

‘I’ve seen a photo of a street of terraced houses, and instead of a tarmac road with cars parked down both sides, the road is covered with grass. Some boys were playing football on it. I thought to myself, I want to live on a street like that’

Mavis, 39

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Newham: an A-Z

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Spotted Dogs, strange hieroglyphics, dry-ski slopes and Zoroastrians... A walk through the streets of Newham throws up the most unexpected details

Aeroplanes announce Newham to the approaching traveller as they steeply climb and bank above this distant and forgotten borough of London. The STOL-jets and prop-planes from the City Airport strain skyward. Nobody looks up: people pay as much attention to these soaring aircraft as they would to a dog barking.

Barking Road, Newham's old commercial spine, was built early in the 19th century to connect the East and West India docks with the river port of Barking. Now it wears the familiar garb of every urban high street: franchise chains and letting agencies, car sale-rooms, pubs and shuttered shops. Here and there the odd 1960s high-rise. Rows of two-storey terraced houses lead off on either side. The Boer War lingers here in pockets – Mafeking Road, Kimberley Road – and little bits of Scotland – Glasgow Road, Tweedmouth Road, Perth Road. Bright doors speak of stubborn house pride: cerise, mauve, moss green, canary.

Canary Wharf's solid blunt obelisk looms everywhere, over house gables, dominating the western horizon, confronting you as you turn corners. Margaret Thatcher's real lasting monument, a concrete and glass hymn to commerce, capitalism and market forces rising heftily, beefily, out of the Isle of Dogs.

Dogs shit freely on Newham's streets as they do throughout London, in Chelsea and Mayfair as well as in Barnet and Peckham. And dogs run free around the estates behind the Barking Road. The few dogs on leashes look at their free-ranging brothers enviously, longing to be released.

East London goes on forever, the great 'other city' within the vast spreading mass of London. Cut off from the west by the office towers of the Square Mile, it runs from Stepney to Dagenham, onwards and onwards. The sluggish flow of traffic on the arterial roads glints in the afternoon sun like the scales of fish.

Fish still swim in Roding Creek, I suppose. One hundred and fifty years ago Barking was a fishing port with over two hundred Barking smacks and a thousand men and boys to man them. Now the northern outfall of London's main drainage decants here at the mouth of Roding Creek where it joins the Thames. The air is rank with the smell of gas.

Gasworks can provide a kind of immortality. Beckton Gasworks are so called after Simon Adams Beck, governor of the Gas Light and Coke Co., who bought the site at East Ham in 1867. Beckton grew and grew and became the largest gasworks in the world. On the map all colours cease at Beckton: it remains white, the gasometers, the tanks and the filter-beds marked as neat rows of circles – strange hieroglyphics.

Hieroglyphics badge Newham's walls today, the graffiti and the tags of the urban young, a form of writing that can be found replicated in Paris, Rio and Manhattan. Tribal markings that defy the local – all seemingly written in the same crazed hand – which are, bizarrely, truly international.

'International cheap phonecalls' proclaims the sign above a shop window, an audacious oxymoron. Indeed, 'international' appears to be a favoured adjective in Newham. 'International hair styling', says another shop window. There is 'International rowing', also, at the regatta centre, and you can pray for your misbegotten soul at

the Amazing Grace International Worship Centre on Barking Road. Two senses of ‘international’ operate here: one is about inclusion – come one, come all – one is about keeping up with the Joneses.

Jones Scrap Metal, at the beginning of Barking Road, is reputedly the biggest in London, which is a not-to-be-sneezed-at claim-to-fame for Canning Town. Another feather in Newham’s cap is the City Airport. Amongst London boroughs only Hounslow can boast a fully-fledged international airport (that word again). You can fly all over Europe from Newham, to Rotterdam and Amsterdam, Paris and Brussels – which is not bad from a borough generally regarded to be on the skids.

Kids mooch around in tatty recreational areas, kids with bikes and skateboards, all colours, all nationalities. The walls and the sheds and garage roofs around them are all crowned with barbed-wire or razor wire or more complicated revolving impediments. Keep kids out, these hostile barriers seem to say, indications of deeper suspicions, no innocence here, a want of love.

Lovage Approach is the new Newham, south of Tollgate Road. Dinky, villagey lanes, with small, clustered brick houses, leaded diamond-paned glass in the windows, porches and dormer-windows, a hotch-potch of domestic styles. Architects creating a ‘community’, here reaching back to their notional roots – reckless pillaging from a catalogue of olde-worlde vernacular styles – as we start the new Millennium.

Millennium Mills still stands, built decades before the Millennium Dome, not so far away. A monument to the borough’s industrial past when the ‘offensive trades’ were ordered out of metropolitan London and were obliged to set up shop in the east along the

Thames. An industrial base almost vanished now, impossible to rebuild or renew.

New City Road turns off Barking Road. A long run of terraced houses. On either side are other identical streets, Kingsland Road, Patrick Road... Avenues of neatly pollarded plane trees, houses built in the 19th century for clerks working in the City. This could be Fulham or Battersea 20 years ago. Now with the new 'villages' proliferating perhaps this is all there is in Newham that is really old.

'Old' Newham never really existed, however. The borough was created in 1965 – the county boroughs of East Ham and West Ham brought together with bits of Plaistow and Woolwich and Upton. 'Ham' means low-lying pasture.

Pasture is hard to find today. There are angular bits of waste ground, thick with buddleia and rose-bay willow-herb, abandoned tracts of land between spur roads and the wire-mesh walls of tyre depots and scrap-metal merchants. Strangely, along the Royal Albert Dock Spine Road there is a sudden profusion of allotments, well tended. Things are growing here: runner-beans and potatoes, lettuce and cabbages. Prince Albert would be pleased, I think, to see such husbandry and enterprise, and so would his Queen.

Queen Victoria's presence still leaves a marked trace. All the royal docks are in the borough. Her own Victoria Dock, her husband's Albert Dock, and her grandson's dock, George V. The City Airport sits between Albert and George like an aircraft-carrier moored in a wide placid river.

River views are distant ones in Newham. The docks dominate the river here: huge wind-flurried rectangles of water reflecting the

turbulent skyscape. And the sewage jetties and the sludge piers of Beckton hog the river bank at Gallions Reach as the Thames's northern meander turns east again. From a spine road you can catch a glimpse of the scalloped towers of the Thames Flood Barrier, shining like burnished steel.

Steel shutters on modest shops – newsagents, electrical goods – tell you something about a place. Many shops selling second-hand furniture tell you something about a place. But just when you think you have Newham sited in its demographic circle of hell you see the dry-ski run – the Beckton Alps Ski Centre – and the Asda superstore. The contrasts abound: pie and mash for sale and McDonald's Drive-Thru; boarded-up, torched flats and bijou pseudo-villages. And everywhere streets bulging with traffic.

Traffic lights in Newham seem set longer than anywhere else in London. 'The borough doesn't like motorists,' a minicab driver confides. The wait seems to go on forever. And look at all the speed-bumps. Yet most people's view of the place is from a car – passing through, heading east or west, on a spine road or a flyover – or from the tall gantries of the Docklands Light Railway. Rare names appear which ring a distinct bell – West Ham, of course – and others that provoke fainter recognitions – Custom House, Silvertown (can there be a place in London called Silvertown?), Canning Town and Upton.

Upton Park, it is hard to believe, had – in the 18th century – a botanic garden second only to Kew, hence its name. It is famous now for being home to West Ham F.C., for some of the worst housing in Europe and for the Spotted Dog, the oldest pub in the borough, which dates from the 16th century. The Spotted Dog – *ave atque vale*.

'Valediction forbidding mourning.' Can there be a stranger borough in London? Can there be images of the city more dramatically bleak and excitingly futuristic? The wind seems keener and fiercer in Newham than elsewhere in London, tugging at you as it rushes from across the North Sea and the Thames estuary, hurrying on its giant flotilla of dark rain clouds, spinnakering westwards. Stand on the dockside at the City Airport and watch the planes lift off for Frankfurt and Bruges, your eye momentarily held by the flashing light at the tip of Canary Wharf, your ear catching the rumble of a train on the elevated trackways of the DLR – as you turn you note the precisely angled slope of the dry-ski run and the bright stacked apartments of a new village-cluster and, behind you, the fuming steel ziggurat that is the Tate & Lyle sugar factory. Some sort of weird rejuvenation is happening here out in the east of London, however surreal. The mineral rain spits on your face, abrading your cheeks gently, as with a fine steel-wool.

Woolwich, or to be more precise, North Woolwich, forms the southern most portion of the borough, and, because the rest of Woolwich was south of the river – in Kent – it was known, until it was amalgamated into Newham, as 'Kent in Essex'.

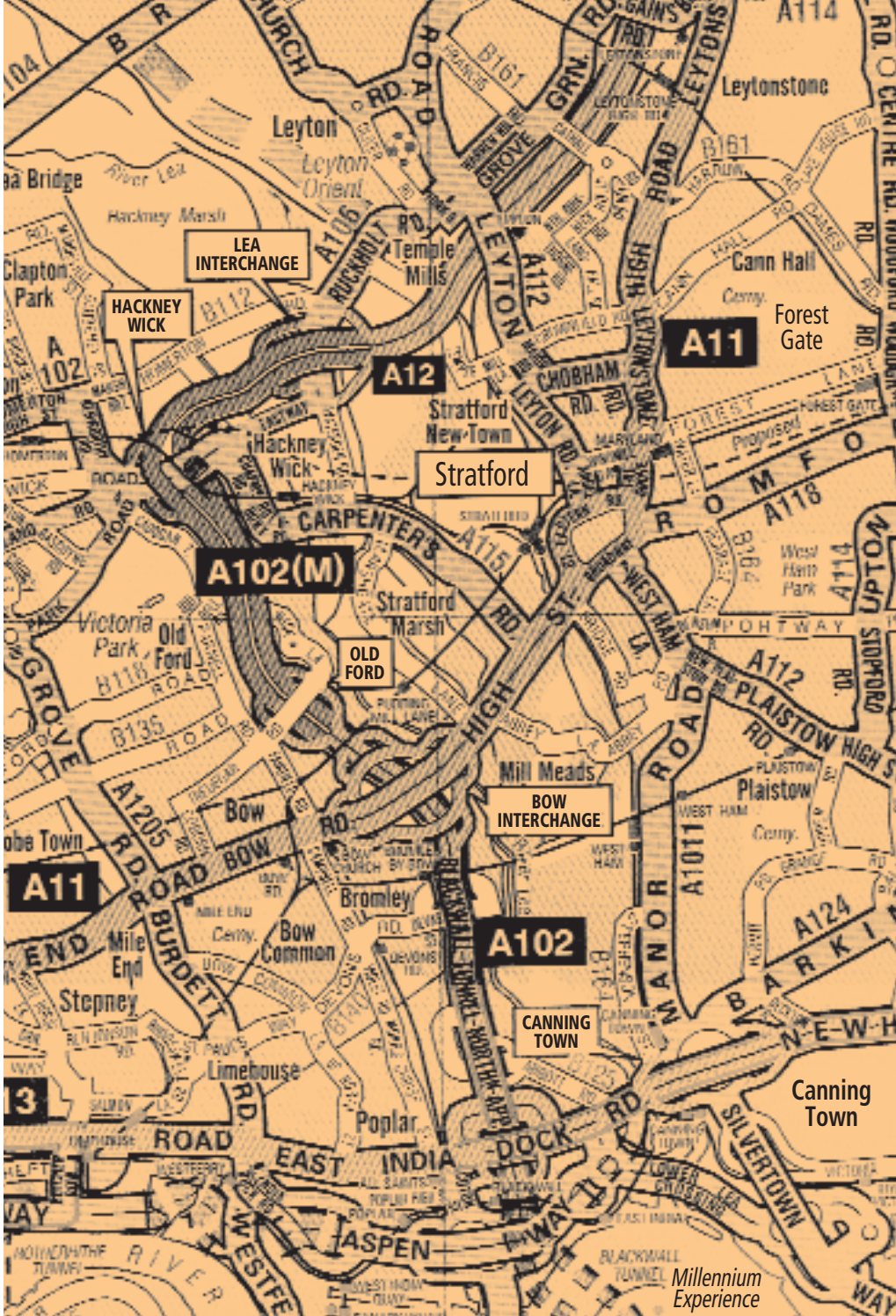
Xeroxing a map of Newham and noticing how it is composed of so many real places with real histories made me realise how artificial a construct it is. So I suggest we should abandon its current pronunciation, the apologetic half-swallowed mumble of 'newum', and boldly re-christen it New Ham, which, along with the ancient low-lying meadows of East and West Ham, might give the place a sense of continuity and a kind of validity – make it seem less young.

Young boroughs lack traditions, lack a sense of community.

Newham has existed for only 35 years. West Ham, by contrast, is an ancient parish and was even a parliamentary borough in 1855, and, moreover, one that played a significant role in the history of socialism. Keir Hardie was elected Labour MP for West Ham South in 1892. Neville Chamberlain suspended its Board of Guardians in 1926 for what the government regarded as over-generous poor relief. What can youthful Newham offer in terms of history and tradition that won't seem wholly *ersatz*?

Zoroastrianism may seem an unlikely notion, even a facetious one, but Newham and its agglomeration of parishes and county boroughs has always been a home to non-conformity and pluralism. There were over a hundred non-conformist chapels of all denominations at the turn of the century; there were Quaker meeting houses in Plaistow in the 17th century and the borough still boasts two convents and two friaries. I'm sure that today any passing Zoroastrian would receive a warm welcome in Amazing Grace's International Worship Centre on Barking Road. You look around at all the contrasts and contradictions of the place and have to conclude that, whatever its difficulties, its transformations and its deprivations, the real and enduring spice in Newham's life has always been its ineffable, unrivalled and bewildering variety.

William Boyd's latest novel is *Armadillo* (Penguin, £6.99)



LEA INTERCHANGE

HACKNEY WICK

A12

A11

A102(M)

Stratford

OLD FORD

BOW INTERCHANGE

A11

A102

CANNING TOWN

3

Millennium Experience