

NEW LIFE FOR THE LEE

Our Suggestions on how Newham's overgrown and underrated part of The Lee Valley could best serve East London



Newham Lee Valley Forum 1984

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Front cover : The River Lee at Old Ford

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The Lea Valley Federation (re-formed in 2009) is a coalition of environmental and community groups and individuals campaigning to protect the Lee Valley Park as a “green lung” for London.
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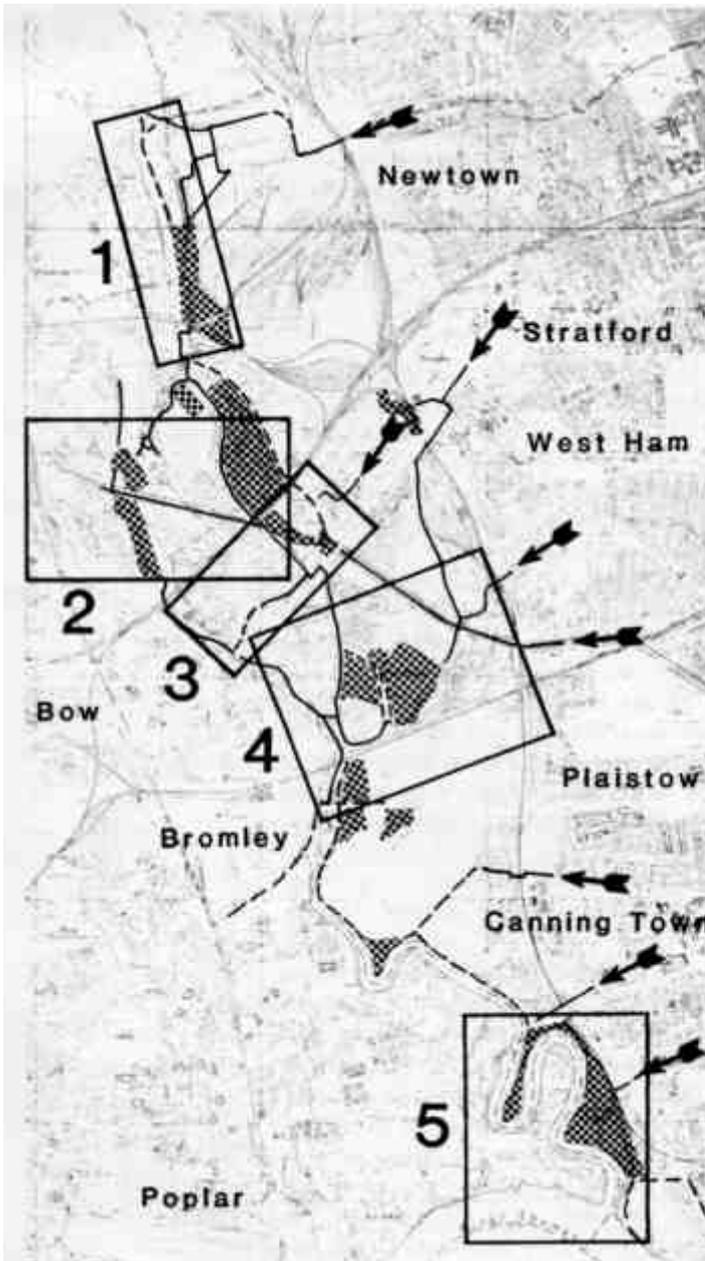
Introduction

- 1.1 The Lee Valley Regional Park has been in existence for seventeen years. Although the Regional Park Authority, who plan and run the park, have provided several large sports centres further north, the full potential of the park as a "green lung" stretching 23 miles from the Inner City into Hertfordshire has not been realised. Newham's share of the park has remained largely neglected and abandoned by everyone involved, with the result that it meets neither regional nor local needs.
- 1.2 The Park Authority is now in the middle of a review of the original Master Plan and has asked the public for suggestions on what they would like in the Park. Early in 1984 Newham Council agreed to set up the Newham Lee Valley Forum, through which anyone in Newham, whether they belong to an organised group or not, are able to get together and put forward ideas for Newham's Lee Valley.
- 1.3 Over several months public walks, discussions and working meetings have been held by the Forum and this booklet sets out the suggestions that have been made. The Forum's main objectives have been to get more people to visit and think about the Lee, and to suggest realistic projects which will actually improve Newham's Lee Valley. The suggestions are not final and we hope they will spark off more ideas, and encourage people to help make improvements happen. The booklet is directed also to Newham Council and to the Park Authority, as the Forum's response to the Park's "Development Options Report", which came out in 1983.

The Objectives

- 2.1 Newham, like its neighbours beside the Lee, is a densely built-up, Inner City Borough with its fair share of crowded streets, busy roads, concrete and industrial areas. Everyone has a need to get away from the bustle from time to time. The need for a park, open space and passive pursuits is nowhere greater than here and yet almost nothing has been done to make Newham's Lee Valley part of a park. First and foremost, Newham's Lee Valley should be a Park, although we recognise that it will always have a strong industrial character. It has lain forgotten for too long.
- 2.2 Newham's Lee Valley must be made more attractive, with eyesores removed and unused areas properly managed or brought into use. It must be made green where there is now dereliction, and made clean where there is now rubbish, pollution and decay. The task is dauntingly large, but we believe it must be done if Newham is to have a Park to attract people to the Lee. Despite all its present disadvantages, the area contains some strikingly attractive views, for example at Bully Fen, The House Mill from Bow Creek, or the River Lee from Old Ford. With proper, caring management it could provide many more.
- 2.3 Some of us have lived all our lives in Newham without realising until now that these possibilities exist. Newham's Lee Valley must be made more obvious, not only by the improvements that are made, but by involving as many people as possible, from all sections of the community, in making and looking after the improvements. Information must circulate more widely on what is there now and what can be done in future. People must be allowed to feel it is their own.
- 2.4 Newham's Lee Valley must be more accessible, both for people to get to and, once there, to go from place to place. Getting to the Lee Valley must be convenient and signposted from the main centres at Stratford and Rathbone Market, and wherever possible from where people live. Opening the entire length of the Northern Outfall Sewer bank footpath will be the most important, but by no means only link to residential areas. The map shows others. A network of footpaths beside each of the waterways will be as important as linking up with more distant paths, such as the Lee Navigation Towpath to Ware, the Hertford Cut through to the Grand Union Canal, and Limehouse Cut through to Limehouse Basin. Providing a waterside footpath south from Three Mills to the Thames, along Bow Creek, will be the most important of these. Footpaths and cycleways will be more important than bridleways, although even these will be possible in places where there is sufficient room.
- 2.5 Newham's Lee Valley must be extended. Even within the limited part of Newham designated as Regional Park there are areas to which the public do not have access. Vacant or redundant land in or adjoining the park, whoever owns it, should be landscaped and included in the park with public access : other future uses should be discouraged. But to realise the River Lee's full potential for all the people of Newham, land and access must be provided outside the designated boundary, particularly down past the A.13 to the Thames.

Access and Pathways



Improved Access



Existing Paths



Proposed Path



Land to be Opened to Public



Local Suggestions

- | | |
|---|----------|
| Bully Fen | 1 |
| Old Ford | 2 |
| City Mill, Waterworks and Bow Back Rivers | 3 |
| Three Mills and Mill Meads | 4 |
| Bow Creek | 5 |

What should be done?

3.1 Most of Newham's Lee Valley is now under-used, misused, vacant or decaying. Nevertheless it does contain vested interests in the form of existing uses or activities, legal and illicit, or existing owners – particularly public bodies – who wish to reserve their position for the future rather than meet the local community's present needs. The vision of the Lee Valley Park as a slice of countryside reaching deep into the city can eventually be achieved and will greatly benefit each locality through which it passes. We do not believe that the regional vision need conflict at all with providing a park to meet key local needs. If there is to be an effective regional park for Newham, however, there are certain key features which must be pursued vigorously and not left to chance.

3.2 **Waterways**

The unifying feature of the Lee Valley is its water. For Newham, with not only the many waterways associated with the Lee, but also the Docks, the Thames and the Roding, this theme should be strong. In fact the waterways are poorly maintained, inaccessible and little used except by anglers. Use of waterways should be developed, both commercially and for leisure purposes, for sporting and for residential use. The waterways and their equipment, which are now deteriorating rapidly, should be restored so that water levels are maintained, channels dredged and kept clear and boat traffic increased. The quality of the water should be improved particularly around industrial premises. Access for boats to the water, particularly canoes and rowing boats, should be easier, with premises provided for clubs wishing to use the river. We should try to reintroduce a commercial boatyard and associated trades into industrial premises beside the river. More, and better moorings should be provided and it should be possible for people to hire rowing or day boats, by the hour or by the day. Greater use of the water will need to be accompanied by effective safety precautions.

3.3 **Wildlife**

Wildlife in the city is recognised more and more as an important feature of urban life. The Lee Valley is unrivalled in East London as a green corridor for bringing wildlife to the heart of the city. 18 different species of butterfly have been recorded at Old Ford and well over 30 species of birds at Mill Meads; there are probably 200 species of plants and several thousand species of insects. 'Town parks' in the surrounding areas may serve an undeniable local need for recreation, but they are wholly unsuited to the range of wildlife found by The Lee. All existing 'green' land in The Lee Valley should be kept as such, with the aim of providing a continuous corridor along the river. Some totally wild areas should be left untouched, but served by pathways. Full species surveys in all parts of the riverside should be followed by proper management plans, which must find the balance between encouraging wildlife and allowing greater public use of The Lee Valley.

3.4 **Local History**

The Newham section of The Lee Valley has a unique archaeological and historical record. The historical development of waterways, railways, ship-building and many industrial processes, as well as the associated housing, are unusually well illustrated. The best, but by no means only example, and one which is unfortunately in an alarming state of decay, is The House Mill at Three Mills. All the area's historical evidence, backed by an active local history library and museum, is a resource that should be developed for local people, schools and national historians alike.

3.5 **Interpretation**

If we are to use Newham's Lee Valley to the full, we must learn to care for it. To get people involved in the area, the best things need to be presented in a way which captures people's interest. Not only must access be provided, but people must be encouraged to visit their park, with the most interesting features highlighted in booklets or walk notes. How areas of wildlife interest are developing, and the way they are managed and protected must be explained, particularly for school parties. Local history extends far beyond the Three Mills area and is still being made. Even the smallest detail can unlock enthusiasm. The area's identity must be projected with information and signposts and protected with sensitive management, litter bins and litter collection, and people's respect.

3.6 **Links**

Changing the way an area serves the local community inevitably involves weighing up the advantages of alternative activities. In many cases different activities, such as boating and angling, can exist side by side, and this can lead people from an interest in one activity to an interest in another. Sometimes, however, activities are incompatible, for example where fences prevent access, or where noise and danger from motorbikes take over an otherwise peaceful area. The local suggestions in the next section try to make sure that anyone with a legitimate interest, whether they be walkers or ecologists, boaters or anglers, local businesses, historians, allotments, school kids, cyclists-or anyone else- can enjoy at least part, if not all of our Lee Valley Park.

Bully Fen – from Temple Mill Lane to Carpenters Road



"We heard the croaking of pheasants coming from the long grass around Hennikers Ditch; goldfinches flew over us on Bully Fen, landing amongst the profusion of wild plants on the bank of the Lee where they feed on the seeds; a rabbit ran towards the river bank and disappeared into the cover there. Our dog started barking and straining at its leash to get down one of a number of holes half-hidden amongst the brambles. A cuckoo was calling close by, and we saw linnets sitting on the allotment fences as we talked to one of the plot-holders."

This important green corridor links Hackney Marshes with Newham's forgotten waterways. Under no circumstances should it be built over; most of the area is wild. It should be safeguarded as a habitat for wildlife, butterflies, kingfishers, water voles and many others. Dominant species, such as Japanese Knotweed or Giant Hogweed, should be controlled. More trees, of native species, such as Alders, Willows and Birches should be planted in copses throughout the area.

A new riverside footpath should link Hackney Marshes and Old Ford and will need to cross the Channelsea and the railway. The nature walk should be extended into areas now inaccessible, with a bridge over the Channelsea sluice.

Access should be provided to the River Lea, for canoes and rowboats, to the south of Temple Mill Road, perhaps including a small boat-house.

Most of Bully Fen itself should be managed as a meadow mown once a year. Regularly mown paths, riverside seats and picnic tables, could make the area a delightful place to spend time.

Paths

- (a) Footpath across to Hackney Marshes
- (b) Link to Temple Mill Lane, and New Town
- (c) New Riverside path south from Temple Mill Lane to Carpenters Road
- (d) Access across river by existing private bridge
- (e) New bridge across Channelsea
- (f) New bridge or level crossing over railway lines
- (g) Footpath through to Old Ford
- (h) Links to existing Nature Walk
- (i) New bridge across Channelsea
- (j) Extension of nature walk to newly accessible areas

Activities

- A Boat hut, with pontoon for canoes and rowing boats
- B Mown grass to water's edge, with seating
- C Picnic Area, with tables
- D Meadows, mown once a year
- E Wild areas, down to water's edge
- F Existing allotments
- G Wild areas, with nature walk
- H Hackney Stadium, ideal site for a velodrome

Old Ford



Old Ford, with its working lock, is one of the highlights of Newham's Lee Valley; a green oasis with some strikingly attractive views in otherwise completely industrial surroundings. The views and wildlife habitats should be preserved and improved and managed to allow limited public access. The lock area itself should be improved. This fits in with the Park Authority's proposals.

There is also scope for introducing more activity to Old Ford, so that people will visit and enjoy the waterside. There could be a small kiosk for teas and soft drinks, with somewhere to sit, perhaps somewhere to display traditional crafts such as blacksmithing or coopering. There could be boating or even residential moorings so long as they are unobtrusive and will not disrupt their surroundings.

Activities that will involve Tower Hamlets communities and stop the area from becoming deserted in the evenings, such as a youth centre on the west bank of the Lee, should be investigated. Unfortunately the area is not suitable for motorbiking, and steps are needed to direct this activity elsewhere.

Several opportunities should be taken to include areas of derelict or underused land; the most important of these, if it became available, would be British Rail's Thornton Fields sidings which stretch from the City Mill riverside to the Waterworks riverside.

Paths

- (a) Start of sewer bank path, Wick Lane
- (b) Existing access to Fish Island
- (c) Existing towing path north to Hertford
- (d) Path to be reopened from Old Ford to Carpenters Road
- (e) New riverside path from Knobs Hill Road to River Lee
- (f) Limited public access to area managed for wildlife
- (g) Sewer bank path to cross main railway, linking through to Stratford and Beckton
- (h) Existing towing path to be extended south to the Thames

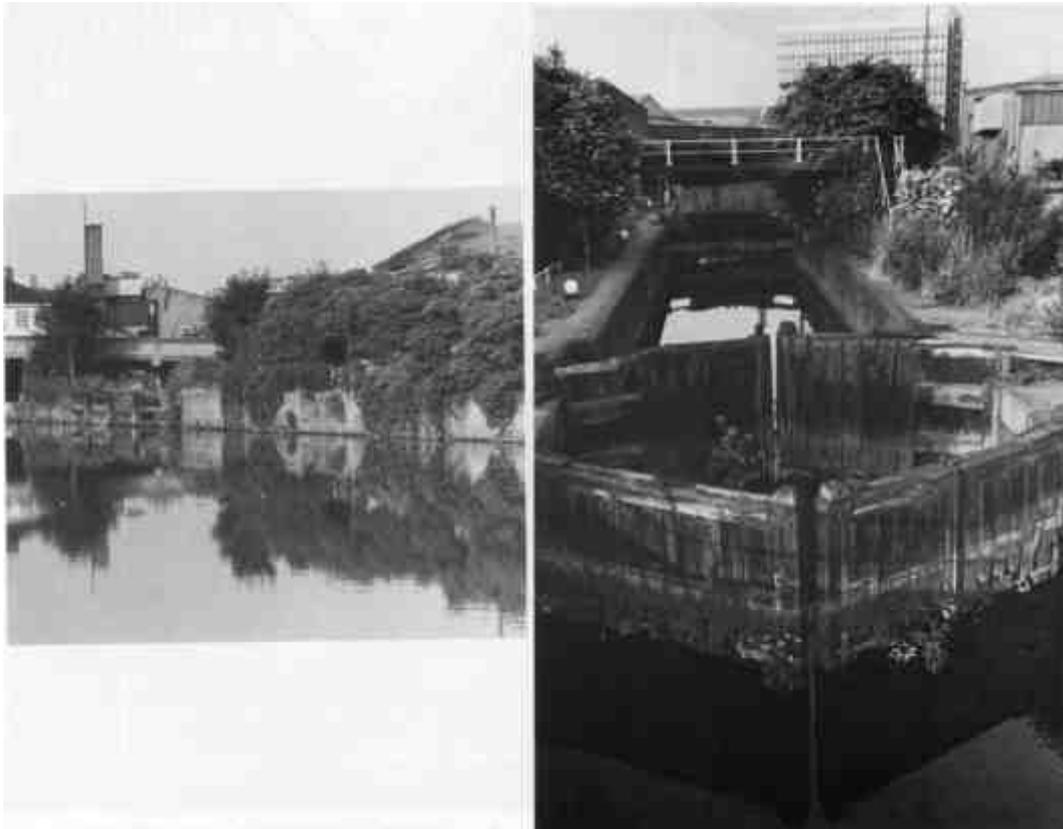
Improvements

- 1. Make sewer bank entrance obvious; exclude motor bikes
- 2. Improve immediate surroundings to lock
- 3. Clean up Pudding Mill River, particularly at mouth
- 4. Use or move abandoned barge
- 5. Trees to screen QMC buildings
- 6. Planting to brighten up sewer bank path
- 7. Trees or shrubs to screen railway from sewer bank
- 8. Screen scrap metal yard in sidings on west bank

Activities

- A Kiosk for teas and soft drinks, with places to sit; displays of traditional crafts
- B Manage as wild life area, with some public access
- C Possible locations for unobtrusive boating facilities; canoeing, residential moorings etc
- D Public recreation with planting of native trees : exclude motor cycles and intrusive or dangerous activities
- E Derelict land brought into use as open space
- F Derelict land next to sewer bank, perhaps for youth centre or animal grazing
- G B.R sidings beside Navigation should be opened to the waterside, with places to sit and better link to sewer bank
- H If Thornton Fields sidings could be released by B.R, the area should be urgently included in Newham's Lee Valley as open space

City Mill, Waterworks and Bow Back Rivers



At the heart of Newham's Lee Valley is this network of forgotten waterways, last restored in the 1930's and now decaying. They are an asset unrivalled in the Lee. Keeping them open and encouraging their use must be a priority; channels must be kept clear, lock equipment and sluices repaired, particularly at City Mill Lock and downstream at Prestcott sluices, to maintain the water level. Boating facilities should be provided, moorings, access for rowing boats and canoes, trips and boat hire.

Beside the waterways and along the sewer bank is an equally important network of footpaths which could offer circular walks on many possible routes rather than along just a single path beside the Lee Navigation; and even that route is completely severed at Bow flyover, where a safe footbridge should be provided. All existing paths should be kept open and more should be provided. A footpath and cycleway along the sewer bank, across the main railway, will be a vital link between the riverside area and where people live.

Making the most of the Lee Valley calls for prompt action when opportunities arise – such as the triangle of derelict land between Bridgewater Road and the sewer bank. Public activities here should make use of the footpath, cycleway, water and towpath that border it.

Paths

- (a) Waterworks riverside path to be restored from Sewer Bank to River Lee, removing obstructions.
- (b) Access from path to Biggerstaff Road.
- (c) Proper signposted access from High St to Sewer bank.
- (d) Sewer bank path to cross main railway linking through to Wick Lane and Victoria Park.
- (e) City Mill riverside path to be maintained from Blaker Road to River Lee.
- (f) Bow Back riverside path extended from Pudding Mill Lane to the navigation.
- (g) Safe and continuous crossing over Bow Flyover to be provided, to integrate Navigation footpath.
- (h) Path along sewer bank to link with residential areas.
- (i) Path along Three Mills Wall River, to Three Mills.

Not Shown

- (j) Public access provided across B.R bridge from Warton Road to Thornton Fields.

Improvements

1. Tree planting to screen Bridgewater Road factories from open area and for wildlife management.
2. Planting on sewer bank to establish green identity, particularly at High St entrance.
3. Major restoration of City Mill Lock and surrounding buildings.
4. Lay out vacant site as garden area and water views.

Not Shown

5. Limit nuisance from rubbish and water pollution caused by firms.
6. Clean up water and riverbanks of Channelsea by Stratford town centre, possibly with artificial increase in water flow, and allow limited public access.

Activities

- A Derelict land brought into use; rubbish clearance, selective planting and wildlife, picnic area, river access.
- B Development of City Mill for leisure moorings, perhaps using a redundant factory building.

Three Mills and Mill Meads



This area would contribute more than any other to the regional and local attractions of Newham's Lee Valley, but unbelievably, this opportunity is slipping away. The 1776 House Mill, the most important of only six in the country, is deteriorating fast. Public bodies have talked for 12 years about restoration to create a museum of industrial archaeology, but the decaying building is getting beyond repair. The urgency to save this building is obvious, the inaction inexcusable.

Three Mills Sports Centre is nearly always locked and inaccessible, and so serves little local purpose. As much of the area as possible should be open to the non-paying public, with access to waterside paths, rather than putting up more buildings within secure boundaries. A camping area would not be appropriate.

A large number of smaller projects could greatly improve the setting of this Conservation Area; climbing plants to cover bare flank walls; repainting gas holders in their original livery; trees and shrubs to screen the unsightly Chemical Works; more open fencing around the attractive Abbey Mill pumping station; even murals in places.

Three Mills is an ideal place to reintroduce boating activities, including canoeing, rowing boats and berthing of barges, and Prestcott Sluices should be restored to help maintain water levels upstream.

Mill Meads is the area of greatest ecological interest in all of Newham's Lee Valley, with over 30 species of birds recorded recently in an area that has long been accessible to all. At a time when the habitats are becoming established and interest growing, Thames Water recently obliterated large areas of Mill Meads to provide a temporary pipe store, and have erected an unsightly concrete fence to deny public access to the remainder for which they have uncertain plans for future development. The area's ecological interest and public access to it must be protected now and in the future, and more building resisted.

Words alone have not saved Three Mills and Mill Meads, they need urgent action.

Paths

- (a) New riverside path through open space
- (b) New riverside path to Bisson Road (needs allotmenters' agreement)
- (c) Public path kept away from sensitive reed beds
- (d) Network of paths within Mill Meads
- (e) New riverside access from Tesco's to the railway

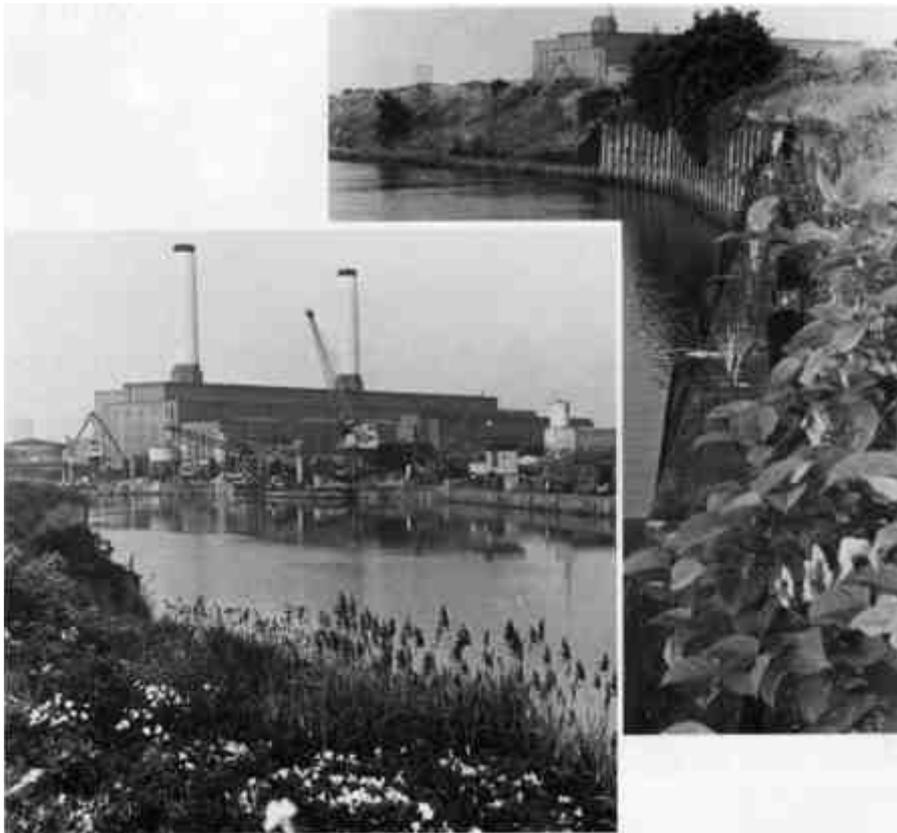
Activities

- A Save House Mill as Museum
- 8 Open Three Mills Centre as public waterside park
- C Improve allotment boundaries within pathway network
- D Manage Millmeads as wild area with some public access. Three Mills School might be used as a study centre
- E Establish bird sanctuary on island and limit access to reed beds
- F Boat hire, seating and landscaping, in conjunction with Museum
- G Berths for Thames barges
- H Reopen coal wharf for boating use if water quality permits
- I Direct water access for canoes and small boats if water quality permits

Improvements

1. More shrubs and greenery from Three Mills to Bow locks
2. More welcoming access to House Mill
3. Remove coffer dam, rubbish and superfluous structures to integrate water views
4. Remove concrete fence beside towpath
5. Improve Long Wall path, drainage and flank walls
6. Brighten up large, plain flank walls to buildings
7. Restore Prestcott Sluices
- B. Extensive trees and shrubs to screen the railway and Chemical Works from Bow Creek to the Outfall Sewer
9. Maintain Channelsea navigation to Abbey Road, south east of island
10. More shrubs and small trees on or beside outfall sewer bank

Bow Creek – from Three Mills to The River Thames



Below Bow Locks, the river widens to a series of broad curves, a large area of tidal water that lies outside the regional park. Bow Creek is mainly industrial, with commercial river traffic still regularly seen.

A new riverside footpath should link Three Mills with the Thames, along the entire length of Bow Creek. In the industrial areas, the waters edge should always be reserved for public access. Derelict land at the mouth of The Lee should be safeguarded to provide a green gateway to Newham's Lee Valley. It should not be used to provide more industry, which could just as well be put on other land near by.

This green area, planted with copses of trees and managed as a semi-wild area, could provide a piece of open countryside rich in wildlife and accessible to the dense housing estates south of the A.13 and to Rathbone Market.

Given suitable screening by trees, part of this area offers the only reasonable location in Newham's Lee Valley for a permanent kids' motorbiking track. Next to the North Woolwich railway line it might not encroach on the waterside but could be combined with clubhouse and bike maintenance workshop. This should be investigated.

Paths

- (a) New riverside path beside Bow Creek, linking to Three Mills.
- (b) New riverside path around Limmo peninsula, with suitable safety measures above river walls.
- (c) New access from Tower Hamlets, using disused railway bridge.
- (d) Signed access from Rathbone Market to Lee Valley.
- (e) Riverside path from A13 down to Lee Mouth.
- (f) New footbridge across railway, from Limmo to Keir Hardie estate.
- (g) New path through Victoria Dock, to Beckton District Park, Outfall Sewer and Beckton Alps.

Not Shown

- (h) Access to riverside path from Cody Road.

Improvements

- 1. Tree planting to screen factory and flyover.
- 2. Tree planting to screen factories and N. Woolwich railway.
- 3. Tree planting to screen possible motorbike area.
- 4. Planting of native tree species in copses to create visual and wildlife interest.

Activities

- A Thames vantage point with seating and information on The Lee.
- B Possible kids' motorbike area, for investigation.
- C Semi-wild area, managed to encourage wildlife.
- D Lee vantage point with seating, etc.
- E Riverside open space off E. India Dock Road.

Not Shown

- F Limited access to reed beds by Bromley Coal Dock.
- G Landscaped public park on derelict land between Bromley Gas holders and Bow Creek.
- H Public access, by arrangement, to Bromley Gas Museum.

How will it be done?

5.1 The right to have a regional park belongs collectively to all the communities who share it. The many different aspects of the area and the diversity of interests in it cannot be the sole responsibility of one, rather remote Park Authority. Nor on the other hand can any one local Council, though familiar with the structure and needs of their own communities, act in isolation.

5.2 **Words are not enough**

Setting down suggestions in a booklet, or firm proposals in a Master Plan in themselves achieve very little. The gradual and alarming deterioration of the House Mill at Three Mills, while official discussions and statements of intent to restore it continue, illustrates the point. What is needed is a clear commitment to an agreed programme to provide a park now, not at some vague time in the future. Present opportunities will not remain for long.

5.3 **Involve all public bodies**

Upwards of a dozen public bodies, many not publicly accountable to the local community but owning large areas of land, hold the key to improving Newham's Lee Valley. They include, for example, the Park Authority, the Greater London Council, the London Boroughs of Hackney, Waltham Forest, Tower Hamlets and Newham, British Rail, British Gas, North Thames Gas, the Central Electricity Generating Board, the London Electricity Board, Thames Water, British Waterways Board and even the crown. These bodies must be brought into agreement at the local level, on how the park can cater for Newham's needs.

5.4 **Co-ordinate neighbouring Boroughs**

The arguments for providing a park at the southern end of the Lee are very strong but the Park Authority has not vigorously pursued this in the past. The particular needs of the Inner City Boroughs at the south, particularly where sites straddle borough boundaries, call for much closer working between adjoining boroughs and with the Park Authority than has happened in the past. We hope that Newham Council will take the initiative in liaison at Member level.

5.5 **Involve local firms**

We recognise that Newham's Lee Valley will continue to be industrial in character, and this can be turned to good use not only as part of the area's heritage, but as the source of practical partnership. Much of the area's disused scrubland adjoins firms' premises, or is even owned by local firms. Improving local facilities, removing a blot from the landscape, and being seen to contribute to an important local project are all good reasons a firm might be prepared to make land or money available. We hope that local firms will recognise these opportunities.

5.6 Involve local groups

Large-scale improvements to Newham's Lee Valley, such as buying vacant land, can be covered in the Master Plan. But upgrading the area will depend also upon very many small projects. If Newham's Lee Valley is to be a success, then people in Newham must not only feed in their ideas but see them through and then make use of the area. They must be involved in the collective management of the Lee Valley by local groups, giving each other mutual support. We hope that the ideas in this booklet will encourage other groups, whatever their interest to bring forward their own schemes for parts of the area.

5.7 Involve local schools

The area contains a wealth of material for teachers in Newham's schools – local history, wildlife, practical projects and much more. This should be presented to them in a form convenient to use both for projects and school visits. More importantly, if children are involved in helping to improve Newham's Lee Valley they will grow up knowing what is there. They will be more likely to respect it and to visit it. We hope that Newham's Education Department and the I.L.E.A will recognise this opportunity.

5.8 Create jobs

At a time of high unemployment, improvements to the area can be used to create jobs. Individual schemes for cleaning up or opening up the area could provide short-term jobs working beside voluntary efforts. Permanent proposals for managing projects, or introducing water-based industries, can provide permanent livelihoods. We hope that a programme of job creation can result from our suggestions.

5.9 Co-ordinate help

In view of the complexity of opportunities in the Lee, and the very large number of local groups from all sectors of the community who could be interested in contributing, we believe that much more could be achieved if there were some local co-ordination of effort in the Lee. Several groups are already independently promoting schemes which could be directed to the Lee. Our discussions suggest that many more could play an active part if offered technical or financial support. We hope that Newham Council, as the local authority, will consider ways of providing this support.

Who are we?

The Newham Lee valley Forum, set up in May, 1984 is a group of people who share an interest in Newham's Lee Valley, its many waterways, waterside paths, wildlife and local history. We want more people to know about The Lee and to visit it. We want the area to develop in a way that will compensate for the crowded, built-up areas that surround it. We would like to have your ideas on how Newham's part of The Lee valley could be improved.

The ideas in this booklet have come from the 100 or so people from Newham who have taken part in a series of walks in the area, and in particular from ten or twenty who have met regularly to pool ideas. We hope our suggestions will spark off more ideas.

We would like to thank –

Newham's Leisure and Recreation Committee, for financial help;

The Lee Valley Association, for arranging the first public meeting;

The Passmore Edwards Museum, for somewhere to meet regularly;

Newham's Department of Planning and Architecture, for helping us to get going, and for help with this booklet in particular;

Anyone who has persuaded a friend to visit The Lee Valley.

If you want to find out more about us, have a project in mind for The Lee Valley, or are simply curious about the area, ring us up.

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