



At the Heart of
Hackney since 1967

THE HACKNEY SOCIETY

Hackney Walks No 12
A Hackney Society Publication
Horticultural Clapton

Duration
1½ hours
Distance
2 miles

Buses:
253, 254
Train:
Clapton



1 Springfield Park

Springfield Park is a Grade II listed park, and its location on high ground sloping down to the River Lea provides fine views over Walthamstow Marshes and the Lee Valley Regional Park. It has a wide variety of habitats including woodland, meadowland, orchard and natural springs from which the park derives its name. It boasts a remarkable range of mature trees. As well as native British species, including the rare Native Black Poplar, it has varieties of trees from across the world as well as relics of prehistoric times such as the Ginkgo Biloba and the Dawn Redwood or Fossil Tree.

The Park's 15 hectares were formed from the grounds of three private houses of which only Grade II listed Springfield House (otherwise known as White Lodge) has survived and now serves as a cafe and exhibition space for the work of local artists.

When the land was put up for sale in 1902, a local campaign successfully lobbied the municipal authority to acquire the land for a public park which was opened in 1905. Designed by the Chief Officer of the London County Council (LCC) Parks Department J.J. Sexby, the Park combined landscaped parkland and formal gardens with recreational facilities such as a bowling green and boating lake. Today the Park also incorporates an urban market garden run by social enterprise Growing Communities which grows produce for a community fruit and veg box scheme. An application to English Heritage for funds to make improvements to the Park and restore it to its former glory is being made by Hackney Council.

2 Clapton Common

Clapton Common is a remnant of the medieval common land formerly known as Broad Common. Because it is rare that this ancient common has survived in an inner city borough, Clapton Common was designated a Conservation Area by LB Hackney in 1969.

During the 18th and 19th centuries the original Broad Common was reduced in size as sections were given over to residential

This walk follows the route of a medieval thoroughfare through Upper and Lower Clapton and looks at the area's fascinating horticultural history down the centuries. The walk starts at the beautifully landscaped parkland of Springfield Park and ends at Sutton House, Hackney's oldest domestic building, where sculptor and landscape designer Daniel Lobb has created a garden for the 21st century.



Springfield Park © Monica Blake

and highway development. Following a public petition in 1872, what remained of the Common was protected from development in perpetuity and its maintenance passed first to the LCC and then to LB Hackney.

In the latter half of the 18th century residences for city merchants and bankers began to be built around the Common. Craven Lodge, at the northern edge of the Common, was the most imposing residence. Dating from the 1820s, it stood on the 70-acre estate of merchant John Craven surrounded by extensive pleasure grounds laid out in the style of Humphrey Repton and Capability Brown, with lakes, bridges and a folly tower. Remarkably the folly tower survived the break-up of the estate in the 1880s and can still be found at the rear of 130 Clapton Common. Now completely covered in creeper, it is Grade II listed.

In 1833 the area had its own Horticultural Society and by 1850 there were almost 300 members who gathered for three shows each summer in the grounds of Craven Lodge or at the house of Josiah Wilson on Stamford Hill. The Montefiore family, who also had a residence at Stamford Hill, gave support to such local initiatives, and Nathan Montefiore is quoted as saying that he was always glad to see both Jews and Christians join together in a flower show as flowers 'taught a lesson to many, by blooming equally surely in the houses of men of all creeds'.

Charles Dickens mentioned the gardens of Clapton and Stamford Hill in *Sketches by Boz*: 'If the regular city man who leaves Lloyds at five o'clock and drives home to Hackney, Clapton, Stamford Hill or elsewhere can be said to have a daily recreation beyond his dinner, it is his garden. He never does anything to it with his own hands



Clapton Common c.1903 © Hackney Archives

but he takes a great deal of delight in it notwithstanding, and if you are desirous of paying your attention to his youngest daughter, be sure to be in raptures over every flower and shrub it contains.'

Throughout the 20th century the houses of the gentry in their large garden plots were almost all replaced by large blocks of public housing built by the LCC and Hackney Council. This continues until the present day, with 98 Clapton Common, one of only two surviving detached Georgian houses overlooking the Common, demolished by its owners in 2014. At the end of the 19th century the house was acquired by Frederick Janson Hanbury of the pharmaceuticals company Allen and Hanbury. Hanbury was a renowned botanist in his own right with a large collection of plants. He created a fine example of a Victorian rock garden while living at Clapton Common which featured in contemporary gardening journals. Hanbury authored a number of scholarly works including the *London Catalogue of British Plants* (published 1895) and *Flora of Kent* (published 1899).

Two areas classified as London Squares lie within the Clapton Common Conservation Area, protected under The London Squares Preservation Act of 1931. They are the grassed enclosures in front of Clapton Terrace and Buccleuch House.

3 The ancient Cedar of Lebanon

The Cedar of Lebanon tree at the junction of Upper Clapton Road and Springfield was a mature tree when Nelson won the battle of Trafalgar. It was part of the



Sir Hugh Low

garden of Cedar Lodge which achieved notoriety when it became the residence of the Reverend John Smyth-Pigott, leader of the Agapemonite sect who built the church in Rookwood Road to the north of Clapton Common. In 1956 the poet John Betjeman visited Clapton to view the deserted Agapemonite Church and wrote in *The Spectator*: 'With a son of Smyth-Pigott I went to find where his father had lived. Only a cedar tree remained.'

4 Low & Company Nursery

Low & Company was a leading English nursery specialising in orchids and other tropical plants. Established in the early 19th century by Scots horticulturalist John Bain Mackay, the company was taken over by its foreman and propagator Hugh Low in 1831 and continued at the Clapton site until it relocated to Enfield in the 1880s. The nursery supplied the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew with seeds and cuttings and was in regular correspondence with Kew's Director Sir William Hooker.

A number of celebrated Victorian plant hunters were employed by the company to source exotic plants. They included William Baxter, James Anderson and Friedrich Carl Lehmann. Hugh Low's eldest son, also named Hugh, spent two years assisting his father at Clapton before embarking upon an expedition to collect plants for the nursery in 1844.

The young Hugh travelled extensively in north Borneo and he was probably the first person to collect orchids in Sarawak, surviving encounters with pirates and headhunters along the way. In 1847 he returned to England where his book *Sarawak; Its Inhabitants and Productions* was published in 1848. The book was the first comprehensive survey of the natural history and ethnology of the Sarawak region and served as a standard work of reference for half a century. However Hugh's plant-collecting



Cedar of Lebanon tree, Upper Clapton Road, 1904 © Hackney Archives

expeditions for the Clapton nursery ended when he embarked upon a career in colonial administration, although in 1851 he made the first successful attempt on the summit of Mount Kinabalu in northeast Borneo where he collected many interesting and extraordinary plants, including the magnificent carnivorous pitcher plants, one species of which is named after him.

Low's nursery, with its four acres devoted to green and hot houses and ranges of glass houses, each about a hundred feet in length, was at the forefront of horticultural development in East London and was described in *The Gardeners' Magazine* as a 'plant manufactory'.

When Low's nursery was established at the beginning of the 19th century Clapton still retained much of its original rural character. By the 1860s, although there was still evidence of the former agricultural and market garden economy, the north of Millfields had been given over to brick earth extraction. This was normally a prelude to building development in that it left the land in such poor condition that it could not revert to agriculture. And so it proved, with a rapid increase in residential development in the period 1870 to the end of the century, driven by the coming of the railway and a regular horse-tram service.

5 Owen C Greenwood and other gardening enterprises

As the Victorian era progressed, establishments catering for Clapton's gentlemen gardeners in their suburban villas were much in evidence. Owen C Greenwood's florists and garden contractors at 27



Owen C Greenwood horse-drawn delivery van c.1910 © Hackney Archives



Brooke House gardens c. 1920-30 © Hackney Archives



Giant Hogweed in the Gaviller Garden 1912 © Hackney Archives

Upper Clapton Road had a large fountain as its centrepiece and a display of tall and exotic ferns. Greenwood's was a flourishing business which not only catered for local events such as weddings and funerals but supplied flowers to London theatres. The firm's horse-drawn delivery vehicle pulled by two immaculately groomed horses was a common sight in and around Clapton. When Owen C Greenwood died in 1936 the business was taken over by his son Stanley Fielder Greenwood.

In 1865 tulips were a speciality of a nursery run by James Batten in Brook Street (renamed Northwold Road). Brook Street was also the site of an establishment run by Mr George Curry whose garden furniture and baskets were featured in the book *Rustic Adornments for Homes of Taste* by Victorian gardening writer and journalist Shirley Hibberd who lived in nearby Stoke Newington. In Hibberd's bestselling book published in 1856 he was lavish in his praise of Mr Curry's skills:

'Mr Curry's rustic chairs and baskets are as superior from the majority of such productions as might be expected from one whose hobby and passion is ferngrowing and who devotes much enthusiasm to the stocking of stumps and baskets with rare and beautiful plants, as he does to the mere carpentry of their formation. His rustic arbours and bark houses are of admirable designs and he fits up bark baskets and tree stumps in a manner most tasteful and bewitching.'

6 Brooke House

On the site now occupied by B6 College once stood a large aristocratic residence built around two courtyards with an oak-panelled gallery some 174 feet long, a private chapel decorated with wall paintings, and surrounded by extensive gardens and orchards with dovecots, stables, barns for the storage of corn and a brewhouse. The first known occupant of the house was the Earl of Northumberland but it is thought that the house dated from the last quarter of the 15th century. In January 1535 the house was passed by Northumberland to King Henry VIII and became known as King's Place. Following the death of King Henry in 1547, the house passed through the hands of various members of the gentry, including Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford to whom some attribute the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. On purchase of the property by Fulke Greville, 1st Baron Brooke, in 1621 it became known as Brooke House. The extensive gardens of Brooke House were visited by celebrated diarists Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn. Evelyn wrote in his diary on 8 May 1654 'I went to see Lady Brook's garden which was one of the neatest and most celebrated in England'. The visit by Pepys took place on June 25 1666. His diary entry recorded that it was in the Brooke House garden that he first saw oranges growing and he 'pulled off a little one by stealth and ate it'.

The house ceased to be an aristocratic residence in 1677 and in the 18th century it became a 'receptacle for insane persons'. The building continued as an asylum until 1940 but, following bomb damage during World War II, it was demolished by Hackney Council in 1954.

7 J Haws Watering Can Factory

On the right hand side of the road is the former Clapton Cinematograph Theatre built in 1910 adjacent to Grade II listed St James's Church. Next to the Church is the site of the former J Haws watering can factory, since developed as a block of flats. In 1886 retired colonial civil servant John Haws obtained a patent for the design of his watering pot. His claim was that

'this new invention forms a Watering Pot that is much easier to carry, and tip and at the same time being much cleaner and more adapted for use than any other put before the public'.

While working in the Colonial Service in Mauritius, Haws' hobby of growing vanilla plants had brought to his attention the deficiencies of the French style of watering cans, with their continuous front to back handles. On his return to England he set about designing a better watering can and in 1886 he opened a factory at 227 Lower Clapton Road. London was expanding rapidly, and on the outskirts of the metropolis the Lee Valley was developing into a centre for large nurseries with extensive glasshouses to feed the capital's population. There was, therefore, an increasing need for watering pots, or watering cans as they came to be known, which could be easily used for watering plants on greenhouse shelves and benches, and for perforated roses for the watering of small plants, delicate seedlings and newly sown seeds. In 1911 the Haws can was awarded the Royal Horticultural Society's Banksian Medal. The



Pond House garden, 1880 © Hackney Archives



Breaker's Yard Garden, Sutton House © Clare Matheson

company continues to flourish from a factory in the West Midlands and the essential features of Haws' design have remained unchanged to the present day.

8 Clapton Pond and Pond House

On the left hand side of the road are the gardens of Clapton Pond. Clapton Pond is said to have been dug in the early 1600s during the reign of King James I for the purpose of a domestic water supply and watering hole for livestock and horses. The Pond was used as a reservoir during the 18th century but by the late 19th century had become neglected and there was a plan to drain it and fill it in. However on being acquired by Hackney Vestry in 1898 it was converted into public gardens, and re-landscaped with flower beds and new trees to a pattern which largely survives to the present day. The cluster of historic buildings around Clapton Pond makes up the Clapton Pond Conservation Area and includes the 17th-century Bishop Wood Almshouses, two fine Georgian town houses and Pond House.

Pond House dates from the beginning of the 19th century when Clapton was a fashionable place of residence for city merchants and bankers. The building is considered to be one of the finest examples of late Georgian domestic architecture in Hackney and has a Grade II* listing. During the course of the 20th century Pond House suffered such neglect that it was placed on English Heritage's Heritage at Risk register. Following acquisition by One Housing Group at the beginning of the 21st century, many of its original features have been

restored, including the elegant bow windows to the withdrawing room overlooking the gardens to the rear of the house. In 1809 the garden was much more extensive than it is today. It had a wall of fruit trees which ran for 640ft and a melon ground, seed house and tool house. Two cows were kept in the grounds to the rear which provided milk for the residents. However the garden was much reduced when Mildenhall Road was built at the end of the 19th century.

9 The Gaviller Garden

Brothers Augustine and William Gaviller lived at 183 Lower Clapton Road at the beginning of the 20th century. The Gaviller family had a long association with the sugar-refining business and the occupation of Augustine Gaviller was listed as West India Merchant. His brother William was a keen gardener and shortly before his death in 1912 he commissioned a professional photographer to record the garden and the principal rooms of the house. These are the earliest colour photographs of any Hackney subject in existence.

The photographs of the Gaviller garden demonstrate an enthusiasm for exotic plants, including the Giant Hogweed. Although an impressive sight when fully grown, Giant Hogweed is invasive and potentially harmful as chemicals in the sap can cause skin blistering and permanent scarring. It is thought that that the Gavillers' fondness for this plant may have resulted in its eventual migration to the banks of the River Lea.

10 Sutton House and the Breaker's Yard Garden

Built in 1535 by Sir Ralph Sadleir, a prominent courtier and diplomat in the time of Henry VIII, Sutton House retains much

of the atmosphere of a Tudor home, despite later alterations to accommodate Huguenot silk weavers, boarding schools, a church institute and a trade union. Left vacant in the early 1980s, the house was squatted, but following an energetic campaign by local residents the house was restored by the National Trust and opened to the public in 1994.

What was formerly the site of a car breaker's yard at the side of Sutton House has been converted by sculptor and landscape designer Daniel Lobb, in collaboration with the children's learning initiative the House of Fairy Tales, into a garden for the 21st century. Converted recycled vehicles provide a focus for the garden and plant pots, tables and stools are made from tyres; small trees sprout from tractor wheels and a two-storey caravan called The Grange is the centrepiece of the garden. Its interior miniaturises the décor of a historic stately home, with a Grecian bust, mirrors, chandelier and fireplace. The ceiling frame is made from Victorian plasterwork found in a salvage yard and there is an oak-carved family crest obtained from a car boot sale.

Details of Sutton House's opening hours can be found at <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-house/>



J Haws Watering Can

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Photographs courtesy of Monica Blake, Hackney Archives and Clare Matheson

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The Hackney Society is the borough's civic and amenity society. For further information log on to www.hackneysociety.org, email info@hackneysociety.org, or write to us at The Round Chapel, 1d Glenarm Road, London E5 0LY.

Other walks are available in the series.

Generously funded by Discover Hackney.



www.hackneysociety.org