

## East London History

As UCL embarks upon its own expansion east and faces the challenges and opportunities this poses, it is not simply moving into a neutral space but one that has been at the centre of historical transformation.

East London has an inescapable presence. Its material importance to the capital city is compounded by the way it is so firmly lodged in the popular imagination. Where exactly East London and the East End begin and end are the subject of considerable debate among residents, planners, politicians, workers and officials. It has commonly been viewed as a working class area while also serving as a destination for diverse populations. Waves of migrants have settled and passed through, including the persecuted Huguenot's of the seventeenth century, Jewish migrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the post war Bangladeshi communities and, in recent years, it has become a zone of hyper-diversity, with people from all parts of the globe. Its accessibility and proximity to the centres of power and wealth have heightened a sense of contrast, with visible inequalities stimulating a wide range of social action. The paradoxical location as both marginal and mainstream have meant that East London has been a seed-bed of new ideas and experimentation.

Despite its long history, in the eighteenth century, the separate villages of East London were rapidly subsumed into urban development. The working classes of East London would furnish the city with labour and leisure of many kinds. They worked in a range of essential industries and services including textiles, docks, ship building and domestic service. The East was the ideal location for messy and foul smelling industries where the westerly wind would ensure that such unpleasantness never reached the senses of the wealthier classes. The invention of the term 'East End' in late nineteenth century helped to embed its symbolic

role as all that was lowly, evil and unchristian where poverty, disease and crime abounded. Outsiders viewed it with both terror and curiosity which meant that slumming and voyeuristic engagement with the unknown became possible for the adventurous. Unsurprisingly it became a catalyst for social reformer, most famously William Booth and the university settlement at Toynbee Hall among many others. Literary imaginations were fired by the sheer difference of the East although a quick retreat could easily be made to more salubrious quarters. From George Orwell's *Down and Out in London and Paris*, a proof copy of which is featured in this exhibition, to Michael Young and Peter Willmott's community study and recent accounts in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* or TV series *Call the Midwife* and *EastEnders*, East London is a place that fascinates a wide audience.

Those living in East London and the East End have not been victims but have actively disputed the meaning of their home which at times became embodied in radical traditions of organising and campaigning such as the 1936 Battle of Cable Street. The First World War poet and artist Isaac Rosenberg, the writer Bernard Kops, the many worker writer groups and dramatic ventures which started in the 1970s spawning people like the playwright Tony Marchant, Alan Gilbey and Liz Thompson and writers such as Gilda O'Neill and Benjamin Zephaniah have all offered differing representations of East London, exploring complex histories and cultures.

While East London has been in constant flux, we currently stand in the midst of a turning point. Gentrification, the movement of people out of the inner city and wealthier people in, spiralling property prices, financialisation and the intense demand for land have been reshaping the district for a number of decades. Most noticeably, the glass skyscrapers with their impersonal workspaces are gradually encroaching upon once vibrant communities. Yet,

despite the building of Canary Wharf and Olympic Park, high levels of poverty continue to be found and the disparity is felt acutely.

This exhibition offers important insights into the chequered history of East London based upon the unique archives held at UCL. Key themes revealed here are its centrality to the development of British trade and capitalism; its status as a 'problem' area beset by a number of social ills; and the consequent desire to control and regulate its people through both disciplinary institutions as well as movements motivated by a social conscience. In particular, education, social divisions and health are prominent in the material on display. As ever, the perspectives and concerns of working class people and the everyday is harder to detect, but not impossible.

The image of East London drew upon a history that stretched back many years. In 1666, the late minister of Shadwell feared for sufferers of the plague who might die in their sins and entreated wealthy and pious Christians to pray for the souls of their poorer brethren. Jumping over a century to 1814 we find John Thomas Smith's representations of 'vagabondiana' highlighting 'typical beggars' in the vicinity, no doubt attracting comic attention and ridicule. Fear of crime was ubiquitous. Nevertheless, the view of outsiders which emphasised disgust, filth and horror could be deflected into a different purpose. The surveyor who identified people living in the 'most offensive and filthy condition' among stagnant pools and rotting vegetables, had a reforming agenda. The application of scientific and clinical language in Edwin Chadwick's Sanitary Commissions, which are on display, led to improvements in health but positioned residents as impassive subjects of a disciplinary authority.

The river is a persistent presence yet its meaning shifts across time. As a 'great trading nation', the Thames was a crucial channel for trade in coal and other necessities which fuelled not only industry but the expansion of domestic life. The 1799 select committee appointed for the improvement of the Port of London, published a striking map to help achieve its purpose. The bright green Thames becomes a free-flowing organism stretching its tentacles out across East London, an ever flowing mass. The well-ordered coloured squares in pink and yellow next to London Bridge – represent the docks and warehouses required to feed the insatiable demands of the city. A few years earlier William Blake had bemoaned the 'charter'd Thames' in his celebrated poem, 'London', where the institutions of the army, church and monarchy were connected with 'mind-forg'd manacles', neglect and 'faces of woe' he found in the surrounding streets. The complaint clearly did not register with the cartographers intent on economic development.

Education and learning also stands out, with chilling utilitarianism of the nineteenth century jostling with ambiguous progressive educational ideas of the twentieth. In the 1870s, Mr Buckle's prize was awarded to 'the headmaster who could produce the best results at the lowest cost', which was nevertheless outshone by the award to the superintendent who achieved the lowest death rate in their patch. Such rudimentary league tables make those of Ofsted and the OECD appear positively tame. One column includes the less than precise category of 'unknown, doubtful or 50-50'; another juxtaposes death rates with numbers of children. The exhibits illustrate the swinging of the educational pendulum towards a concern with child-centredness, with Margaret Macmillan's work on imagination and creativity in childhood and, later still, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) with its multicultural jigsaws to encourage learning about different communities.

East Londoners themselves are occasionally visible within these wider social, economic and political changes as glimpses of different meanings shine through some of the objects on display. Although Jewish groups were referred to as part of the 'lower classes' in 1802, by 1846 there are signs of cultural recognition with the publication of a Jewish cookbook while in 1921 the West Ham synagogue celebrated with a prize-giving at Stratford Town Hall. Similarly, but in a different context, the book on the laws and constitution controlling the work of Watermen and Lightermen tells us that working people were exerting some control over their livelihoods. The 1913 menu for the menu for the annual dinner of the Whitechapel and Spitalfields Costermongers' and Street-sellers' Union reflects the way in which civil society was being occupied by local constituencies. In the 1940s, the Trades Advisory Council enquires about relative weights and contents of the Bun Loaf and Chalah Loaf which echoes with an earlier 'moral economy' of the eighteenth century while looking forwards to the fair trade movement in contemporary times.

History is never simply about the past and it remains as a resource for the future. The shifting configurations of East London have not obliterated all the older ways of life and modes of thought. Struggles over space, health, learning and livelihoods are still being played out today.

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