

Don't mess with this hotbed of London dissent

It takes some doing to unite [London's](#) Marxists with its Freemasons, but [Islington](#) council has done just that.

Nine years after it attempted to flog off [Clerkenwell](#) Green at public auction, the Lib-Dem-led borough is back with new proposals to privatise this historic public space. And the eccentric collection of institutes and fraternities who inhabit this wonderful urban square are rightly up in arms.

Amid the deadly jargonese of Islington council's new Action Area Plan there lurks a threat to encourage shops and cafés "to locate on Clerkenwell Green". What that means in practice, according to the Clerkenwell Green Preservation Society, is that the unique attributes of "this public open space of national importance" would be undone by yet more cafés and takeaways.

In the process, "public activities, public assembly and recreation" would be sacrificed for commercial concerns. Al fresco dining and May Day marches rarely rub along together.

Of course, the "green" is not a green at all. It is a small, raised area encircled by open roads, leading to narrow streets, and overlooked by the elegant spire of the church of St James. But ever since Wat Tyler and his revolting peasants turned up in 1381 to behead the local prior, torch the monastery and camp out, it has served as the place of London radicalism. From the beginning, as Peter Ackroyd puts it in his biography of the capital, "it has been the home of groups who wish to be separate and separated".

In the 15th century that meant the religious free-thinkers, the Lollards. In the 16th century, persecuted Catholics sought refuge there — which didn't save three of them being hanged, drawn and quartered on the green. Then came the Quakers and even the Freemasons, who still reside opposite at Sessions House.

But it was the battle for the vote and the struggle for liberty in the 1800s which saw Clerkenwell Green established as the heartland of radical activism. It was a place of assembly and disorder, speeches and marches, all sustained by the local printing shops.

In 1816 the orator Henry Hunt addressed a crowd of 20,000 working men and women at Spa Fields north of the green as they struggled for the right to cast their vote. The heroes of the trade union movement, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, were first greeted on the green on their return from Botany Bay.

And then, in 1871, as the Paris Commune was upending the French capital, some 500 Londoners convened on the green to raise the red flag in support of the socialist cause.

The City Press noted that Clerkenwell Green was now “the headquarters of republicanism, revolution and non-conformity”. So it was no surprise that in 1902 an exiled [VI Lenin](#) chose this corner of Islington to edit his underground Russian journal, Iskra — The Spark — or that in 1933 the old Welsh school at 37a Clerkenwell Green was converted into the Marx Memorial Library, where it still prospers today.

There is also significant liberal history here. In “a neighbourhood well known to democracy”, the London Patriotic Society was founded by philosopher John Stuart Mill and other Liberal MPs “as a place for political lectures and discussions” free from meddling magistrates. Here liberal firebrands campaigned against repression in [Ireland](#) and for reform of the police.

So it seems short-sighted for the Lib Dems now to try to curtail the attractively informal, dissenting spirit of this place with a [Starbucks](#).

Councils always want to tidy up untidy places, but with so much of London's outside arena already under chairs and tables, by-laws and zones, why not let history breathe and just leave the green alone?

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