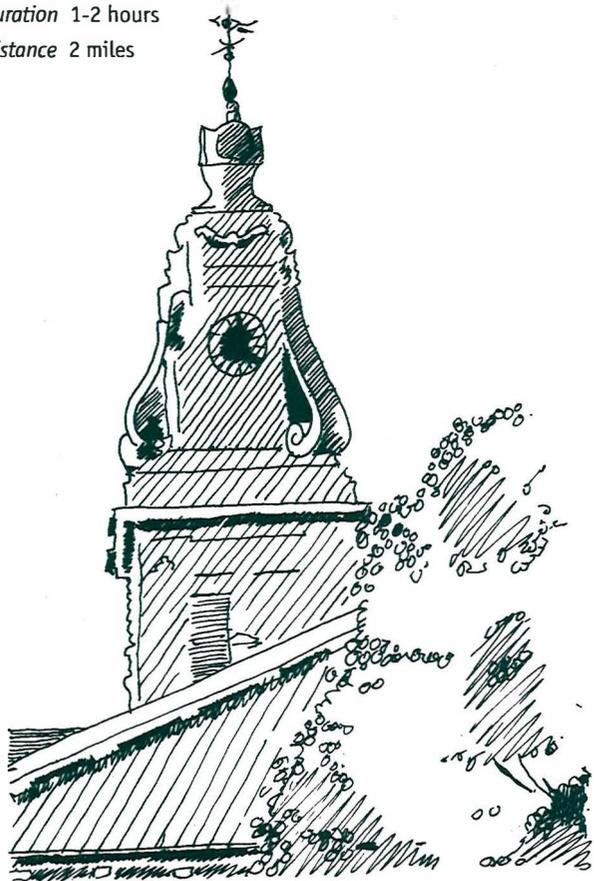


# Central Hackney and Victoria Park

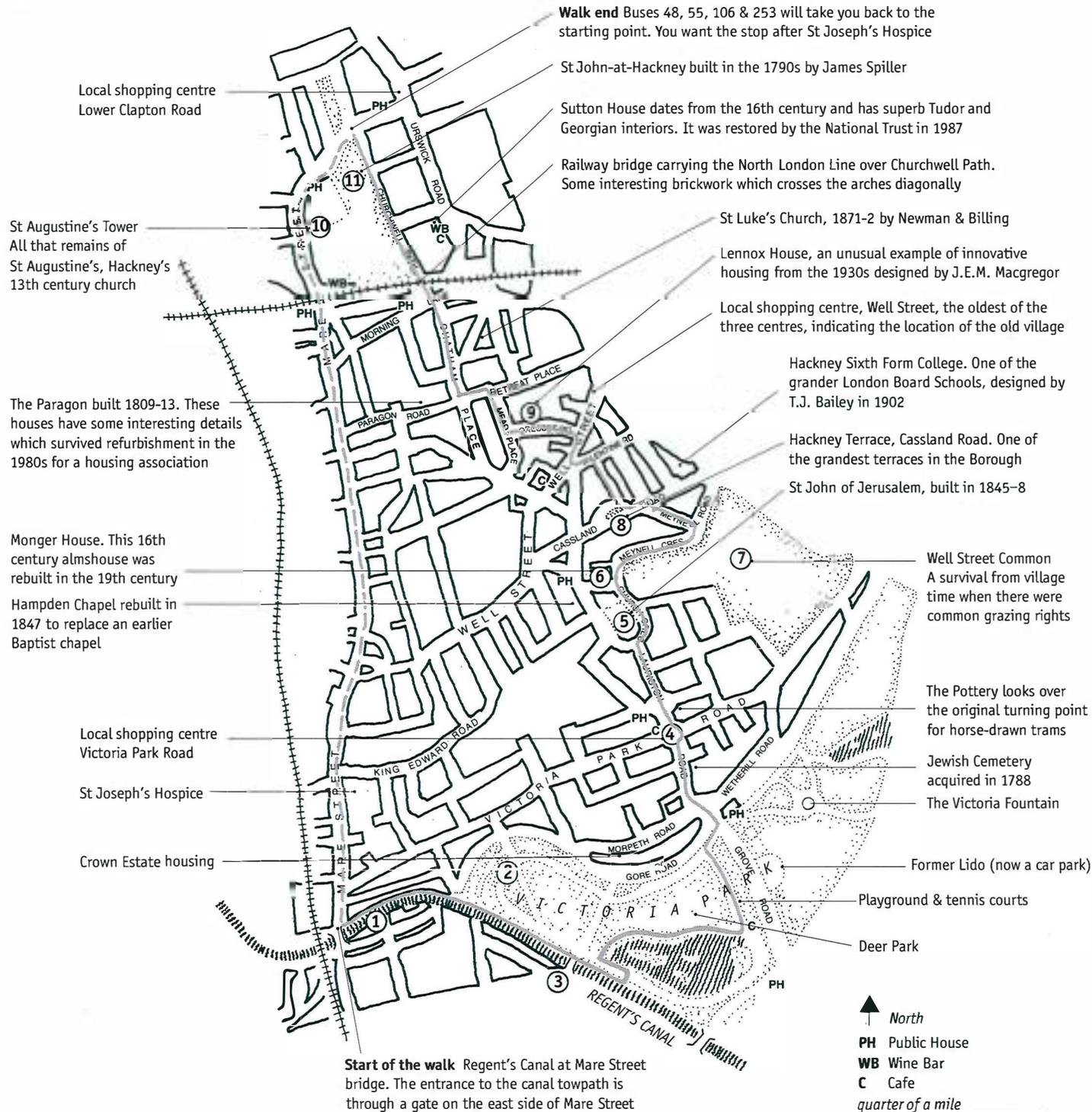
Duration 1-2 hours

Distance 2 miles



This walk takes you through an interesting and varied cross-section of Hackney.

You start on the Regent's Canal towpath, enjoy Victoria Park, pass through an area with a wealth of variety and interest, and end up in the heart of the old village of Hackney near the Church of St John-at-Hackney. If you wish, you can then take a bus back to your starting point on Mare Street.



The maiden voyage along the full length of the **Regent's Canal [1]** was made on 1 August 1820 by the City State Barge 'in a style of magnificence that has scarcely ever been witnessed before'. On board were John Nash, Lord Macclesfield, with the Committee and principal dignitaries. This was probably the high point in the canal's history.

The idea for the canal had been promoted some eighteen years before by Thomas Homer, who saw the possibilities of linking the fast-growing London Docks with the newly-opened terminal to the Grand Union Canal at Paddington. At that time, the route passed mainly through open country. However, not much happened until Homer introduced the idea to John Nash, who was working on his plans for Regent's Park. He understood how the canal could be an asset to the Park, and thought that it would be a financial success. He brought the project to fruition by putting money into it himself. The first sod was turned in October 1812.

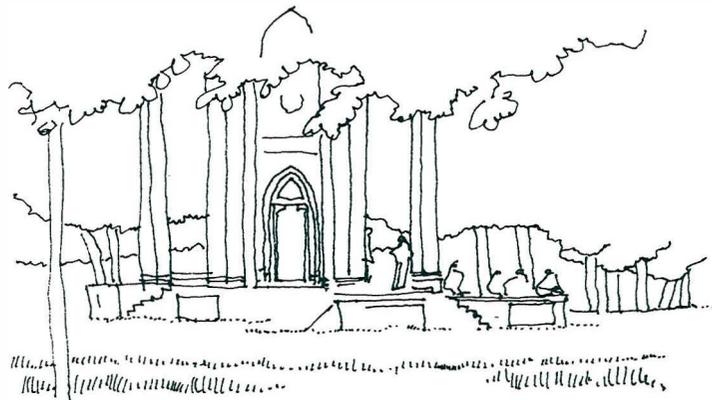
Traffic did use the canal after the much delayed opening, but the company was usually in financial difficulties, and Nash failed to make a fortune from his investment. Then along came the railways, which threatened transport by canal. However, we can be thankful that the Regent's Canal Railway Company, which later proposed buying up the canal and constructing a railway along the length of it, failed to raise sufficient funds. The canal link between Regent's Park and Victoria Park is a reminder of the historical connection between these famous open spaces.

During the early 19th century there was a great desire to create more public parks in urban locations. This led to the development of Regent's Park and others at Primrose Hill, Battersea and Kennington, and in other cities. In June 1840, with Chartism very much in the air, a petition containing 30,000 signatures was presented to Queen Victoria calling for the creation of a 'Park in the East End of London'. One of the reasons given was that it would be 'likely to diminish the annual deaths by many thousands'. The following year, the government agreed to the proposals to create **Victoria Park [2]** which was to become 'the first park specifically intended for the Poor in any capital city'. The man chiefly responsible



Victoria Park

for the Park's creation was James Pennethorne (1801-71), Architect to the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, the 19th-century predecessor to today's Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. He proposed two sites to the Commissioners; his preference was for an undulating site near Bow Common with views of the Thames and Blackheath, but for reasons of economy, the Commissioners chose a more northerly site at Bonners Fields. The 237-acre site, shaped roughly like a wellington boot, lay in the angle between the Regent's Canal and a cut which linked it to the River Lea. It was crossed by a lane (Grove Road) linking Hackney to the Mile End Road. The site contained market gardens, grave-diggings, brick pits and a few impoverished hamlets, and necessitated purchasing land from twelve freeholders. In theory this should have been relatively straightforward, but in fact compensation claims dragged on for years. He declared the chosen site to be 'dead flat without variation of any kind, except excavations



The Victoria Fountain, Victoria Park

for clay and gravel'. As Sir John Summerson wrote in *Georgian London*, 'Pennethorne's design for the lay-out and approaches were massacred with sadistic parsimony' by the Board of Supervisors. This was the first time the government had funded the creation of a public park, and it did not want a dangerous precedent to be set. The government raised funds by selling off York House on the edge of Green Park (now known as Lancaster House), which was surplus to requirements. Thus, raising taxes was avoided.

Pennethorne's vision included building grand terraces around the Park, echoing those around Regent's Park. Surrounding land was purchased with the intention of leasing large sites for fashionable villas to developers. The income from them was to fund the maintenance of the Park. Unfortunately there were very few takers, as sufficient potential residents could not be wooed from central and west London to live in the Hackney/Bethnal Green area. The neat rows of curved terraces which were eventually built were very much a second best, and it took far longer for them to be developed than Pennethorne had anticipated.

The Park was opened without ceremony in 1845. A handsome Superintendent's Lodge (destroyed in World War II) stood near **Bonner Hall Bridge [3]** over the canal. Near the bridge are two large marble dogs which were presented to the LCC in 1912 by Lady Regnart, copies of a Greek sculpture called the Dogs of Alcibiades. Two bathing lakes were created and used daily until 1934, then a Lido was opened in 1936. (This has since been closed and its site is now used as a car park!)

Socially and aesthetically, Victoria Park was a great success, and may be compared with other great urban parks such as Brooklyn



Entrance to Victoria Park at Bonner Hall Bridge

Park in New York in layout and feel. The Park is now managed by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

The area north of the Park and the Canal was laid out in the 1850s to 70s by speculative builders in a piecemeal fashion. (This period was the time when Hackney's population increased most rapidly, from 38,000 in 1861, to 125,000 by 1871!) The Crown bought some of the land in this area for the Park housing development, and the rest belonged mainly to two charities – Sir John Cass's Charity and St Thomas's Hospital – and one family, that of Henry Handley Norris, who was also rector of South Hackney. There are some significant features, such as the railway and the post-war housing estates, but apart from these, changes have been gradual, with a block of building here and a house or two there. The walk offers opportunities to consider the process of change from the green fields of only two hundred years ago to today's townscape.

Coming out of the Park along Grove Road you reach the first of three small shopping centres [4] encountered on the walk. These offer some clues to the geography of the original village centres of the area. This one radiates out from the roundabout on Victoria Park Road. Do not miss the incongruous addition to the North West quadrant, which must have been added when the Liberty

building behind Regent's Street was all the rage. Just beyond is a curiously large crossing of minor roads where trams, originally horse drawn, used to turn round. The pottery, a coach house, was occupied for a while by the Metropolitan Tramway Company, possibly as a rest room for drivers and conductors.

Church Crescent contains some interesting three-storey, semi-detached



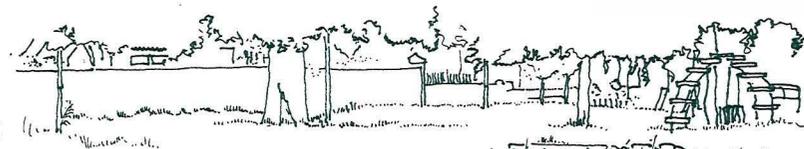
*New Council Housing, Church Crescent*



*The West Porch, St John at Jerusalem*

villas in modern movement style by Colquhoun and Miller (1981–4). The spire of **St John of Jerusalem** [5] is now in front of you. It makes a good landmark and indeed it was used as a marker by the Luftwaffe as they flew in towards London across the marshes to the east. The original spire was demolished towards the end of the war by a rocket which exploded prematurely in mid-air. The present green copper-covered spire, by Cachemaille-Day, was lowered into place by helicopter. The church was designed by E.C. Hakewill (also architect of St James, Lower Clapton Road) and built in 1845–8 on land owned by the rector of the church, Henry Handley Norris, who oversaw its construction. On his death in 1850 he was buried in the churchyard, where his tombstone can still be seen. The stone used is Kentish rag with Speldhurst stone dressings. Like the stone, most of the names of the roads around the church come from villages around Tunbridge Wells in Kent and were chosen by the rector's son, Henry Norris.

Before turning right across Well Street Common, you will see **Monger House** [6]. Henry Monger's bequest of 1669 provided for six



*Well Street Common*

almshouses and an annuity for six poor men over sixty years of age. The original building dates from 1670, and was rebuilt in 1847 incorporating some of the original stonework.

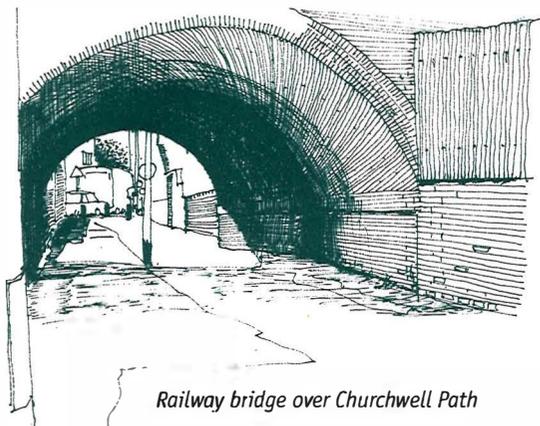
Meynell Gardens were built in 1932–3 by A. Savill. Very Hampstead Garden Suburb! As you turn the corner from Meynell Crescent into Meynell Road, note the plaque on the end house bearing the date 1894.

**Well Street Common** [7] is one of the old stretches of Lamas-land which have survived in the Borough. Lamas-land was private land available for common use after Lamas (1 August) until the following spring.

It is a shame that **Cassland Road** [8] carries such heavy traffic, for opposite the Crescent, it contains one of the grandest terraces in the Borough, originally known as Hackney Terrace. In contrast to the rather severe north elevation which faces the road, it has some delightful curved rooms on its south-facing garden side. Originally the houses had not only private gardens, but also a communal pleasure ground behind opening onto Well Street Common. Note the fine pediment which contains the date of building, 1792, Coade stone garlands and coats of arms – those of the three building developers, including their architect, William Fellowes. This development was organised along the lines of a building society with subscribers (a very early example).

**Lennox House** [9], in Cresset Road, is an unusual example of experimental pre-war public housing of 1937. It was one of the most successful designs by J.E.M. Macgregor, who later became Professor of Architecture at Cambridge University. He expressed his aim as being 'a building composed of many separate homes, each having as much fresh air and light as possible, and a real substitute for the

garden or yard ... together with a sense of privacy'. The original idea was that the volume of building beneath the stepped flats should be used as a



*Railway bridge over Churchwell Path*

covered market, the income from which was to subsidise the rents for the flats above. The ziggurat design with private balconies conceals an innovative reinforced concrete structure. Note the plaque on the side of the building featuring a sculpture of the Virgin Mary with child, and the inscription 'The Bethnal Green and East London Housing Association Limited'. Also look out for a handsome warehouse in Collent Road by James Taylor, built in 1893. As you walk along Mead Place, look to the left, where you may catch a glimpse of the New Gravel Pit burial ground behind a corrugated iron hoarding.

When you turn into Chatham Place, note the world-famous Burberry factory on the left-hand side, built in 1932. Before crossing Morning Lane, look at the factory building on the right hand side. This building incorporates the Old Gravel Pit Meeting House, a Unitarian (nonconformist) chapel established in the early 18th century. Note the blue plaque on the side of the building facing Morning Lane commemorating Joseph Priestley (1733-1804): 'Scientist, Philosopher and Theologian ... Minister to the Gravel Pit meeting here in 1793-1794'.

All that remains of the old Parish Church of St Augustine's is **The Tower** [10]. The church was built in the late 13th century, probably by the Knights Templar, an order of military monks who owned land in Hackney. By the 18th century the church had become too small for the growing population of Hackney, and the structure was in bad repair.

It seems that the level of the main floor had risen about four feet as a result of the large number of bodies buried beneath it. All except the Tower was demolished when the new church, St John-at-Hackney, was completed. Among the owners of the 'Church Field' which was purchased as a site for the new church, are two names still familiar in Hackney, Richard Benyon and Peter Beauvoir.



*Side entrance to St John-at-Hackney*

Walking up Churchwell Path towards **St John-at-Hackney** [11], especially in winter with the bulk of the church looming through the trees, can give an unexpected sense of the atmosphere of old village Hackney. The church is rather grand, as are many of the tombs in the adjacent churchyard. St John's was built in the 1790s to the design of James Spiller. Originally there was to have been a spire. The ionic porches and rather curious tower were added in 1812 by Robert Streater, but it was not until 1854, after the structure of the tower had been reinforced, that the bells could finally be moved from the old tower.



*The graveyard, St John-at-Hackney*

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