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HISTORY OF TOWER HAMLETS
Overview and Key Messages

Section 3 provides an overview of the history of Tower Hamlets, from prehistory to the present day. It identifies the key themes that have had a strong influence on the development of the Borough, and on the heritage that remains today. They provide the foundation of Tower Hamlets’ distinctive character, and make a significant contribution to the Borough’s unique sense of place and identity. These themes inform the priorities for what needs to be protected and enhanced through the Conservation Strategy. They also identify opportunities for alignment with the broader strategic priorities of the Borough.

Tower Hamlets has a long history of maritime and trade activity, migration and change. Shipbuilding was established here by the late 14th century, and by the 19th century the docks were of international importance. The 14th century also saw the first wave of immigration, with the Flemings who introduced hops into the area, leading to the development of the brewing industry. There have been a number of successive waves of immigration since then, including the Huguenots, the Jewish community and, most recently, arrivals from Bangladesh in the mid 20th century. Throughout these developments the Borough has been characterised by a dynamic built environment. There has been a tradition of adaptive re-use, such as at the Old Truman Brewery site, and there has also been change and redevelopment of larger areas. This is particularly well exemplified with the successful regeneration at Canary Wharf, and the establishment of the internationally competitive financial district there.

The themes of maritime and trade activity, and of immigration were critical to the character and evolution of the Borough, and it is important that the heritage associated with these is protected and enhanced if Tower Hamlets is to retain its unique sense of place and identity. The Borough is also characterised by a dynamic built environment and a tradition of adaptive re-use. Ongoing regeneration and development of the Borough, while being aligned with the pattern of its historical development, also potentially increases pressure on the very remains of this tradition, and a balance will therefore need to be found to accommodate both priorities. The tradition of adaptive re-use could be one solution to this, where the Borough’s social and economic needs are delivered through existing heritage stock.
Prehistory, Roman and Mediaeval Times

Tower Hamlets is rich in prehistory. The earliest known Londoner was buried in Blackwall approximately 5,000 years ago, and later prehistoric activity took place at several sites in the Borough, including at Old Ford, Wapping and the Isle of Dogs.

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In Roman times, Tower Hamlets lay largely to the east of the Roman city of Londinium. Two main roads ran through the Borough from the city and, as was typical of the period, burial of the dead took place outside the city walls, with cemeteries at Spitalfields and to the south of Aldgate High Street. At that time the majority of the area would have been farmland or marshland grazing to provide food for the city’s large population.

Following his victory at the Battle of Hastings (1066), William the Conqueror constructed ‘The White Tower’ as a firm base from which to secure and maintain the city of London. He chose the site for his castle within the ready-made defences of the existing Roman walls at the south-eastern corner of the city. In 1110, another major route east from the city was developed, and pottery and bell-founding industries were established.

In general, however, settlement in the Tower Hamlets area was very light before 1300, although early settlements are known in the vicinity of St Dunstan’s, Stepney and also at Bethnal Green. Flooding continued to be a problem across much of the Borough, although embanking and drainage had created much arable land by the early 13th century. The medieval economy across the majority of the Borough was essentially rural, with a settlement pattern of isolated farms with the beginning of ribbon development along the main routes.

Industry, Immigration and Development

The pressure of population growth in the city, and the increasing restrictions on industry and immigrants within the city walls led to the development of the area immediately outside the walls for industry and crafts. The area saw its first wave of immigrants with the Flemings, who introduced hops in the 14th century, leading to the development of the brewing industry here.

The Flemings were among the first of several waves of immigrants.

There was already a thriving suburb at Whitechapel in the 14th century, and hamlets with an industrial/commercial character developed, such as Ratcliff with its shipbuilding, and Limehouse, named after the lime kilns which processed chalk. By the mid 14th century there were small settlements at Mile End, Old Ford, Marsh (Isle of Dogs) and Poplar, though the majority of the population lived adjacent to either the city, the River Thames or the River Lea.

There was further rapid expansion in the south-west of the Borough from the 16th century, but despite this, the majority of the Borough was noted in the 16th century as a place of fresh air and rural peace, and was favoured as a location for the country houses of the wealthy. Improved drainage initiatives in the 16th century, using the skills of the immigrant Dutch engineers, allowed larger areas to become useable pasture.

Maritime Trade and Waterfront Development

Although shipbuilding had been established
at Ratcliff by the late 14th century, it was not until the mid 15th century that the waterfront to the east of the city really developed. The wharves and slipways continued to develop along the riverside, until by the 16th century the river frontage was completely filled. The increasing numbers of workers employed in the river trade led to the development of large areas of tenement housing in the hinterland of the wharves, accessed by a network of lanes, alleys and courtyards (such as at Wapping High Street).

The East India Company constructed the Blackwall Yard in 1614, which became the largest private shipyard in the country, and attracted a number of associated industries and services in the hinterland to the north. This hinterland gradually became developed, with large villages supporting the maritime trade.

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**The Spread of People and Industry**

The spread of industry from the city increased following the break up of monastic property after the Dissolution, and was fuelled by London’s rapidly rising population, which nearly trebled in the 17th century. This period also saw the arrival of the Huguenots, who established themselves in the Spitalfields area, where they introduced the silk-weaving that was to become an important industry. This period also saw the beginning of Brick Lane’s important brewing industry.

The increasing affluence of the city brought people from Essex and Suffolk, and by the end of the 17th century 22% of London’s population lived to the east of the city. Despite this, however, large areas of the Borough remained rural, and continued to be used as a retreat by the wealthy.
Beyond the city fringes, development continued in the form of the enlargement of the hamlets, ribbon development along the main routes, and increasing development behind this. In 1720, a total of 21 hamlets were recorded within what is now the modern Borough. New churches were constructed to serve the rising population, including 3 by the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor (see Section 4).

**Radical Changes to the Borough’s Character**

It was during the later 18th and 19th centuries, however, that the increasing pace of development radically changed the character of the Borough. The general trend was one of the spread of urbanisation eastwards, and the displacement of the wealthy to the rural peace of the outer suburbs.

The first major development of the 19th century, which was to have a momentous impact on the Borough as a whole, was the construction of the new enclosed dock basins with large associated warehouses (including for example the internationally important West India Docks and the St Katharine Docks), to prevent delays in loading and unloading of cargoes and the associated risk of theft. These necessitated the clearance of considerable areas of pre-existing building and the displacement of significant numbers of people, which led to severe overcrowding in neighbouring areas and the development of unsanitary housing conditions. The construction in 1812 of the Regent’s

**Construction of the new enclosed dock basins, such as the internationally important West India Docks, had a momentous impact on the Borough.**

Canal and its associated dock (now
Limehouse Basin) gave access to the entire country’s canal network, and trade through the docks soared. The riverside wharves saw a huge boom in their level of trade and activity in the later 19th century, which led to the construction of huge warehouses along the waterfront, especially at Wapping. This redevelopment of the riverside largely swept away the earlier, tighter urban grain of narrow wharves and alleys. Massive warehouses were also built along the main arterial roads, and adjacent to the railways.

Employment in the docks and associated trades also increased significantly, putting pressure on available housing, and leading to the construction of more houses. Furthermore, these houses needed to be located close to the docks given the lack of mass transport. The population was experiencing significant overcrowding and squalor in the urban areas and the docks, and the decline in the weaving industry led to significant poverty issues in the established urban areas.

The London County Council and the three metropolitan Boroughs of the area took responsibility for social housing in the Borough, and a programme of wholesale slum clearance began. The establishment of these new local authorities also led to a phase of civic buildings including town halls (such as Bethnal Green in 1909), municipal baths (such as Poplar Baths), and libraries.

Elsewhere, other developments were taking place which would also have an impact on the built environment. Several new large suburban cemeteries and noxious industries (including brewing, soap works and potash works) were built in the east of the Borough. The eastern half of the Borough, including the Isle of Dogs, had remained largely undeveloped by the mid 19th century other than along the main arterial routes, where planned estates had recently been built. However, this was set to change rapidly.

The mid century development of passenger railways into Fenchurch Street provided mass transport for workers in the city, and allowed them to live further out than was previously possible. This provided a massive stimulus to housing development, and by the end of the century the urbanisation of the Borough was largely complete.

The population hit a peak at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, with trade through the docks at a high, industry along the river Lea continuing to develop, and a large portion of the population of Bethnal Green, in particular the large Jewish community, still employed in the clothing and footwear trades. As the increasingly middle class Jewish community moved out in the mid 20th century, they were replaced by the next major wave of immigration - from Bangladesh.

Decline and Regeneration

However, the area’s fortunes started to change significantly, such that by 1930 it was the capital’s poorest place. Bombing during World War Two aimed at the destruction of the docks had a catastrophic impact, and led to the need for an accelerated housing programme, with the Borough receiving every type of development in post-war social housing leaving a legacy of much innovative architecture. Almost half of the houses in the Borough were destroyed or damaged, leading to a mass exodus from the Borough. This left a population of only 45,000 in the 1960s, compared to 130,000 in 1901. The decline of the docks began with the development of part of the East India Docks as Brunswick power station in 1946. The increasing mechanisation of cargo-handling and the lack of need for large warehouses meant that these early 19th century facilities were largely obsolete. While others were modernised and continued to operate for a while, they were eventually overtaken by the container revolution, with Felixstowe, Harwich and Tilbury taking their trade. As a result, the 1960s saw the closure of East

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India, St Katharine and London Docks. The riverside warehouses of Wapping and Limehouse became redundant, and the associated industries which had located here also folded, leaving a vast area of deserted or demolished buildings.

The London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) was created in 1981 to address the problems of regenerating these vast redundant areas. Early redevelopment was generally focused around small scale industrial and business estates, but this changed in the later 1980s with the successful development of Canary Wharf and its large post-modern commercial architecture – today an internationally competitive financial district.

There has been an incredible surge in population in the Borough since the 1960s, and current projections suggest that the population could increase to as much as 300,000 by 2025. Regeneration is ongoing in the Borough, with the development of 43,000 new houses by 2025, with significant investment in transport that will improve accessibility to the central and eastern parts of the Borough, to the City fringe and Isle of Dogs, and with the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games - the single largest regeneration project in Europe and the UK.

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