



At the Heart of  
Hackney since 1967

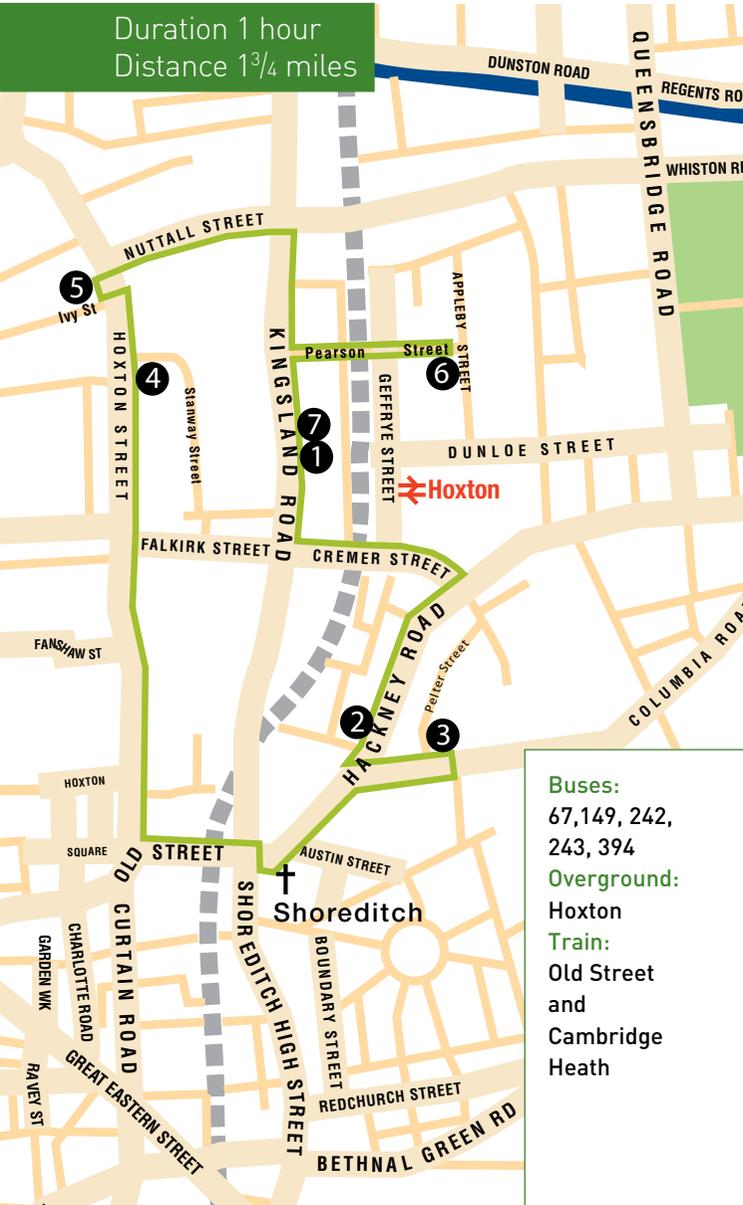
THE HACKNEY SOCIETY

## Hackney Walks No 11

A Hackney Society Publication

# Horticultural Hoxton

Duration 1 hour  
Distance 1¾ miles



**Hackney is rich in horticultural history, with its good soil and proximity to the City of London. Horticultural history, however, has one big drawback, especially in cities: it disappears under bricks and mortar. It also enjoys a great advantage, for it can be recreated with living plants.**

This walk will take the garden historian around places that were horticulturally important, ending with gardens that flourish today, to show how fashions have changed through the centuries, and demonstrate the ingenuity of city gardeners.

### 1 The Geffrye Museum

The museum is housed in a group of almshouses built in 1714 by the Ironmongers' Company with a bequest from Sir Robert Geffrye, former Master of the Company and Lord Mayor of London. When Sir Robert made his bequest, Hoxton was an area of open fields and nursery gardens, with a few private residences and charitable institutions strung out along the route northwards from the City, now the Kingsland Road. An idea of what the area looked like is given by the survey undertaken by Chassereau and published in 1745.

### 2 Hackney Road Recreation Ground

Walk along Cremer Street to Hackney Road, and turn right to reach a small patch of open ground dominated by plane trees. This was once part of the burial ground of St Leonard's Church, Shoreditch, and just inside the railings is the tomb of Thomas Fairchild.

Fairchild was one of London's most celebrated nurserymen of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, who crossed a carnation with its cousin, the Sweet William, to create the first artificial hybrid. He called this phenomenon Fairchild's Mule, as it was barren. Given the strict hierarchical nature of 18<sup>th</sup>-century society, when a paper was presented about the Mule to the Royal Society, Fairchild was allowed to attend, but as a working man and thus not eligible to be a member, he had to have his paper read out by another. At his death in 1729, Fairchild asked for his body to be buried in the part of the burial ground reserved for the poor, leaving various charitable bequests including the annual sum of £25 to St Leonard's for the preaching of a sermon on 'the wonderful works of God in the creation'. He may have chosen this particular subject as some would suggest that the creation of Fairchild's Mule was tampering with God's works.



The Ironmongers' Almshouses from an 18th-century engraving  
© Hackney Archives

### 3 Columbia Road

Cross the Hackney Road and turn left into Columbia Road. A few yards on the left, by the nursery school, are some very ornate gates. These are the only remains of Columbia Market, built by the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts in the 1860s to provide a food market to serve an area that had become desperately overcrowded. Nearby was the Old Nichol, one of London's most notorious rookeries. The market proved a failure because traders preferred to sell outdoors and their customers, many of them Jewish immigrants, wanted to buy on a Sunday, which the Baroness would not permit. It was replaced by a much more modest venture, a street flower market that began on a Saturday but moved to Sunday enabling Covent Garden and Spitalfields traders to sell their leftover stock.

Thomas Fairchild's tomb © Monica Blake



Columbia Flower Market is now a huge attraction but also attests to the East Enders' traditional love of flowers. Across the road can be seen Leopold Buildings, a model Victorian block of flats originally provided for 'the industrious poor' with spacious balconies and window boxes.

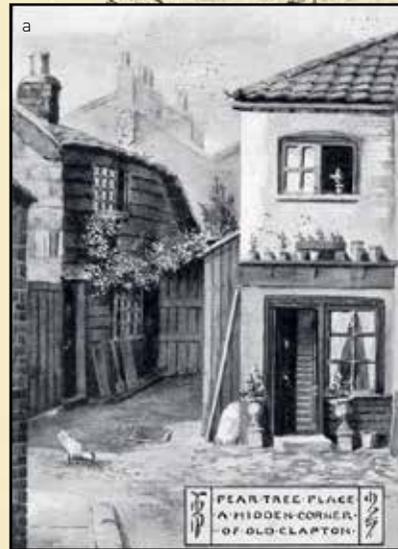
#### 4 Hoxton Gardens

Walk up to St Leonard's Church, cross Kingsland Road into Old Street and turn right into Hoxton Street. This was the 'high street' of Hoxton, and retains some of its village feel. Hoxton Garden is to be found on your right, just south of Stanway Street. This is a rare piece of open space, run for the community by the Hoxton Trust, with a clock tower as its central feature. In earlier centuries, this would have been an area of pleasure gardens, providing a welcome break from the overcrowded streets of the City. A tract published in 1598, *Newes from Hogsdon*, invites 'Have at thee, then, my merrie boys, and hey for Old Ben Pimlico's nut-browne'. Ben's garden, in which he served his ale, stood on Pimlico's Path, an earlier name for Hoxton Street: he subsequently decamped to Westminster, where the district of Pimlico is named after him. In the later 17th century, tea gardens became fashionable.

#### 5 Hoxton's Nursery Gardens

At the top of Hoxton Street, turn left into Ivy Lane. Imagination will be required to recreate the area in the 17th and early 18th centuries, when this was a horticultural hub, although there is a hint in the name of Hoxton Garden School. Here in the 17th century were the adjoining nurseries of James Ricketts, William Darby and George Pearson.

Detail from Chasserau's *Survey of Shoreditch*, 1745 © Hackney Archives  
 a. Window gardening in a 1930 line drawing of Pear Tree Place, Hackney, by Florence Bagust © Hackney Archives  
 b. The frontispiece to Thomas Fairchild's *City Gardener*, 1721





Engraving of Balmes House, showing its elaborate 17th-century gardens



St Mary's Secret Garden



The Tudor knot garden under construction © Geffrye Museum

In a 'Good Gardens Guide' compiled by J. Gibson in 1691, we get some details of these. Ricketts had the largest, 'abundantly stocked with all manner of flowers, fruit-trees, and other garden plants, with lime trees ... and for a sale garden, he has a very good greenhouse, and well filled with fresh greens, besides which he has another room very full of greens in pots'. Darby had a much smaller garden, but grew unusual greens that he over-wintered in greenhouses of his own making.

Thomas Fairchild leased a piece of land here in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and this is probably featured in the frontispiece to his *City Gardener* published in 1721. A path between flower beds leads to a gate flanked by stoves for tender exotics. In the foreground are tubs containing an agave, banana, dwarf palm and cactus. The book was intended to advise customers of the trees, shrubs and flowers suitable for London gardens, bearing in mind that the atmosphere was even then polluted by smoke from burning sea coal.

Gibson gives us an interesting insight into the ways of nurserymen, for he advises that Ricketts sold his plants the dearest and did not take due care to have his plants prove well, for which he lost custom. Pearson on the other hand was moderate in his prices, and accounted very honest in his dealing, 'which gets him much chapmanry'.

Pearson specialised in cultivating anemones, a florists' flower. Florists at this period were not

retailers of cut flowers, but enthusiasts who developed and exhibited pot-grown plants. They particularly liked flowers that were streaked or striped: the tulip is the most famous example of such blooms, but still-life paintings of the time show striped anemones. Pearson claimed he had the best in London, and sold them only to gentlemen. Darby kept a folio paper book in which he pasted the leaves and flowers of almost all manner of plants, which made for more accurate identification than the woodcuts reproduced in herbals.

If visitors looked northwards from these nurseries, they might have caught a glimpse of Balmes House, formerly the residence of Sir George Whitmore, a Lord Mayor of London. His grand formal gardens are shown in a contemporary engraving. The diarist Samuel Pepys describes walking up through the fields to the house in May 1668 before enjoying supper in Islington. No doubt the gardens with their box hedges and clipped phillyreas (striped privets) were provided by the neighbourhood nurserymen. The end for the mansion came with the building of Regent's Canal: the site of the house is now part of the De Beauvoir estate, while the intervening areas were filled with workshops and warehouses for the furniture trade that became such an important element of Victorian Hoxton.

## 6 St Mary's Secret Garden

Return to Kingsland Road and cross into Pearson Street, which may have been named after nurseryman George Pearson. At the corner of Pearson Street and Appleby Street is St Mary's Secret

Garden. This was begun in 1986 when local volunteers started to clear a disused green space and to engage with local community and disabled groups, using horticulture as therapy. In 2006 the garden took on the name of the church nearby that had been demolished after bomb damage in the Second World War.

Inner city gardeners have over the centuries found ways of cultivating plants even if they do not have their own plots. Window gardening, as seen in Leopold Buildings in Columbia Road, was one way of doing this. A modern alternative is communal gardening, as at St Mary's Secret Garden, which includes a woodland plot, food-growing areas, herbaceous borders, a herb and sensory garden, and the Golden Company's honey bees.

**The garden is open Monday to Friday, from 9.00am to 5.00pm.**

## 7 Geffrye Museum

Return to the Geffrye Museum to visit the recreated historic gardens, which can be reached by taking the path to the left of the almshouses. **These gardens are open from the beginning of April to the end of October, Tuesday to Saturday, from 10.00am to 5.00pm.**

At the end of the path is the walled herb garden, a reminder of the importance that herbs played in daily life through the centuries. Nicholas Culpeper, the radical apothecary who wrote a herbal that was first



The auricula theatre in the Georgian garden © Geffrye Museum (right Berties' 'Royal Sportsman' Auricula)



published in 1652 and is still in print, would have cultivated many of the herbs featured here at his home in Spitalfields. His principal focus was plants to make up into medicines, remedies and ointments. Housewives, too, at this period would have grown herbs to treat their families and livestock, but also used them for cooking, dyeing, cosmetics and general household use. Thus, for instance, sweet-smelling meadow wort was strewn on the floor, while wormwood was put amongst clothes to deter moths and fleas. The garden is laid out to show these different applications, including plants that we do not immediately think of as medicinal, such as the Madonna Lily.

The Elizabethan garden to the right of the walled herb garden also has some herbs growing in raised beds. Two features of more sophisticated gardens of the period are the knot garden and an arbour or herber. The Elizabethans loved complex patterns, in geometric shapes, or sometimes in the form of a heraldic animal. The knot garden at the Geffrye, planted with santolina and hedge germander, is based on the pattern of a wooden panel of an early 17<sup>th</sup>-century cupboard in the museum's collection. The arbour has a framework of hazel, over which roses clamber in the summer. It provided welcome shade from the sun, and Shakespeare



The greenhouse in the Victorian garden © Geffrye Museum

makes clear it was a useful place for people to hide to overhear conversations: in *Much Ado About Nothing*, he has Beatrice lured to an arbour to learn of Benedict's thoughts.

The Georgian garden is also formal, but in a different style; more vertical with box clipped into various shapes, like the mock privets on offer in the nurseries of Hoxton. Against the rear wall of the almshouses is an auricula theatre, based on the design of one made for Lady Salisbury at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire. The auricula, an alpine cousin to the primula, was adopted as a florists' flower in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and prized for its double-flowered and striped forms. An 'auricula revolution' took place in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century as a result of a break in the flower, producing a clear green edge to the petals with a central ring of meal or paste.

Auriculas can cope with a cool, moist climate, but the flowers are easily spoilt by rain, hence the theatre to protect the plants from the weather, as well as to show these dramatic flowers to best effect. Their flowering season is mid-April to mid-May, so that they are preceded at the Geffrye by a display of polyanthus and followed by pelargoniums and pinks.

The Victorian garden contains a delightful greenhouse, based on one shown in a painting in the museum. The Butters family was so proud of its garden at 49 King Edward's Road in Hackney that they had themselves painted in it by the artist Pieter Cornelius Dommersen in 1876. Walter Butters was a builder who made a fortune building new houses in the rapidly

expanding suburb of Hackney. His garden reflects the prosperity of his business, but records show that even modest backyards in Hackney often sported little greenhouses, built by the owners making use of their practical skills.

Another feature of the museum's recreated Victorian garden is the round beds set into the lawns, and they too appear in the Butters painting. In spring these beds are planted in delicate pinks and mauves, but in summer they display the Victorian love for a 'blaze of colour', with pelargoniums, lobelia, cinnerarias, and canna lilies. Modest gardens were usually long and narrow, so round beds would be difficult to achieve, but ribbon planting flanking the path was very much the fashion.

The final historic garden is Edwardian, reflecting the influence of Gertrude Jekyll. In some ways it is much less formal than the Victorian carpet beds. The planting forms patches of colour, with the pastels that were so admired in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the pergola, where wisteria flourishes in late spring, has a faint echo of the Tudor arbour.

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Photographs courtesy of Monica Blake, Geffrye Museum and Hackney Archives

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The Hackney Society is the borough's civic and amenity society.

For further information log on to [www.hackneysociety.org](http://www.hackneysociety.org), email [info@hackneysociety.org](mailto:info@hackneysociety.org), or write to us at The Round Chapel, 1d Glenarm Road, London E5 0LY.

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