



THE HACKNEY SOCIETY

SPACES 2023

News and views about Hackney's built environment

Issue 79 Spring 2023 // ISSN 2047-7465

Abney Park



Many Hackney Society members will have noticed the works going on at Abney Park Cemetery. The editor contacted the team behind the works to get an update on the plans, what we can expect and when we can expect them.

Answers were provided by the Council (HC), Abney Park Trust (APT) and the architect (KO) (Kaner Olette www.kanerolette.co.uk)

The Abney Park Restoration Project is a Hackney Council initiative which received £4.7m from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) in 2019, which was increased to £5m by Hackney Council, in order to secure the future of Abney Park, the 'Magnificent Seven' Cemetery in Stoke Newington. The Restoration Project will restore the historic buildings on site, improve accessibility and develop a programme of activities at the Cemetery. The project will change Abney Park from being underused, neglected and at risk of becoming a ruin, to a well-loved and well-used green space. Furthermore, the Restoration Project will aim to build into Abney Park a sustainability that preserves its future and allows the Park

to continue to improve for years to come. Local people and those visiting from further afield will be able to fully engage with Abney Park and its heritage; be that as a nature reserve, a historic landscape, a place of remembrance or as a local park.

First of all, can we have an update on timing? When realistically will all the works be finished?

The project has encountered a number of setbacks due to complications with the site and listed buildings, and for the new buildings supply chain issues delayed the early stages. All is progressing however and the projected completion date for all works is the second quarter 2023 (HC).

Did the architects look at the redevelopment at any other cemeteries, similar environments or historical landmarks for inspiration of good practice?

Yes, we visited various sites including Brompton Cemetery, Highgate Cemetery, Gravesend Cemetery, Springfield Park, St John at Hackney (Hackney Church)

and The Asylum (a former church used for weddings). We also visited newer structures such as Southwark Park Pavilion and London Wall to review the materials strategy for the new build elements. Many websites were also reviewed such as Arnos Vale Cemetery, Chiswick House Café and Battersea Arts Centre. All this research gave us the opportunity to review and better understand several factors such as interpretation, materials, layout and character as well as sensitivity of the spaces (KO)

There has been a lot of effort to ensure the redevelopment is informed by wide consultation, necessary but no doubt frustrating at times?

It is always extremely useful to spend time discussing face to face schemes of this nature. There are many different stakeholders as well as the public and park users. Everyone has a different view of things. Sometimes there are plain misunderstandings about what is intended (and what is not) – we still see issues highlighted on social media where people

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comment before seeing the full proposals and seem to respond positively when they do. Some issues however cannot be resolved by the project works or views are irreconcilable. It was very clear throughout though that many people care very deeply about Abney and naturally some are nervous of major change. (KO)

How can people get the latest information and communicate with you if – for example – they have concerns?

HC updates its Abney webpage regularly and the contractors put updates on the High Street gate hoardings monthly. APT continues to respond reflectively to community questions and concerns about the works, particularly through its Twitter and Facebook accounts after consulting with HC on progress. We regularly answer questions about the works and address concerns at @AbneyParkN16 and / AbneyParkCemeteryN16 on Facebook. We also maintain a detailed microsite at abneypark.org/restoring-abney, and hold

regular open days. We love to hear from the local community, talk to people about the park and the works, and hear what they think. (APT)

How are you balancing local interests and outside expertise?

Since its inception, both external expertise and local interests have been equally weighted in terms of the project development. It was vital we got the right expert input from architects, landscape architects, structural engineers, business planning experts, community consultants and ecologists in order to develop a viable plan and ultimately to submit a successful funding bid. At the same time, we knew how highly valued Abney Park is by the local and wider community, and for many different reasons, so extensive consultation was carried out to ensure visitors, users and audiences understood what we were

trying to do and why, and had opportunities to comment, make suggestions and input into the plans. Development of the Activity Plan in particular, involved a great deal of consultation with users, non-users and stakeholders including local schools and community groups. The Council's aim is to develop Abney Park for the people of Hackney, both now and for future generations. (HC)

How did the relationship between the Trust and the architects change as the Project progressed?

The restoration project is a Council initiative which started to be developed when it took back management of Abney Park from the Trust in 2015. Therefore, Abney Park Trust (APT) does not have a direct relationship with the architects.

The Council's aim was to address the heritage at risk, improve the park's facilities and access, increase its use by the local community and ensure its future sustainability by including income-generating opportunities onsite. There were concerns over the main entrance, but it is grade II listed and was always going to be restored rather than changed.

Since it is no longer responsible for the site, APT, a registered charity, was consulted on plans and will be delivering part of the NLHF funded activity plan in partnership with the council. (HC)

APT's major role is to bring the Park's heritage and ecology to life through tours, open days, events and monument repair. As well as its dedicated staff, it has a volunteer team of grave maintenance workers, artists, tour guides, musicians, creators, litter pickers, and trustees who look after the charity's assets. (APT)

The hoardings indicate that there is going to be some sort of facility for learning for e.g. school groups? What

thoughts went into the design process for this in terms of what you would like to see as an outcome for learning?

The main internal learning space is in the community room near the east entrance. From our experience at Orleans House Gallery Learning Centre in Twickenham, and other similar spaces, we tried to develop a scheme that was welcoming, light and very flexible. Clear signage and being fully accessible to all users were key and the space has its own dedicated accessible toilet/kitchenette. It was important to have strong physical links to the external space to the west (via a generous set of bifold glazed doors) for Forest School and other externally based learning. The layout allows for the room to be quite separate from the park when it needs to be but also with glimpses through to the main path. We tried to accommodate as much storage as possible so the furniture and equipment can all be cleared away to allow for a variety of uses. Acoustic treatment is applied to the ceiling and there is a warm robust timber floor with underfloor heating. (KO)

This will replace the previous facilities - until the current restoration works began there was a portacabin classroom onsite which was used for everything from puppet workshops and cinema events to bug spotting days and percussion workshops. (APT)

The provision of a new and well-equipped community and learning space at Abney is an important part of the restoration project. It has been designed to be multi-functional and flexible for use by formal and informal learning groups for activities such as school workshops and projects, teachers' Continuing Professional Development, arts and crafts sessions, talks, meetings and even exercise classes. It will be bookable by businesses and community groups and will be managed by the cafe operator. The Council and Trust will have combined use of it for up to 2 days per week to deliver activities as part of the activity plan and other activities for community engagement and Trust fundraising. (HC)

When APT was founded in 1991, it committed in its charitable aims to "the advancement of public education" – and that's a commitment we still hold today. We're open to all ideas in terms of learning outcomes: as a general guide, we'd like to use the space to put on programmes, workshops and other events which explore history, ecology and culture. Fundamentally, the Trust's work is community-led, and

our approach is based around building relationships with people. What we really want is for the community to bring their creative ideas and plans to us, so that everyone can help shape our programme and make the most of the available time in the fantastic new buildings.

If you're interested in working with us on any sort of educational project, we'd love to hear from you on info@abneyparkorg. Whoever you are, and whatever your practice or area of specialism might be, we'd like to hear from you and have a discussion. (APT)

Is there to be increased signage within the cemetery to help with navigation? Much as there is some fun to be had in getting lost, it does put some people off going away from even the main paths.

The Abney Park Manager is working on new maps which indicate some assorted highlights of the cemetery which will be placed at both entrances and available online and in leaflets available in the cafe. These are being designed to increase people's confidence in navigating the site and to raise awareness of some of the wonders of Abney that they might have walked past otherwise. Alongside this, new finger posts will be placed at strategic points to enable people to find their way to the cafe, toilets, chapel and exits. We decided against too much signage however, so as not to clutter the park, but we will review this if people complain of getting lost! (HC)

The Church Street entrance has made the cemetery accessible for prams and wheelchairs from that side. However, there is still a limit as to how far wheelchairs etc can go. Are there any more plans for accessibility or is it the nature of the place that means that is always going to be very limited?

Maintenance at Abney Park is an ongoing job which due to the nature of the historic landscape and urban woodland will never be "finished". All the main paths will be reviewed once the restoration work is finished – i.e. once the works vehicles have left - and mended where needed. The smaller concrete paths will also be addressed as part of the ongoing maintenance, as these are uneven and cracked, but this is budget dependent as it will be a large job to break up and remove all the concrete. Unfortunately, even once they have been resurfaced they are likely to be inaccessible to wheelchairs as they can't

be widened because of the proximity of graves. (HC)

Are there plans for historical information similar to the music hall individuals? Or for individual graves of notable people that are away from the paths?

The Abney Park Manager has created completely new interpretation to enhance the visitor experience. She has deliberately limited the word count of these to make them as accessible as possible. This will go in at both entrances, in the cafe and community space, and be dotted around the cemetery. The new boards are all thematic rather than about specific individuals, apart from one board that's been written by the Salvation Army about William Booth. It is very challenging to note all the people of interest on a physical board, but each board directs viewers to Abney Park Trust's website which contains a wealth of information about the residents of Abney Park, where the word count is less restricted and people can research at leisure. (HC)

For example, the APT's website includes a dedicated section on Music Hall stars, as well as archive footage of past Trust events on this topic – such as the 2020 deep-dive into Abney's Music Hall history by BBC Radio 4 star Colin Sell. (APT)

Can you explain about the plans for green roofs and space for bees? Will the café eventually sell Abney honey?

The green roof to the cafe and community space building has been designed to further enhance the habitat at this important nature reserve, and link the habitat of the wider cemetery with the main entrance and its new facilities. It is part of the Council's Nature Recovery Plan and Parks Strategy to increase biodiversity across all its parks, and is being planted in consultation with ecologist Russell Miller. We are encouraging invertebrates of all kinds including the many varieties of bees that reside here. We currently have no plans for hives. (HC)

The website mentions that the plan is for the Chapel to host weddings. Are there to be specific criteria for those who wish to get married in the Chapel?

The restored chapel will be managed by the council's venues team who will be happy to take all kinds of bookings for use of the space, including weddings. There are no restrictions beyond what the team can manage within their capacity. They have



already received a number of wedding enquiries and they hope it will be popular. Although run as a commercial enterprise, there will be a lower community hire rate, and the chapel will be open to the public once per month. APT will also be using it for certain events. (HC)

Has any of the work revealed previously hidden graves?

None of the works have taken place on any of the burial plots of Abney, so no, nothing new has been discovered. With certain excavations the Museum of London's archaeology department were on hand in case of any unexpected or significant finds, but nothing of note was discovered.

However, the council's Abney Unearthed project, now in its 6th year, is dedicated to finding previously unmapped or incorrectly recorded graves across the site. This is currently funded by the NLHF grant and its team of dedicated and committed volunteers regularly make new discoveries alongside researching the people and their lives, from all walks of life. Please see the heritage section of the Abney Unearthed website to find out more and read about some of the people. (HC)

Are the catacombs likely to be accessible?

When the site was assessed at the beginning stages of the restoration project funding bid, the idea of opening the catacombs was explored as a possibility. However, this was ruled out early on due to the costs and unknown value of making them accessible. It is something we may one day return to in a future funding bid but have no plans to do so at present. (HC)

About the architects

Kaner Olette Architects is an RIBA Chartered Practice based in Kent specialising in heritage and public sector community projects.

Noticeboard

Restoration of Sir Ralph Sadleir memorial

The Hackney Society was represented at the Tudor Choral Evensong service at St Mary's Standon, Hertfordshire, to commemorate the completion of the tomb restoration of the man who both built and lived at Sutton House in Homerton. The service took place on Sunday 26th February.

Standon will have an Open Gardens event on 10th June when the gardens of Standon Lordship (where Sir Ralph lived and died) will be open to visitors.



English Heritage Blue Plaque for Richard Price

The unveiling took place on 22nd February 2023, carried out by Price's fellow Welshman, broadcaster Huw Edwards, at 54 Newington Green.

The terrace of houses where Price lived date from 1658 and are some of the oldest domestic residences in London. He was the pastor at the nearby Meeting House for many years and was a leading radical thinker of his day – English Heritage describe him as a 'philosopher, mathematician, leading intellectual, dissenter and preacher'.

The street artist Stewy has completed a stencil image of Price opposite the house, on Newington Green.



Footways Map of Hackney Central

Footways, a project to map out a network of 'quiet and enjoyable' walking routes in London has launched a map of Hackney.

Print copies can be picked up from libraries and Hackney Museum. The digital map (where suggestions can be made for additional points of interest) is available at

<https://footways.london/hackney>

The launch event was held at Church House, Hackney Church on 16th January 2023. Speakers included Laurie Elks and Sean Gubbins.



Hackney Society Events

Dates for the Diary

April 30th, morning. Visit to St Leonard's Church, Shoreditch.

May 25th, evening. Walk in East Wick, an emerging post-Olympic townscape.

June 29th, evening. Visit and talk, Maintaining, Refurbishing, Adapting and Developing Transport for London's Heritage Estate.

July 22th, morning start, afternoon finish (bring a picnic). Walk the Hackney Brook.

September 20th, evening. Visit to Perseverance Works and AGM.

Booking pages will be announced in the usual way using the *Spacelets* email list. Tickets cost £5 for members and £10 for guests.

Spaces is published by the Hackney Society. Views expressed in the articles are not necessarily those of the Society.

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