



ENGLISH HERITAGE

London's Lea Valley: the Olympic Park story



INTRODUCTION

The Olympic Park lies in the East End of London, north of the River Thames and on the east side of the River Lea, which flows southward to the Thames. This area, known as the Lower Lea Valley, was until recently a little-known and largely uninhabited landscape of wild vegetation peppered with pylons, canals, locks, bridges and towpaths – mostly silent and still – a no-man’s land ripe for development. Yet it has a fascinating past that shaped the area, traces of which can still be seen, and which are celebrated in this leaflet.

The Lower Lea Valley

London’s River Lea rises on Leagrave Common, Bedfordshire and flows about fifty miles south until it meets the River Thames. While the valley has a relatively small geographical footprint, it has left a huge industrial legacy, one that produced the technologies and inventions that have shaped the modern world.

Many of the streams and channels were harnessed from the eleventh century to form transport routes and millstreams to provide water power for the flour mills. Development accelerated when the Navigation Improvement Act was passed in 1425, followed by a further Act of 1571 which encouraged the use of the river as a major transport route. During this period, the Lee Navigation Canal – 42 miles long – was created to speed up the progress of the boats.

At Old Ford, close to the earliest main crossing place between London and Essex, the area was surrounded by marshy flood plain. Two canals were cut across the marsh in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. These were the Hackney Cut, a two-mile-long canal

with two single locks built in the 1770s to bypass part of the River Lea, and the Hertford Union Canal, opened in 1830 between Hackney Cut and the Regent’s Canal. The Old Ford locks, a pair of locks that allowed boats to move in two directions at the same time, were built in 1865. The Lea and the canals around Old Ford are navigable waterways with associated banks, towpaths and walls, many of which are now protected.



Old Bow Bridge with George Hodgson’s Bow Brewery to the right, with smoking chimneys

HACKNEY WICK TO TRINITY BUOY WHARF

Throughout the nineteenth century the excellent waterways were used to transport goods, predominantly timber; many timber merchants and saw millers built their premises close to the canal at Hackney Wick and Old Ford. The area became one of intense noisy, smelly activity where factories produced toxic and chemical products to supply London and the rest of the world: paint, varnish, printing ink, oil, gum, resins, soap and glue were all made in works lining the canals.

Not all the buildings were industrial. In the 1850s the North London Railway Line arrived in Hackney Wick, and from 1878 the Gas, Light and Coke Company laid out a small factory town with streets lined with terraced houses, factories and a school. The housing has gone but some of the warehouses, stables and industrial buildings remain today within the Fish Island Conservation Area. This protected area – called Fish Island because the streets were named after freshwater fish: Smeed, Dace, Monier, Bream and Roach – is now an artistic and creative hub, with artists' workshops accommodated in the former factories whose workers once processed rubber or made cardboard boxes.

South of the Olympic Park a handsome group of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tide mills are located at Three Mills. The mills produced flour for the bakers of London, gin for the taverns and bacon for the Royal Navy. Further south is the Bromley-by-Bow gas plant, the site of the gunpowder rocket factory of William Congreve II who provided rockets that were fired by the British on the Americans in 1812. Where the Lea meets the Thames are two important sites. On the west bank is the lighthouse of the Trinity



Three Mills at Bromley-by-Bow with the House Mill (1776, listed grade I) and the miller's house in the centre, and the Clock Mill (1817, listed grade II)



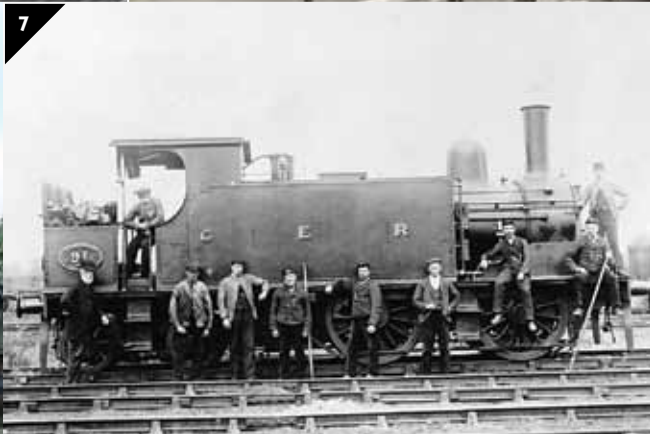
HMS Warrior built in 1860 at the Thames Ironworks

Buoy Wharf where, in 1852, the eminent scientist Michael Faraday oversaw the first experiments to illuminate the lighthouse by electricity. On the east bank, the Thames Ironworks was located, which, in 1860, built the HMS *Warrior*, the world's first seagoing ironclad battle cruiser. The Thames Ironworks later built the HMS *Thunderer* in 1911, which fought in the battle of Jutland during the First World War.

SITES OF HISTORIC INTEREST

Surrounding, and sometimes buried beneath, the Olympic Park are sites of special historic interest. Many are industrial in nature, places where factories produced goods which have had an impact on our modern world: porcelain, matches, locomotive engines, plastic and petrol. Sporting history was made in the area to the north of the Olympic Park at Leyton, where many leading post-war athletes competed.

- 1** In 1859 Eugene Carless set up a business as a distiller and refiner of mineral oils in Hackney Wick. In the 1860s, in partnership with William Blagden, Carless and his company began to refine British shale oil and coal tar for use in lamps. When the partnership dissolved in 1870 Carless turned to refining the newly imported American crude oil and became the leading distiller in Britain. By 1872 new partners entered the business and the name changed to Carless, Capel and Leonard. The company perfected its refining techniques and the petroleum spirit that Carless, Capel and Leonard finally provided for the burgeoning motor car industry was given the trade name 'petrol'. This photograph c 1950 shows the Carless truck being loaded with petrol cans at the Hackney Wick works.
- 2** At Hackney Wick George Spill founded a waterproof cloth factory, managed by his brother Daniel. Here waterproof goods were produced, including ground sheets and capes, which were supplied to the troops during the Crimean War. In 1862 Daniel Spill visited the International Exhibition at Kensington and became interested in a material called 'Parkesine', an early form of plastic invented by Alexander Parkes (1813-1890). Spill agreed in 1864 to manufacture Parkesine at the Hackney Wick factory in Wallis Road, producing a range of products from the new material such as pens, knife handles, combs and buttons.
- 3** A plaque on a wall in Wallis Road, Hackney Wick commemorates the site of the invention of 'Parkesine', at the Parkesine Works in 1866.
- 4** Just west of the Olympic Park stand the surviving buildings of the Bryant and May match factory built in 1861 (listed grade II). In 1888 women workers suffered long hours and low wages while handling toxic phosphorous which caused their bones to deteriorate and their teeth to fall out. A female socialist and activist, Annie Besant, drew attention to their plight, which provoked a strike by the 700 women matchmakers. Such was the public sympathy for their stance that the company conceded to every demand of the strikers.
- 5** The former sports ground and running track of the Eton Manor Athletic Club, Leyton, c 1955. After the post-war Olympic Games at Wembley in 1948, the athletics track was taken up and transported to Leyton where it was re-laid. Roger Bannister, who ran the record-breaking four-minute mile in July 1954, and Chris Brasher, who won gold for Britain in the 3,000 meters steeplechase at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, competed here.
- 6** London in the mid-nineteenth century was not the healthiest place to live. In 1854 there were almost 20,000 deaths from cholera caused by raw sewage contaminating the capital's drinking water. Following the 'Great Stink' of 1858, when the stench of the River Thames carrying the sewage upstream alerted Members of Parliament to the problem, the civil engineer Joseph Bazalgette designed and built a pioneering sewage system with a network of sewers and pumping stations across London to deal with the foul water. Abbey Mills, one of the ornate pumping stations built in the late 1860s, is situated at the south-eastern end of the Olympic Park. It is listed grade II*.
- 7** Near Stratford Town Centre, close to where the International Station now stands, stood the Great Eastern Railway Works, established in the 1840s to build railway engines, including the Decapod (0-10-0). The engine could attain a speed of 30 miles per hour in 30 seconds from a standing start pulling a train weighing 300 tons. This late nineteenth-century photograph shows James Holden, supervisor of the Great Eastern Railway Works at Stratford, with workers.



PEOPLE, BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY

From the mid-nineteenth century, many industries that were originally established closer to the centre of London moved to the outer edges of the East End of London where land and rents were lower than other parts of the city, and spacious sites available on which to set up the sort of business that was not compatible with operating in a residential area – tanning, textile production, printing and furniture making.

A hundred years later, the area around Hackney Wick and Stratford proved attractive to local East Enders and immigrants arriving in post-war London and wishing to set up small businesses such as scrap yards, light industrial manufacturing, textile production and food processing. On the eve of the development of the Olympic Park, photographers Marion Davies and Debra Rapp captured pictures of the activities which portray the hard work and entrepreneurial spirit of the diverse business communities in the Lower Lea Valley, many of which have closed or relocated.

A Tracey Manning, working men's café, East End Centre, 2006

Tracey provided breakfast to the local workers beginning at 4 a.m every day for 13 years. She and her colleagues wished to continue serving food on the Olympic site but failed to win a contract.

B Messrs Singh, Directors, Lucky Wholesale Company, 2007

The Singh brothers sold toys and party gifts for 40 years. They started the business in Southall soon after their arrival from Delhi in 1955, before moving out to Stratford. Just before the start of development of the Olympic Park, the brothers took early retirement.

C Jenny Man, Chinese food van, Pentaluck forecourt, 2006

Jenny provided Chinese meals for the night workers at Pentaluck Food store, who shipped vegetables from Spitalfields Market. Many of the specialist food companies around the site of the Olympic Park moved to Leyton.

D Kenney Tingey, cabinet maker: fitting a bow end to a hall table, Priest Brothers, 2006

Priest Brothers, established in Bethnal Green by Ronald Priest in 1950, specialises in making and selling fine traditional English furniture. The factory moved to Stratford where they employed 20 skilled

craftsmen. The family-run business has now relocated to Chelmsford in Essex.

E Tony Geere, Jyotindra Patel, Scott Cullen: stock takers, Tyrone Textiles Ltd, 2006

Tyrone Textiles Ltd is a family business founded in 1978. The firm specialises in manufacturing and distributing home furnishings, especially lace and voile curtains. In Stratford for 19 years, the company has now relocated to Enfield.

F Seamstress, Panache Outerwear Ltd, 2006

Panache was one of the many clothing manufacturers in the area. Using traditional techniques and over 20 specialised machines that replicate hand-processing, this company makes products for the couture market. The company have moved to Bow.

G Javed Iqbal, Kalandar Japanese Used Car Parts, 2007

Kalandar was one of the many car repair sites in the Lower Lea Valley and was full of second-hand car parts. Pictured here in the last days of Kalandar's operation, Javed sold his business to JJ Autos Ltd and returned to Pakistan.

H Preparing next season's Burberry coats, Panache Outerwear Ltd, 2006

All photographs © Marion Davies and Debra Rapp





Maureen Dyson wins the 100 yards hurdles at Eton Manor Athletics Ground, 1951



An Eton Manor athlete competing in the long jump c1955

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Acknowledgements

Text: Susie Barson, Dr Jim Lewis

Photographs: Damian Grady, Derek Kendall, Marion Davies, Debra Rapp

Editors: Dr Robin Taylor and Sarah Enticknap, English Heritage Publishing

Map: James Gulliver Hancock

Design and production: Ledgard Jepson

Archival images: Newham Heritage and Archives; Bishopsgate Library, Bishopsgate Institute; Vestry House Museum, London Borough of Waltham Forest; London Borough of Hackney Archives; Petrochem Carless Limited

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