

BOOKS

# Digging for diamonds and other gems in the Garden

## DIAMOND STREET: THE HIDDEN WORLD OF HATTON GARDEN

By Rachel Lichtenstein  
*Hamish Hamilton, £20*

REVIEWED BY NATASHA LEHRER

In June 1940, a small boy and several members of his extended family — parents, uncles, aunts and cousins — were bound by ship for England, on the run from occupied Belgium. One night, in the shadowy darkness of the cabin, the boy awoke to the frantic whispering of his mother: "Shall we throw them overboard?" Barely more than a toddler then, it was several years before the boy confessed that he was certain that his parents were weighing up whether or not to drown him.

The small boy was my father, and the whispers did not concern the children of the party but the handful of diamonds that my grandmother had hidden in her underwear when she and my grandfather — a Polish-born diamond dealer who had been living for some years in Antwerp, the then centre of the international diamond trade — had left for the coast in advance of the Nazi invasion of Belgium.

This small package would prove to be the way in for my grandfather to become a member of Hatton Garden's



PHOTO: HIRSCHFIELDS OF HATTON GARDEN

Historical vista: Hatton Garden bustled in the 1800s even before its paving stones became precious

mysterious Diamond Club, founded by largely Orthodox Jews like him who were lucky enough to escape in the early part of the Second World War from Antwerp to London, location of the almost mythical heart of the diamond business to which Rachel Lichtenstein returns again and again in her delightful and absorbing book.

She delves deep into the geological and historical strata of Hatton Garden and her journey takes her back to the mythical King Lud (of Ludgate Circus and Hill) and his pig-herding son Bladud, to the great Ely Palace, and the estate of Sir Christopher Hatton (rumoured to have been Elizabeth I's lover) where Hatton Garden now stands, its name testa-

ment to the wealth and aristocracy that marked the area before its decline into notoriety in the 17th century as the city of London expanded.

The influence of the psycho-geographer Ian Sinclair, with whom Lichtenstein collaborated on the wonderful *Rodinsky's Room*, and of the oral historian of East London Alan Dein, is palpable

throughout. Lichtenstein's narrative shifts between interviews with former and current Hatton Garden denizens, the perusal of archival material and the exploration of the material traces of the area's rich history.

*Diamond Street* reveals the ever-changing social currents and waves of immigration that have always been one of the characteristics of the great city at whose heart it lies and Lichtenstein lunches with the children of Italian

**She lunches with the children of Italian grocers**

grocers, has tea with the descendants of Belgian Chasidic diamond dealers, talks to historians, archaeologists and poets, gathering all these

"memories, whispers, shards" from a history "so rich in memory-traces, lost landscapes and sacred architecture."

It is a shame there's no index and that Lichtenstein's fabulous narrative should be marred by a few errors that should have been picked up by a decent editor. But, though Hatton Garden is not a particularly beautiful street, like the rough diamonds with which it has been identified for almost a century, once the multiple facets of its fascinating history are brought to light, it reveals astonishing, undreamed-of depths.

Natasha Lehrer is a writer and translator