



Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood Forum

**Local context:
History of Bow**

July 2020

Review of the History of the Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood Plan Area

The Neighbourhood Plan area has a rich history that demonstrates the determined East End spirit of defiance and energy of renewal. Located between the City of London to the west and the London docklands to the south, the area has a unique and distinct history which is rich in social reform. The area's proximity to the original settlement of the City of London means that it can be considered one of the earliest suburbs of the city.¹

The earliest known history of the area was discovered in the mid-1800s. At this time the remains of a Roman road were unearthed during archaeological excavations near Armagh Road, to the north east of the neighbourhood area.² That original Roman road ran from Aldgate in the City of London through to Colchester in Essex and is considered one of the oldest trade routes in Britain. It is suggested that Boudica passed over the road and through the area on her way to fight the Romans.³ This appears to be the first of many rebellious episodes that would occur throughout the history of the local area.

Those early archaeological excavations also show that the area was important for other reasons too. In addition to the road, the remains of a fourth century settlement were discovered at Old Ford. The site revealed large quantities of cattle bones showing marks of butchery.⁴ This suggests the area was an important area for food production for the City of London and cattle may have been brought here from outlying farms in Essex for slaughter.⁵

By the 12th century, the historical record suggests there was a hamlet established in the area. Legend has it that the hamlet was called Bow after the shape of the arches of the first stone bridges that were built across the River Lea.⁶ The story goes that the stone bridge was ordered by Queen Matilda, wife of Henry I, in 1110 after she narrowly avoided drowning while crossing a ford in the river.⁷

In 1311, the area was granted the construction of a chapel-of-ease by the Bishop of London. The chapel would allow residents of the area the ability to attend worship while surround roads were flooded in winter. Consecrated as a parish church in 1719, Bow Church has survived threats of total re-building and severe bomb damage.⁸ The church still stands proud in the south-east corner of the Neighbourhood Plan area.

Right up to the late middle ages the area remained largely rural. Open land through was used for arable and pastoral farming.⁹ However, the proximity of the area to the City, the Port of London and a supply of water from the River Lea meant that the area would soon undergo development. After the Great Fire of London in 1666, city-dwellers were attracted to living

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mile_End

² https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Driffield_Conservation_Area_Character_Appraisal_and_Management_Guidelines.pdf

³ <https://romanroadlondon.com/roman-road-market-history/>

⁴ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Driffield_Conservation_Area_Character_Appraisal_and_Management_Guidelines.pdf

⁵ <https://www.ideastore.co.uk/assets/documents/Local%20History%20Archives%20Online/walks/bow%20heritage%20trail.pdf>

⁶ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Fairfield_Adopted_CAA_and_MG.pdf

⁷ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Fairfield_Adopted_CAA_and_MG.pdf

⁸ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Fairfield_Adopted_CAA_and_MG.pdf

⁹ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Driffield_Conservation_Area_Character_Appraisal_and_Management_Guidelines.pdf

away from the dangers of the city.¹⁰ Urban development began to arrive in the area in the late 17th century around Mile End Old Town, in the south west of the Neighbourhood Plan area. Small clusters of housing and terraces appeared which were inhabited by a wealthy class of merchants and mariners.¹¹

The first large-scale development took place on land belonging to two large estates. The first was the Coborn development, which began upon the death of Prisca Coborn in 1701. A parson's daughter, she bequeathed her estate to the Coborn Charity to provide a school to teach 50 poor children to read and write as well as to support the poor of Bow. A new school and school-house were opened in 1813 but their cost considerably exceeded the estimate and the trustees had to seek parliamentary powers to sell part of the estate and to grant building leases.¹² The charity trustees leased plots for development and construction began to the east of Coborn Road in 1817. The villas in Coborn Street were ready for leasing in 1827.¹³ Around this time the eastern section of the Regent's Canal was built through the to connect with the Limehouse basin.¹⁴ The canal currently provides the western-most perimeter of the Neighbourhood Plan area.

The second development was on the estate belonging to Sir Charles Morgan of Tredegar in the south west corner of the Neighbourhood Plan area.¹⁵ Initial developments centred on fields that were attached to the early 18th century Essex House, which is now occupied by Onyx House (built in 1985 by the architect Piers Gough).¹⁶ By the 1830s, the villas in Rhondda Grove, the houses at the eastern end of Morgan Street, the main western terrace of Aberavon Road and much of Tredegar Square were built.¹⁷ To this day, Tredegar Square has retained its character and is considered one of the finest Georgian squares in this part of London.¹⁸ Indeed, much of the Georgian terrace housing in this part of the Neighbourhood Plan area retains its historic and almost rural character.

The Morgan developments continued to expand with the completion of terraces to the north (Alloway and Lichfield Road, College and Tredegar Terrace and further development on Morgan Street).¹⁹ Census data from 1851 show that a number of residents had professional employment at the port of London and East India Docks.²⁰ In 1839, the Eastern Counties Railway line was built, which still cuts a route through the area. In the 1840s, the Hertford Union Canal along the northern perimeter of the Neighbourhood Plan area was built to link the Regent's Canal with the River Lea.²¹

By the middle of the 19th century, the pastoral lands, market gardens, fields and orchards of the area that had been supplying the City of London were rapidly urbanising as the city expanded eastwards. Problems of overcrowding, poverty and squalour that were associated with development during the industrial revolution were becoming real social problems. In

¹⁰ *Changing Places: A short history of the MEOTRA area* (2001) p4

¹¹ <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Clinton-RoadV1.pdf>

¹² <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol1/p290a>

¹³ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Tredegar_Square_CAA_and_MG.pdf

¹⁴ *Changing Places: A short history of the MEOTRA area* (2001) p20

¹⁵ *Changing Places: A short history of the MEOTRA area* (2001) p5

¹⁶ <https://manchesterhistory.net/architecture/1980/401mileendroad.html>

¹⁷ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Tredegar_Square_CAA_and_MG.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.ideastore.co.uk/assets/documents/Local%20History%20Archives%20Online/walks/bow%20heritage%20trail.pdf>

¹⁹ *Changing Places: A short history of the MEOTRA area* (2001) p7

²⁰ *Changing Places: A short history of the MEOTRA area* (2001) p15

²¹ *Changing Places: A short history of the MEOTRA area* (2001) p20

1839, the Annual Report of the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages recorded a mortality rate for the area which was far higher than for the rest of London. The report stated that a park in the East End of London would 'probably diminish the annual deaths by several thousands'.²²

In 1840, a petition signed by 30,000 residents was presented to Queen Victoria, for a green space to be made available for the 'healthful recreation' of the East End. The government bought 77 hectares of land and architect Sir James Pennethorne prepared plans for Victoria Park, which lies along the northern boundary of the Neighbourhood Plan area.²³ As such, this was the first public park in London that was specifically built for the enjoyment of the people.

The second half of the 19th century saw significant urban expansion that would lead to a streetscape that many would recognise today. Land north of what was now the Great Eastern Railway was developed from the 1860s, to coincide with a station that was opened on Coborn Road. The now sought after Victorian terraces of Antill Road and surrounding streets were built around this time for artisans and shopkeepers. Although primarily residential, the area historically included a number of small businesses operating either from home or within small industrial buildings, such as those between Medway and Lyal Roads.²⁴ Many of the terrace houses within this central west section of the Neighbourhood Plan area still have original period features such as bay windows and painted stucco decoration. The commercial importance of this area was confirmed with the establishment of the Roman Road market in 1888, which still continues to this day.²⁵

To the east, the area around the River Lea has a long industrial history including flour mills and bakeries in the mediaeval period²⁶ to a scarlet dye works in the mid-17th century and a china factory producing Bow porcelain in the mid-18th century.²⁷ Situated in the south east corner of the Neighbourhood Plan area, the Bryant and May match works factory occupies an important place in local history as well as British social history more generally. The extensive and imposing buildings date from 1861 and are one of the most important surviving industrial complexes in East London. The site was extended in 1874 for warehousing and offices for senior employees and includes a picturesque group of red brick cottages.²⁸

Workers at the Bryant and May factory were responsible for writing an important chapter in the social history of the area in what is known as the 'Matchgirl's Strike' in 1888. The strike was caused by the generally poor working conditions in the factory as well as the unfair dismissal of colleagues. The social activist and journalist Annie Besant publicised their plight and approximately 1,400 women and girls refused to work at the end of the first day.²⁹

²² https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/ignl/leisure_and_culture/parks_and_open_spaces/victoria_park/history.aspx

²³ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Victoria_Park_CAA_and_MG.pdf

²⁴ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Medway_CA_Character_Appraisal_and_Management_Guidelines.pdf

²⁵ <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Roman-Road-MarketV1.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.ideastore.co.uk/assets/documents/Local%20History%20Archives%20Online/walks/bow%20heritage%20trail.pdf>

²⁷ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Tredegar_Square_CAA_and_MG.pdf

²⁸ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Fairfield_Adopted_CAA_and_MG.pdf

²⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matchgirls%27_strike

Fearing bad publicity, the management of the factory eventually relented and agreed to the demands of the workers' demands. This was a key moment in British history and is widely accepted as the strike that sparked the rise in unskilled unionism.³⁰

The rich social history and determined spirit of the East End continued into 1912. Sylvia Pankhurst came to Bow as a representative of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) to campaign for local MP George Lansbury, who had resigned his seat in parliament to fight a by-election on the issue of votes for women. Pankhurst started the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) with headquarters in Old Ford Road and Suffragette handbills were printed at 459 Roman Road. At 45 Norman Grove, a toy factory was opened in 1914 to provide women with a living wage while their husbands were at war.³¹ The area's rich Suffragette past is celebrated in a mural that is currently painted on the side of the Lord Morpeth pub in Old Ford Road, which marks the location near where the ELFS headquarters once stood.

In addition to his support for women's suffrage, George Lansbury was a famous East End social reformer who campaigned for social justice and to improve the living and employment conditions for the working classes. He led the Labour Party from 1932 to 1935 and he was jailed alongside 30 local councillors for his part in the Poplar 'rates revolt' of 1921.³² The location of his house and a memorial to his memory are located along the southern perimeter of the Neighbourhood Plan area at 39 Bow Road.³³

The Second World War had a drastic effect on the area as the East End was particularly badly bombed during air raids. The first flying bomb, the V1 rocket, landed in Grove Road in June 1944.³⁴ Much of the terraced housing in the area survived. However, there are a number of locations that suffered bomb damage and were redeveloped in the decades that followed the war. Selwyn Green was created on the site of WWII bomb-damaged terrace houses between the 1950s and 60s. Additionally, some Victorian housing was removed through slum clearance and large estates were built in the area. Examples include the Lanfranc estate.³⁵ Mile End Park, which lies along the western perimeter of the Neighbourhood Plan area, was created on industrial land that was devastated by bombing.³⁶ However, the park was not completed until the end of the 1990s.

The post-war period marked an era of decline for the area. The London docks, which had remained an important source of employment in the area, were moved to container-port facilities in 1968. Over the course of a decade, London's up-river docks had closed.³⁷ Towards the turn of the millennium, the area was a focus for regeneration. The Bryant and May match factory, which closed in 1979, became one of East London's first urban renewal projects in 1988.³⁸

³⁰ http://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/work/england/london/article_3.shtml

³¹ <https://spitalfieldslife.com/2014/08/03/east-end-suffragette-map/>

³² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Lansbury

³³ http://www.towerhamletshomes.org.uk/My_Neighbourhood/Monuments_sculptures/Malmesbury_George_Lansbury_Memorial.aspx

³⁴ *Changing Places: A short history of the MEOTRA area* (2001) p8

³⁵ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Medway_CA_Character_Appraisal_and_Management_Guidelines.pdf

³⁶ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/ign/leisure_and_culture/parks_and_open_spaces/mile_end_park/mile_end_park.aspx

³⁷ *Changing Places: A short history of the MEOTRA area* (2001) p15

³⁸ <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/education/educational-images/bryant-and-may-match-factory-bow-10984>