**Woodberry Down and the Stoke Newington Reservoirs**

**The New River**

The New River was constructed from 1609-13, an unprecedented enterprise to bring fresh water from the countryside to London which by the early 17th century was already a metropolis of some 150,000 people and chronically short of clean water. The enterprise was carried out by the New River Company and half the capital was provided by King James I. The water came from Amwell near Ware in Herts = a spring where the chalk hills slope down to the River Lea. To this day, there is a plaque at this site (a beautiful place and well worth a visit) which commences:

Amwell perpetual be they stream,

Nor e’er thy spring be less,

Which thousands drink who never dream,

Whence flows the boon they bless

Unfortunately the spring dried up permanently in the 18th century! A second source was established at Chadwell spring (just north of Ware) which also subsequently dried up. A more reliable source of water was established in the 18th century by extracting water from the River Lea between Ware and Hertford. An Act of Parliament allowed abstraction of 22½ million gallons daily (a source of bitter consternation to the local millers). The New Gauge – a device to regulate the intake can still be seen - a trip to the 3 sources of the New River makes a splendid day out. Subsequently, boreholes were tapped into aquifers beneath the chalk north of London to augment the flow.

The head of the River was by Sadlers Wells in Islington – still called New River Head – and water was conveyed by gravity to households in an area ranging from Soho to the City through pipes consisting of hollowed out elm logs. The pipes leaked prodigiously and were replaced by cast iron pipes in the early 19th century. Charges were high (the New River Company was fabulously profitable) and supply was intermittent and unreliable – Charles Dickens was one of the many London residents who complained about it.

The flow of the river was ensured entirely through gravity. The distance from Amwell to New River Head as the crow flies is under 20 miles but the river flowed in a series of meanders around the western tributaries of the River Lea so as to follow the contours and maintain a constant drop of just 5½ inches per mile. These meanders were later cut off by a series of aqueducts and tunnels.

**Stoke Newington Reservoirs**

The Stoke Newington Reservoirs were constructed in 1831-3 as a storage facility. The banks were lined at higher levels with stones taken from Old London Bridge, then in the course of demolition. A pumping house – of which the remains can be seen adjacent to East Reservoir next to Lordship Road – lifted the water out of these storage reservoirs for conveyance on to New River Head. It was later used as a chlorination plant and is now known as “The Gas House” and is listed Grade 2.

It was at this time, 1831, that London suffered its first cholera epidemic with further outbreaks in 1848-9 and 1853-4. Originally thought to be caused by London’s bad air, the link with polluted water was increasingly suspected and proved by a London doctor, John Snow, in 1854. Furthermore, as London spread northwards from the early 19th century the New River itself was increasingly polluted and bathing in the river was an increasing nuisance. In 1852 the Metropolis Water Act was passed requiring all supplies of drinking water to the capital to be filtrated. The New River Company acquired land to the west of Green Lanes for the construction of filter beds. At the same time, the Company’s engineer William Chadwell Mylne (note the middle name) constructed the enormous baronial pumping house. This housed six steam engines which pumped water from the treatment works to covered storage reservoirs (still existing) at Dartmouth Park and Hornsey. The Stoke Newington works became the operational terminus of the New River after the section to New River head was closed off in 1946. A fragment of this section survives in Clissold Park.

**The Closure of the Stoke Newington Treatment works and the saving of the Reservoirs**

In the 1980s, Thames Water started constructing its Ring Main, a kind of M25 of the water system to connect its various treatment works in the Thames and Lea valleys. TW said that the lower part of the New River and the Stoke Newington reservoirs and works would become redundant and that the reservoirs would become insalubrious once no longer refreshed by the flow of the River. It put up proposals (or to be precise various proposals) including a retail park on the filter bed site and partial development of the reservoirs for housing. This was opposed locally by the Save the Reservoirs Group and more widely by the New River Action Group, concerned to maintain the New River itself. It is hard to guess what the result of this stand off would have been in today’s hardnosed days but the outcome was broadly satisfactory – the Reservoirs were preserved – the West Reservoir as a sailing centre and the East as a nature reserve. The filter beds went to housing – at a low density (the increase of London’s population was not then widely foreseen) but horribly unimaginative. Perhaps in retrospect a denser and pizzazzier scheme would have been preferable?

Mylne’s engine house was listed Grade 2\* in 1972 – by then the steam pumps had been long superseded. It comes as no surprise that this decision was protested by the Metropolitan Water Board (the pre-privatisation predecessor of Thames Water) whose Clerk described it as “an expensive lavatory for local pigeons” and as a potential “menace to passing traffic”. It is now – of course – a much-loved climbing centre.

**The** **Reservoirs Today**

West Reservoir was made over to Hackney Council and is no longer an operational site. It is leased to Greenwich Leisure who operate the water sports activities. There is no public access to the water except for water sports.

Following the public outcry, Thames Water maintained the New River with a much reduced flow and the East Reservoir remains an operational reservoir, the water being pumped to Thames Water’s treatment works at Coppermill in Walthamstow. The site is maintained for nature conservation by London Wildlife Trust. The reservoirs and the New River are classified as being of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation, favoured by wintering ducks such as tufted duck, shovellers and gadwall and with reed beds occupied by reed warblers and (very occasionally) the elusive bittern.

There is a long term project led by London Wildlife Trust to manage the reservoirs, Woodberry Wetlands, for conservation and improved public access including the possible restoration of the Gas House.

**Woodberry Down**

**Development in the 19th century**

The current redevelopment of Woodberry Down will be the third transformation of this area over the space of some 150 years.

The first occurred in the 1860s. A London map of 1863 shows the area still as open country albeit there were already villas on the east side of Green Lanes and the south side of Woodberry Down, , with long gardens extending down to the West Reservoir. The area around Manor House was engulfed by the advancing wave of suburbia from the 1870s – Seven Sisters Road was built up with substantial Victorian villas, not as grand as Woodberry Down but very respectable. !930s photos suggest the houses were similar to these still surviving on the north side of Amherst Park. Woodberry Grove itself was an island of super gentility. My mother recalls (this must be from about 1930) going for a tea in a gorgeous house of a friend whose (Jewish) family owned the Sun Maid raisin business – probably typical of the inhabitants at this time.

By the 1930s, Seven Sisters Road was losing its social cachet with some of its houses falling into multi-occupation. But it puts matters in perspective to observe that there were just 185 houses on the area earmarked for compulsory purchase for the Woodberry Down Estate, a number that increased to about 1980 in the LCC development and 4600 (and rising) in the development scheme now replacing it.

**Redevelopment by the London County Council**

The Woodberry Down estate was the brainchild of Herbert Morrison, Labour leader of the LCC which was looking for sites to provide housing for respectable working class families displaced by slum clearance in the inner city. The LCC had already engaged in large scale development on the edge of London, such as the Becontree estate which provided 25,000 homes by 1935, but was anxious to identify sites closer to the homes of those being displaced and therefore less disruptive of community life. The scheme was fiercely opposed by the (then) Conservative council of Stoke Newington and local residents. A newspaper article complained (anticipating Lady Porter) that in the place of existing residents “come people who will make Morrison even more secure in his County Hall office”. The local ratepayers complained that the estate would result in destruction of “one of the delightfulest residential districts in the whole of London” and that “the introduction of 12,000 to 15,000 persons of the poorer working classes from other boroughs would detrimentally affect the whole of this small borough”.

The scheme was approved by the LCC in 1936 but construction was delayed by the war and took place over the years 1946 to 1962. The pattern of building, favoured in Germany but previously unusual in Britain, was a series of parallel blocks running at right angles to the road intended to introduce plenty of light and air. Most of the earlier blocks are very recognisably based on pre-war LCC designs but with some post war features such as the use of horizontal concrete banding for decorative effect. The regular pattern and uniformity of the blocks created a rather regimented effect. As the estate was being built in the 1950s, its design concept was already being outflanked by more progressive estates constructed by Hackney Council, such as Wilton Estate and Frederick Gibberd’s Somerford Estate, with a wider mix of housing types and form and construction materials.

Four of the first blocks (which are soon to be demolished) were built to eight stories and constructed (due to the post war shortage of steel and bricks) in rendered concrete, very reminiscent of public housing in East Berlin. Construction of family homes to 8 stories was unprecedented and highly controversial. Also unprecedented was the installation of lifts in public housing going from ground to fifth floor.

It is interesting to compare and contrast Woodberry Down, with the LCCs Stamford Hill estate, built before the war but conceived only a few years earlier. Stamford Hill is much tighter and more enclosed and with a marked lack of communal facilities. Woodberry Down was intended to be different: lighter, airier, more spacious and – above all – served by amenities which would create a socially integrated community.

Thus, as part of the estate there were a primary and secondary school. The latter opened in 1955 as one of the first comprehensives, soon to be over-subscribed and by the early 1960s 80% of the pupils continued to 6th form and half to higher education. It has since been demolished.

The Junior school, opened in 1950, still stands and is listed Grade 2. It is the earliest surviving post war school designed by the LCC. It contains a number of artworks salvaged from the Festival of Britain.

Additionally there were shops, a library, pub, a noted health centre (with dental and foot clinics and a specialist child guidance centre), a community clubhouse and children’s playgrounds. The health centre, now called the John Scott health centre, is also listed Grade 2.

The estate had a notably low turnover of tenants in the early years. But inevitably sense of community dissipated as the first cohort of tenants gradually dispersed and the allocation of social housing shifted increasingly to families who were homeless or in greatest need.

**Woodberry Park – the Face of the Future?**

Which bring us to the new Woodberry Down – re-christened Woodberry Park by its developers, Berkeley Homes – and focus of this walk.

The bare facts about this development are summarised in my *Spaces* article. The numbers quoted keep changing but in broad terms about 2,000 social homes are being replaced by about 4,600 homes. However, this number is quite likely to rise. Consultation is taking place on revisions to the Woodberry Down Masterplan and the developers, Berkeley Homes, have expressed a desire for higher densities (which will inevitably mean some lowering of design standards).

Social housing units are being replaced one for one – a programme of rolling decant with all displaced tenants eligible for a home in the new scheme. Social housing will reduce from 100% to just over 40% in the new scheme.

The development will take place over more than 20 years extending till about 2030. The first phases are being concentrated on the frontages to the West and East Reservoirs – there being an understandable intention to create the signature of the development (and the selling price point of homes) by reference to the high environmental and design standards of the first phases. To date 441 existing properties have been demolished and 854 houses have been completed, made up of 421 social rented, 153 shared ownership and 298 homes for sale.

There are sharply divided opinions about this project with many postings on the internet to the effect that the new Woodberry Down is an unnecessary destruction of a working class community, a plot to gentrify the area, and as clear a piece of social engineering as Herbert Morrison’s scheme in the 1930s. It is not absolutely necessary to take one or other side in this debate – both have some points!

***Beyond Economic Repair?***

A report commissioned by Hackney Council in 2002 concluded that the majority of the blocks in the old estate were beyond economic repair due to, inter alia, disrepair of the drainage system; ground movement and subsidence; widespread presence of asbestos; the poor condition of many balconies and the poor thermal performance of the metal windows. These conclusions have been questioned by critics of the redevelopment scheme.

***Planned Gentrification?***

Both sides have solid arguments on this point. Hackney Council can fairly argue that a mixed scheme was the only way to finance development; that no one currently living in Woodberry Down is being forced out; that exceptional measures have been taken to involve the existing community in the redevelopment scheme and that – finally – the new scheme provides better public facilities – and notably a new comprehensive school (the old Woodberry Down secondary school closed in 1981) than what went before. Critics will argue that – be that as it may – the decision to redevelop clearly will result (and possibly is intended to result) in the area being dominated by the incoming property-owning middle classes – a demographic which the present leadership of Hackney Council is keen to embrace.

***Gain is the name of the Game***

Make no mistake - housing gain is back at the centre of the agenda. London is expected to have 1¼ million more inhabitants by 2030 and recent population statistics suggest that even this may be an underestimate. The London Plan set statutory targets for every London Borough. Hackney’s current target is 1085 houses per annum and this target is sure to be raised. Hackney is keen to be seen as a “can do” borough that equals or exceeds its target and for some audiences parades Woodberry Down as an exemplar of a private/public partnership which delivers a sizeable housing gain whilst replacing social housing at (it is said) the end of its economic life.

***A sense of community***

The Woodberry Down development goes as far as anyone could reasonably hope, in these straitened times, to seek to create a community and not just hutches to file away office workers at night (compare and contrast the dreadful “Hale Village” in Tottenham Hale). Our walk incorporates the commendable Robin Redmond Community Centre and the new Skinners Academy. The design of the estate incorporates shops, play space, streets for people, waterside areas to linger and congregate. This is all work in progress and the outcome is hard to predict – Woodberry Down is handy for the underground but remote from centres, such as Stoke Newington – that have a clear sense of place. It is an interstice between “places”, being built in an era when the sense of community has never been weaker. It will be well indeed if the outcome can measure up to the hype and the expectations.

***A template for the future?***

The scale of the ambition for Woodberry Down is absolutely predicated on the scale of the project. It requires a pretty large development, by any standards, to incorporate its own secondary school! In brief, it is unlikely that a development on this scale will occur any time in the foreseeable future.

***Can we do density well?***

If London is going to have 15% more people in 20 years time, we are going to have to live with much greater density of development. Most of the increment in housing planned in Hackney is likely to be achieved by building upwards in already densely populated centres such as Dalston and Shoreditch. Woodberry Down represents a different model which obviously incorporates high rise elements but with a far superior ambition in terms of urban design. Whether you approve or not, it is unlikely to be improved upon in Hackney anytime soon.