



St Matthias Church, Poplar

Conservation Area

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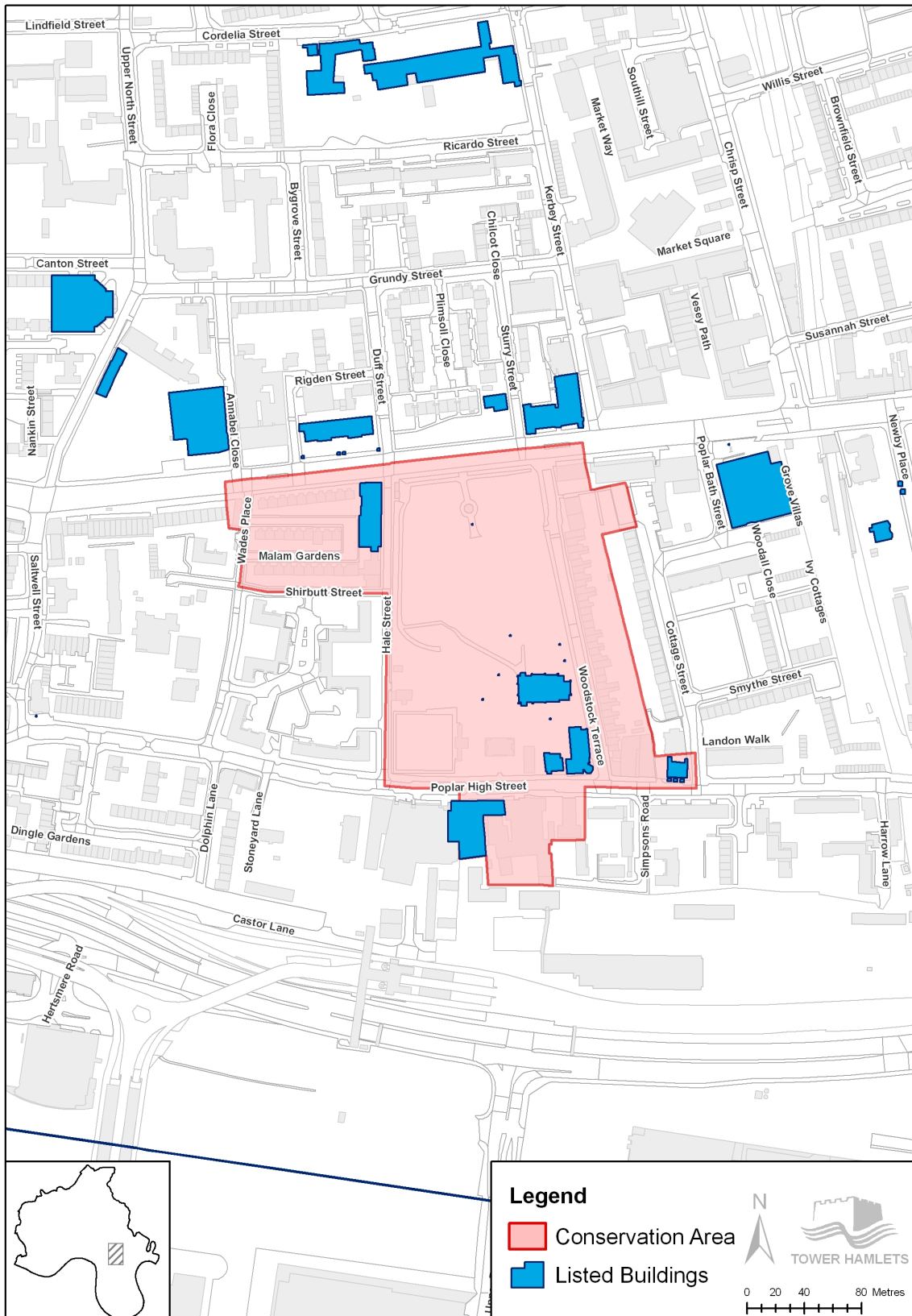
Adopted by Cabinet: 5th march 2008
London Borough of Tower Hamlets
October 2007

Introduction

Conservation Areas are parts of our local environment with special architectural or historic qualities. They are created by the Council, in consultation with the local community, to preserve and enhance the specific character of these areas for everybody.

This guide has been prepared for the following purposes:

- To comply with the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Section 69(1) states that a conservation area is “an area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.”
- To provide a detailed appraisal of the area’s architectural and historic character.
- To provide an overview of planning policy and propose management guidelines on how this character should be preserved and enhanced in the context of appropriate ongoing change.



ST MATHIAS CHURCH CONSERVATION AREA

This map is indicative only and is not a planning document. For further information please contact the Council.

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1. Character Appraisal

Overview

The St Matthias Church, Poplar Conservation Area was designated in February 1986. The Conservation Area is bounded by East India Dock Road to the north, the terrace group at Woodstock Terrace to the east, Tower Hamlets College along Poplar High Street to the south and Hale Street and Wade's Place to the west. The Conservation Area has as its centrepiece, the historic St Matthias Church and churchyard. The purpose of the designation was to safeguard the visual setting of the Grade II* listed St Matthias Church, the oldest church in Poplar.

History

The East India Dock Road was constructed in 1806–12 as an eastern extension of Commercial Road to link the City and the newly constructed East India Docks, north of Blackwall. The original hamlet of Poplar and the historic docks at Blackwall lay to the south of the precinct's principal street, what is now known as Poplar High Street. Founded in 1600, the East India Company (EIC) established its shipyard at Blackwall and came to dominate the hamlet of Poplar, supporting its local chapel and bestowing almshouses.

Over the years, the area experienced a wavering population and prosperity, coinciding with the history of the docks. In the mid 17th century, just a double row of houses existed along Poplar High Street. Although the area was well regarded in the 17th and 18th centuries, Poplar was not an affluent area. Merchants and shipbuilders preferred to live in more rural areas further north. The population began to grow rapidly after the construction of the West and East India Docks at the start of the 19th century. During this time, public buildings were built along Poplar High Street, but as the river docks grew evermore in significance, the commercial importance of Poplar High Street weakened in the 1860s. By the 1880s, prosperity declined to a state that the shops were virtually empty and the alleyways deteriorated into slums. In 1899, the Metropolitan Borough of Poplar formed, assuming the separate parishes of Bromley

and Bow. Poplar High Street ceased to be a civic centre when the new Town Hall was constructed on Bow Road.

Built on the site of the East India Company's almshouse (which had been founded in 1628 on Poplar High Street), the foundation of Poplar Chapel was laid out in 1639, but was not constructed until 1652-54, for the hamlet of Poplar and Blackwall. Known as Poplar Chapel, it was closely modelled on the Broadway Chapel, Westminster (1635-8) which combined Gothic and Classical elements on its exterior.

Almshouses were re-built in 1798-1806 as separate groups of buildings, to the north and south of the then rectilinear open space, as shown in historical maps (Ordnance Survey of 1867-70). The almshouses were Poplar's principal private charitable foundation, originally founded to provide for disabled East India Company seaman.

In 1866, eight years after the transfer of East India Company's property to the crown, the almshouses were demolished and Poplar Church was consecrated as St Matthias, with its own district within the parish of All Saints being established. The site then became the grounds for the Poplar Recreation Ground in 1866-7. Extensive restoration of the church followed, with external and internal changes undertaken.

St Matthias Church survived the Blitz of the Second World War, with only minor damages. In 1976, the church finally closed its doors due to the declining number of worshippers. The church endured vandalism where monuments were stolen as architectural salvage and the stained glass windows were smashed. The church remained derelict and unused until it was converted into a community centre in 1993. Its restoration programme was conducted and funded by English Heritage and the London Dockland Development Corporation in 1990-1 and is now maintained by the St Matthias Conservation Trust.

Character

The prevailing character of the St Matthias Church Conservation Area is defined by its group of miscellaneous public buildings and a residential townscape, complementing the St Matthias Church and the Poplar Recreation Ground surrounding it.

Located in the south-eastern corner of the Poplar Recreation Grounds, exists the Grade II* listed St Matthias Church and its churchyard. The St Matthias Church that is seen today has endured restoration, decline and renewal since 1866. The existing church was remodelled and enlarged in phases between 1870-6, by the architect William Milford Teulon (1823-1900). The 17th century, red brick, old Poplar chapel was superficially clad in Kentish ragstone with Bath stone dressings, and its round-headed windows re-fenestrated and the roof re-covered in slate. The previous Georgian turret was lengthened and clad with zinc, topped with its earlier ball finial and furthermore, north and south porches were added to the church's main building. The intention of the restoration was to give what was considered a 'low' church, an architecturally ecclesiastical feel and appearance. Several monuments and headstones surround St Matthias Church in its churchyard. Many have been damaged, badly weathered or removed, however several Grade II listed memorials commemorating local notable people remain.

South of St Matthias Church, along Poplar High Street is the collection of institutional public buildings of Grade II statutory listing. The first almshouse stood on the corner site of Woodstock Terrace and Poplar High Street, now occupied by the Grade II listed former District Board of Works Offices (117 Poplar High Street). Erected in 1869-70, and once containing the Poplar Borough Council offices until 1938, the building is notable for its octagonal tower, capped by a finial copper dome marking the corner. Constructed of yellow stock brick with Portland stone dressings, the former office is mid-Victorian free Gothic in style, with some Venetian detailing. Two storey wings abut the corner tower, with Venetian inspired, pairs of tall narrow windows. The design by the architects Walter Augustus Hills (1834-1917) and Thomas Wayland Fletcher (1833-1901) of Bow were selected from 43 competition entries.

Next door at 115 Poplar High Street, is the former East India Company chaplain's house. The chaplain's house is the only surviving building of the East India Company's Almshouse complex. The early 19th century building by S.P Cocknell is of yellow stock brick, with a central stone pediment with a sculptured coat of arms of the East India Company.

On the southern boundary of the Conservation Area, is Tower Hamlets College at 112 Poplar High Street. Opened in 1906, the building was design by W E Riley (1852-1937) and the LCC architects department. Faced in Portland stone, its style has a restrained use of classical-renaissance orders and ornament to dress the principal opening. Built as 6 bays, an additional 3 bays were added to its east, in 1931. The originally central group of articulated coupled engaged Doric columns rise from the sill course. The college was purpose-built and had a merchant navy cadet training emphasis, hence the maritime putti over the door.

At the junction of Poplar High Street and Cottage Street is the Grade II listed Poplar Coroner's Court, with the mortuary building to its rear. Dated 1910-11 and by the LCC, the building is of red brick with stone dressings, with a tiled roof and stucco covered eaves and is essentially of domestic Arts and Crafts character. The main entrance is from Poplar High Street, through a Tudor style arched doorway. In its scale, accommodation and layout (and in locating the mortuary to the rear of the court), Poplar's Coroner's Court is characteristic of other such courts built in London in the late 1890s – 1900s.

Running north through the Conservation Area and running the length of the Poplar Recreation Ground, is Woodstock Terrace, containing a single row terrace of 1850s houses. The non listed terraces are uniform in presentation, expressing an isolated remnant of Victorian working class family dwellings, which once covered the Poplar area. The characteristic London roof is concealed behind a corniced parapet. The uniformity of the cornice line is an important feature of these buildings. Stucco details decorate the doorway and pairs of bay windows exist on each floor. The row of terrace housing is highly regarded as being of townscape merit.

To the north-west of the Conservation Area, is the former Pope John House, now known as Blomfield House, designed by Sir Arthur Blomfield & Son in 1892. Constructed of red brick with stone dressing and slate roof, the building is Victorian Tudor in character. It sits adjacent to the estate of Malam Gardens, built by the Commercial Gas Company to house some of its employees. The 29 houses are arranged in three terraced rows, all facing in the same direction to the north. Situated off Wade's Place, the estate's internal road, Malam Gardens circles around the middle row of houses. Each house is identical in design and built of speckled brown, red and black brick, with the pitched roofs covered in dark red tiles. The houses were powered by gas for lighting and heating, and so was the new street with its gas street lamps.

Land Use

Apart from the church itself, the land use character of the area is mixed. The strip south of the church along Poplar High Street, is aligned with several civic buildings – the council offices, coroner's court and college. Although some of its land uses have changed, the public buildings are of historical and architectural significance. The cluster of public buildings complements the church and its garden surrounds, in which the open space is largely valued by college students and residents of Poplar. The residential properties of Malam Gardens and Woodstock Terrace flank the recreation grounds to its west and east.

Scale

The prevailing scale of the St Matthias Church Conservation Area is appropriately low rise, complementing the relatively low scale of St Matthias Church. The terraces along Woodstock Terrace range between 2-3 storeys, whilst the houses at Malam Gardens are 2 storeys in scale. To the south, on this section of Poplar High Street, the scale of the public buildings range between 2-3 storeys, with the highest point occurring at the corner of Woodstock Terrace and Poplar High Street. The council office's octagonal tower and spire on the corner site, is equivalent to 4 storeys plus.

Open Spaces

The historic churchyard of St Matthias Church contains monuments and tombs scattered throughout the open space, including Grade II listed memorials. Surrounding the churchyard is the ample open space of the Poplar Recreation Ground. As approached from East India Dock Road, behind the surviving stone gate piers unfolds the Grade II listed memorial of an angel on a pedestal of white stone and marble. This memorial commemorates the 18 children killed in a Poplar School, by a German bomb in 1917. The recreation grounds almost extends the length of the block, from East India Dock Road to Poplar High Street, with nurtured lawns, mature trees, paths and flowerbeds enclosed by its peripheral fence. The recreation grounds provide a retreat from the urban character of this part of Poplar, whilst protecting the serenity and setting of the church.

Views

The area is characterised by a range of distinctive views. The straight lines of East India Dock Road and Poplar High Street create long views to the west and east. As viewed from East India Dock Road, Poplar Recreation Ground is enclosed within a band of mature planting. The gardens unfold the St Matthias Church, which has a charming presence. Similarly, the open space is enclosed on its western and eastern boundary behind a continuous ribbon of trees and shrubbery behind its fencing. Views running north-south through Hale Street and Woodstock Terrace towards Poplar High Street, end with buildings terminating the street. The towers of Canary Wharf set a backdrop to the smaller scale of Poplar, highlighting the distinction between the low rise character of the St Matthias Conservation Area and its developing metropolitan surrounds.

Summary

This is an area of particular special architectural and historic interest, illustrated by its rich history and significant architecture dating from the 17th century. The character and appearance of the area, as described in this appraisal, define its special qualities. There are minor improvements that could be made to buildings in the Conservation Area, but overall this has little impact on the qualities that led to its designation.

2. Management Guidelines

Overview

This Management Plan has been prepared in consultation with the community, to set out the Borough's commitment to high quality management of Conservation Areas and their settings. The Development Design and Conservation Team operate within the context of the Development and Renewal Directorate of the Council, alongside Major Projects, Development Control, Strategy and Building Control.

Areas are as much about history, people, activities and places as they are about buildings and spaces. Preserving and enhancing the Borough's architectural and historic built heritage over the next decades is of vital importance in understanding the past and allowing it to inform our present and future.

Conservation Areas also promote sustainability in its widest sense. The Council is committed to this in Policy CP3 of the Core Strategy its Local Development Framework (LDF). The re-use of historic buildings and places is environmentally responsible as it protects the energy and resources embodied in them and combats global warming.

Consideration of appropriate amendments to the boundary of the Conservation Area, and recommendations for additions to the register of listed buildings, either the statutory or local list, will be considered by the Council.

Who is this document for?

This is an inclusive document which will engage with many different people and organisations. It will depend on the support of the community to achieve its objectives. It is aimed primarily at the residents, businesses, developers and others living and working in the area. The Conservation Area belongs to its residents, as well as the whole community, and their priorities will be reflected in these documents after the consultation process.

The document has also been prepared to align conservation objectives within different parts of the council, and provide a single point of reference for the management of the area. It represents our shared commitment to conserve the special architectural and historic character, and to help manage sensitive new development and refurbishment where appropriate to successfully preserve and enhance the quality and character of the area.

Outline Guidance on Applications

Before carrying out any work in this area, you will need to apply for consent even for minor work such as replacing railings. These consents include planning, listed building and Conservation Area consent, as well as others for work such as felling trees.

When planning applications in a Conservation Area are decided, the planning authority will pay special attention to whether the character of the area is preserved or enhanced. The character of St Matthias Church, Poplar is described in detail in the Appraisal in the first part of this document.

In St Matthias Church, Poplar as in other Conservation Areas, planning controls are more extensive than normal. Consent is required to demolish any building, and a higher standard of detail and information is required for any application. When applying for listed building consent, please note that all parts of the building, including its interior walls, ceilings and all other internal features, are protected. Some buildings are nationally (statutorily) listed, and some are locally listed by the Borough to indicate buildings that the Borough wishes to protect.

The exact information required will vary with each application, but in general applications must include:

- A clear design statement explaining the reasons behind the various architectural, masterplanning or other design decisions.
- Contextual plans, sections and elevations of existing buildings

- Drawings, including construction details, produced at larger scale (eg. 1:50 or 1:20) clearly indicating the nature of the work proposed.
- Additional detail regarding materials and construction.
- Photos of the condition of existing building (including details where appropriate).

More details are available on the Tower Hamlets website. If in any doubt, the Council welcomes and encourages early requests for advice or information.

When alterations are proposed to listed buildings, complying with the building regulations can be particularly complex, and early consideration of building control issues can help identify potential problems early in the process.

Policies Relevant to the Conservation Area and how they are Implemented:

Any new development should have regard to national, regional and local planning policy.

- At the national level, the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 places a duty on Tower Hamlets to designate Conservation Areas in “areas of special architectural or historic interest”, and to formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of its Conservation Areas. National policy for planning and the historic environment is set out in Planning Policy Guidance 15 (PPG15).
- At the regional level, policy 4B.1 of the London Spatial Development Strategy (or London Plan) states that ‘The Mayor will seek to ensure that developments ... respect London’s built heritage.’
- At the local level, the new Local Development Framework (LDF) of Tower Hamlets states that ‘the Council will protect and enhance the historic environment of the borough’. This is described in detail in policy CP49 of the Core Strategy of the LDF. In addition, applicants should note policy CP46 to ensure that access issues are properly addressed in work carried out in a Conservation Area.

Listed Buildings in the Conservation Area

Grade II*

- St Matthias Church, Poplar

Grade II

- Memorial in Poplar Recreation Ground, East India Dock Road
- Pope John House, East India Dock Road
- St Matthias Vicarage – 115 Poplar High Street
- Coroner's Court – 127 Poplar High Street
- Poplar Technical College – 112 Poplar High Street
- Old Poplar Town Hall, Council Offices – 117 Poplar High Street
- Unidentified body stone tomb (St Matthias)
- Tomb of Hugh McIntosh (St Matthias)
- Tomb of Captain Samuel Jones and family (St Matthias)
- Tomb of John Smart (St Matthias)
- Tomb of Solomon Baker (St Matthias)
- Tomb of Samuel Coppendale (St Matthias)

Highways and Transportation Issues

The quality of the streetscape, the surface materials, street furniture and other features can all be integral parts of the character of Conservation Areas. Any work carried out should respect this historic character. Anyone involved in development which impacts on public spaces should refer to the Council's Street Design Guide, TfL's own Streetscape Guidance and English Heritage's 'Streets for All' document. The ongoing cost of maintenance should also be considered carefully.

Since the mid 1930s, the original high street has experienced gradual changes of street widening and the development of blocks of housing estates. The current Poplar High Street bears little resemblance to its former street pattern, although public buildings dating back to the 17th century still remain today.

East India Dock Road is the major traffic route along the northern edge of this Conservation Area. Similarly, Poplar High Street carries significant loads of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, close to the Tower Hamlets College.

Works by statutory services (gas, electricity, water etc) have the potential to damage historic ground surfaces or ancient underground structures. Early consultation with the conservation team is encouraged for any works.

Opportunities and Potential for Enhancement

Preservation of the historic setting of the church and glimpses of the churchyard through breaks in the perimeter edge, will be a consideration in the assessment of development proposals. While the surrounding residential forms present uniform frontages with little scope for alterations, any additions and renovations to the buildings must be considered in appropriateness to the group of buildings, as well as to the overall setting of the Conservation Area.

East India Dock Road and Poplar High Street has been part of the character of the setting of St Matthias Church and its recreation grounds for hundreds of years. The quality of the street environment will indeed impact the character and setting of the Conservation Area, in which the Council seeks to preserve and enhance.

Trees, Parks and Open Spaces

In its most recent use as a community centre, St Matthias Church and its churchyard have been reasonably maintained and its condition has been stabilised over recent years. The surrounding green open spaces, pathway, mature trees and park furniture have all been well maintained within the Poplar Recreation Ground.

The continuous maintenance of the church and churchyard, including its tombstones, memorials and the surrounding gardens should be ensured as the centrepiece of the Conservation Area. The management of parks and open spaces are particularly important in preserving the character of the St Matthias Church Conservation Area,

ensuring the public gardens and the sacred character of the churchyard is respected. This principle should be observed in all future management and maintenance of the churchyard gardens.

All trees in Conservation Areas are protected, and some trees are also covered by Tree Preservation Orders (TPO's). Notice must be given to the authority before works are carried out to any tree in the Conservation Area, and some works require specific permission. More information can be found in the Council's Guide to Trees, and on the Tower Hamlets website. Carrying out works to trees without the necessary approval can be a criminal offence, and the Council welcomes early requests for advice.

Equalities:

Valuing diversity is one of the Council's core values, and we take pride in being one of the most culturally rich and diverse boroughs in the UK. This core value has driven the preparation of this document and will continue to inform changes to this document in the future. These values will also inform changes to buildings and places where this document provides guidance to ensure inclusivity for all sections of the community.

This Character Appraisal and Management Guidelines will support the Council's aims:

- a strong spirit of community and good race relations in Tower Hamlets.
- to get rid of prejudice, discrimination and victimisation within the communities we serve and our workforce
- to make sure that the borough's communities and our workforce are not discriminated against or bullied for any reason, including reasons associated with their gender, age, ethnicity, disability, sexuality or religious belief.

Please contact us if you feel that this document could do more to promote equality and further the interests of the whole community.

Publicity

The existence of the Conservation Area will be promoted locally to raise awareness of current conservation issues and to invite contributions from the community.

Consideration of Resources Needed to Conserve the Historic Environment:

The most effective way to secure the historic environment is to ensure that buildings can continue to contribute to the life of the local community, preferably funding their own maintenance and refurbishment. Commercial value can be generated directly from the building, through its use as a dwelling or office, or through its role in increasing the attractiveness of the area to tourists and visitors. However, it should be noted that economic reasons alone will not in themselves justify the demolition or alteration of a building in a Conservation Area. The Council will consider grant aid to historic buildings and places.

In order to meet today's needs without damaging the historic or architectural value of a building, a degree of flexibility, innovation and creative estate management may be required.

Ongoing Management and Monitoring Change:

To keep a record of changes within the area, dated photographic surveys of street frontages and significant buildings and views will be made every 5 years. Also, public meetings will be held every 5 years to maintain communications between all stakeholders and identify new opportunities and threats to the Conservation Area as they arise.

The Council recognises the contribution of the local community in managing Conservation Areas, and will welcome proposals to work collaboratively to monitor and manage the area.

In addition, the Borough's Annual Monitoring Report, prepared with the new LDF, will assess progress on the implementation of the whole Local Development Scheme, including policies relevant to conservation.

Enforcement Strategy:

Appropriate enforcement, with the support of the community, is essential to protect the area's character. The Council will take prompt action against those who carry out unauthorised works to listed buildings, or substantial or complete demolition of buildings within a Conservation Area. Unauthorised work to a listed building is a criminal offence and could result in a fine and/or imprisonment. Likewise, unauthorised substantial or complete demolition of a building within a Conservation Area is also illegal. It is therefore essential to obtain Conservation Area or Listed Building Consent before works begin.

If listed buildings are not maintained in good repair, then the Council can step in to ensure that relevant repairs are carried out. In some circumstances, the Council itself may undertake essential repairs and recover the cost from the owner. The Council has powers of compulsory purchase, if necessary to protect Listed Buildings.

The Council will enforce conservation law wherever necessary, and will consider the introduction of Article 4 Directions to remove Permitted Development Rights where appropriate.

Further Reading and Contacts

- The Survey of London, volume 43: Poplar, Blackwall and the Isle of Dogs.
- The Buildings of England (London 5: East). Cherry, O'Brien and Pevsner.

The Council encourages and welcomes discussions with the community about the historic environment and the contents of this document. Further guidance on all aspects of this document can be obtained on our website at www.towerhamlets.gov.uk or by contacting:

Tel: 020 7364 5009

Email: placeshaping@towerhamlets.gov.uk

This document is also available in Libraries, Council Offices and Idea Stores in the Borough.

For a translation, or large print, audio or braille version of this document, please telephone 0800 376 5454. Also, if you require any further help with this document, please telephone 020 7364 5372.

Also, you may wish to contact the following organizations for further information:

Mile End Old Town Residents Association

English Heritage

www.english-heritage.org.uk

The Georgian Group

www.georgiangroup.org.uk

Victorian Society

www.victorian-society.org.uk

20th Century Society

www.c20society.org.uk

Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings www.spab.org.uk

Listed Buildings at Risk:

<check against Register>

Any other threats to the Conservation Area

(to be written at public consultation stage)

Priorities for Action (1-5)

(to be written at public consultation stage)