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## Historical perspective

The following historical survey is indebted in particular to two sources: David Mander's *St John at Hackney; The Story of a Church* published by the Parish of Hackney (1993), and Susanah Duval's architectural thesis *The Conservation and Regeneration of Urban Open Space; Case Study - St John at Hackney* (1999). See Appendix 2 and 3 for detailed plans.

### The churchyard

St John's churchyard, dating back to medieval times, was the burial ground for the whole of Hackney, a prosperous settlement outside London until sometime after 1800. The churchyard covers almost seven acres, and can be divided into a number of distinct spaces.

The oldest is the natural, raised grassed area behind St Augustine's Tower. It is possible to imagine that this is little changed since late medieval times. Changes that have occurred since then include the stone paths, seats, and mature trees.

In the 17th century (1671), this original churchyard was extended back to a house on what is now the bus garage. In the next century, most of the churchyard was walled (1707), although much of this was removed when it passed into municipal management. Later, in 1745, the churchyard was extended east to Churchwell Path. This open green area behind low railings, also with mature trees, is regularly mown and used for the occasional school sports day. The sliver of land opposite the St John and St James primary school (formerly the Rams Episcopal school) was added and consecrated in 1763.

Before the end of the 18th century, the northern part of the churchyard was bought to accommodate the new church – which was begun in 1792. North of the new church, the paths

were laid out much as we find them today, and planted with avenues of horse chestnut and elm trees - some of which survive to this day. The land south of the new church (now the walled garden) formed the new churchyard.

Unusually, the 19th century had little impact on the churches or the churchyard. The new church tower was added in 1812, although the new church was completed in 1797. When it was then proposed to demolish St Augustine's Tower, as originally intended, the outcry that followed ensured its partial survival. (This was an early and effective example of Victorian conservation.) In 1859, the churchyard was deemed full and would take no more burials. By this time, the churchyard had become surrounded by most of the current commercial development on The Narrowway (formerly Church Street) to the west, and by the housing terraces on the east side.

During the second half of the 19th century, and particularly after the cessation of burials, the churchyard suffered neglect - to a condition that was "disgraceful beyond words" according to one observer in 1892. In the 1870s, a public urinal was installed alongside St Augustine's Tower. It was to take another decade of public objection to have it removed. However, two significant improvements were made towards the end of this period.

They were to:

- build a new mortuary on what was Rectory land in 1891. Until then, the mortuary was in the tower, while inquests were held in the Mermaid public house.
- open the northern part of the churchyard as the Hackney Churchyard Recreation Ground, thereby formalising it as public open space for the general benefit of the public. This work entailed covering and grassing over flat stones,



removing head and foot stones to the north and west walls, levelling much of the site. The design for the north garden (the Recreation Ground) included a large central urn and other plant urns, shrubs and low lavender hedges, ornamental flowerbeds, and avenue lighting. In addition, four areas were railed-off to retain the more substantial gravestones and family tombs, two on either side of the new church, two at each end of the open green area

In the 20th century, the Celtic Cross was installed in 1901. After the first war, the north recreation ground became a war memorial with the current Cenotaph replacing the central urn in 1921. A further plaque was added in 1946, while a year later in the southern half of the churchyard, the Lidice Rose Garden was planted to commemorate those who died in Lidice (Czechoslovakia) in World War Two. The other significant development during this period happened in 1924, when the London Borough of Hackney became the 'managing agent' for the church, responsible for maintaining most of the grounds of the churchyard as public space.

Five developments mark the second half of the century:

#### **the municipal garden**

designed in 1953, this garden overlooks the Narroway on the south west corner of the churchyard, between the tower and the bus garage.

#### **the walled garden**

designed in 1964, this garden contains many original features including the rose beds, the pond (now empty) with its fountain and raised pebble surround, the outdoor draughts and chess boards and shelter, specimen trees and shrubs at the perimeter, a brick shelter, and the raised sensory flower bed with braille plaques. This garden is a unique example of

an early municipal designed sensory garden and was awarded a Civic Trust commendation for its design.

#### **the shelter and public conveniences**

built at the middle junction of the L-shaped churchyard, at the bottom of the Rector's garden. These are now disused and near-derelect, except as a store for the grounds maintenance staff.

#### **St John's children's nursery**

was built on another part of the Rectory grounds in the 1960s.

#### **the Churchwell Playspace**

at the south east corner, opposite the St John and St James primary school, has been designated as a 'children's play area' for over 100 years. The playground was reclaimed from dereliction by the Churchwell Residents Group in 1982 and has been maintained by them since. This space is in urgent need of attention to repair damage following a fire last year and to bring it up to modern play space standards.

## **Buildings**

The two churches in the churchyard are of historical and architectural significance. All that remains of the medieval St Augustine's church is the tower, the only Grade 1 listed building in the borough of Hackney, with two stones in the ground indicating the putative eastern boundary extent of the old church. The tower has been owned by the Council since the 1930's and, since 1990, has been cared for by the Hackney Historic Buildings Trust working with the Local Authority.

The replacement or 'new' church - St John's - was designed by James Spiller and built between 1792 and 1797, with the spire and main porch added in 1812-13. Views differ on its



merits. According to the Victorian George MacDonald, it was 'The ugliest church in Christendom, save one'. When the early 20th century architect Beresford Pite undertook essential restoration to the roof, he said of the architect that he lacked "the special power of Inigo Jones, which mysteriously imparted beauty to simplicity and a sense of justice to proportions." But he did add that the church design "has courage and originality and demands respect for its intrinsic as well as historical interest." (1932).

Recent impressions have been more favourable. John Betjeman described St John's as 'an astonishing yellow brick building in the shape of a Greek cross with Portland stone steeple' – which (according to John Summerson) 'beautifully weathered and gleaming white, seems to float in sublime independence of the sturdy brown temple which really supports it'.

The costs of maintaining such a large building today are prohibitive, and additional sources of income are required to help defray the overheads. Currently the church accommodates the St John's Community Space project. Partly funded by the National Lottery, the project caters for an average of 60 people a day, offering meals, showers, advice and courses for the homeless - including art, music, carpentry, and photography.

## The setting of the churchyard

The churchyard is flanked by a variety of different buildings and spaces. For centuries, the church and its grounds acted as the heart of Hackney. For many years the Town Hall was located in the building which now houses the HSBC bank. It was only when the Town Hall moved to its current location in 1836-7 that a new civic and commercial focus developed in Mare Street. North of the churchyard, across the only road boundary (Lower Clapton Road) is Clapton Square, built for



Detail from the 1870 Ordnance Survey Map

the emerging Victorian middle classes. East of the churchyard are rows of Georgian & Victorian terraces, notably Sutton Place and St John's Church Road.

Most of the churchyard is surrounded by continuous, brick boundary walls, notably around the Rectory, and along Churchwell Path (with its pedestrian entrances to St John's Church Road, Sutton Square and Sutton Place), and by blank gable walls of the police station and the bus garage. Much of the old perimeter wall is a listed structure. The only buildings that overlook the churchyard are St John's church itself, the mortuary and the former Social Services building in Sutton Place.

There are the three 'schools' on or near the churchyard: St John's day nursery, situated behind the wall west of the church, St John and St James Primary School opposite the play area on Churchwell Path, and Homerton Boys School at the eastern end of Sutton Place.



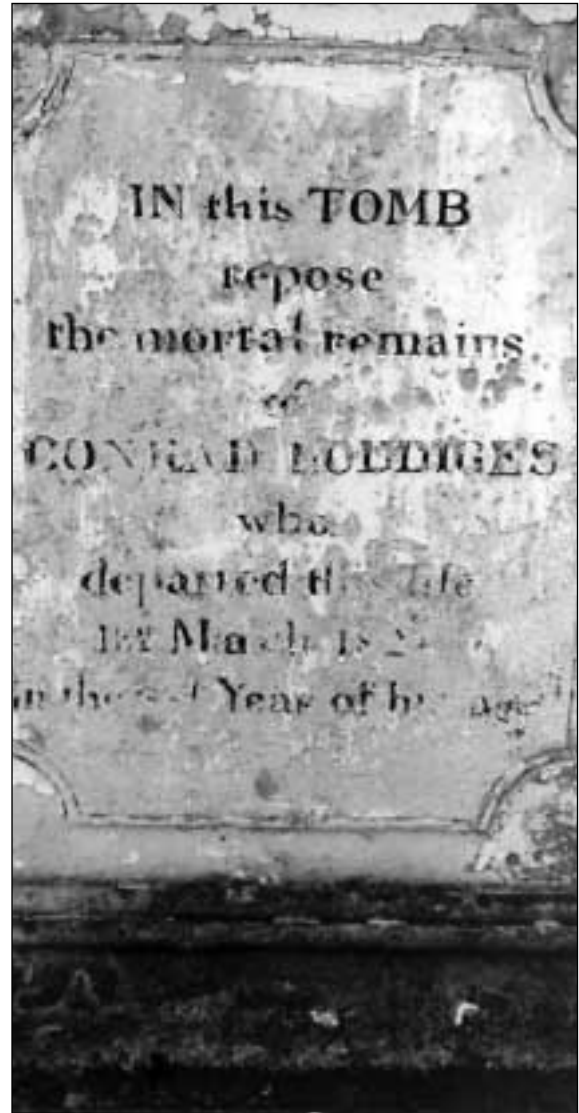
## Notable associates and burials

The Revd Urswick (1502-21) rebuilt and enlarged the old church. Post reformation, the church developed a reputation, first in the 17th century for radicalism under the Revd Sheldon, then in the early 19th century for reaction under the Hackney Phalanx, an early High Anglican movement under the Revd J.J Watson.

Buried in the churchyard are such notables as the Beaufort family (inventors of the Beaufort scale), the Elizabethan poet and playwright, Edward de Vere, the German Loddiges family (who at one time had the largest hothouse in the world in the environs of the Town Hall) and many Huguenot families who settled here from France.

The social mix of the area has also changed noticeably. From being a wealthy village and then suburb for the City in the 17th and 18th centuries, it became an early Victorian middle class area, with later influxes of working class housing, and then a late 20th century inner area subject to major slum clearance programmes and other physical and social upheavals.

In his preface to *St John-at-Hackney* (by David Mander), the former Rector of Hackney William Hurdman had this to say: 'A community as mixed as Hackney needs a sense of roots and identity. St John-at-Hackney, solid, austere, huge, firm, some say forbidding, and with a certain feel of faded grandeur, gives a sense of place and continuity'. The churchyard, as the setting to this important church, also contributes to the sense of place and history of the area, creating a crucial backdrop to a local landmark in the Heart of Hackney.



The Loddiges tomb