

Today, if the Lea Valley is known at all, it is as a featureless backwater, undesirable, poor, largely forgotten, awaiting the heroic arrival of the Olympic legacy to 'regenerate' it. Its history however is very different, and its role in the story of London is significant and profound. And some of this is still visible, if only just.

The environs of West Ham formed a rural farming area of notable quality as recently as the early nineteenth century. The Lea above Limehouse was described in Hoflers Anglers Guide in 1848 as 'a beautiful pastoral country adorned with villages...flowing through parks and meadows with countless cows and sheep'. It had also become a location of choice for aristocratic living and leisure outside the noisome City. It was the outcry caused by the demolition of the seventeenth century hunting lodge in Bromley by Bow in 1906 that led directly to the development of the legal protection now given to important historic buildings. (One of the panelled rooms of the lodge can still be seen preserved in the V and A Museum Room 52)

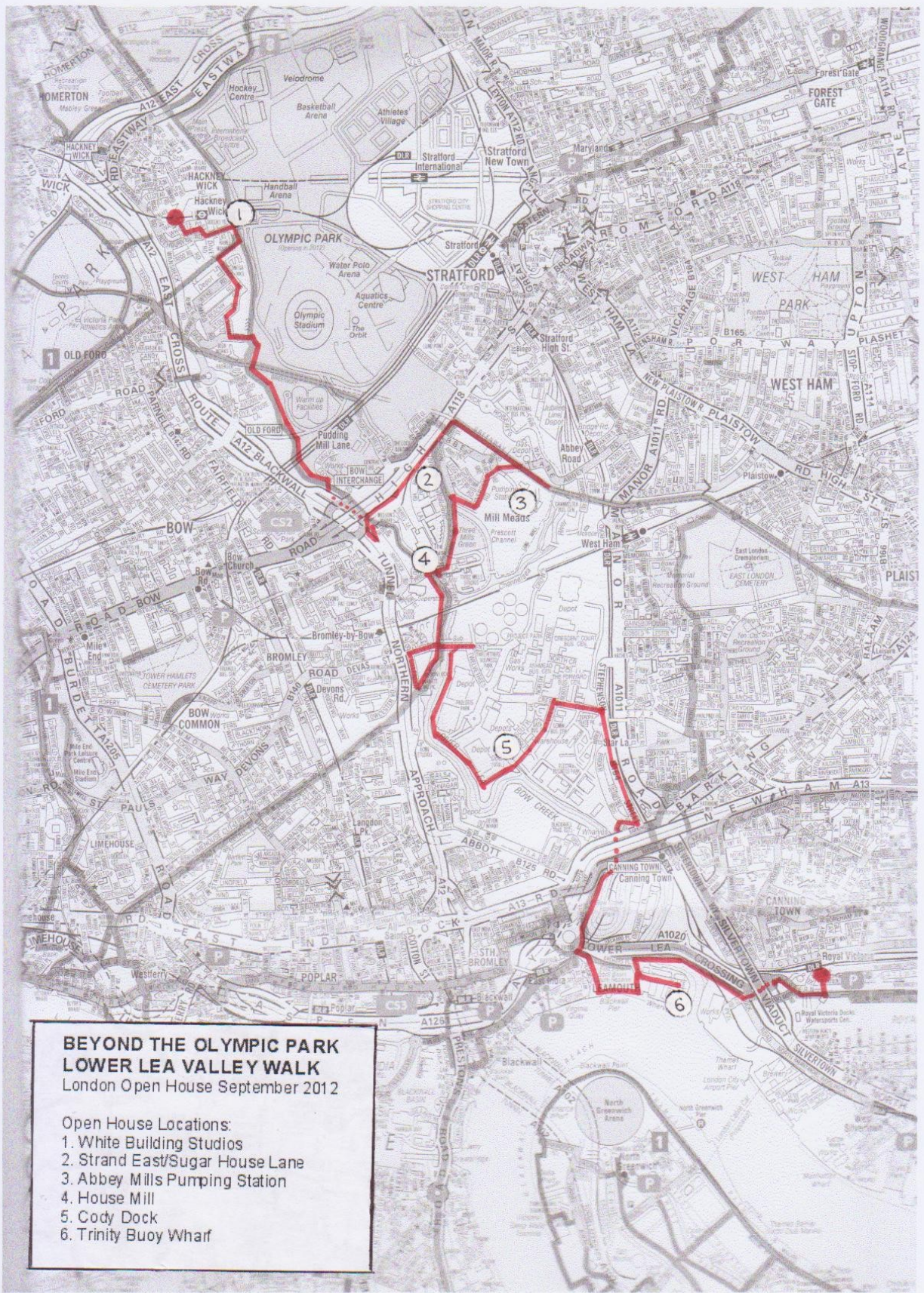
During the second half of the nineteenth century however a massive industrial boom turned West Ham into an industrial region comparable in scale and character to many industrial cities of the north, though seldom recognised as such. Its location beyond the reach of new regulations brought in by the London Metropolitan Board of Works encouraged the development of noxious industry in particular.

Huge industrial works evolved including rail engineering at Stratford, the Bromley by Bow gasworks, and the Thames Ironworks steel and shipbuilding yard. The Lower Lea also played its part in the wider Lea's extraordinary history of technological innovation, most memorably perhaps at Hackney Wick where petroleum was first refined and given its name (the site now lies forgotten beneath the Media Centre)

In parallel, West Ham began a period of explosive population growth. Between 1871 and 1901 population rose from 62,919 to 267,358. Inevitably this had a major impact on living conditions in the area. The intersection of the industrial built environment with the receding countryside created a hybrid landscape: green spaces and natural rivers survived alongside chemical factories, docks, gasworks and slums, creating a mosaic of urban industrial spaces, older agricultural landscape and older still estuarine wetlands, a framework still discernable today.

The combination of a low-lying, flood-prone terrain, a heavily polluted river and intensive and uncontrolled industrial and housing development, gave rise to a wretched environment memorably described by Charles Dickens in his article 'Londoners over the Border'. In the half-century that followed, environmental and social conditions continued to suffer as the industrial sector expanded across the wetlands of the Lower Lea Valley and the Thames Estuary. Droughts, floods, unemployment crises and the increasing levels of infectious disease attracted national attention and concern, and together contributed to the rising demand for an interventionist government. West Ham became a hotbed of labour and socialist politics and was a geographic vanguard in Britain's transition from liberalism to social democracy at the turn of the twentieth century.

In 1908, local officials tried to address the interconnected social and environmental problems with a then novel proposal for a large public works project to transform the Bow Back Rivers into managed canals using unemployed workers. Too ambitious for 1908, a similar approach was implemented between 1930 and 1935 to transform the Back Rivers and Stratford High Street (this included filling in Pudding Mill River and moving the City Mill and Waterworks rivers). Subsequently, the area has been subjected to a string of grand but unrealised visions and plans, of which the Olympics, with its lugubrious regeneration ambitions, is perhaps simply the latest.



**BEYOND THE OLYMPIC PARK  
LOWER LEA VALLEY WALK**  
London Open House September 2012

Open House Locations:  
1. White Building Studios  
2. Strand East/Sugar House Lane  
3. Abbey Mills Pumping Station  
4. House Mill  
5. Cody Dock  
6. Trinity Buoy Wharf