

A GENERAL HISTORY OF SHOREDITCH AND SOUTH HOXTON

The history of Shoreditch has been largely dictated by its location outside the City walls of London. The origin of the name is unknown, but it has a Saxon origin and may come from the "Sewerditch", a stream, which ran east of St Leonard's to near Holywell Lane. Shoreditch was a settlement where the Roman roads of Kingsland Road and Old Street met. Kingsland Road was part of Ermine Street, and Old Street linked this with Watling Street.

In the Middle Ages, the Augustinian Priory of St. John the Baptist in Haliwell dominated the eastern area. It was built near a sacred or holy well. The Church was south of New Inn Yard. Holywell was founded by 1158, covered 8 acres, and was the richest Augustinian nunnery in the country. The street pattern round the walls largely survives, being Shoreditch High Street, Holywell Lane, Curtain Road and Batemans Row. The Priory site was split up at the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539. Several stone finds have been made. Curtain Road was named after the curtain wall there. At the north end of Shoreditch High Street was an ancient stone cross.

There were a number of religious foundations who were endowed by city merchants and the gentry, including St Mary Spital to the east, the boundaries to which dictated the borough boundary. Shoreditch's oldest buildings were by the High Street near the Priory site. South Shoreditch remained largely rural in the Medieval period and on until the seventeenth century, and was considered useful for institutions because of relatively good road links. Ribbon development grew up along Old Street and Shoreditch High Street.

It is perhaps not widely known that the first two London theatres were built in Shoreditch. The first playhouse, called simply "The Theatre" of 1576 was on Curtain Road at the junction with New Inn Yard, the first permanent playhouse in Britain. James Burbage, the head of the Earl of Leicester's Company of players, needed a permanent home for players to perform in, as the Lord Mayor had prohibited plays from being performed within the City walls. Previously plays were held in places like inn yards. The Theatre was a large polygonal building and was demolished in 1598 under the terms of its lease. The Curtain Theatre, on the site of Hewett Street, eventually came under the same management as the Theatre. Centrally theatre was centred round the Globe at Bankside. William Shakespeare came to Shoreditch as an actor and lived in Bishopsgate and possibly in Holywell Street. The first of his plays were performed in Shoreditch and it is possible that at least one Shoreditch character inspired a Shakespeare character.

Hoxton held several almshouses, the first being in Old Street. Wealthy city companies built their own almshouses.

Industries have existed in Shoreditch since Medieval times much as brick making along Kingsland Road. Others were there because they were not allowed to operate within the City walls, such as tanning. A sixteenth century

forerunner of the clothing industry was a Master John Tyre, who lived near Shoreditch Church and made clothes of the highest quality.

The wealthy started to move out of London to Shoreditch, including Masters of City companies and rich foreigners. This was in response to the growth of the City's population. Newcomers built on fields and gardens, between Old Street and Shoreditch High Street along which the population had been concentrated. The newcomers were mostly tradesmen supplying the needs of the City, and were for example, ironmongers, saddlers and tailors.

Hoxton comes from the Saxon word Hochestone, meaning a farm or fortified enclosure belonging to Hoch or Hocg. In 1415 the Lord Mayor of London "caused the wall of the city to be broken towards Moorfields, and built the postern called Moorgate, for the ease of the citizens to walk that way upon causeways towards Islington and Hoxton". Hoxton inhabitants responded by enclosing the fields and harassing walkers from the City and archers on Hoxton Fields. In 1514 an uproar led to the hedges and ditches being destroyed so that Londoners could enjoy the drained farmland of Hoxton.

In the late sixteenth century there were "enclosures for gardens, wherein are built many fair summer houses, some of them like midsummer pageants, with towers, turrets and chimney tops, not so much use or profit, as for show and pleasure".

Hoxton has been an area of entertainment and refreshment for centuries, being on a main route for travellers. In 1598 Hoxton Street was "a large street, with houses on both sides". A notorious alehouse was "The Pimlico". Part of a poem of 1609 called " 'Tis a Mad World at Hogsdon" went "Doctors, Protors, Clerks, Attornies, To Pimlico make sweaty journies". The playwright Ben Jonson killed an actor in a duel at the rear of the pub.

Hoxton was a centre of Catholic resistance to the Reformation and Edmund Campion, the martyr, was hidden in Hoxton.

In 1675 local weavers protested against multi shuttle looms, which would do the work of 20 people. For three days, mobs went through Shoreditch and Hoxton, removing looms from premises and burning them in the street. The mobsters were caught, pilloried and fined.

In the seventeenth century Hoxton was renowned for the quality of its market and nursery gardens, supplying the city. There were a number of private mad-houses.

Maps from the mid to third quarter of the eighteenth century show that the land north of Bateman's Row was used as gardens and cultivated land. The land west of the late Great Eastern Street had a few estates with large houses. The estate field and land patterns can still be seen in the street pattern of today. By contrast, there was development along most of Shoreditch High Street, with tensely populated lanes, alleys and courtyards.

Shoreditch High Street was called Holywell High Street; it was wider to the south and was called Church End to the north. The eastern parish and borough boundary was Lock Street, where Boundary Street is now. Curtain Road and a pathway to the north existed, as did a path forming the later Holywell Row and east part of Scrutton Street. Old Street was Old Street Road; Worship Street already existed in name. There was a mound called Holy-well Mount west of the Priory, said to have been the site of plague burials.

There was a vinegar yard, and tenter grounds (where cloth stretched on frames and clothes were laid out); their boundaries exist today as Luke Street, Phipp Street, Scrutton Street and Clifton Street. South of Worship Street was a large tenter ground where the Finsbury Market, Pindar Street and Clifton Street area is. Appold Street existed as Long Alley and was fully built around.

The Hoxton area, in contrast to Shoreditch, was laid out by this same period to a more formal street pattern. Hoxton Square was laid out shortly after 1683. Pitfield Street existed by name. Hoxton Market was simply called the Market Place. Hoxton and Charles Squares, were the most fashionable residential areas, Shoreditch included. One of the earliest Academies (of 1669) was in Hoxton Square. The squares were centres of illegal non-conformist sects.

There has been a church on the site of St Leonards since at least 1140. The previous church had four aisles and a tower seventy-foot high, with five bells. The bells are famous for being in the nursery rhyme "Oranges and Lemons: when I grow rich/say the bells of Shoreditch". Queen Elizabeth I was "much pleased with Shoreditch bells". The old church fell into disrepair and some of it actually fell down during divine service in 1716. The new church was built in 1736-1740 by George Dance the Elder in a neo-classical style. Dance also designed Mansion House. There are several memorials to prominent people. The Church was the first in London and probably in the country to be lit by gas, in 1817. The stocks, whipping post and pump remain. The walls, gates and railings are nineteenth century. 118 ½ Shoreditch High Street, the Clerk's House, by the Church, was the watch house. It dates c1735 and is one of the very oldest in the area.

In 1736 there was a large protest against the use of cheaper Irish labourers brought in to build the new church. The unemployed English workers attacked the Irish and the mob grew to 4,000. The militia were brought in and crowds dispersed peaceably.

An unusual engraving of 1845 shows Shoreditch High Street lived with Georgian shopfronts with shops and trades of all descriptions. Early Victorian pubs and warehouses were beginning to be built. Trades included: drapers, tailors, clothiers, mercers, boot and shoe maker, chemists, butcher, ironmonger, jeweller, oil and colour warehouse, and etc. Clothing, furniture and printing were the three main trades in Shoreditch.

South Shoreditch and Hoxton were well placed to counter the greater effects of the Industrial Revolution. The factory system was set up and concentrated in the Midlands and the North of England. However, the cheap labour in the east of London made this still a profitable industrial area. Semi-skilled workers there concentrated on specialised trades, especially those, which had to be close to warehouses, which retained a working pattern, which was pre Industrial Revolution.

South Shoreditch was the centre of the London furniture trade in the Victorian period. The opening of the Regents Canal in 1820 made timber transportation cheaper and easier. South Shoreditch and Hoxton were near enough to trade with the City yet far enough from it to keep lower rents. By 1861 about 30 per cent of all London furniture makers worked in the East End. London's large population and housing growth led to a greatly increased demand for furniture. A wide variety of historic and modern styles were made.

Curtain Road, Old Street and Great Eastern Street laid out in 1872-6, were centres of the trade. There were many specialist workshops close to each other. The various stages of construction and finishing were therefore carried out on different premises. Although there were workers who could make a whole piece of furniture, many were only trained to make one component, for example, the drawers. The largely unskilled were lowly paid. The trade was a "sweated" trade and many worked long hours for little pay and were exploited. It was quite easy to set up in trade for a little money specialising in one product. A number of Unions were active within the trades.

The following are taken from the Shoreditch Street Directory of 1872.

Curtain Road	:	
43, 45 :		Varnish makers
51	:	Upholsterer
71	:	Chair manufacturer
85	:	Timber merchant
143	:	Thimble manufacturer
32	:	Gilder
66	:	Plane maker
110	:	Draper

Great Leonard Street (Leonard Street) :

12	:	Whatnot manufacturer
22	:	Easy chair and sofa manufacturer
48	:	Frame and picture dealer

88 : Human hair merchants

Shoreditch High Street

168 : Herbalist
173 : Paper stainer
133 : Tailor
211 : Alhambra Temperance Hall
218 : Coffee House
225 : Looking glass manufacturer
231 : Clothier

Hoxton Market

10 : French polisher
13, 14 : Easy chair and couch manufacture

Hoxton Square

6 : Tassel manufacturer
23 : Cornice pole manufacturer
25 : Printer
32 : Private House

Hoxton Street

3 : Pawnbroker
25 : Egg Merchant
43 : Varnish manufacturer
35 : Tailor

Several Jewish and some Dutch and French names occur. Jewish people played a key role in commerce and manufacturing. Jewish people fled persecution in Russia, Lithuania and Poland, and came in large numbers to the East End, spreading to Shoreditch from the 1880s. Jewish firms were involved in all aspects of trade and specialised in cabinet making and other pieces. They also worked in tailoring. Jewish people were the chief ethnic group to come to the area in search of work and cheap housing. Huguenots largely stayed further to the East. French names exist in Fleur de Lis Court and Sclater Street.

Many former residential properties in South Shoreditch were converted into industrial use, but increasingly in the Victorian period, premises were purpose built. This mix of small workshops with large warehouses and showrooms can be seen today.

Shoreditch's population grew faster than any other London parish in the first half of the nineteenth century. By 1851 there were up to 130,000 residents. (In 1801 there were 35,000 people). It was greatly overcrowded, with resulting problems. The building of warehouses, workshops and the railway destroyed many areas and alleys such as Swan Yard and Leg Alley. The 4,000 dispossessed people were not given other homes and this worsened the severe overcrowding. The population had almost doubled between 1800

and 1830 and did so again between 1830 and 1860. By 1850 Hoxton New Town was built and Hoxton was part of London. Shoreditch Station was opened in 1840 and became Bishopsgate Goods Station in 1874 when the railway was extended to Liverpool Street.

There were a number of theatres in and around Shoreditch and Hoxton, for example the Britannia Theatre of 1858 housing 4,000; Macdonald's (Hoxton Hall) of 1864, and the Varieties of 1870 in Pitfield Street. When the Britannia Theatre's Sara Lane "the Queen of Hoxton" died in 1899, the crowds at her funeral were so thick that people could not get through Hoxton Street.

The centre of London's wholesale cabinet trade had to move from the site of Broad Street Station when this was built, to the Curtain Road area in the early 1860's. By the late nineteenth century, the trade there was "where they have settled and grown into the wonderful proportions they have today" (1898). Long Alley (now Finsbury Avenue/Appold Street), was described then as one of the busiest foot thoroughfares in the parish and a busy marketing centre for the nearby alleys and courts. Finsbury Market was in 1898 a block of two storey shops, mostly greengrocers. In the late nineteenth century, the area was described as "that blend of small tenement houses and modern business premises which is characteristic of Shoreditch". Shoreditch High Street had many coster's stalls and barrows and needed a street keeper in uniform.

The gridiron street pattern was possibly due to the ancient North-South street pattern of trade routes, with square or rectangular field and plot patterns having been built on. Off the main roads were many courts and alleyways where the worst overcrowding was. Census returns in the nineteenth century show a man and wife living with 14 lodgers in 2 bedrooms, in order to pay the high rents. As rents were raised, householders took in several lodgers. Workers could not afford to travel far to work.

Hoxton Square was by the mid nineteenth century a centre of the furnishing trade. By the end of the century, several areas were considered to have become run down. Hoxton Square was "with numerous broken pavements and many dilapidated houses, presents and intolerably dreary aspect". Hoxton Street "is of great poverty and squalor; it is one of the open-air markets of the poor and is lined by perpetual barrows and stalls". Georgian buildings can still be seen. No.32 Hoxton Square is late seventeenth century or early 18th and is a rare survival. No. 56 is early to mid 9th century on a possibly earlier house. No. 10 was the church vicarage. 125 – 130 Shoreditch High Street was a purpose-built foundry and showroom of c 1880. Many Victorian houses were prestige premises. Some reflected the Italianate and classical fashion. Wall cranes and loading bays for furniture to be hoisted up can be seen. The increased production skills, larger cast iron beams and rolled steel joists meant larger factories and warehouses could be built, with metal frames. 91-101 Worship Street is a valuable survival of a Phillip Webb industrial terrace, designed in 1863. Webb was a close friend of William Morris and was instrumental in the Arts and Crafts movement; this

emphasised the need for honesty of construction and materials. There were workshops, with living accommodation above.

Other historic buildings include 17-21 Pitfield Street, early 19th century with earlier building behind. 2 and 4 Paul Street are mid 19th century. The Church of St Michael, Mark Street, was designed by the eminent architect James Brooks in 1863-65, with clergy house and Sunday school of 1870. No. 87 Great Eastern Street is third quarter of the 19th century. 6-8 Garden Walk including 32 Rivington Street was the Shoreditch electricity generating station, 1905-7 by the London County Council to serve the LCC tramway system.

15-23 Christopher Street is an early 19th century terrace of four storeys and basement. 24 Curtain Road is early 18th century. 128 and 132 Curtain Road are late 18th – early 19th century. 180-2 Shoreditch High Street 1865-80, Italianate, partly of steel-framed construction.

190 Shoreditch High Street is an early 18th century house and No. 91 has an early 19th century front on an earlier building. No. 196 is early 18th century. They are examples of premises where tradesmen lived, manufactured and retailed in the same building.

The Police Court opposite the Town Hall was built in 1903 by J. Dixon Butler. Shoreditch Town Hall was built in 1866 by C.A. Long with 1902 extension. 340 and 342 Old Street are early 18th century.

Charles Booth in “Life and Labour of the People in London” of 1902 gave the following description:

“The character of the whole locality is working-class. Poverty is everywhere, with a considerable admixture of the very poor and vicious ... Large numbers have been and are still being displaced by the encroachment of warehouses and factories ... Hoxton is known for its costers and Curtain criminals, for its furniture trade ... No servants are kept except in the main Road shopping streets and in a few remaining middle class squares in the west”.

Booth said there were areas of high poverty, prostitution and thieves. Many women were home-workers and many came from outside to work. There were many lodging houses, “even though the advantages of the situation are largely counter balanced by an evil reputation for poverty and vice and the absence of open spaces”. There were some model dwellings, taller than the typical Shoreditch dwellings of 2 storeys. “The great change during the last 10 years has been the displacement of dwelling houses by warehouses and factories, the last to leave the more central parts being the very poor or the inhabitants of model dwellings. (They) have been forced further afield, often going as far as Tottenham or Walthamstow”.

Charles Dickens knew the area and visited it sometimes when he walked the streets for inspiration for his works. Mr Micawber lived at Windsor Terrace, City Road (now demolished) and Oliver Twist lived in South Shoreditch.

In the twentieth century, the population of Shoreditch decreased to 119,000 in 1901, going to 80,000 in 1939. The Metropolitan Line opened from the 1860s and the Northern Line from the 1890s (under different names) and were later extended. Cheaper tram and railway fares meant workers could live in the Lea Valley, for example. Before and during the inter-war period, there was great demand for cheaper mass-produced furniture. Firms moved north and south of Shoreditch in order to build larger premises. Workers moved with them, and those that stayed tended to specialise in higher quality work. The furniture trade declined from the 1960s.

However, even in the 1930s a survey found that 10.2 per cent of people lived more than three to a room. Birth, death rates and infant deaths were amongst the highest in East London. However, the area had not attracted voluntary social effort as other deprived Boroughs.

In recent years, office developments associated with the City of London have grown into the Shoreditch area, due to the pressure of space and lower overheads. The Broadgate development was the largest of such developments in Europe.

Kay Owen
Planning Division
August 1991

PCUAAK