Local objections have been quashed by Boris Johnson, the rather less elegant Mayor of London.



Roundel, Brick Lane, London (Artist: Keith Bowler 1995)

In another part of Brick Lane, this roundel, picturing scissors and buttons, commemorates the "rag trade" clothing industry of the area. The name Brick Lane derives from brick making activities in the 15th century. But since then the area has had a rich history of immigration which brought other trades: the Huguenots in the 17th century, followed by the Irish, the Ashkenazi Jews and, more recently, the Bangladeshis. It became a weaving, clothing and tailoring centre due to the presence of master weavers in Spitalfields as from the 17th century and the large influxes of skilled and semi-skilled immigrant labour.



Roundel, Hanbury Street, London (Artist: Keith Bowler 1995)

Why are match heads red? At the door of the Community Hall at 22 Hanbury Street, a look at this roundel may lead you to some interesting history, and to the answer. This roundel depicts a ring of matchstick figures holding hands to commemorate the Matchgirls of the 1880s. They were the women and girls who worked at the Bryant & May match factory at nearby Bow in the East End of London. They suffered extremely poor working conditions including low pay, fourteen-hour working days, and heavy fines for any infringement. But perhaps the worst was the severe health risk caused by the use of toxic white phosphorous in their production of the matches. This caused a condition known as "phossy-jaw" with its ulcerating mouth sores, disfigurement of the jaws and face, and even the risk of death.

In July 1888, Bryant & May dismissed a worker. This resulted in an immediate strike by 1400 of the women & girl workforce. The reason behind the dismissal seems to have been the refusal by the workers generally to sign a paper contradicting an article about the women & girls' working conditions. The article was written by Annie Besant and entitled "White Slavery in London". She was a social reform activist who published the article in her halfpenny weekly paper called "The Link" and, apparently, it angered the Bryant & May management. [Continued below...]



Roundel, Hanbury Street, London (Artist: Keith Bowler 1995)

The Bryant & May management reinstated the sacked employee almost immediately but the women and girls continued their strike, demanding an improvement in their general working conditions. Their strike action attracted much publicity. The Matchgirls were supported by Annie Besant and others - including Eleanor Marx (the youngest daughter of Karl Marx), members of the Fabian Society such as George Bernard Shaw, and many who donated to a Matchgirls strike fund. William Bryant, one of the factory owners, became nervous about the publicity and its effect on his reputation as a prominent 'liberal'. So the Bryant & May management agreed to improvements in working conditions and in their treatment of the workforce, and the strike ended later in July 1888. [Continued below...]



Roundel, Hanbury Street, London (Artist: Keith Bowler 1995)

Eventually, the 1906 Berne Convention prohibited the use of the highly toxic white phosphorous in matches production and it was banned in Britain as from 1911, in favour of the less toxic red phosphorous.

So that's why match heads are red.

The Matchgirls roundel is set into the pavement outside the Hanbury Community Hall, originally a Huguenot Church built in 1719. At the time of the strike, it was the Christ Church Hall and it was the building used by the Matchgirls for their strike meetings.

The Matchgirls are now considered to be forerunners of the early 1900s; of the modern day women's rights cause; and even of the British trades union movement.

A lot to learn from this little piece of street art.

More of Keith Bowler's work can be seen at www.keithbowler.co.uk

PHOTOGRAPHER FOR HIRE

Stephen Robinson is a photographer operating from his Zambia base. He undertakes photo assignment work in the corporate, industrial, mining, donor-aid project and environmental fields, including the production of photo based communications, advertising and promotional media.

This commercial work supports his nature photography speciality, including landscape, environment, conservation and wildlife work - and including his well-known panoramic photography project and exhibitions on the remote landscape, peoples and environment of Zambia.

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