

# Hackney: portrait of a community 1967 - 2017



'Of all the outskirts of London, the borough of Hackney is to me the most interesting and the least considered'  
Sir John Betjeman, 1979

'The north-eastern corner of the borough, Clapton, is ... down the rabbit-hole wrong ... . The press dubbed the area "Murder Mile"  
Crap Towns II, 2004



'Contemporary Hackney has become a place of complex cultural and religious integration'  
Tony Travers, 2015



A turret barometer, the only one in England, on St Mark's Church, Dalston 1983. (Photo Alan Denney)

This book has been very much a communal effort. First, thanks to all the contributors of the pieces that have made it such a singular production. Thanks, too, to Jane Leaver, June Harben and the Holborn Studios for their generous donations. And last, but not least, to members of the Hackney Society and their friends who have walked, sponsored and quizzed in aid of this project.

**Hackney:**  
portrait of a community  
1967-2017

Edited by Laurie Elks



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The Hackney Society promotes the highest standards in design and protects Hackney's unique heritage. The Society has encouraged positive development of the borough's built and natural environments, through engagement with a broad cross-section of local people and experts. We encourage exemplary new design, regeneration and conservation of our rich heritage through our newsletter, *Spaces*, our publications (see p.238), walks, talks, meetings, website and social media.

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Ridley Road market stall, 1980. (Photo Neil Martinson)

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In the 1960s and '70s, the Hackney Gazette every week carried up to 12 pages of advertisements for employment in the clothing trade.



## Introduction

Ten years ago, to mark its 40th birthday, the Hackney Society published *Modern, Restored, Forgotten, Ignored* – a commemoration and a celebration by 40 authors of 40 of the borough's most important buildings. This was the most ambitious publishing project undertaken by the Society which has been publishing excellent books about Hackney and its historic environment since the 1970s. One of our members, Steve Szytko, suggested that on our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary we could go one better by bringing out a book commemorating the 50 extraordinary years of Hackney's history since we set up shop in 1967; 50 stories, 50 authors, one framing event for each year. It has been a great privilege to have been asked to commission these stories.

I never doubted that I could persuade 50 excellent writers to bring this project to fruition. The borough is rich in people committed to social and environmental causes: intelligent, indomitable, energetic, contrary, idealistic. To turn the epigram of W.B. Yeats on its head, it might be said of Hackney that the worst lack all conviction whilst the best are full of passionate intensity. This book is full of the testimonies of people who have lived in Hackney, stayed in Hackney, fought to make it a better place. Whatever the rights and wrongs of gentrification (of which there is much, possibly too much, in this book), I hope that this fighting spirit will not die. I was very sorry that three doughty characters died as this book was being planned: Joe Lobenstein, whom I would have asked to write about the Conservative interlude in power; Brian Sedgemore, who spoke so eloquently about the conditions on Trowbridge Estate; and Roger Lansdown, who made the improvement of Hackney's public transport his lifetime ambition. They would have made magnificent contributions. But I was delighted to have first-hand testimonies from Chris Sills, Ken Worpole, Stuart Weir, Brian Belton, Geoff Taylor, Alan Rossiter and Julian Harrap of events forty or more years ago. This book is rich in personal memory.

The project has been logistically daunting and I was faced with a jigsaw of events and years, working out how to place each story in a different framing year. I did not, to be frank, scan the pages of the *Hackney Gazette* to find the most important events. We, my editorial colleagues and I, selected the events which we thought of greatest interest, and then worked out a year to assign to them. This seemed perfectly legitimate as the most significant events have run and run, weaving into the history of our place over the years. To give just one example, the stirring story of the restoration of the Hackney Empire started when the irrepressible, bloody-minded Socialist Roland Muldoon walked into the place in 1986, determined to rescue Frank Matcham's great theatre which had sunk to ignominious depths as a bingo hall. It ended, in a way, in 2004, when the restored Empire re-opened its doors having overcome the scepticism of the Arts 'fundariat' and obtained lottery funding. I asked Simon Thomsett, general manager of the Empire over many of those turbulent years, to frame this story around the appearance of Ralph Fiennes as Hamlet in 1995. He has responded magnificently, wrapping the longer story around that one framing event. And of course, the story of the Empire in all its magnificence remains very much alive to this day.

I beg readers' indulgence for the fact that, in a few cases, the connection between the story and the framing event is slightly tenuous but I hope that the logistical difficulties will be understood.

I met a woman recently who had returned to live in Hackney after spending 20 years away. I asked her for her thoughts and she replied “It’s exactly the same but totally different”. I demurred and said that in my opinion it was totally different but exactly the same! I will return to that thought in a moment but focus first on that ‘totally different’ question. How has Hackney changed? Or to put that matter emphatically: How Hackney has changed!

It is hard to know quite where to start with that question, but let us recall for a moment 1967, the year of the birth of the Hackney Society. The predominant change in the air at that time was the progressive elimination of the ageing Victorian housing stock – poorly maintained, rent-controlled, and overcrowded. In its stead, Hackney Council, aided and abetted by the GLC, provided housing: modern, spacious, and built to Parker Morris standards which far surpassed the space standards of most of today’s ‘luxury apartments’. Aspiring families put themselves on the waiting list and waited patiently till they reached the top of the queue. For those who could not wait, or looked further afield for their ambitions, there were new and expanding towns outside London and factories and offices were relocating. The population of Hackney fell by over 100,000 between 1931 and 1961 and by a further 18,000 between the censuses of 1961 and 1971. The tide of falling population was only to turn, unexpectedly, in the late 1980s.

The progressive municipalisation of the borough, its housing stock certainly, but also its life blood, was presided over by successive Labour councils; confident of their higher purpose, unassailed by doubt and seemingly in power for ever. There was an unexpected interlude when the Conservatives took power in 1968 as a result of a national backlash against the government of Harold Wilson. But three years later, Labour was back and it was business as usual. John Kotz, who was later to become leader of the council, wrote an unapologetic political memoir, *Vintage Red*. It captures the spirit of the council leadership at the time, as well as being unintentionally revealing of the poverty of its imagination. He proudly recounts how his first act, on returning to power in 1971, was to unearth the Red Flag which the Tories had stowed away during their term in office.

During the research for this book, I read the report of the inspector who had to rule in 1972 on the council’s plans to demolish and redevelop a large area of Mapledene, close to London Fields, now containing some of the borough’s most desirable real estate. What comes through is the council’s conviction that the waiting list would be cleared, everyone who wanted a council house would get one, and that the Victorian housing stock was doomed. The tenants would be working class and Labour-voting, and the political leadership would be drawn from their number. Indeed, Hackney’s political leaders up to the 1970s were predominantly council tenants.

The vision was paternalistic and, to be fair, Hackney was run as a tight ship with experienced councillors, effective management, low rents and rates. Services were mostly of a decent standard and included provisions, such as tea dances and holidays for the elderly, which have long since disappeared. But if the council was benevolent, it was also autocratic. Schemes for the decoration of its flats were dictated by the council, and tenants who fell into rent arrears were dealt with peremptorily without any enquiry into circumstances. No one was expected to argue and very few did.

I remember an inspiring Anglican vicar, John Pearce, telling me, not long after I arrived in Hackney in 1972, how dreadful it would be if the borough were to become

one vast council estate. The thought came as a revelation to me – young, naïve and left wing. The tide was to turn sooner than he or I imagined as the ground hollowed out under the council’s leadership in the 1970s. Government funds became tight after the oil crisis of 1973-4; national political sentiment was moving against the building of council housing even before Mrs Thatcher killed it off; housing priorities changed after the exposé of homelessness in *Cathy Come Home*, and estates were increasingly the home of the disadvantaged rather than the aspiring. The traditional economic base was also disappearing. Back in the 1960s and ‘70s, the *Hackney Gazette* regularly carried up to twelve pages advertising work in clothing factories as well as other kinds of manufacturing industry. All of this was to end as factories closed and skilled workers left the borough. Sean Gubbins’ article on the Simpson’s factory depicts a lost world of skilled, well-paid and secure manual work. All of this is clearer now than it was to the political leaders of the time, as John Kotz’s memoir vividly shows.

Then, too, there were the questions being posed by the awkward squad who were beginning to make their voices felt. Stuart Weir settled in Balls Pond Road in 1967 and he was to be a moving spirit in the fight to save De Beauvoir from the bulldozer. He was no friend of the Tories, but as his article on De Beauvoir – and Christopher Sills’ article on the Conservative interlude in power – reveal, the three-year intermission from Labour rule applied just sufficient brakes to the momentum of municipalisation to change the outcome. The saving of De Beauvoir proved to be a pivotal moment and, as John Finn’s article describes, the infant Hackney Society was to play its part in saving the borough’s most valuable physical fabric from destruction.

Things began to move also in the intellectual sphere. Ken Worpole, who moved to Hackney in 1969, describes the impulses which led to the establishment and flowering of Centerprise – bookshop, coffee shop, headquarters for a myriad of community organisations, a place to give voice to the creative spirit of people who had previously been silent. As Anna Harding’s article records, this was also the moment when artists started to arrive to take up space in redundant industrial buildings, creating Hackney’s status as London’s most beloved borough within the artist community. The pioneering community arts organisation, Free Form, set up shop close by in Dalston Lane, later helping to establish Chats Place in deepest Homerton, a celebrated home for community pantos, agitprop, cabaret, jazz and music hall.

Environmentalists started to make their presence felt in Hackney from the 1970s. In 1974, Stoke Newington residents formed the Save Abney Park Cemetery Committee which helped to persuade Hackney Council to buy the cemetery after its future was threatened by the bankruptcy of its owners. Five years later, Save the Marshes was launched by Hackney campaigners to rescue Walthamstow Marshes from gravel extraction. The determination and campaigning nous of this group led to total capitulation by the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and the preservation in perpetuity of the Marshes. A few years later, Save the Reservoirs launched a campaign to prevent the development of the reservoirs in Stoke Newington. Monica Blake, one of the members of this campaign, records how the battle continued over almost 20 years. The West Reservoir is now a sailing centre, whilst the East Reservoir has been restored as Woodberry Wetlands Nature Reserve. As Margaret Willes’ article on horticultural Hackney describes, the movement to make things grow in Hackney has often been counter-cultural, and it still is.

Political protest became more articulate. Hackney has for centuries enjoyed a reputation as a centre of radicalism. Back in the 1960s and '70s there was a small radical fringe, including a strong claimants' union movement. The so-called Angry Brigade, who sent letter bombs to loathed Tory politicians, was based at 359 Amhurst Road in Stoke Newington. But the radical fringe was small and political discourse was mostly relatively docile. Later, as Daniel Rachel observes, Hackney was to play a central role in the Rock Against Racism movement at a time when far-right politicians were targeting support from the white community of Hoxton and the East End, and the British National Party established its headquarters in Shoreditch. As Duncan Campbell describes, there was also forceful opposition on the part of the black community – supported by the political left – against the police, stirred by unexplained events at Stoke Newington police station. The infamous Sandringham Road 'front line', where distrusted police confronted rampant drug dealing, was a tangible expression of a tense and divided community. Political protest was to continue in the 1980s and '90s and beyond, both against the actions and policies of a dysfunctional and near-bankrupt Hackney Council, and against national policies such as Mrs Thatcher's detested poll tax.

Experimentation and innovation spilled out into the mainstream education sector, supported by staff of the permanently Socialist Inner London Education Authority. Geoff Taylor, who taught in the borough in those years, later becoming a Hackney Labour councillor, questions whether that was necessarily to the benefit of young people growing up here. That argument will run and run!

Politically, things were moving too. Stuart Weir, his communitarian instincts sharpened by the successful fight to save De Beauvoir, joined Hackney Council as a Labour member in 1974. He found the inflexibility and complacency of the leadership suffocating and gave up the struggle four years later. But the elections of 1978 and 1982 brought in more young radical councillors at a time when national politics were becoming increasingly polarised and Mrs Thatcher faced up to the so-called 'Loony Left'. The 'Left', though that term is disputed by John Kotz, took control of Hackney Council in 1982 when Anthony Kendall, who, significantly, had been a community worker at Centerprise, defeated John Kotz in the vote for the council leadership. The scope to improve the borough's destinies was certainly curtailed by the malevolence of Mrs Thatcher's government, but it cannot be denied that the inexperienced new leadership, or, to be precise, the dizzy succession of political leaders, substantially messed up, causing Hackney's financial and administrative affairs to fall into a precipitous decline from which it has taken many years to recover. Jim Cannon and Jessica Webb, past and present members of Hackney Council, tell that story.

The population of Hackney has been fast-changing. The Caribbean community was well established in Hackney by the time of our opening chapter in 1967, and there was already a sprinkling of other minorities including Turkish Cypriots, as described in Muttalip Unluer's article. The other large minority in the 1960s was Jewish; not the ultra-orthodox Chasidim, but a more secular and integrated community, most of whom later moved on to further-out suburbs. Instead, into Hackney moved several new minority groups. Vietnamese and Kurds have come to Hackney as a result of political disturbances at home. Linh Vu has told the story of the journey of Hackney's Vietnamese community. Rachel Kolsky's article describes how Chasidic Jews have gathered in Stamford Hill and

Upper Clapton. A fuller and more comprehensive history of Hackney would describe the different experiences and different opportunities of the many communities who make up Hackney today.

In editing this book, my notional reader has been not the Man on the Clapham Omnibus but the Man (or Woman) on Homerton Station. During the rush hour, eight trains pass each way and the platform rapidly fills up with the new generation of Homertonians, mostly on their way to work in Central London. My friend and neighbour Roger Lansdown fought with a tiny band of confederates to bring back trains to Hackney, an objective which included the restoration of a station at Homerton of which no trace, and little memory, then existed. When the trains finally returned to Homerton in 1985 they were ancient, carrying few passengers, with stations en route mostly unmanned and threatening. Before the days of Oyster cards, when I asked for a ticket to Homerton at London Transport offices, the response was always one of puzzlement followed by a search for the correct station code. A ticket-seller helped me – he said “Look, it’s 6979. You know what 69 is and just add 10 to that.” After that, I always asked for 6979 and it speeded things up considerably! Now most people know where Homerton is and the passenger movements are close on five million each year. I hope that if some of the men and women thronging the platform at Homerton read this book, they will understand better how things have changed in Hackney and how the enthusiasm and energy of campaigners have helped to change it.

But I will return to the theme of change and continuity. Perhaps now is the moment to mention the dreaded ‘H’ word. The word ‘hipster’, or one of its variants, appears at various places in this book. It is interesting (at any rate to me) that the word ‘yuppie’ appears not at all, though that was the term of choice for well-heeled incomers in the 1980s, a period recalled in Suzanne Waters’ article on the first post-war wave of private housebuilding. It is a moot point whether the change is mostly one of terminology and facial stubble, or whether it reflects a significant change in the identity of people choosing to make their home in Hackney.

Be that as it may, many of the articles touch in various ways on the impact of gentrification on Hackney: on its markets, its streets and its pubs among other things. Whilst I make no apology for the selection of the themes of these fifty chapters, I do feel that read alone, this book might give a slightly exaggerated sense of the changes that have taken place and, possibly, an over-optimistic view of the future. Just at a physical level on the streets, the greasy spoon cafés and old-fashioned boozers are still there alongside the gastronomic restaurants and hipster pubs. The estates are there amongst the renovated million-pound houses, mostly built to an enclosed design so that it is easy to pass them by without registering them. Your local Tesco, if you pause awhile, is full of people moving round slowly, filling up their day. As Ian Rathbone’s article makes clear, the too numerous betting shops are taking money from the community, whilst the money shops are lending it back at extortionate rates of interest.

I sometimes feel, and I am not the only one, that Hackney Council has an agenda to speed the process of gentrification on its way. This narrative lauds the new and the fashionable – the Fashion Hub, Broadway Market, Hip Hoxton, Victoria Park Village, the Olympic ‘Host Borough’, Shoreditch tech and so forth. Within this narrative there is a view that older institutions and facilities – Ridley Road Market, artists’ studios,

'underneath the arches' car repair shops and the like – must make way if they cannot match the rent that the incomers are able to pay. There is an element of economic reality in this. James Watson, who has written about Hackney's new wave of pubs and breweries, pointed out to me that the craft beer pubs attract a clientèle willing to pay £6 or more for their pint whilst the old-fashioned pubs are selling lager and keg bitter for £3 50. If your old-fashioned boozier gets a makeover, stripped floorboards and a bearded clientèle appearing seemingly from nowhere, there is probably not much that can be done to halt the juggernaut of progress. Nevertheless, whilst Hackney has a very mixed population, and that is not likely to change, the council must serve the needs of all the community. Ridley Road Market represents the past of Hackney but also, I very much hope, its future.

Hackney not only remains one of the most under-privileged boroughs in the country but also one full of unfulfilled human potential. Muttalip Unluer remarks how few in the Turkish communities go on to university, or find employment in the financial services industry on our doorstep. And Kirsty Styles, in a very penetrating article on Shoreditch's hi-tech boom, points out how little progress has been made towards enrolling the borough's young people in tech businesses.

That life is improving for many in Hackney is not in doubt. In 2010, Hackney was reckoned to be the second most deprived borough in the country. A range of measures summarising deprivation in local authorities indicates that Hackney was 'only' the eleventh most deprived five years later. As Annie Edge has described, the performance of our schools and colleges has dramatically improved over the space of a few years. A resilient economy and a well-performing education system offer greatly improved life-chances to our young people. But conversely, it is well to be wary of brute statistics. Indices of poverty and deprivation can be skewed by the arrival of wealthier young people who pull up the average without necessarily raising the position of those at the bottom of the pile. It is, or should be, common ground that a great deal has been achieved since Jules Pipe became mayor of Hackney in 2002 and initiated the turnaround in the borough's affairs, but a very great deal remains to be done.

And then there is the question of gangs. Julia Lafferty's article on Clapton's famed 'Murder Mile' emphasises that much of the mayhem was caused by imported internecine strife and turf wars between Yardie gangs hailing originally from Jamaica. Emma Bartholomew, in her article on the senseless death of Shaquille Smith, underlines the fact that gang conflict has become more pervasive and more juvenile. It is a fact that too many young people growing up in Hackney are enmeshed in drug dealing; knife-toting, admiring of false and empty rap idols. Many more, raised alongside the kids in gangs, live in a culture of fear which can be damaging to ambitions and educational attainment.

Where to place the riots of 2011 within this kaleidoscope is a moot question. The riots in Hackney received great attention, not because they were more intense than elsewhere, but because more journalists live in Hackney – or know the way there – than less well-known suburbs further out of central London. As Hackney South MP, Meg Hillier, emphasises, the riots were swiftly over and the process of repair of communities has been prompt and enthusiastic. It is probably true to say that the riots reflect the very different experiences of life in the buzzing world-city that is London more than any specifically Hackney malaise.

To add a personal note, I am the custodian of Hackney's oldest building, St Augustine's Tower, which opens its doors on the last Sunday of the month. On the preceding Monday, I put up banners saying that the Tower will open and that entry is free. I have often asked myself why it is that of the many people who visit us, only a tiny proportion live on nearby council estates. Lynsey Hanley, in her excellent book *Estates: An Intimate History*, suggests that there is a wall in the head of many people growing up on estates, corralling their belief in themselves and their potential. I suspect that that is the explanation why so many of our neighbours pass by our beautiful tower – but perhaps I am wrong.

So the epigram 'totally different but exactly the same' – up to a point, sums it up for me. This book is mostly about the changes that have taken place in Hackney. I celebrate those changes and I played a part in some of them. But I also believe that the borough's vitality depends on the new, younger generation arriving in Hackney having the same commitment to make it a better place as my generation which arrived in the 1970s.

This book has been made possible by the generosity of my co-authors. I would like to thank them for contributing their time and answering my endless questions. The authors of this book have not only shared their knowledge of Hackney, but have helped in different ways to shape its history. Hackney's history owes so much to people who have worked for their community in many imaginative ways to make a difference.

I would also like to thank the professional photographers who have generously donated their work: Simon Mooney, Alan Denney, Neil Martinson, Berris Connolly, Chris Dorley-Brown and Dudy Braun. In addition I thank warmly the other members of Hackney Society's editorial team: Margaret Willes, Annie Edge, Monica Blake, and Glory Hall who has designed the book.

**Laurie Elks**



The Peace Mural in Dalston Lane, 1985. (Photo Alan Denney)

# 1967: The Birth of the Hackney Society – John Finn



Shepherdess Walk, Shoreditch. One of the early campaigns of the Hackney Society was to oppose Hackney Council's proposal to demolish the Georgian terrace. (Photo Simon Mooney)



“We shouldn’t like people to think we are in favour of propping up old ruins,” was what worried Michael Thomas as he first let the world know of his and others’ intention to form a society to campaign for the protection of historic Hackney, first announced in the *Hackney Gazette*, 11 January 1967.

The new London Borough of Hackney, the amalgamation of the former Metropolitan Boroughs of Hackney, Stoke Newington and Shoreditch, and only two years old, was facing a massive housing crisis. Hackney had apparently the third biggest housing waiting list in London (*Hackney Gazette*, 20 February 1967), with large numbers of working-class families living in over-crowded, multi-occupied, privately-rented housing – desperate to move into a clean, dry and warm council house. That, I remember, was the great hope of many of my father’s family, living in Hackney’s Victorian terraces, sharing outside WCs, and some in gas-lit rooms. This problem had been the biggest task of local government in London since the 1930s. Now the 1960s and ‘70s saw plans to solve the problem that threatened to make a lasting impact upon the built environment.

All three of the former constituent boroughs published, from time to time, official guides. Thumbing through the editions prior to the 1965 amalgamation, the first impression is of a huge amount of advertising by local industries. There was still a big industrial sector, especially in Shoreditch and Hackney Wick: furniture, chemicals and paint, ironfounders, glassworks, timber, clothing, food, laundries – and some famous names amongst them, including Simpson’s tailoring, Bronco toilet tissue, Carless Petrol (‘100 years in Hackney’) and Platinum Pens. There is, states the *Hackney Guide*, “no clearly defined line separating commerce and industry from the residential areas”. But even then that industrial profile appeared to be in decline.

While proud of their histories, the boroughs were keen to promote themselves as builders of new housing, and to demonstrate the zeal with which they intended to stride into the golden future inspired by the Greater London Plan, more popularly known as the Abercrombie Plan after its principal author. Shoreditch Council boasted that they had completed their five-year slum clearance and house building programme ahead of schedule, and proudly pointed to the “huge blocks of flats” they had built, with more promised. They predicted that the “majority of Shoreditch will be housed in conditions undreamt of a generation ago”.

Meanwhile Stoke Newington took inspiration from the Woodberry Down redevelopment “so vast and complete in itself as to be almost a borough within a borough”. While for Hackney, in 1961 “throughout the whole area, building activity continues as the new and finer Hackney continues to rise”. Labour’s vision in Hackney was for an almost total redevelopment programme. However, the *Hackney Guide* notes that “reluctantly there was no alternative to demolition” of sites like the bomb-damaged sixteenth-century Brooke House.

It was the era of Abercrombie-inspired ‘comprehensive redevelopment’, where whole areas of sub-standard and bomb-damaged accommodation would be replaced, along with any other viable buildings, shops and factories as necessary, to plan for self-contained estates that would include health centres, community halls, laundries, open spaces with industry segregated away. Constituency Labour parties in London sent resolutions to the Annual Conference calling for total ‘municipalisation’ of housing. In neighbouring Tottenham for example, which I knew well in the 1960s, it was a regular demand.

Meanwhile, at the level of national politics, Labour and Conservatives competed by announcing ever more ambitious housing targets. Harold Macmillan's government raised the target to 300,000 per annum. His housing minister, Keith Joseph, later admitted that he was a "more" man: "I used to go to bed at night counting the number of houses I had destroyed and the number of planning approvals I had given. . . just more." Harold Wilson's Labour Party promised to raise numbers to 400,000 and to "obliterate London's slums", including Hackney's estimated 2,225 sub-standard dwellings, as part of a London-wide housing programme.

To cap it all, the *Gazette* headlined the news (14 February), that the newly-created Greater London Council (GLC) was planning to create the notorious Ringway 1 or London Motorway Box around central London. Two of the routes, the North Cross Route and Eastern Avenue extension were mapped to push through Dalston and Victoria Park respectively to Hackney Wick, displacing an estimated 3,200 people from their homes.

Mr Thomas and friends couldn't have timed their initiative to protect Hackney's historic environment with greater precision. The previous year, Albion Square residents formed an Action Group "to preserve the pleasant Victorian charm of the square" against compulsory purchase. Michael Thomas commented that "it is encouraging that this has been formed and perhaps there could be a more centralised kind of society ... open to all those who are genuinely interested in the history and character of the borough". He was anxious to point out that such a group would not be what he called a "homeowner's society". The *Gazette* article stated that the idea had gained the support of John Betjeman, co-founder of the Victorian Society, and later to become Poet Laureate and National Treasure. Betjeman had written affectionately in the *Spectator* of trips to Hackney and Stoke Newington by way of the North London Line and the Great Eastern to Clapton. "Hackney", he said then, "is full of the real London". His poem 'The Cockney Amorist' conjures a memory of the Hackney Empire as the "soft electric lamplight/Reveals the gilded walls". He agreed to become the fledgling Society's first president.

And so the *Gazette* was to report that the Hackney Society had held its first meeting on 6 February. A steering committee discussed a draft constitution which included the following objectives:

- a. To encourage the preservation, development and improvement of buildings, streets and areas within the London Borough of Hackney which are of historic interest, architectural merit or distinctive character and charm.
- b. To encourage high standards of architectural and town planning within the borough.
- c. To study critically all plans for the development of the borough and to put forward constructive criticism.
- d. To encourage the preservation and improvement of parks, squares and other open spaces within the borough.
- e. To stimulate public interest in and care for the beauty, history and character of the area of the borough and its surroundings.

The first public meeting followed in May. Leaflets were printed which opened with words that still seem redolent today:

- I love Hackney. But what will it be like in 10 years' time?
- If you are interested in the place you live in come along to the first meeting of TheHackney Society.



The Agapemonite Church at Stamford Hill, one of Sir John Betjeman's favourite Hackney buildings. He described in the *Spectator* in 1956 how the interior was "a blaze of glory". (Photo Simon Mooney)

John Betjeman was the star speaker along with Patrick Stirling from the Civic Trust, and Paul Kirby from the GLC Planning Department.

A busy programme followed during that first year including a walk along the Regent's Canal, a visit to the Geffrye Museum and garden party ("well attended in spite of the rain") and a walk to visit churches in the Shoreditch area.

These events helped to bind Society members in friendship but there was also serious campaigning work to be done. The new Civic Amenities Act 1967 had introduced Conservation Areas and improved the scheme for statutory listing of buildings of architectural and historic interest. The first committee spent "a considerable amount of time" looking at the likely areas of Hackney that could benefit from the protection offered by this new legislation. They focused on two decaying mansions at 187 and 191 Stoke Newington High Street and Sanford Terrace, a Georgian terrace overlooking Stoke Newington Common. Sanford Terrace was neglected and blighted by a scheme for comprehensive development (now Smalley Estate) and had just come under a compulsory purchase order. The saving of Sanford Terrace was to become one of the first achievements of the Society.

The new Society was eminently respectable. Its first vice-presidents were Ellis Hillman, former LCC member and subsequently of the GLC, Nicholas Taylor, the Sunday Times architectural correspondent, and the Venerable M.M. Hodgins, Archdeacon of Hackney. Initially the Society balked at confronting the big redevelopment schemes head on – like the De Beauvoir project, which it left to the locals to fight. But by the time of the Mapledene compulsory purchase proposals, the Society had realised that in order to preserve and protect, it would sometimes need to take on planning authorities, locally and regionally. The arduous and sometimes wearisome task of preparing submissions, proofs of evidence, appearing at public enquiries including the 1972 and 1977 Mapledene enquiries, fell on the Society and its hard-working committee members. The Society also weighed into the campaign to resist the ruinously destructive Motorway Box and signed up to the North London Line Committee to save the Richmond-Broad Street Line from closure. Another early campaign helped to save the magnificent Georgian terrace at Shepherdess Walk, Shoreditch, from destruction.

The Society was up and running. Fifty years later, it still has work to do.

# Hackney Society Publications

## **Hackney Society Publications**

*From Tower to Tower Block*, 1984

*Buildings at Risk in Hackney*, 1987

*Hackney Houses*, 1987

*Loddiges of Hackney*, David Solman, 1995

*Famous Women of Hackney*, 1998

*Twentieth Century Buildings in Hackney*, Elizabeth Robinson, 1999

*Hackney: Modern, Restored, Forgotten, Ignored*, Lisa Rigg (ed), 2009

*Hackney: An Uncommon History in Five Parts*, Margaret Willes (ed), 2012

For more information, see [www.hackneysociety.org](http://www.hackneysociety.org)

To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hackney Society, we have produced a portrait of the community over the past half century. One portrait? What has emerged is a whole series of portraits which, like a kaleidoscope, makes up a whole.

Hackney is one of the London boroughs that has changed most radically over the past fifty years. In 1967 it was one of the poorest areas of the capital, the home of a combination of light industry and much inadequate housing, with a largely working-class population. But Hackney could also boast some of the fine historic buildings of London, which is why Sir John Betjeman was persuaded to become the Society's first President.

Today, the picture is very different. Hackney is regarded as cool, hip, the smart place to live and work, with easy access to the City. It is also home to many cultures from every part of the world. Some of its historic buildings and open spaces have survived, though not all, despite campaigns to try to save them. And the picture is complex. As one long-time Hackney resident has pointed out, in some ways the place is very much the same as it was fifty years ago, but for some, it remains an area of deprivation and violence.

Fifty pieces have been commissioned from a whole range of authors, who have drawn on their own experiences and expertise. The subjects covered range from social issues such as housing, the question of 'regeneration' and education, to the cultural, with the demise of dog racing, the opening of Centerprise and the flourishing of the theatre as exemplified by the Arcola and the Hackney Empire. The darker side is not glossed over, with a piece on the death of Colin Roach by Duncan Campbell, and the riots of 2011, written by Hackney MP, Meg Hillier.

*Front cover images: top row: The Simpson's factory in Stoke Newington Road (Simpson's Archive); Trowbridge Estate rising above Hackney Wick (Hackney Archives); second row: Broad Street station at night (Gordon Edgar); the tool market, Kingsland Waste (Hackney Archives); third row: protest following the death of Colin Roach (David Hoffman); Broadway Market (Sean Pollock); fourth row: graffiti at Hackney Wick (Glory Hall); a volunteer at St Mary's Secret Garden (The Gentle Author).*



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