

# The urban village

Once a swathe of bucolic landscape desired by London's elite, Hackney is now one of the city's most cosmopolitan and diverse boroughs, finds Carla Passino

**W**ALKING down Mare Street, vibrant even in these days of restrictions, it's hard to reconcile today's Hackney with pictures from the past. Shop-lined roads were once babbling streams, pubs were market gardens and this bastion of hip, edgy, urban creativity was a remote village where people retreated for a taste of idyllic countryside. But then, few places have changed more over time than this corner of East London.

According to local lore, the small settlement that sprang up along the Roman roads to Lincoln and Colchester owes its name to a Danish chief called Hacon, whose eye—islet—this was. No trace remains of this early history, but some medieval records indicate that the Knights Templars owned about 110 acres in the Hackney Marshes and built some mills on the River Lea—hence today's Temple Mills. The village's first parish church, St Augustine, was named after the Templars' patron saint.

At about this time, Hackney was becoming increasingly popular with wealthy Londoners,

who prized its fresh air and beautiful countryside. Among the early settlers was Sir Ralph Sadleir, a common man who rose to prominence as Henry VIII's Principal Secretary of State. In 1535, he built himself the exquisite Sutton House, now a National Trust property.

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The history of Sutton House mirrors Hackney's social changes. As the middle classes began arriving in the mid 18th century, it was split into two properties and, for about 100 years, the west wing became home to a silk-weaving Huguenot family, one of the many that had sought refuge in East London. Then, as now, the village was a tolerant place that

welcomed not only the Huguenots, but also a Jewish community, people of African descent (parish records speak of an Anthony that lived to the ripe old age of 105, dying in 1630) and, later, the Windrush generation and Turkish, Kurdish and Vietnamese immigrants, among others. A particularly notable incomer was Joachim Conrad Loddiges, a German gardener who opened an exotic-plant nursery in the 1770s. Beating Kew Gardens by more than 20 years, Mr Loddiges went on to build a Grand Palm House, which so struck a visitor that he wrote to *The Gardener's Magazine* in 1829: 'All that I had before seen of the kind appeared nothing to me compared with this. I fancied myself in the Brazils.'

But the tranquil village studded with water-cross beds was soon to morph into a busy part of the city, as the advent of the horse-drawn omnibus and, later, the railway, opened up development opportunities. Advertisements for Hackney properties from 1871 highlight the presence of mod cons such as an 'indoor wash-house', 'hot and cold-water baths' and ►



## EAST LITTLE BLACK BOOK

### Mahala

A quirky shop selling ethically made homeware, accessories and clothing (261, Well Street, E9)

### The Broadway Bookshop

'A wonderful place to spend a few hours,' says Christian Eldershaw (6, Broadway Market, E8)

### E5 Bakehouse

The best sourdough in London, according to Daniel Woods of Savills (396, Mentmore Terrace, E8)

### The Marksman

This excellent pub is famous for its Sunday roasts (254, Hackney Road, E2)



The modern hipster image of Hackney is reflected in venues such as The Dining Room, Mare Street Market

Alamy; Getty

the omnipresent 'Venetian blinds', which were a hit with the middle class. The construction frenzy came at a cost, not least to the Loddiges nursery, the lease of which ran out in the mid 19th century. Many of its magnificent palms found safe haven at Crystal Palace, including one that might have previously belonged to Joséphine Bonaparte: it was so massive that it required a team of 32 horses to be conveyed across the length of London to Sydenham.

Although the Victorians made Hackney urban, they also gave it one of its most cherished parks. Opened in 1845, Victoria Park now belongs to Tower Hamlets, but it's very much part of Hackney's history. Not only did its 'pleasant arrangement of walks, shrubberies, green turf, gay flowers and shady trees' provide welcome respite for local families, but it was also the backdrop to an unusual pastime: miniature-yacht sailing, with toy boats whitening the surface of the lake and competing for prizes, according to Edward Walford's *Old and New London*.

The same joyous atmosphere fills the park today, with its boating lake, Chinese Pagoda and Sunday market standing testament to a hard-fought renaissance that followed

the Second World War's heavy bombing and the difficult post-war decades. Hackney itself, too, suffered enormously: local factories disappeared fast and the area was plunged into poverty. However, this void was progressively filled by the Arts, with creative people attracted by the combination of warehouse-like spaces, low rents and a free-thinking culture (at Sutton House, which had fallen into disrepair, squatters painted murals, opened a community centre and held concerts in the barn). Music venues and art studios mushroomed across the former village, past residents of which range from Sid Vicious to Hollywood superstar Idris Elba.

The culture scene is as lively today, according to Christian Eldershaw, of estate agent Mr & Mrs Clarke. Music, in particular, 'is hugely important to the area; communities evolve around record shops and independent radio stations such as Netil Radio in London Fields'. This, together with colourful street art, cocktail bars and markets old and new—from the indoor Mare Street Market to Victorian Broadway Market and, just across the borough border, the Columbia Road Flower Market—has fuelled Hackney's rise to top

#### THE UPS AND DOWNS

Residents love Hackney's friendliness and 'anything-goes attitude', according to agent Christian Eldershaw

**Residents like 'being able to get into town easily, as well as being away from the hustle and bustle,' according to agent Daniel Woods. Parks provide a welcome escape: the bravest enjoy bracing winter swims in the London Fields lido**

Residents are acutely aware of the social inequality across the borough, notes Mr Eldershaw

hipster destination, a label that sits uneasily with some locals. Nonetheless, the area retains its village spirit. 'I like to think of Hackney as a community of communities, a thriving, dynamic and ever-evolving group of people from all over the world, of all ages,' says Mr Eldershaw. 'It's the friendliest place I know in London and the centre of my universe.' 🐾

## At home in Hackney



### Richmond Road, £2.2 million

Perfect for those who crave green space, this semi-detached Victorian house backs onto London Fields. The 2,200sq ft interiors include five bedrooms across the top two floors, plus, downstairs, a magnificent double reception room with original wooden flooring and working fireplace on the first floor. Situated on the ground floor is a large open-plan kitchen and dining area, which gives access to the private terrace and garden. *Dexters* (020-7247 2440; [www.dexters.co.uk](http://www.dexters.co.uk))



### Graham Road, £4 million

Built in 1890, this end-of-terrace house has been renovated by WPG Architects and João Botelho, who created a mix of period and contemporary across the 3,000sq ft interiors. Living areas brim with details, from marble fireplaces to the lighting, combining pieces by John Cullen and Buster & Punch with 1930s chandeliers. The three bedrooms upstairs include the master suite with a terrace and there's a self-contained two-bedroom apartment on the lower ground floor. *Hamptons International* (020-7226 4688; [www.hamptons.co.uk](http://www.hamptons.co.uk))



### Parkholme Road, £1.475 million

This pretty, end-of-terrace house is situated a short walk away from London Fields, Broadway Market and the transport links at Dalston Junction. The 1,761sq ft interiors stretch across four floors, with the kitchen and dining area on the lower ground floor, two reception rooms (one of which has a particularly fine fireplace) and one of the bedrooms on the ground floor and three more bedrooms upstairs. Outside, the garden is the perfect place to eat and relax. *Savills* (020-7241 4111; [www.savills.com](http://www.savills.com))