

Finsbury: Past, Present & Future

Report for EC1 New Deal for Communities compiled by
Dr David R Green, King's College London, May 2009.



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Introduction

Contrasting the seeming permanence of London's built environment – its churches, streets, houses, flats and offices – with a population in constant flux, V. S. Pritchett wrote in 1962 how “The rate of change in the modern world is so fast that in a decade we will all look like gravestones with half an epitaph written”.¹ Nearly half a century has passed since those words were written and if anything the sense of impermanence has become more intense and more pervasive. In Finsbury the sense of transition is very real. The people who first moved into the new post-war housing developments, whose experiences, families and ties to the locality often stretched back generations, are becoming fewer. And as that population ages, so the collective memory that links the present with the past becomes more tenuous. It is therefore an appropriate moment to focus attention on the way the area has changed and the processes that have shaped its present day physical and social fabric.

To understand the nature of change EC1 New Deal for Communities commissioned the Geography Department of King's College London under the direction of Dr David Green to coordinate the One History project. The research for this took place over a period of five months between January and May 2009. This report is part of that project which reflects the desire to understand better the changes that have taken place in the area and to consider how the processes that have shaped the locality and its communities might influence the future.

Aims and Objectives of One History

The One History project consists of the following elements:

1. Finsbury: Past, Present and Future report.
2. Two walking trails that explore the history of everyday landscapes in the EC1 area. These trails follow routes along St John Street and between Ironmonger Baths and the Spa Green estate.
3. Oral histories with residents and workers in the area which have helped inform this report and which will be available on the project website and deposited with Islington Local History Centre as a permanent record of life in the area at the current time.
4. A website www.ec1history.co.uk which contains all the research produced by this project including this report, the oral histories, short articles and the walking trails together with a podcast of the walks themselves.

Structure of the Report

The report consists of two sections. The first outlines how the locality has changed over approximately two thousand years, focussing mainly on the last two hundred years during which the area was built up. The second section explores some of the trends that have influenced those changes and the way they link to the present. By focussing on these trends this report also raises questions about the area's future and the policies to manage change.

Section 1: EC1 in the Making

This section identifies the geographical area covered by the research, which primarily consists of the old metropolitan borough of Finsbury. It explores its early history as a locality lying on the fringes of the City of London. It then concentrates in more detail on the last two hundred years focussing on population change, economic growth and radicalism. The last part of this section examines how the area was transformed after the Second World War and the way it continues to change today.

Section 2: Linking the Past to the Present

In the second section, some of the trends that link the past to the present are explored based on the interviews with local residents, oral histories that were recorded as part of this project and other information gathered in the course of the research. Four themes have been highlighted:

1. Place and belonging.
2. Celebrating ordinary landscapes.
3. Always under pressure: Finsbury and the City.
4. Towards an open society: EC1 and the wider world.

In each of these themes the nature of the changes that have taken place are discussed and questions raised about their implications for the future of the area.

¹ V. S. Pritchett, *London Perceived* (Penguin, 2003; first edition 1962), 40.

Section I: EC1 in the making

In many ways the Finsbury district that incorporates the area covered by EC1 New Deal for Communities is no different to many other traditional working-class districts in inner London that in recent years have experienced significant demographic, economic and social change. The loss of traditional jobs in factories and the introduction of new sources of employment, the arrival of newcomers to local authority estates, the conversion of buildings to new uses, gentrification and the loss of a sense of a tight knit community, all of which have characterised Finsbury, have also been repeated in other inner London districts.² How those changes impact on an area is partly dependent on wider processes that operate beyond its borders. But it is also partly dependent on the characteristics of particular places and communities – on the ‘personality’ of a district that makes it different from other places. It is this personality that is the focus of attention here.

Present Boundaries

The EC1 New Deal for Community area covers part of what in the 20th century became known as the metropolitan borough of Finsbury. Lying to the north of the City borders, the borough was formed by the London Local Government Act of 1899 (62 & 63 Vict. c.14) which divided the County of London into 28 metropolitan boroughs, replacing the numerous parish vestries and district boards of works that had previously administered the city. Finsbury was created by combining Clerkenwell and St Luke’s together with the much smaller districts of St Sepulchre Middlesex, the Charterhouse and Glasshouse Yard.

Finsbury c. 1900



Source: *Bartholomew's Pocket Atlas of London, 1922*; reproduced from www.hipkiss.org/data/maps/bartholomews-pocket_atlas-and-guide-to-london_1922_metropolitan-boroughs_2000_1486_600.jpg

Up till 1965 Finsbury was a separate borough but after the reorganisation of London local government it was amalgamated with Islington, although as a place name Finsbury is still currently used and recognised by older local residents and remains much in evidence on the street signs present in the district. The EC1 NDC area largely consists of the current day Bunhill ward and a small section of Clerkenwell.

Street Signage in EC1



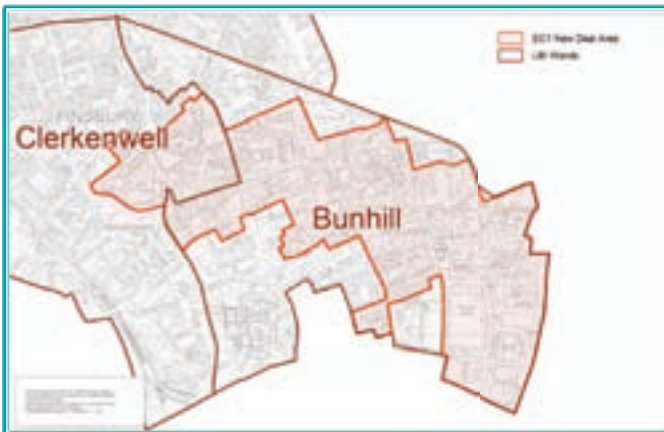
² For a recent discussion see the sections on Bermondsey and Battersea in Peter Hall, *London Voices, London Lives*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2007).

The EC1 New Deal for Community area: south Islington



Note: the area in red denotes the EC1 NDC area. The boundary marked in black denotes Islington.

EC1 New Deal for Community: Wards



Source; EC1 NDC.

Early Development

During the Roman period (55 BC– 446AD) the area that became Finsbury lay outside the city walls. To the west was the Fleet River which formed a natural boundary with a deep inlet and valley. The Walbrook stream lay to the east and ran through a marshy area. Drainage was further impeded by the building of the Roman wall surrounding the city, creating what later became known as Moorfields. Between the departure of the Romans and 886, when Alfred formally re-established London as a “burgh” or fortified town, the city languished. Following a prolonged period of warfare with the Danes in the later 10th century, peace returned and the city began to expand with several new churches built, including that at Westminster. There were large amounts of infilling in the City and new streets were laid out to the north of Cheapside. William Fitzstephen’s account in 1173 describes many of these features, including the weekly horse fair held in Smithfield (the ‘smooth field’) and Moorfields. Several religious and military orders were given land in the area surrounding the city, including two in Clerkenwell – the priory of St Mary and that of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem. Other religious orders had estates in close proximity including the Carthusians just to the south in Charterhouse and the Augustinian priory of St Bartholomew, the remnant of which is Great St Bartholomew’s church in West Smithfield.

In the next 400 years, London continued to grow with the pattern of development around its fringes heavily influenced by the existence of land owned by the religious orders. When the monasteries were dissolved during Henry VIII’s reign in 1539, the land they owned was sold off and new streets started to be laid out. In Clerkenwell, Smithfield continued to function as a horse and livestock market but developments were taking place elsewhere that had important repercussions for the area. In the 16th century, John Stow’s *Survey of London* described how the district around Smithfield and Clerkenwell was associated with the sale of livestock and how metal working had become important. Breweries were also present, excluded from the City itself by guild regulations but free to operate beyond the walls. Meanwhile, to the east of the district the marshy area known as Moorfields had been drained and the Walbrook diverted underground. Further north, towards the high ground near the hamlet of Islington, the New River was constructed by Hugh Myddleton between 1609 and 1613 to provide a clean supply of water to London, and this resulted in the building of reservoirs close to Saddlers Wells.

Economic Growth and Residential Development c 1700–1850

At the start of the 17th century fingers of development were beginning to spread outwards from the City towards Islington but for the most part the area remained open ground. It escaped damage during the Great Fire of London in 1666 and in the following decades became increasingly associated with manufacturing activities, notably clock and watch making in Clerkenwell, and brewing further to the east. The expansion of gin drinking in the early 18th century arising from the encouragement given to British distillers in an effort to stifle foreign competition was the catalyst for establishing several large distilleries in the district which continued to function until well into the 20th century.

Economic expansion and population growth in the 18th century brought with it a demand for housing and the area began to be built over from the 1750s. By the 1790s, as Richard Horwood's map shows, streets to the immediate north and south of Old Street had been laid out. Small groups of houses were beginning to spring up just to the south of the new City Road, which had been opened in 1761, eating into what was still open ground. To the west Clerkenwell Green and the surrounding streets had already been completed but further north lay open fields and the reservoir of the New River Company. By the end of the 18th century there were also three prisons in the area including the Bridewell, the Clerkenwell House of Detention and Coldbath Fields, the latter now the site of the Post Office Sorting Station at Mount Pleasant.

Finsbury in the 1790s – Richard Horwood's map 1799



In the next fifty years, more streets and housing were constructed so that by the 1850s there was very little open ground left other than the newly laid out King's Square belonging to the St Bartholomew's estate, and Northampton Square just to the south of the City Road, which belonged to the Marquis of Northampton. However, in contrast to new construction that was taking place at the same time in the West End, where large aristocratic landlords were able to plan and control development, these two relatively large estates were the exception rather than the rule. Most construction was undertaken piecemeal by small landowners, developers and builders who did so without much overall control. As John Summerson so perceptively remarked of the process 'The resulting jig-saw is a monument to the economic assiduity of the little man'.³

The irregular layout of the 19th century street pattern, the variety and in many cases the relatively poor quality of houses bear witness to this piecemeal process of growth. In this sense Finsbury had much more in common with districts further to the east, which also developed without the influence of large landlords, than it did with places further west. Apart from some Victorian street improvements, such as the extension of Clerkenwell Road to provide an east-west route to link with Old Street, the 19th century street pattern remained largely unchanged until the Second World War and subsequent large scale re-planning of the area. In Finsbury, therefore, not much remains of this streetscape, although it is much more in evidence closer to Clerkenwell.

³ John Summerson, *Georgian London* (Pleiades, London, 1945), 180.

Finsbury c. 1827 – James Greenwood’s map



Finsbury 1914

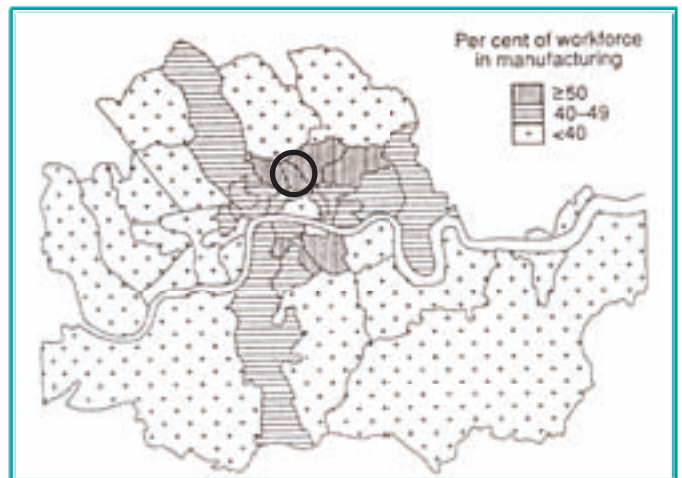


The Expansion of Industry

Although London does not feature in the history of the industrial revolution, it nevertheless had a large manufacturing base. The high cost of land and distance from coal supplies meant that steam power was relatively rare. Instead, large numbers of workers were employed either in small workshops or in their own homes making items such as books, clothes, furniture, shoes, and watches. These kinds of activities took place largely in an inner industrial perimeter that included Clerkenwell, Finsbury, Shoreditch and Bethnal Green in the north, and the southern districts of Southwark and Rotherhithe.

In Clerkenwell and Finsbury one of the characteristic industries from the 18th century was watchmaking. The numbers involved are difficult to estimate though they were substantial: in 1798 there were said to have been 7000 watchmakers in Clerkenwell out of a male population of nearly 11,000 and another 1000 in St Luke’s and, although these figures are likely to have been overestimates, they nevertheless were an indication of the importance of the industry in the area.⁴ Although the numbers fell in subsequent decades, by 1851 over a third of all watchmakers in London (4182) lived in Clerkenwell (843) and St Luke’s (733).⁵

The Inner Industrial Perimeter 1851 (% workforce in manufacturing and building)



Source: 1851 census.

⁴ M. D. George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Peregrine, 1966), 176.

⁵ These figures are taken from the 1851 census.

In London manufacturing often took place either in small workshops located in the backyards of houses or in one or two rooms in the houses themselves. This was particularly true of the watchmaking trade which was characterised by small employers and individual workers often working on their own account. Wherever handicraft work was more important than mechanisation, and where the division of labour allowed production to be broken down into separate components, domestic industry was important. As a result, although street maps might suggest that an area was residential – by virtue of the absence of factories – the truth was that for many home and work were one and the same. This was certainly true of Clerkenwell and Finsbury. Charles Booth's survey of poverty in London during the 1890s recorded that in Northampton Square, for example, the upper floors of houses were frequently used as workshops.⁶ Watchmaking declined in the second half of the century and by 1901 the number of men employed had fallen to 3503.⁷ The introduction of cheap, mass produced watches, notably from Switzerland and the United States, was pioneered in the 20th century by firms such as Ingersoll, which opened a store in London in 1904 and which built a factory in St John Street that used novel production line techniques. From that time on, workers in the area were involved more in repairing than making watches by hand.

House with former workshop on upper storey, Northampton Square



Source; David Green, 2009.

As pressure on space in the City mounted in the second half of the century, largely as a result of economic expansion and the coming of the railways, so warehouses and factories began to spread into residential areas and to replace housing and less intensive land uses. In Finsbury, this process was given further impetus by the cessation of the slaughter of livestock at Smithfield in 1855, which meant an end to the herds of cattle that were previously driven down St John Street. The drovers and cattle were replaced by other forms of traffic, notably the brewers' drays that delivered beer and spirits from the various breweries and distilleries that had been established in the area, including Cannons Brewery and Nicholson's Distillery on St John Street and Whitbread's on Chiswell Street. Other industrial uses also ate into the housing stock. Towards the end of the 19th century cigarette manufacturing became important and several large factories using modern machinery were built. By the early 20th century, nearly one in three of all tobacco manufacturers in London were located in Finsbury.⁸ By then other large factories and warehouses had also started to appear along the main through routes – Bovril on Old Street; Scholls shoes, Ingersoll Watches and Pollard shop fitters on St John Street. None of these businesses survive today, although ghostly reminders of the past remain etched into the urban fabric in one form or another.

The Ingersoll Factory, St John Street



Source: David Green, 2009.

⁶ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London* Second Series: Industry, vol. 2 (Macmillan, 1903), 25–29.

⁷ These figures are taken from the 1851 and 1901 censuses.

⁸ This information comes from the *Post Office Trade Directory for London*, 1931.

Reminders of the industrial past

Below left: Ruts made by metal rimmed cart wheels in the granite entrance way to Cannon's Brewery, St John Street.

Below right: Marble entrance to former Salmon and Gluckstein tobacco factory, Dingley Road (now the back of the Thistle Hotel).



Source: David Green, 2009.



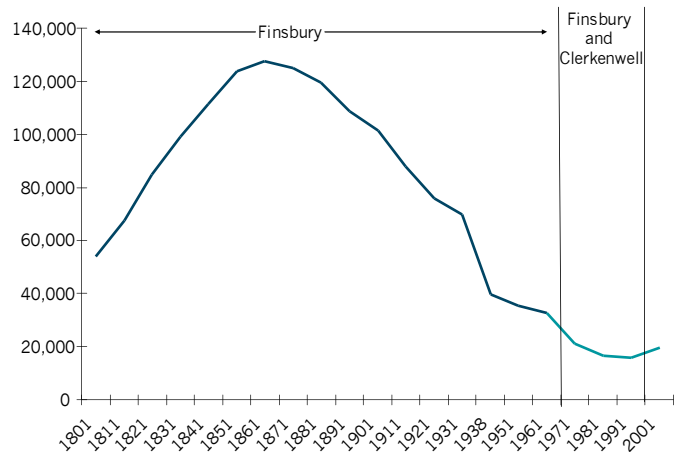
Source: David Green, 2009.

Above: Black cat cigarette advert on old Adkins and Co (later Imperial Tobacco) factory building, Dingley Road.

Population, Housing and Poverty

Rapid population growth accompanied development. In 1801 the Finsbury area had a population of just over 54,000 but this had more than doubled by 1861 to reach a peak of over 127,000. In the second half of the century, as warehouses, commercial premises and factories began to replace housing; the population started to fall and by 1901 was just over 100,000. Population decline continued during the inter-war years, as families moved out to newer, suburban estates on the edge of the city. The fall in population was particularly rapid during and immediately after the Second World War, largely as a result of bomb damage to the building stock.

Population change in Finsbury 1801–2001

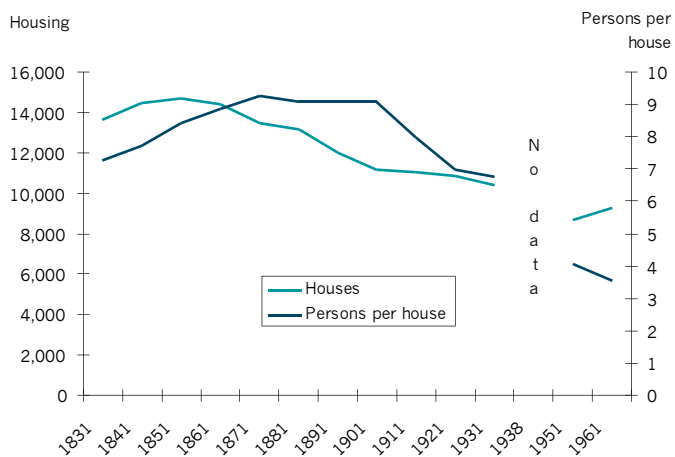


Source: Figures for 1801–1961 are taken from the census (Vision of Britain, www.visionofbritain.org.uk); 1971 Islington Planning Department, *Finsbury District Study* (Islington Council, 1977); 1981–1991 Islington Council, *Finsbury Neighbourhood Profile* (Islington Council, 1995); 2001 Census, Key Statistics tables KS01 to KS24.

Note: Prior to its formation in 1899 Finsbury consisted of several separate districts which included Charterhouse, Glasshouse Yard, St Sepulchre, Clerkenwell and St Luke's. The figures for 1801 to 1891 consist of the total population for each of these districts. From 1901 until 1961 the figure is for the Metropolitan Borough of Finsbury. Between 1971 and 1991 the figure refers to the Finsbury and Clerkenwell census sub districts. In 2001 the figures cover Bunhill and Clerkenwell wards.

As commercial development pushed outwards from the City in the second half of the nineteenth century, so pressure mounted on the remaining housing supply with three inter-related outcomes: overcrowding worsened; rents rose and poverty increased. To some extent the falling population was paralleled by the declining number of houses but the rate of decline was not sufficient to prevent worsening levels of overcrowding. Between 1851 and 1901 the area lost nearly a quarter of its housing stock. However, population did not fall to the same extent and as a result the number of persons per house remained at around 9 between 1871 and 1901. Since many houses also included workshops, particularly in the Clerkenwell area where there were a large number of watchmakers and repairers, even this figure fails to convey the true extent of overcrowding.

Housing in Finsbury 1831–1961



Source: Figures for 1831–1961 are taken from the census (Vision of Britain, www.visionofbritain.org.uk). Data on housing is missing between 1931 and 1951.

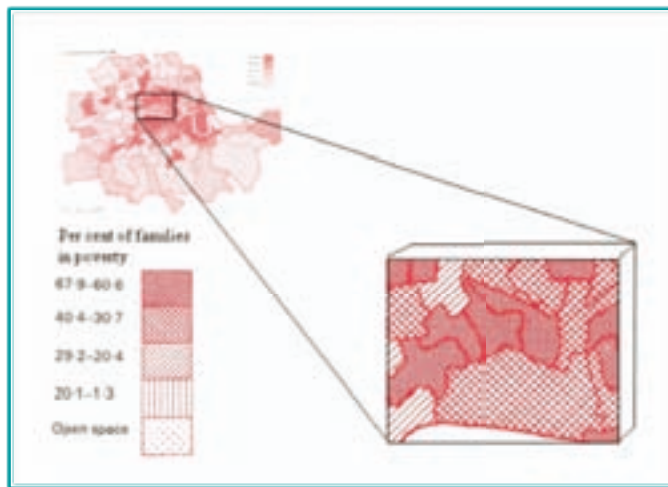
These pressures were largely responsible for the fact that by the time of Charles Booth’s poverty survey in the late 1880s and 1890s, Finsbury was one of the poorest and most overcrowded districts in London. Overall, Booth estimated that 45% of Finsbury’s population was in poverty compared to an average of 31% in London as a whole, with over 53% of inhabitants living in overcrowded conditions of two or more to a room.⁹ However, within this overall figure lay some intense pockets of poverty. The area bounded by Old Street to the north, Goswell Road to the West, Beech Street to the south and Whitecross Street to the east, for example, had over 70 per cent of its population classified as poor, the third highest proportion of poverty in London as a whole. It was no coincidence that the most intense pockets of poverty were found in these districts immediately fringing the City where pressure on space was greatest, housing was in shortest supply and rents were accordingly high.

Poverty in London 1889



Source: J. Shepherd, J. Westaway and T. Lee, *A Social Atlas of London* (Clarendon, 1974).

Poverty in Finsbury 1889



Source: J. Shepherd, J. Westaway and T. Lee, *A Social Atlas of London* (Clarendon, 1974).

⁹ Booth’s definition of poverty was based on the amount of money needed by a family to maintain an independent existence; i.e. not depend on charity or poor relief. It was roughly estimated at 21 shillings a week, equivalent to £1.05p in today’s currency. See Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London First Series: Poverty* vol. 2 (Macmillan, London, 1903).

Radical Finsbury

For over 500 years, Finsbury has been associated with radical gatherings, political movements and social reform, from the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 which culminated in Wat Tyler's murder at Smithfield, to the Finsbury Plan in the 20th century, where the Labour Council embarked on one of the most ambitious social reform programmes ever seen in London let alone the UK.¹⁰

Opportunity to gather freely in public was an important element that helped to foster this tradition. Open areas close to the City were often the meeting point for crowds and political gatherings and there were several such places in or around Finsbury, notably Clerkenwell Green, Coldbath Fields, Moorfields and Spa Fields. Religious dissenters in the 18th century, such as John Wesley and George Whitefield, finding that they were prevented from preaching in churches, took to the open air, using Moorfields as their base. John Wesley's house and chapel, built in 1778 on the City Road, remain open to this day as a place of worship and a Methodist museum. Throughout the 19th century Clerkenwell Green was a regular meeting place for Chartists, Fenians and socialists. In the early 20th century it was a well known venue for Communist Party gatherings. Spa Fields was the site of large scale civil unrest in 1816 and 1817 whilst a riot at Coldbath Fields in 1833 resulted in the first death of a policeman at a political demonstration. Other open spaces also offered opportunities for crowds to gather, such as at Smithfield, which was the site for the notoriously unruly Bartholomew Fair until it was banned by the City authorities in 1855. Though less overtly political than the meetings elsewhere, nevertheless for the duration of the fair, which lasted several days, the social order was questioned and traditional conventions overturned.

Open spaces were not the only sites where political gatherings and debate occurred and as the area became more built up, so other kinds of meeting places became important. Throughout the district, pubs and meetings halls were the venue for political debate and trade union activity and these spaces provided ample opportunity for a thriving working-class, dissenting culture to develop. William Morris and Eleanor Marx lectured in the building that subsequently became the Marx Memorial Library on Clerkenwell Green. The South Place Ethical Society, the first free thinking organisation in Britain, had meeting rooms in Finsbury Pavement which were the venue for lectures by, amongst others, Annie Besant, who led the matchgirls strike at Bryant and Mays in 1888, and by Clara Collett, one of foremost feminists of her generation. In the 1920s the Communist Party of Great Britain often held meetings there.

While spaces may have provided an opportunity to discuss and debate freely, by themselves they are not sufficient to guarantee the continued existence of a radical tradition.¹¹ In this respect other factors are important, notably the nature of work and the kinds of places in which it was performed. In the 18th and 19th centuries, highly literate London artisans working in small craft based workshops were noted for their radical politics. This sense of independent thought amongst the skilled working class was described by Henry Mayhew in his investigations into London workers in the 1850s when he noted "The artisans are almost to a man red-hot politicians. They are sufficiently educated and thoughtful to have a sense of their importance in the State".¹²

In the case of Clerkenwell and Finsbury what created and sustained radicalism was the independent artisan tradition fostered in the watchmaking and printing trades. The cooperative nature of watchmaking was particularly important in this respect. As early as the 17th century, watchmaking was noted for its minute division of labour, using a host of cutting tools and small machines to make the individual components. The machines themselves were small enough to be adapted to workshops, and so the trade remained highly fragmented, often carried out in individual homes. There could be over 100 different tasks involved in making a watch from manufacturing the springs and cutting the wheels to gilding the case and assembling the final product. Many of those involved in the trade worked as independent craftsmen, either producing watch parts for several employers, or themselves offering parts for sale.

However, that independence also rested on the need to cooperate closely with others. Each worker was dependent on the other for custom. As the watch parts moved from one person to another, so the chains of interdependency were forged and clusters of skilled artisans living and working in close proximity to each other shared tools, knowledge and ideas. Such linkages were further buttressed by the fact that workshops and homes were often in one and the same place, which meant that workers were also neighbours. These dense networks of connections meant that they were part of a close community tied together by kinship and friendship links as well as by the nature of their work. Independence, therefore, was not incompatible with interdependence and recognition of the crucial importance of cooperation. These values in turn help to explain the subsequent development of a robust political culture based around the needs of a working-class population.

¹⁰ The Peasant's Revolt of 1381 was in opposition to an unpopular poll tax charged on all persons aged 15 or more.

¹¹ Coldbath Fields Prison, for example, was extended in the 19th century to occupy the open site which has been the venue for riots in 1816.

¹² H. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1862), vol. 3, 243.

Evidence of the radical and dissenting tradition was expressed in several ways over and above the public meetings and debates that took place in open spaces, pubs, lecture halls and chapels throughout the district. Following its creation as a new constituency by the 1832 Reform Act, Finsbury's radical tradition was very evident in the MPs that it returned to Parliament. Between 1834 and 1861, the constituency was represented by Thomas Duncombe and by Dr Thomas Wakley between 1835 and 1857. Between 1841 and 1852 these two MPs were elected unopposed.¹³ Together they embraced a diverse range of radical causes. Duncombe himself fought for the rights of religious dissenters, helped draft the People's Charter which, amongst other matters, argued for secret ballots and universal manhood suffrage, and presented the second Chartist petition to Parliament in 1842 signed by more than 3 million people. Thomas Wakley, meanwhile, was a qualified doctor and founder of the *Lancet*, who campaigned on a variety of causes, including medical reform, the abolition of flogging in the British army, the adulteration of food and, in his capacity as coroner for Middlesex, was a firm opponent of the new poor law. The tradition of selecting radical MPs for Finsbury continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1892 Dadabhai Naoroji was elected as member for Central Finsbury, one of the first Indian-born MPs ever to take a seat in the British parliament. Naoroji was highly critical of British policy in India and became an influential figure in Indian independence.

Close links with Russian revolutionary thinkers existed and several came to London in the course of the 19th and early 20th century. Lenin lived in Percy Circus in Finsbury in the early 1900s and edited *Iskra* ('Truth') from buildings in Clerkenwell Green.¹⁴ *Iskra* was not the only left wing newspaper to be published in the area: *The Daily Worker*, the organ of the British Communist Party, was first printed in 1930 from offices in Tabernacle Street, and its successor, *the Morning Star*, was for many years produced in Farringdon Road, both places lying within the old borough of Finsbury. In the 1940s, Charles Platt Mills, the last Labour MP for Finsbury before the constituency was amalgamated with Shoreditch in 1950, was expelled from the Labour Party for his support for Italian Communists.¹⁵

In the course of the later 19th and 20th century the open spaces in Finsbury associated with radical meetings and political dissent were gradually eroded or disappeared – a function of the changing urban landscape as well as shifts in the forms of political debate. This was something not unique to Finsbury. The growing importance of print culture and in the 20th century the influence of radio and later television each played a part in reducing the significance of outdoor debate as a means of encountering and exchanging ideas. However, the underlying political culture that had sustained the radical, dissenting tradition remained and its legacy today is reflected in the landscape. The activities of the old Finsbury Council, which had a strong Labour presence from 1928, resulted in the rehousing schemes that arose from the Council's commitment to make improvements. These remain as concrete reminders of the area's radical past.

¹³ F.W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1832–1885*, (Gower, Aldershot, 1989).

¹⁴ Berthold Lubetkin's bust of Lenin, which was commissioned by Finsbury Council and unveiled in 1942, was originally placed in Holford Square and later in Bevin Court, which Lubetkin himself designed in the 1940s. Lubetkin himself had it removed after it was defaced and it is currently on permanent display at the Islington Museum.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 29 April 1948.

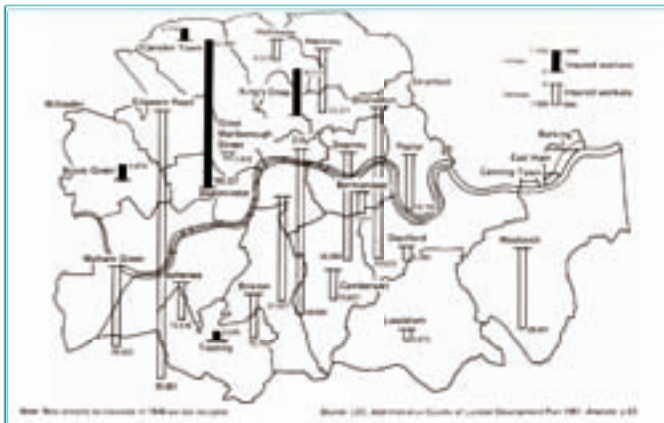
Bombs and Plans: rebuilding Finsbury in the twentieth century

Although population continued to fall in the twentieth century, so too did the number of houses, and whilst the level of overcrowding may have declined, what was left of the housing stock was often in very poor condition. The poverty which had characterised the area at the end of the 19th century continued into the 20th. By the 1930s Finsbury was one of most overcrowded boroughs in London with 20.5% of the population living in overcrowded conditions (defined as 2 or more to a room) – only Shoreditch (23.6) and Bethnal Green (21.7) were worse.¹⁶

Large scale damage and destruction during the Second World War exacerbated the already poor housing conditions in the area. Approximately 18% of the area was damaged by bombing, a figure only exceeded in Stepney and Shoreditch. It was estimated that over 90% of the housing had suffered some form of bomb damage, with nearly 1700 houses out of a total of 9899 uninhabitable, destroyed or demolished.¹⁷ In 1951 the census recorded that 44 per cent of households in Finsbury did not have access to piped water or were forced to share a tap, and 28 per cent had to share a WC with other households. On both measures, Finsbury was the worst borough in London.¹⁸

In one sense, however, wartime destruction had a beneficial impact on Finsbury. Areas which had been badly bombed, notably in the East End and the City of London itself, lost not only housing but also commercial and industrial premises. In the immediate post war years firms sought new areas in which to locate and there was a westward movement away from these places. In inner London, Finsbury, along with Westminster, witnessed an increase in the number of factories and a corresponding rise in the number of insured workers employed in the borough. Further evidence of the continuing significance of commercial and industrial activity in the district comes from an unlikely source: the adverts contained in a booklet that accompanied a pageant to celebrate Finsbury's recovery that was performed at Sadler's Wells theatre between 20 June and 2 July 1960. A full page was given over to 'Industry in Finsbury' and although the loss of premises as a result of war damage was acknowledged, so too was the fact that many had been rebuilt according to the latest ideas in planning. 'Finsbury's future prosperity may therefore be anticipated with certainty', the programme notes predicted.

Employment Change in London 1938–1949



Source: K. Young and P. Garside, *Metropolitan London: politics and urban change 1837–1981* (Edward Arnold, London, 1982, 227).

Adverts in *The Finsbury Story* (1960)



Source: *The Finsbury Story* (1960).

¹⁶ *The Times*, 2 April 1936; London Metropolitan Archives, Overcrowding Survey for the Housing Act 1935: LCC/CL/HSG/01/022/S.3. Living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms were included. For an explanation of the overcrowding standard see J.White, 'When every room was measured: the overcrowding survey of 1935–36 and its aftermath', *History Workshop Journal*, 1977 4(1), 86–94.

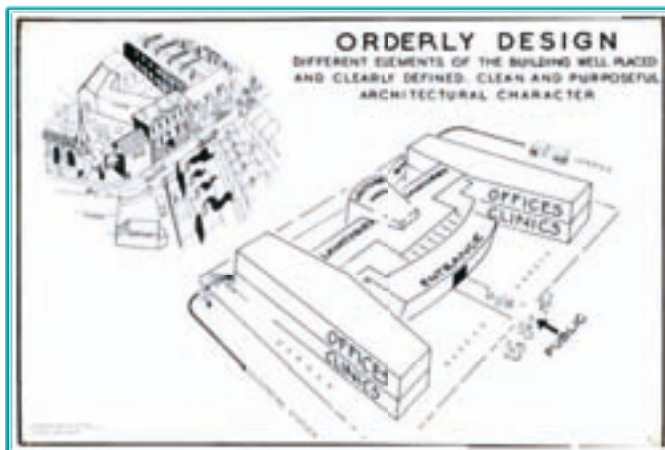
¹⁷ N. Bullock, *Building the Post War World*, (Routledge, London, 2002).

¹⁸ London County Council, *London Statistics* vol. 1, 1945–54, 104–105.

However, the most visible evidence of that post war recovery was the comprehensive rebuilding programme undertaken by Finsbury Council which was made possible by a combination of economic revival and political will. The economic recovery of post war Finsbury and the ambitious rehousing programme promoted by the Council were in fact different but related sides of the same story, for without the rateable income from industry and commerce it would have been impossible to have financed the scale of redevelopment that was undertaken. The Finsbury Plan which was designed in the 1920s recognised the symbiotic relationships between residential and business uses, dividing the district into a primarily commercial south and a residential north. Rate revenue from business supported the municipal provision of social amenities and housing whilst workers in the factories found accommodation close by.

Given the extremely poor conditions in which large numbers of the population were living, it is little surprise that housing became such a key a key issue in local politics. The rapid growth of council housing in Finsbury after the Second World War coincided with the equally rapid rise of the Labour Party to political dominance. To some extent the process has already started before the outbreak of war. The Council had commissioned a comprehensive housing report in 1928 and this coincided with the first time that Labour gained majority control. With the exception of the next set of elections in 1931, they never lost control of Finsbury. Although some council housing was constructed in Finsbury as a result of the plan, progress was slow until Labour regained power in 1934, coinciding with Labour also gaining control of the London County Council, with its leader Herbert Morrison a keen advocate of municipal housing. In Finsbury Dr Chuni Lal Katial (1898–1978), who was Britain's first Asian mayor, became the chairman of the Public Health Committee in 1935 and was responsible for reviving the Finsbury Plan, a comprehensive programme for health and housing. The immediate outcomes were the construction of the Ironmonger Baths and Laundry, which still exist today, and the innovative Finsbury Health Centre, built by Berthold Lubetkin and opened in 1938, ten years before the founding of the National Health Service. The figure below sketches Lubetkin's orderly vision of the future contrasted with the disorderly conditions of the past.

Berthold Lubetkin's Sketch for the Finsbury Health Centre, 1938



Source: www.bdonline.co.uk

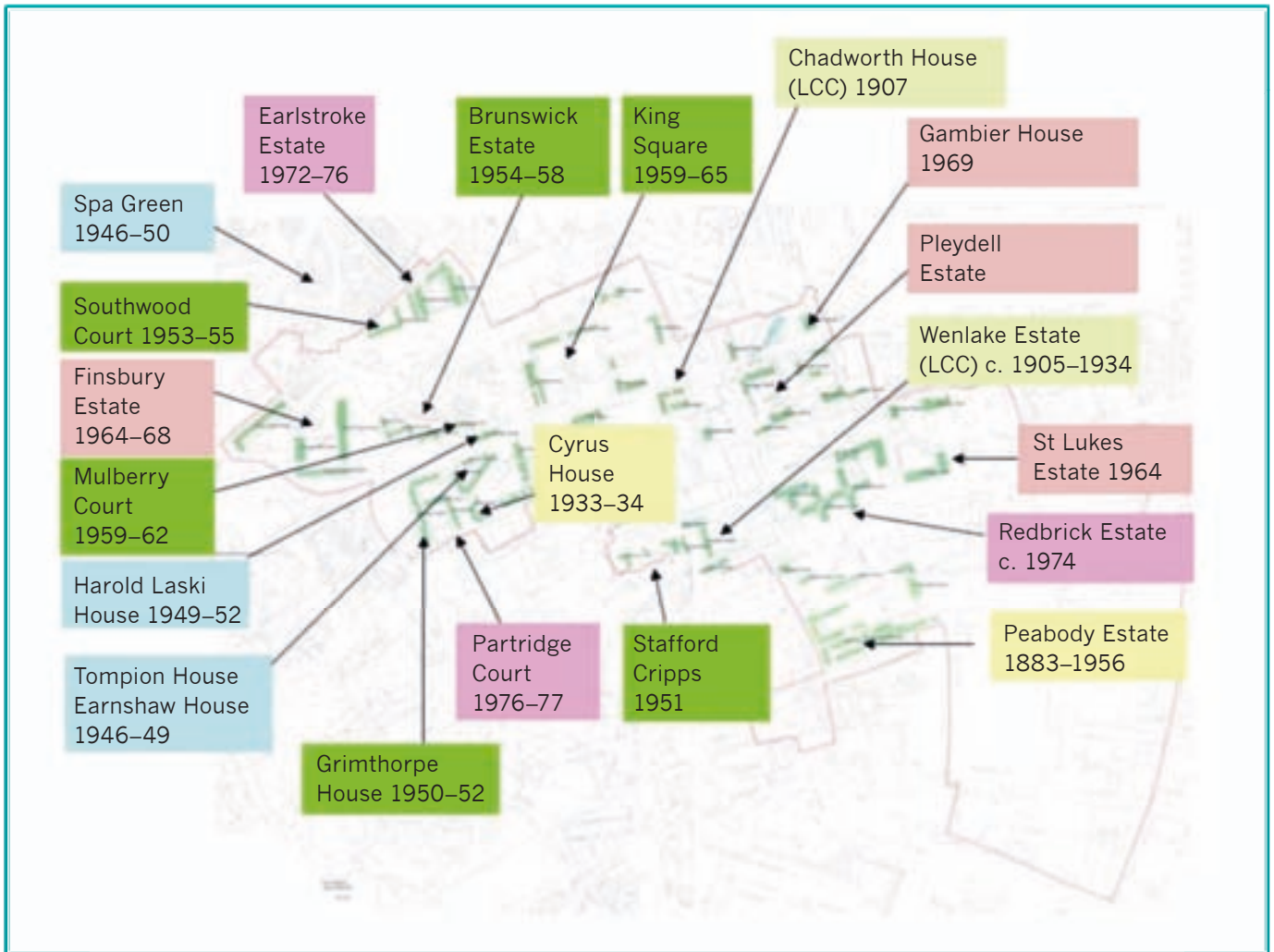
The war halted plans to demolish the poorest housing and rebuild new blocks of flats, but following the large scale damage to the housing stock, the impetus to rebuild gathered pace and new estates began to be constructed. With the means to do something about it and the political will, Finsbury Council embarked on one of the most ambitious slum clearance and rehousing programmes in London, let alone the rest of the country. An indication of the scale of the housing programme was that although in terms of population it was the second smallest of the metropolitan boroughs, by 1960 the Council had nevertheless rehoused the largest number of families of all the London districts.¹⁹

New estates began to be constructed almost as soon as the war had ended which in scale dwarfed the earlier provision of municipal housing that had taken place up till then. In the eastern part of the district a cluster of new estates were built in the 1940s and 1950s starting with Spa Green designed by Lubetkin and the Tecton practice and which was opened by Herbert Morrison in 1949. Tompion House, Earnshaw House and Harold Laski House were also started in the 1940s. A large number of estates were built in the next decade: Stafford Cripps, Grimthorpe House, Southwood Court, Mulberry Court, the Brunswick and King's Square estate were all planned or built at that time. Between 1945 and 1958 over 1000 new dwellings were constructed by the council.²⁰

¹⁹ LCC, London Statistics vol 5 1951–60, table 100.

²⁰ Statement on behalf of the Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors of the Metropolitan Borough of Finsbury, *evidence to the Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London*, 1958.

Finsbury Estates



Notes: The dates reflect as near as possible the start and end points of construction. The main sources used include the *Architects Journal* (1954, 1979); *Building Design* 25 July 2008; *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* (1957); *RIBA Official Architecture and Planning* (1965); *The Times*; A. Forshaw, *20th Century Buildings in Islington* (Islington Society, 2001); Survey of London, *South and East Clerkenwell* vol. 46: (Yale University Press, London, 2008).

Building the Peabody Estate, Finsbury



Source: *The Finsbury Story* (1960).

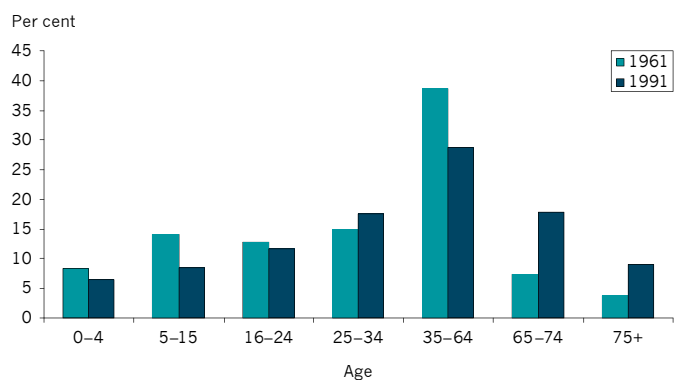
Finsbury 1965–present

The optimism expressed in the *Finsbury Story*, although admirable, failed to materialise as the British economy entered a period of de-industrialisation from the late 1960s onwards. The importance of manufacturing and industry in Finsbury meant that it suffered more than most from plant closures and job losses. Between 1961 and 1975 the number of manufacturing jobs in Finsbury halved from 39,530 to 20,307.²¹ Loss of jobs also meant increasing vacancy rates. In Clerkenwell in 1975 Islington Council noted that approximately 1 million square feet of industrial premises out of a total of 2.5 million square feet were vacant.²² Alternative local sources of employment tended either to be in relatively low paid and unskilled service sector, often involving female and part time work, or increasingly in financial and business services. These trends were not unique to Finsbury but its reliance on industrial employment made it particularly vulnerable to the changes that were taking place.

These trends continued in the 1980s. In inner London, the decline of manufacturing was marked and had a significant impact on male employment. Between 1981 and 1987 in inner London there was a reduction of some 47,000 men in full time employment compared to a 14,000 increase in women's full time work.²³ Much of this shift related to a decline in manufacturing, particularly in metal goods and light engineering, which alone accounted for half of the job losses in inner London.²⁴ The importance of manufacturing and especially metal work in Finsbury meant that it was particularly hard hit by the structural change in the economy. The shift to services, notably banking and finance, required a very different skill set to that typical of local residents who therefore found it difficult to gain access to new employment. The outcome was that during the 1980s there was a marked shift in levels of employment in the district. Between 1981 and 1991 the proportion of the economically active population in work fell from 59% to 45%, largely as a result of outmigration, whilst those defined as retired increased from 16 to 27%.²⁵

The decline of industrial employment was also responsible for the outmigration of adults of working age, a trend that was already well established by the 1970s but which gathered pace during the 1980s.²⁶ This had a further knock-on effect since the migration of the most economically active population left behind a community that was composed increasingly of the elderly and those not in employment, with the corollary that many were dependent on other sources of income support. Between 1961 and 1991 the proportion of the population aged between 35 and 64 years fell from 39 to 29 per cent whilst those aged 65 and over rose from 11 to just under 19 per cent. This change also affected the provision of local services. Several residents interviewed for the One History project noted the decline in the number of local shops and markets with some regret. The ageing population has also meant a fall in the number of children, with the result that several schools have been forced to close since the 1970s making the area even less desirable for families.

Age of the Finsbury population, 1961 and 1991



Source: 1961 census (Vision of Britain); 1991 (Islington Council, Finsbury Neighbourhood Profile, 1995, Appendix B).

²¹ Islington Planning Department, *Finsbury District Study*, 1977, 4.

²² Islington Council, *Finsbury District Study Working Party*, 1975, 7

²³ M. Frost, in K. Hoggart and D. R. Green (eds), *London: a new metropolitan geography*, (Edward Arnold, London, 1999), 40.

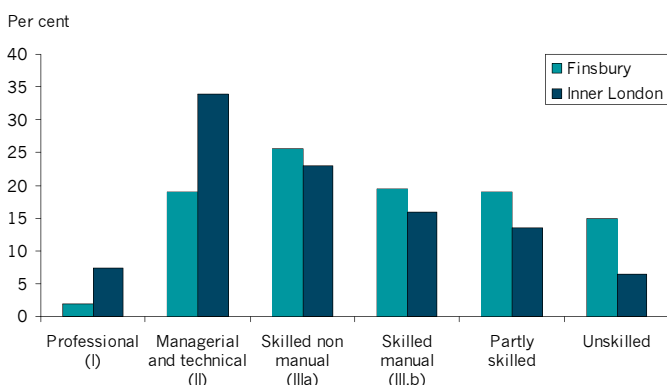
²⁴ Frost, 41.

²⁵ Islington Council, *Finsbury Neighbourhood Profile*, 1995, Appendix B.

²⁶ Islington Council, *Finsbury District Study Working Party*, 1975.

The impact of these large scale changes to Finsbury has been to widen social divisions and accentuate deprivation in a variety of ways. The decline of manufacturing and growth of the service industry brought about a shift in the social composition of the district. In the 1930s the working population was predominantly employed in skilled manual labour with a relatively large unskilled category. A large proportion of these groups would have been employed in industry. However, by the 1990s the picture was changing with a decline in both skilled and unskilled manufacturing employment and a relative increase in non manual skilled work and some higher end technical and managerial employment. Nevertheless, Finsbury still lagged behind the rest of inner London in relation to the shift to a service and knowledge based economy. According to the 1991 census, it remained a predominantly working-class area with relatively high proportions of the workforce employed in skilled and non-skilled jobs and comparatively few professional and managerial workers.

Social Class 1991 (economically active 16+)



Source: 1991 census, small area statistics, Table 1991.

The changing social composition of the area is reflected in the different kinds of pressures that have had an impact on housing in the area. The decline of manufacturing and the parallel rise of financial services in the City together also account for the mounting pressures of gentrification, with many former industrial sites which had become derelict being converted into high value residential accommodation. In more recent years gentrification has begun to transform parts of the district, notably in the south around Clerkenwell and along St John Street where former industrial premises have been turned into luxury apartments.

This process was similarly encouraged by the sale of former council houses under the right to buy legislation. Estates now contain a greater mix of people consisting of at least three distinct groups. First, there are the long term and relatively aged residents, many of whom moved into their flats when the estates were first built or were still very new and some of whom remain under old rent control legislation. Secondly, there are the newcomers whose claim to housing rests on the council policy of allocation according to need. This group consists of a more varied ethnic and social mix. Finally, there are those who have purchased their flats under the right to buy and who have either sold their properties to new and relatively wealthy incomers, or who sub-let to students and other workers who can afford to pay a premium for proximity to the City and central London.

In March 2001 the Llewelyn-Davies report *New Finsbury New Deal: master plan framework* was published which outlined the challenges that the district faced. The trends described above had continued making the EC1 area one of the most deprived in the country. At the time of that report the EC1 NDC area had a 21% unemployment rate, more than four times the national average. This figure was even higher for black and minority communities, where the reported rate was 33% of the economically active population. Such figures were accompanied by a variety of other indicators that suggested the area was one of the most deprived in the country, and which provided the rationale for the creation of EC1 NDC. The creation of EC1 NDC heralded a ten year programme of investment in the local area. Since then monitoring of key social and economic indicators suggest that trends in the area may have been reversed. After a long period of decline, population in the EC1 NDC area has started to increase and between 1999 and 2006 it rose from 8709 to 9880. These changes are underpinned by shifts that hint at improvements in the area's fortunes. Between those years there has been a decline in the number of elderly and an increase in people of working age. More young people and adults from the area are going into higher education. And until the very recent economic downturn, the proportion of those out of work was also declining.²⁷ Such changes suggest the reversal of decades of decline but they also hint at some important social changes that are taking place both in the EC1 area and in the immediate surroundings which will pose equally important challenges in the coming years.

²⁷ These data are taken from the National Evaluation Administrative Data for the EC1 NDC, July–August 2008. Available from EC1 NDC.

Section II: Linking the Past to the Present

This section identifies four key themes that link the past to the present. Each theme focuses on key aspects of change and raises questions about how these have impacted on the area and the lessons that can be learnt. These themes are not exclusive, nor are they exhaustive. They are indicative of the ways that history, memory and landscape can provide topics for debate and suggest ways of engaging with change.

1. Place and belonging.
2. Celebrating ordinary landscapes.
3. Always under pressure: Finsbury and the City.
4. Towards an open society: EC1 and the wider world.

Place and belonging

“Whitecross Street was a village; everybody knew everybody. You used to go down in the mornings and you see the same people going to get a paper or a loaf of bread”.

(Oral History, number 5)

Betty Bruncker has a hall named after her on the Gambier Estate where she was a long term resident and local neighbourhood activist. When she died hundreds turned up to her funeral. She is not the only person whose memory is preserved in the landscape. On the Finsbury Estate – a name that itself identifies a district that in a political sense no longer exists but which in other respects is very much alive – the four main buildings are named after the founder members of the local Labour Party: Michael Cliffe, Patrick Coman, Charles Townsend and Joseph Trotter. Walking through these places is an encounter with the memory of those who helped create their communities and neighbourhood. In this respect the local landscape is a storehouse of memories that locates the histories of individuals, families, neighbours, friends and colleagues firmly in the neighbourhood. It is through those shared links that attachment to an area is created and a sense of identity and belonging is fostered.

“The local people, the home bred people that have been living around here, their families have been living around here for ever, for years.”

(Oral History, number 4)

The attachment to place is most evident among long term residents of the neighbourhood, some of whom have lived in the area for several generations. When the current estates were first built, the policy was to keep relatives and neighbours together and move whole streets *en masse* into the new housing.

Finsbury Council’s evidence to the Royal Commission on London Government in 1958 is worth quoting for the light it sheds on the importance of maintaining those local links:

“It is an accepted fact that the best type of new development is by neighbourhood units in imitation of the natural development of a village. Post-war large scale redevelopment which has ignored this has resulted in an excessive incidence of minor nervous complaints and a decline in civic morale and awareness of social obligation. Housing, rehousing and redevelopment must therefore be effected on a district basis with regard for geographical boundaries and local historic traditions which give an established area that civic pride which isolated new development completely lacks... Housing is essentially a ‘personal’ matter and family and kinship ties and neighbourhood spirit are immensely strong and should be respected in any consideration of redevelopment...”²⁸

The result was that when the new estates were built, friends, relatives and neighbours from particular streets were rehoused together, so that although the physical surroundings changed, the social relationships remained the same. There are still several individuals living in the area who were the first to move into some of the new post war estates and who have remained there ever since. This stability is reflected in the fact that a third of residents in the EC1 NDC area have lived there for more than 20 years.²⁹ For this group, shared experiences and friendships have helped to fostered a strong emotional attachment and commitment to the neighbourhood.

The sense of place, however, is not fixed in stone. The landscape itself has changed out of all recognition in the past fifty years, and is poised on the brink of change again as old buildings are put to new uses and as new groups move into the area. In common with other inner London areas, that change is evident in the make up of the communities. New ethnic and social groups are altering the composition of the neighbourhood in very distinctive ways. Until relatively recently, most people in Finsbury were British born. In 1931, over 97% of its population had been born in the British Isles and by 1961 this had only fallen slightly to 93%.³⁰ Since then, however, immigration has changed the demographic composition of the area and at the last census in 2001 the number of British born had fallen to 74%. This shift has continued and according to recent MORI research, the number of households in the EC1 NDC district with English as a first language has fallen from 72% in 2002 to 61% in 2008.³¹

²⁸ Statement on behalf of the Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors of the Metropolitan Borough of Finsbury, *evidence to the Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London*, 1958, 11.

²⁹ MORI, Islington Topline NDC Survey, 28 November 2008.

³⁰ These figures are derived from the 1931 and 1961 census.

³¹ MORI, Islington Topline NDC Survey, 28 November 2008.

In addition to shifts in the ethnic composition of the area, change is also taking place as a result of several factors. As the original inhabitants of the area die or move away, they are being replaced by different groups and individuals. In the past, as noted above, the allocation of social housing took account of established social relationships. Today the process is more piecemeal making it more difficult for newcomers to establish links with neighbours and others in the locality. The allocation of social housing according to need also means that new individuals and families to the area often include those with multiple needs. At the same time, the right to buy legislation has meant that some dwellings in local authority estates are now privately owned, and this has also brought new types of tenants into the area, also with few or no direct local attachments. For this group, Finsbury primarily offers a convenient location – a place with easy access to elsewhere rather than one which is chosen because of its particular local attraction. Gentrification has also brought in new social groups who have often bought property that had previously been devoted to industrial or commercial use. The overall result is that the sense of identity that seemed to characterise the locality is perhaps less clear today than it was in the past.

These social changes can be seen as problematic but equally they offer new opportunities. Growing diversity does not necessarily mean increasing social division and new kinds of area based social relationships can be created through recognising common ground. Becoming comfortable with diversity is, as Robert Putnam has recently remarked, one of the key issues facing contemporary urban societies.³² New people can also bring a renewed sense of dynamism and involvement that can be channelled into improving conditions. If this sense of belonging is considered desirable, then the current challenge is how to foster an attachment to the locality amongst an increasingly transient and varied group of people.

This is a complex issue with no single answer. Recent research has suggested focussing on a combination of approaches including creating a balanced age profile, fostering local networks through choice based lettings, and neighbourhood interventions that seek to improve cohesion and engagement with local policy.³³ Environmental improvements and the provision of local facilities are also important in this respect. So, too, is sharing histories as a way of understanding people and place – something that the One History project has attempted to do in a variety of ways. Each of these are ways of increasing what Robert Putnam has called ‘sites of interaction’ and which he sees as vital to embracing and making the most of social and ethnic diversity.

Celebrating ordinary landscapes

Finsbury’s landscape is ordinary in two ways. Until the intervention of the Council after the Second World War, no large landlords existed to plan the area in its entirety. The urban fabric of buildings and streets therefore grew as a result of decisions made by innumerable individuals over a long period of time. After 1945 the northern part of the district was largely remodelled according to a vision of social reform rooted in local working-class politics. Ideas about architecture and planning may have been derived from European modernism but it was planners and local politicians, many of whom had strong personal links to the locality, who made that vision a reality. What exists today, therefore, particularly in relation to the housing estates, reflects a tradition of local working-class engagement with the political process.

Social reformers in the 19th and early 20th century keen to cleanse the city of disease and reform the morals of its inhabitants turned to street clearances and tenement blocks as a way of dealing with the problems. The back alleys and mass of congested streets of poor inner city areas were seen as barriers to the free flow of traffic and air. In the EC1 area Clerkenwell Road and Roseberry Avenue represent two of the many Victorian street improvements in London that were driven through areas of poor housing as a way of clearing the slums. After the Second World War, modernist town planning and architecture continued this process by emphasising the importance of movement on the ground and light and air above it.

By destroying much of the streetscape, bomb damage provided the canvass upon which the new city was to be planned. Old and damaged housing was removed to make way for modern high rise; the old street plan was remodelled to allow flows of traffic to move more freely; open spaces were created where before there were none. The dense network of small houses and streets were swept aside in favour of a much less dense set of physically separate and architecturally distinct local authority estates. There was to be no compromise with either history or geography. The high rise estates embodied both a new social vision and an equally new social geography. Whilst the old streetscape was knitted into the fabric of the city, the new high rise blocks were deliberately separated out. High rise blocks – termed ‘streets in the sky’ – were built surrounded by swards of green space. The full modernist vision was then to separate out pedestrians from traffic in functionally and physically separate spaces – walkways to allow pedestrians unrestricted access of movement and roads and streets for traffic to move unhindered through the city. The city was to become a city of flows – of cars, lorries, people and air with blocks of high rise surrounded by open space – cellular communities of separate but interlinked individuals.

³² Robert Putnam, ‘*E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century*’ The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2007), 137–74.

³³ D. Robertson, J. Smythe and I. McIntosh, *Neighbourhood identity: people, place and time* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008).

“Well, I mean we were all on the streets. Now you get these tower blocks the sense of community and sense of knowing people is not so great.”

(Oral History, number 1)

This modernist vision, though laudable in intent, has in more recent years proved wanting. It is not the purpose of this report to question the failings or otherwise of modernist architecture but rather to consider the historical legacy of that process in Finsbury and the challenge that it poses. This legacy of separate clusters of housing provides both challenges and opportunities for enhancing local distinctiveness in the area. Irrespective of the personal isolation that can occur in tower blocks, the physical separation of estates as individual entities in the urban landscape can exacerbate the difficulties of creating links between individuals making it more difficult to generate an emotional attachment to the neighbourhood as a whole. It is difficult to separate out these feelings of separation and isolation from changes in housing policy and wider shifts in British society.

The immediate built environment and housing policy, however, are only part of the reason for these commonly expressed feelings of separation and isolation in contemporary British cities. Material well-being has reduced reliance on close neighbours for assistance; individualised leisure facilities made available through television and more recently the availability of the internet, with all the possibilities that provides for participation in virtual communities, each have a part to play in fostering individual isolation within the urban environment.

On the other, the physical proximity of individuals, particularly those living on estates, can be used to create a sense of common interests through shared management and participation. The creation of Tenant Management Organisations (TMO) has been important in that respect. Although the actual architectural design of buildings may hinder personal interaction, nevertheless the sheer fact of physical proximity provides an opportunity to bring different groups of people into closer contact with each other. This is not without its problems, nor is physical proximity by itself sufficient to encourage face-to-face contact. It is, however, a pre-requisite for it to take place. Trips to local shops and markets, attendance at community centres, events and street festivals all increase the likelihood of contact and personal interaction and thereby help to foster greater knowledge of individuals in the immediate locality. These daily repetitive encounters increase personal acquaintance and levels of trust. They provide the bridges by which different and sometimes diverse groups of individuals can become connected.³⁴

³⁴ Bridging social capital involves important ties between people who are ‘unlike’ each other. See Putnam, ‘*E Pluribus Unum*’, 143. The concept initially appeared in his book *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2000).

The challenge in the contemporary urban environment, particularly in high rise estates, is to generate these kinds of meetings so that these individuals can encounter each other in a spirit of mutual trust and understanding.

How to foster common ground is not something unique to EC1. A bewildering array of initiatives exist to bring communities together from singing competitions that take place on balconies to cultivating community gardens.³⁵ Celebrating the ordinary landscape is part of that challenge and the One History walking trials are part of that process of recognition. Understanding how the everyday landscape has been created and how it has changed through political involvement and civic engagement is a way of emphasising the power of individuals and groups to transform their own environment.

Always under pressure: Finsbury and the City

“...One of the things that really appeals about this area is that it’s not the City. As soon as you cross over the road you’re in the City and the feel changes. It’s corporate; there’s a lot more suits; it’s a lot more traditional. Clerkenwell, interestingly, has this very long history of almost flying in the face of the city. The traditions have sort of carried on... we’re not corporate, we’re not the City.”

(Oral History number 10)

The significance of Finsbury’s location on the northern fringe of the City of London has been and continues to be profound. The City is the single largest contributor to the UK economy, accounting for around 19% of gross domestic product.³⁶ Having such an economic giant on its doorstep presents both threats and opportunities for Finsbury. The pressures of high land values and competing land uses are balanced by the business opportunities and cultural facilities that the City can offer.

Being close to the City but not being part of it has influenced the kinds of activities that have taken place in Finsbury. As part of a fringe belt it attracted activities that were necessary but not always welcome or possible in the City itself. In Finsbury and Clerkenwell this included the brewing of beer and distilling of spirits, the imprisonment of criminals, the care of the sick and the slaughter of livestock. None of these activities fitted easily into what was already by the medieval period a densely occupied urban core. But neither could they take place at a distance. Until the coming of the railways in the middle of the nineteenth century, for example, it was uneconomical to transport beer

³⁵ Examples of these kinds of local initiatives are provided by Common Ground. www.commonground.org.uk

³⁶ www.cityoflondon.gov.uk This figure refers to 2008.

long distances and before refrigeration the slaughter of livestock had to take place close to the point of consumption. Both activities, therefore, were tied to locations close to the main concentration of population in the City. With the exception of the meat market at Smithfield, these activities have largely disappeared from Finsbury although the buildings they once occupied have often been recycled for different uses.

At the same time as being on the physical edge of the city, Finsbury was also on the conceptual edge. Ideas that were incompatible with accepted wisdom in the City – be they religious dissent or political radicalism linked to independent artisans – flourished around its edges, and Finsbury retained a tradition of being a place where the *status quo* could be and was questioned. Although still present in Finsbury, the tradition of political radicalism is perhaps more muted today than it was in the past. But in other respects that questioning and commitment to social reform has continued. This is particularly true in relation to the large number of voluntary sector headquarters that exist in the area, such as Shelter or the Royal National Institute of the Deaf.

It is also true in the commercial world of the creative and cultural industries that now comprise an important part of the local economy. Architects, design studios and computer graphics companies all rely on innovation and one of the key drivers of that process is the ability to think in different ways and follow non-traditional solutions to problems. Just as the independent artisan tradition fostered innovation and experimentation in watchmaking and precision engineering, so small, independent companies today often rely on creativity as the basis for doing business. Close enough to the City to find customers yet far enough way to be insulated from a culture of conservatism, appears to have been as important for watchmakers in the 18th and 19th centuries as it is for those in the creative industries today. According to the eminent urban theorist, Peter Hall, the importance of social marginality – of the willingness of significant numbers of individuals to think outside the dominant value system – is the key to the creative city.³⁷

Being on the edge of the City, however, brings its own challenges, not least from the pressure on house prices and land uses. As one resident put it

“The pressures you are under in this area are the City and the land values and everything else here puts pressure on the area and you are going to be pressured all the time.”

(Oral History, number 1)

That pressure comes in two forms. The first and most obvious is the cost of housing. The large amount of disused industrial and commercial premises that existed in the area until relatively recently not only attracted architects and design firms but also provided an opportunity to convert premises to luxury apartments. Attracted by proximity to the City and convenient transport links to the rest of London, relatively highly paid workers were able to buy or rent these new apartments. In addition, the right to buy legislation has also meant that private ownership and rental has increased which has brought different social groups into the heart of the estates. With social housing in short supply and with rising rents, housing for local residents is increasingly difficult to find. The result is that children are often forced to move away leaving ageing parents and relatives without nearby family support.

The second source of pressure that proximity brings is in relation to business rents. It is, in fact, part and parcel of the same story as the effects of gentrification on housing supply. For small companies, rising rents can pose an insurmountable problem. In response to a question about owning business premises, the owner of one family firm of engravers who has been in the area for over 30 years noted that if they had not owned their new building they would have been forced out of the area. This threat was also mentioned by other local businesses in the creative sector. Since companies often rely on word of mouth and networks of local suppliers, as they are forced to move out so those networks become thinner and more diffuse. Although web based custom may to some extent replace place based contacts, no-one involved in local business, be it traditional engraving to computer aided graphic design, denied the importance of these local networks for economic survival. For businesses no less than for people, locality matters.

³⁷ This is the strong message contained in Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1998).

Towards an open economy and society: EC1 and the wider World

The changes that have periodically swept over EC1 and which are still a feature of the everyday landscape remind us that Finsbury, in common with all other places, is not an island separated from the wider currents of world events. From the priory of St John of Jerusalem, the religious-military order established in Clerkenwell to provide care for pilgrims to the Holy Land, to the most recent migrants to the area, and from the location of foreign owned factories, such as the Ingersoll building to the many different restaurants that have developed around Smithfield, each reminds us of the links that exist between Finsbury and the wider world.

These links pose challenges and provide opportunities. In economic terms, since the 19th century the area has been increasingly subject to the winds of change that blow from elsewhere. This was true of watchmaking, where cheaper machine made Swiss and American watches introduced in the later 19th century supplanted hand made London watches. Although watchmaking in London virtually collapsed as a result, change also meant adaptation and innovation. There was a shift to repair work, an activity that is still in evidence in small workshops dotted around Clerkenwell. There was also a movement into allied trades, such as the manufacture of electricity and gas meters, or into precision instruments. For the most skilled workers, change therefore also meant new opportunities.

Finsbury has also been an attractive place for foreign investment and several of the large factories that located in EC1 in the 20th century were owned by overseas companies. Scholls Shoes and the Ingersoll Watch Company, for example, both American owned, each opened premises in St John Street and there were numerous tobacco firms in the area including several that were merged in the early 20th century into two rival conglomerates: the British American Tobacco Company and Imperial Tobacco. In the later 20th century, decisions to close these factories were made outside the area itself and in some cases from headquarters located thousands of miles away. This situation was not confined to foreign owned companies. The Bovril Company, which was founded in 1889 in Old Street and which at one time owned huge ranches in Argentina, was taken over by Unilever and its offices closed when production moved to Burton on Trent in 1968.

In social terms, links with the wider world are most evident in relation to ethnic and cultural diversity. The fact that over a quarter of the current population living in Finsbury was born outside the UK is something new but the existence of migrants in the area is not and in the 19th and 20th centuries several played crucial parts in helping shape the locality. It was no accident that revolutionaries and social visionaries were drawn to an area noted for its radicalism, tolerance of newcomers and openness to new ideas. Whilst Lenin, who lived in Percy Circus in 1902–3, focussed his attention on overthrowing the Tsars in Russia, Berthold Lubetkin, another Russian émigré, was more concerned with how architecture could be enlisted to promote social reform. His links with another Finsbury migrant, the Indian-born doctor Chuni Lal Katial, who was chair of the Finsbury Health Committee and who later became the mayor, resulted in the revolutionary Finsbury Health Centre and the flats put up in Spa Green by the Tecton architectural practice which Lubetkin himself founded. Other migrants were also associated with that practice, including Ove Arup and Carl Franck who subsequently helped design the King's Square, Finsbury and Pleydell Estates in the borough. These networks of Russians, Germans, Danes and Indians reflect the opportunities that diversity offers to a society willing to remain open to new people and ideas. As Peter Hall has argued in *Cities and Civilization* an open society tolerant of newcomers and new ideas is the crucial characteristic of cities that are truly creative.

Concluding Remarks

Developing an historical perspective is not a question of fossilising the past according to some mythical golden age; nor is it about merely providing a context against which current day issues and topics might be set. Historical understanding is more than just that. It is about becoming aware of the influences that have shaped the past and the way that change in an area has been achieved. It provides an invitation to engage with that change by recognising what unites individuals as well as what makes them different. It is a way of acknowledging that no area is an island and that the wider links between people and places provide opportunities to shape the future of an area. By understanding the past individuals and communities can question, challenge and shape the course of change.

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Appendix: Oral history Interviews for One History

The oral histories compiled as part of the One History project were conducted by Eoin Dunne and are available on the project website and on deposit at the Islington Local History Centre. Quotes from the interviews have been identified by number in the text as follows:

1. DH, 24 February 2009
2. JT, 25 February 2009
3. JM, 5 March 2009
4. DK, 10 March 2009
5. JB, 10 March 2009
6. FF, 24 March 2009
7. JW, 31 March 2009
8. SD, 15 April 2009
9. DA, 16 April 2009
10. MB, 26 April 2009

Bibliographic Note

This report is based on a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, including census reports, council publications, newspapers and oral histories. Sources have been cited as they appear throughout the text. Much of the original material consulted is available at Islington archives and at the London Metropolitan Archives. A growing body of material is also available on the internet, including all the 19th century census abstracts. Full details of the research will be available on the One History website at www.ec1history.co.uk

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