

Vestry House

An Overview

The Walthamstow Vestry was a body that comprised, 'a meeting of all ratepayers in vestry assembled', and it was responsible for many aspects of local government since the sixteenth century. It originally met in the church of St. Mary the Virgin at Church End and its responsibilities were both ecclesiastical and secular. They included providing for the poor from the rates collected from local householders. Nowadays, the Vestry meets only once a year for the election of churchwardens.

The Vestry House In Rectory Road

The Vestry House was built in 1730 when the Vestry committee purchased an acre of Church Common for £6. They bought the land for building a workhouse for local paupers as well as to



provide rooms for Vestry committee meetings. The Common, that was the village enclosed in 1850, covered 27 acres south of Church End and had contained stocks (Removed in 1756) and a pound for stray cattle. Vestry Road largely follows the route of a footpath across the Common to the church of St Mary.

Left: The present day Vestry House Museum

Vestry House originally housed between 30 and 40 paupers, but it was expanded in 1756, then again in 1779 and 1814, and by the 1820s it accommodated around 80 people. However, following the formation of the West Ham Poor Law Union in 1834, the Walthamstow paupers were moved from Vestry House to the new Union Workhouse, which was built by 1840 and later became Langthorne Hospital, now the site of a new park, Langthorne Park. After this, Vestry House was used by a number of other bodies, including by the Parish Clerk.

Police Station & Lock-Up

The 1756 extension was used as a police station until 1870, When the Metropolitan Police 'took possession of the district' in 1840 they applied to occupy the 1756 extension of the building, and from 1841 until 1870 it served as their police station. One of the cells can still be seen in its original state complete with graffiti written on the walls by those who were locked up inside it!

The museum has made use of this in its exhibitions. One of the cells still exists with its original bench and toilet and in this area they have recreated a scene from April 1861. We know that on this evening Sgt. Charles Carpenter was on duty whilst James Wright, a local labourer, had been arrested for being drunk and disorderly and was locked in the cell.

Outside the entrance to the modern day museum is where the Old Watch House or Cage used to be that was used for the overnight accommodation of prisoners . It was erected in 1765 and removed in 1912.

Walthamstow Volunteers & Other Users

In 1870, the police were transferred to a new station in Lea Bridge Road and their old premises were taken over by the Walthamstow Volunteers for use as an armoury. In 1891, they in turn moved out to a new drill hall in builder until 1933. The oldest part of the Church Hill Road, and the 'old armoury' as it now came to be called was then used by a local house became first the headquarters of the Walthamstow Literary and Scientific Institute, and then a private house until 1930. After its acquisition by Walthamstow Borough Council and with considerable assistance from the Walthamstow Antiquarian Society it became a Museum of Local History and Antiquities in 1931 In 1933 the entire building was purchased and the Museum extended.

The Garden

The Vestry House garden originally stretched as far as Church Path but 7 cottages were built on part of it in 1840 and were occupied by policemen using the Police station. The railway further encroached on the land in the 1860s and a piece of land was added in compensation



for this on the west of Vestry House at the junction of Church Path and St Mary Road. The workhouse garden was originally used for growing fruit and vegetables, and later became a display area for the Museum, containing various artefacts such as a Roman sarcophagus, a Berkeley Water Pump from Jeffries Square in Woodford, a horse trough from Leyton, a clay oven

Vestry House: The present day garden

and a sundial that may be from Wanstead House. This area was later used for educational activities. Until it was redesigned with HLF funding, the garden behind Vestry House was in two sections divided by a row of beech trees that were originally a beech hedge, but grown up through lack of tending. The adjacent section that was originally behind the police houses was cleared in the early C21st, with new railings erected onto Church Path. Both areas of garden were largely grass with some perimeter trees.

The Restored 18th Century Kitchen Garden

The aims of the Vestry House restoration project were to restore the kitchen garden of the Georgian era, using herbs and varieties of plants listed in the old Vestry minutes housed in the Museum. The planting is inspired by its history as an c18th workhouse garden, with an emphasis on useful plants including vegetables, herbs and dye plants. There is also a wild meadow area and a bed designed to attract butterflies. The garden is maintained by an active group of volunteers. Other improvements included the café/refreshment area together with further educational facilities for the Museum such as a community room, accessible toilets, new exhibitions and children's play area.

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June 2014

Acknowledgement

This article is taken largely from Waltham Forest's excellent web site:
<http://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/pages/services/vhm.aspx>