historical character & identity

Aldgate has been an important gateway into and out of the City of London for centuries. In Saxon English, “Eldgate” means “old gate”, a reference to the Roman gate which was the focus for the area. It was one of six gates in the Roman Wall and was demolished in the 18th century.

Aldgate was also home of the Aldgate Pump, built in the 16th century over a much older well that had been used since the 13th century. The water from the pump was said to have healing properties.

Unlike Stepney, which was originally a village, Aldgate, along with Whitechapel, grew up as a true London suburb. In common with Whitechapel it has traditionally been a place of coming and going and really had no central point.

Unfortunately, few remnants of the past still exist, only the street names such as The Minories and Houndsditch still remain. This was also where the herbalist Nicholas Culpeper lived in the 1640s and grew his plants, and again, this history survives in the names of streets such as Camomile Street and Wormwood Street.

Toynbee Hall was opened in Commercial Street in 1884 and played a pioneering role in addressing the high levels of deprivation in the Victorian East End. It established a residential community that attempted to address the pressing social problems in this part of London, while trying to answer fundamental questions about the facts and perceptions of poverty and the nature of community.

Today, Aldgate remains a thriving cultural melting pot, sitting side by side with other rich and colourful places, such as Shoreditch, Spitalfields, Wapping and the City of London. Its gateway function has been undermined in modern times, with poor-quality development and disconnected public spaces.

landscape & open space

Aldgate is a densely populated commercial area close to the City of London with few residents and, typical of this density and land use, has few parks. Only three small neighbourhood parks lie in the area, including Mallon Gardens and Altab Ali Park. Altab Ali Park is the largest of the neighbourhood parks and is also a cemetery. Aldgate also has a limited number of children’s play spaces and all are located in the north of Aldgate. The largest of these play spaces is in Altab Ali Park.
heritage & townscape

The Aldgate area is identified by the prevalence of office buildings, of which many provide secondary accommodation. This type of development peaked in the late 1980s. While most of the office buildings in the area are of dated and relatively undistinguished aesthetic quality, there are a few buildings of high quality, such as the RBS offices on Leman Street. London Metropolitan University is also has a couple of dominant buildings in the area.

A small portion of Aldgate is located within two conservation areas: Whitechapel High Street, in the north of Aldgate, and Wentworth Street, which is mainly in Spitalfields. Many of the listed buildings in the area lie in and around Prescot Street, Alie Street and Leman Street. The listed buildings on Prescot Street are fine examples of Victorian commercial buildings.

block pattern & movement

The character of Aldgate is dominated by heavy traffic. This is especially true of the area around the Aldgate Gyratory where the traffic arteries of Commercial Road, Whitechapel Road, Commercial Street and Aldgate High Street meet. As a result the street environment is unpleasant for pedestrians, which only is exacerbated by the uninviting subway system in and around Aldgate.

The street pattern in the area is dominated by large office blocks. Other more fine-grained blocks are spread around the area, but are generally less significant. This includes the area between Leman Street and Mansell Street.

Aldgate includes one London Underground station (Aldgate East), but is very close to several other stations, namely Aldgate, Tower Hill and Tower Gateway.
historical character & identity

The world famous Tower of London stands on the River Thames on the western boundary of the borough. It dates from the reign of William the Conqueror in the 11th century and, in the past 900 years, has been a fortress, royal palace, zoo and state prison. The iconic White Tower stands in the centre built by William the Conqueror in 1078. Although no longer a Royal residence, the Tower remains a royal palace and retains a permanent guard.

The Tower has always been an isolated place, to ensure the security and safety of the Royal Family. It remains isolated to this day, roads heavy with traffic wrapping around this World Heritage Site, sadly separating a wonderful asset from the rest of Tower Hamlets.

Nearby is St Katharine Docks, one of the first of London’s docklands to be restored. It was established at the end of the 18th century with warehouses importing tea, rubber, marble, ivory and sugar. It is now home to restaurants, pubs, shops and an attractive marina.

landscape & open space

The Tower of London and St Katharine Docks is bounded by the River Thames, the City of London, Wapping and the railway viaduct to the north. Due to its inner-city location, the area has a limited number of small parks, located outside of Tower Hill and Tower Gateway stations, close to busy roads. These parks, such as Trinity Square Gardens, are characterised as neighbourhood parks due to their size. The Tower of London and St Katharine Docks only has two children’s play spaces, both of which are located in the south-east corner of the area.

The Tower of London and St Katharine Docks lies on the Thames and includes St Katharine Docks. Hence it has substantial waterspace.
heritage & townscape

Many landmarks of national and international importance are found in the Tower of London and St Katharine Docks area, which takes its name from two prominent landmarks. Along with the Tower of London, these sites are important points of destination and major tourist attractions, each drawing large volumes of people. Other landmarks in the area include Tower Bridge, Royal Mint Court office block and Merita House.

The St Katherine Docks area has undergone much development in the last 30 years, largely in the form of medium- to high-density housing, a large hotel, commercial office blocks as well as the addition of bars and restaurants. However, the docks still retain their original sense of enclosure, and some historic buildings such as the Ivory House warehouse remain.

The Tower of London and St Katharine Docks is an area of exceptional architectural and historic interest, with a character and appearance worthy of protection and enhancement. Hence it sits within the Tower of London Conservation Area. The Tower of London is a listed building, along with St Katharine Docks, and the Tower of London is a World Heritage Site and an Ancient Monument.

block pattern & movement

The Tower of London and St Katharine Docks is characterised by a coarse grain. The medium to large blocks are often separated by major roads that carry heavy traffic. These large blocks include: the Tower of London; St Katharine Docks; the Royal Mint Court office block; and Merita House. The nature of the blocks and the heavy traffic leads to an environment that is both confusing and unfriendly to pedestrians. The area also tends to have relatively high buildings and street blocks that are inward looking and have blank walls, which creates an impression of poor linkages and permeability.

The major traffic arteries in the Tower of London and St Katharine Docks area are classified as highways and these roads are important north-south and east-west links. These roads include the Tower Bridge Approach and Mansell Street – which are significant roads as they lead to Tower Bridge – as well as East Smithfield, which later becomes the Highway.

The Tower of London and St Katharine Docks area generally has good transport links, with two stations: Tower Hill Underground station and Tower Gateway DLR.
The name Wapping comes from the original Saxon settlement of “Waeppa’s people”. Since its founding, this place has had a colourful history.

Located immediately east of the Tower of London, Wapping was largely marshland until drained in the 14th century. From the 16th century Wapping gained infamy as a place of execution and was one of the sights of Tudor London. Execution Dock, as it was called, was located on the site of Wapping station. This was where the famous pirate Captain Kydd was hanged in 1701. These executions carried on late into the 19th century.

Wapping’s heyday was probably between the time of the Glorious Revolution and the early 19th century. In the 17th century its riverside community gained its own church and vestry. Sailor’s cottages sat side by side with seafaring industries such as anchor-smiths, sail makers, distilleries and timber yards, while merchandise from abroad such as rum, ivory and gold trundled continuously up and down Wapping High Street. Wapping was also the setting for many of the Dickens novels.

When the docks were built at the beginning of the 19th century, in many respects the heart was torn out of Old Wapping. Houses and workshops were lost due to the arrival of the London Dock Company, and the area’s population diminished. Wapping and St Katherine Docks, like West India Docks on the Isle of Dogs, were great walled enclosures. They severed much of Wapping from the surrounding neighbourhood, and forced the population into overcrowded housing around the fringes.

After the war nearly all the dock warehouses were demolished and the surviving walls now encircle new housing. Wapping has subsequently experienced different phases of housing development, from LDDC housing and social housing estates, to the converted warehouses of the 1980s-1990s, which still give some impression of the former density of trading activity in the area.

A considerable proportion of parks are located in Wapping, of which the majority are neighbourhood parks due to their small size. These parks include Wapping Gardens, Wapping Rose Gardens, Wapping Green, Wapping Woods and Swedenborg Gardens. The larger district park (King Edward Memorial Park) is also located in Wapping and is characterised as such due to its medium size. Wapping also has a number of children’s play places spread throughout the area, two churchyard cemeteries and playing fields and pitches in King Edward Memorial Park. The small ecological area off the Highway, is classified as a semi-natural space, where the site’s primary function is wildlife habitat.

Wapping lies on the Thames and hence has a substantial waterspace, featuring the sizeable Shadwell Basin, as well as the smaller Hermitage Basin and an ornamental canal.
heritage & townscape

Wapping is characterised as being primarily a residential area, interspersed with open space, community facilities and schools. Much of the building stock in Wapping comprises developments from the 1970s and 1980s, which are not architecturally distinctive. There is greater townscape interest in the southern part of Wapping, where Wapping High Street has well preserved and often listed wharves of high density and scale. The listed News International building is a large, monolithic, enclosed block, surrounded by high blank walls on all sides. Tobacco Dock is a Grade I listed building that currently stands empty.

Wapping has four conservation areas, of which the largest – Wapping Pierhead and Wapping Wall – are located in the south. The two smaller conservation areas, Wilton’s Music Hall and St Paul’s Church, are in the north.

block pattern & movement

The highway in Wapping is a busy artery and is an important east-west link from the City to Canary Wharf. The highway however causes a considerable physical and psychological barrier in between Wapping and Shadwell.

The blocks in the area are generally variable in size, from fine-grained blocks along the river to the south, to larger coarse-grained blocks further north, including the News International site. These larger blocks are often difficult for pedestrians to navigate.

Wapping has its own London Underground station, as well as being close to the DLR and London Underground stations in Shadwell. However, these London Underground stations in Wapping and Shadwell are currently closed for construction, and will reopen in 2010 as part of the London Overground network.
historical character & identity

The name Shadwell literally means “the well of shadows”. It lies between Wapping and Ratcliffe and was a riverside settlement that developed rapidly in the 17th century, through the expansion of shipbuilding and maritime industries. It was largely destroyed in the 19th century by the creation of Shadwell Basin.

In the 19th century, with increasing demand for both dockworkers and sailors, the area lost its selective base of skilled artisans and professional families and became overcrowded. The Danish church in Wellclose Square was replaced by schools and mission rooms. Later, philanthropic enterprises helped the overcrowded Jewish immigrants living in the area further north around Commercial Road.

Radical post-war replanning after extensive bombing damage disrupted old patterns. New housing was designed away from the old routes, while the historic centre of Shadwell in Shadwell Docks, gravitated towards Watney Street Market in the north. Shadwell is more typical of the western side of Tower Hamlets, with its mix of social housing estates and 19th-century terraces.

landscape & open space

A moderate collection of small neighbourhood parks are distributed throughout Shadwell. These parks include Ropewalk Gardens, Gosling Gardens, Cavell Street Gardens and St George in the East. Many of Shadwell’s neighbourhood parks are located within housing estates. The medium-sized district park King Edward Memorial Park is also within close proximity to Shadwell, located in nearby Wapping. Shadwell also contains a number of children’s play spaces equally distributed throughout the area, of which many are small in size and located within housing estates.
Shadwell is a lively area in which the focal point is Watney Market, off Commercial Road. Watney Market is a medium-sized open-air market that is widely used by residents as a shopping destination, and is surrounded by a post-war housing estate. Public-realm improvements have recently been implemented in and around Watney Market and Shadwell DLR station.

Away from the hub of Commercial Road and Watney Market, Shadwell is predominantly a residential area. The area contains a mix of architectural styles, largely consisting of medium- to high-rise post-war housing estates, with pockets of low-rise Victorian terraced housing.

The conservation areas in Shadwell are primarily located on the north side of Commercial Road, including Myrdle Street, Ford Square, Commercial Road, St George in the East and part of London Hospital. Shadwell has a small number of listed buildings, of which the largest proportion are located in Myrdle Street, London Hospital and St George in the East.

Shadwell is impacted by heavy traffic. The area has two primary traffic arteries: Commercial Road and the Highway (A1203). These roads, along with the railway arches, create barriers that hinder north-south pedestrian movement.

Shadwell is largely fine-grained to the north of Commercial Road, with areas of terraced housing. However, to the south of Commercial Road, the area is predominantly coarse grained, as much of the housing stock consists of post-war estates. South of Commercial Road, many of the housing estates suffer from poor permeability, with ill-defined routes through estates. This is particularly noticeable in the area between Cable Street and the Highway.

Shadwell is well connected by public transport with a DLR and East London Line station (which is currently closed and due to join the London Overground network in 2010). As well as being a shopping destination, Watney Market forms a key north-south link from Commercial Road to the station.
historical character & identity

In 1086 Stepney was listed in the Domesday Book. The ancient name of this place was Stibenhede, Stebenhythe, or Stebunhethe. The term is a well known Saxon word, signifying a haven or wharf. The medieval village grew up around the church of St Dunstan’s, which was founded in 952 by the Archbishop of Canterbury and is the oldest church in east London.

From the 17th Century the village, then known as Mile End Old Town, was a genteel retreat away from the crowded Thames-side hamlets, favoured by those who had profited from maritime industry and trade.

The area today is a mix of post-war high-density housing, Victorian mansion blocks and the terraced housing that survived the slum clearances. Historic Stepney Green is regarded for its architecture, many of the surrounding streets including Arbour Square and Sidney Square, contain many Georgian and Victorian houses.

landscape & open space

A substantial proportion of open space is found in Stepney. Parks in the area include the medium-sized district parks of Stepney Green Park, Belgrave Open Space, St Dunstan’s Churchyard and Whitehorse Road Park. Stepney also contains an urban farm, allotments, two churchyard cemeteries, sports centres and a number of children’s play spaces. Smaller sized neighbourhood parks in the area include Shandy Park, Stepney Green Gardens, Trafalgar Gardens and Beaumont Square Gardens. Although not located in Stepney, Mile End Park is a large park that lies adjacent to Stepney. Mile End Park contains a range of spaces and sporting facilities including Mile End Stadium, playing fields and pitches, children’s play spaces, an ecology park as well as open grass spaces.

Stepney has access to waterspace frontage, as it’s located on Regent’s Canal, which lies in-between Stepney and Mile End Park.
heritage & townscape

Stepney is largely a quiet residential neighbourhood off the busy main arteries of Mile End Road and Commercial Street. The architectural styles vary widely in the area, from terraced housing and mansion houses to pre- and post-war housing estates. A large proportion of Stepney is located within the Ocean Estate which is a mix of medium- to high-rise pre- and post-war housing.

Conservation areas in Stepney include Stepney Green, Albert Gardens, York Square and Regent’s Canal. York Square Conservation Area in the south consists of low-rise terraced housing of Regency design, many of which are listed, as well public open space and high-quality townscape around the Grade I listed Parish Church of St Dunstan and All Saints. Stepney Green Conservation Area is an area of exceptional architectural and historic interest, including the grand buildings along Mile End Road, the houses and mansion blocks (including Dunstan House) along Stepney Green and the picturesque aspect created by the mature trees of Stepney Green Gardens.

block pattern & movement

Stepney experiences heavy traffic on its edges along Mile End Road and Commercial Road, both of which create barriers to north-south movement. The railway line in the south of Stepney also creates a barrier that hinders north-south and east-west movement.

Stepney is predominantly fine-grained south of Ben Jonson Road and coarse-grained to the north where the Ocean Estate suffers from poor permeability, with ill-defined routes through the estate and many dead ends, making it confusing for pedestrians.

Stepney has good transport links, including Stepney Underground station to the north and Limehouse DLR and c2c services to the south.
historical character & identity

Limehouse is named for its historical connections. It comes from the lime coasts or kilns that were established there in the 14th century and used to produce quick lime for building mortar.

In the days of the docks, the area was associated with imports. This is in contrast to the preceding years when it was associated with two kinds of exports: beer and people. The beer, in the shape of India Pale Ale, went from the Limehouse Brewery in Fare Street to colonial servicemen in India; the people fell into two categories: voluntary emigrants to Australia, the first of whom went from Dunbar Wharf, and involuntary ones, who went from the nearby Wapping Old Stairs by the Town of Ramsgate pub.

Limehouse was also the setting of London’s original Chinatown. Limehouse Causeway, Pennyfields and West India Dock Road made up the heart of Chinatown in the 1890s.

In the 19th century the canal system originating in Tower Hamlets was the entrance to the busy arterial route serving Britain’s commercial life. The Limehouse Basin and Limehouse Cut were the main links from the Thames to the River Lea and onwards to the industrial north.

landscape & open space

Limehouse lies on the River Thames and has substantial waterspace. Limehouse Basin is situated in the centre of Limehouse from which runs two canals: Regent’s Canal, which runs north-west and Limehouse Cut which runs north-east.

Limehouse encompasses a number of parks, including the southern portion of Mile End Park which is classified as MOL, although the majority of Mile End Park is located in Bow and Mile End. Limehouse also contains a number of smaller neighbourhood parks which include Ropemakers Fields, St James Gardens, Rectory Gardens and Albert Gardens. A number of small children’s play spaces are also located in the area.

All these spaces fulfil a local function of providing local residents and workers with access to waterspace, open space, trees, wildlife and grass.
Limehouse is largely residential in use and is primarily characterised by historic warehouse conversions, modern developments, as well as post-war council estates. The development immediately adjacent to the River Thames forms a continuous band of settlement, that joins the riverside development in Wapping to the Isle of Dogs. These residential buildings along the River largely consist of medium- to high-density historic warehouse conversions and modern developments.

Access to the river is currently blocked in many instances by a number of modern, gated developments. Development north of Commercial Road primarily consists of a number of low- to medium-rise housing estates, with some modern development along the Regent’s Canal and Limehouse Cut Canal. Commercial Road contains a mix of low- to medium-rise commercial and residential uses.

Approximately half of Limehouse sits within conservation areas. The largest two conservation areas in Limehouse are Narrow Street and St Anne’s Church. Other conservation areas that are partially located in Limehouse include Brickfield Gardens, York Square, Albert Gardens and Wapping Wall. Limehouse also has a number of listed buildings.

Limehouse contains a mixture of fine- and coarse-grained areas, which makes it an area that can be difficult to orientate and navigate for pedestrians and cyclists. A number of large blocks, combined with Limehouse Basin, can make it difficult to access the River Thames, which is often hidden behind development.

Limehouse has a number of congested roads, such as Commercial Road and the Limehouse Link, which is partially underground and leads to the Rotherhithe Tunnel or to the City. Both Commercial Road and the Limehouse Link are important connections from the City to Canary Wharf and are classified as highways. The DLR and the c2c service railway lines run through the area and, along with the busy roads, create a physical and psychological barrier to movement. Many of the more desirable properties are located to the south of the DLR railway line and Commercial Road; many of the housing estates are located to the north. Limehouse is however well connected by public transport, with the DLR and c2c services running through the area.