

Marx Memorial Library Visit, write up by Brigitte Istim

On 7th March 2013 a group of eight library workers visited the Marx Memorial Library which is housed in a handsome Georgian building facing Clerkenwell Green. We were shown around by Jane Powell, Deputy Librarian and Archivist, who gave us a fascinating insight into the multi-layered history of this building and the people who have occupied it since its foundation in 1737.

Originally designed as a charity school for Welsh boys number 37A Clerkenwell Green was also home to a variety of workshops and a coffee shop before being taken over in the late nineteenth century by the 20th Century Press, Britain's first radical publishing company. The beams that were set into the ceilings to support the weight of the printing presses are still visible.

The Marx Memorial Library and Workers' School, a registered charity, was founded in 1933 on the 50th anniversary of Karl Marx's death. Given Marx's reputation as a voracious reader – all those hours in the British Library – it was felt that a library was the most appropriate way both to commemorate his memory and to promote his theories about history, economics and society.

Today the Marx Memorial functions primarily as a research archive although it is possible for members to borrow items from the 50,000 plus book collection. The most heavily used archive relates to the British volunteers who joined the International Brigade, formed to fight on the side of the Republicans against Franco's Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. This collection includes medical records, photographs and a wonderful banner depicting a raised fist embroidered, as Jane said, 'by the ladies of Barcelona' in honour of the 15th Brigade, 35th Division of the British Battalion.

The Barcelona banner is displayed in the library's public meeting room and is accompanied by a mural and another banner, each of which has a slightly surprising link to individuals who are famous outside the context of left wing history. The fringe attached to the Hammersmith Socialist Society's banner was sewn on by William Morris, renowned more as a wallpaper designer than a left wing activist, and the mural, again with a Spanish Civil War theme, was painted by Rosa Branson, aunt to Richard whose red connections apparently extend beyond the colour of his Virgin logo.

Moving on to the library's first floor we visited the main book collection and reading room via a detour to a small panelled room which was used by Lenin from 1902 to 1903 for the purposes of editing *Iskra* (Spark), a political newspaper run by Russian émigrés. The filing cabinet and chair in this room are of the right vintage but Jane is unsure whether the chief architect of the Russian revolution ever actually sat on the green cushioned chair.

Another large mural dominates the reading area, painted in 1935 by the aristocratic socialist Jack Hastings, Viscount of Huntingdon. Hastings worked with Diego Rivera, the famous Mexican artist and his painting is actually a fresco executed directly on to wet plaster, a notoriously difficult medium. Entitled 'The worker of the future clearing away the debris of capitalism' the fresco features a muscular blond giant sweeping

aside institutions like banks and churches. He is flanked by left wing luminaries including Marx, Engels and a very blue-eyed Lenin. For many years this fresco was hidden behind library shelving which was actually tacked on to its delicate surface. Then in the 1980s Channel 4 made a documentary about the fresco, 'Marx on the Wall', and rather than pay an access fee they funded its restoration – today the only sign of any rough treatment is a missing fragment on the lower right border.

One of the Marx Memorial's greatest treasure troves is its collection of Soviet political posters. This is a particular passion for Jane who used to work in the British Cartoon Archive at the University of Kent. She is gradually cataloguing the Soviet collection, a major task as there are around 2,500 posters and many of them are both fragile and very large and difficult to scan. At present about 500 have been catalogued and 100 can be viewed on-line.

The above gives only a small glimpse of the Marx Memorial's history and resources. 2013 is the library's 80th anniversary making it as good a time to visit as any. It will be part of Open House weekend in September and those who visit then will be able to explore the labyrinthine basements which sit just above the buried River Fleet as well as the upper floors. Anyone who does visit should make sure they take a look at one of London's most memorable loos – an intern from the University of Kent has banished beige paint with a collage of revolutionary newspapers and cards and a hammer and sickle rising like a shooting star above the water cistern.

Many thanks to Jane for such an interesting and informational tour and thanks to Liz Chalmers of Stenhouse Library at Kingston Hospital for organising the visit.