

Walthamstow – A brief visit

By Michael Gilbey [[email](#)]

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Each December my wife and I make the journey from Somerset to North-East London where I used to live. Our destination is Chingford Mount Cemetery to tend my mothers grave but often on our return journey we travel to an excellent Chinese supermarket called See Woo just south of the Blackwall Tunnel to top up on necessary supplies. Our journey is a distance of some 360 miles for the round trip travelling around both the northern and southern stretches of the M25 motorway. Although this distance is more than enough for anyone to drive in one day, fortunately the majority of the journey is via motorways or good standard dual-carriageway which helps make the journey more tolerable.

For a change we decided to vary our route a little from Chingford Mount to Woolwich to allow a brief visit down memory lane. Our little diversion was a straight line to the Crooked Billet, Chingford Road, Hoe Street and Leyton High Road to Leyton Town Hall before re-joining the East Cross route to Blackwall Tunnel.

Being a considerable number of years since we travelled this route, we fully anticipated seeing changes from what we used to know.

Apart from the road layout at the Crooked Billet, what was more noticeable was the standard of drivers or more accurately the lack of it. Now living in an area unused to traffic problems, it does seem that drivers in London seem to adopt a far more aggressive driving style performing the most discourteous of manoeuvres simply to gain a meaningless extra inch of advantage in a queue. I sometimes wonder if what some of these people undertaking what they might consider a "good days" driving would ever realise that a short time earlier and also later that day, I would be driving for some hours on end at a speed off at least 70mph and not crawling they way they are used to? I suppose it's all a matter of perception. I also cannot help but wonder if some rude drivers ever realised I used to drive emergency vehicles and did, (and still could), perform some driving manoeuvres they could only dream about.

In the main, the part of our journey from the Crooked Billet to the Bell junction at Forest Road did look more or less as I recall it. The old bus garage which was originally a tram depot had however undergone some transformation. The large garage with it's rows of London Transport red buses were now replaced

with housing and the former offices also appeared to have been converted to housing. It did however all appear to have been tastefully done.

Familiar shops in Hoe Street have certainly changed but given the nature of the retail industry, shop types and facades will always be in a constant state of flux. One of my favourite shops which was double fronted and sold items of electronic equipment had also unfortunately gone. I did note a complete new range of buildings from Browns Road to that well known haunt of the Rose and Crown public house. It was good to see this place was at least still flourishing.

Rounding the bend in Hoe Street by the old Granada cinema did however take me completely by surprise. As the vista towards Hoe Street Station came into view, staring me in the face was the uncompleted concrete profile of what appears to be a high rise block of flats or offices in creation, thrusting upwards above the rooftops. My once so familiar skyline now completely dominated by what I consider a hideous blot on the landscape. When driving it is not possible to completely absorb everything one sees as concentration on the road and traffic clearly take first priority. It did seem as we drove past this building site that this construction was actually sitting atop of the railway bridge but I could be mistaken about that. When one no longer lives in an area it's always wise to avoid disparaging remarks out of respects for those that still live there. I cannot help however but think that this construction however high it may finally be will visually do little for the future of Walthamstow.

Although it was sad to see the Granada still boarded up, at least the horrible fly posters that always seem to adorn empty buildings have been removed, for now anyway. I was also surprised to see the large open piazza area at the top of the High Street. The last time I saw Google maps this area was all behind hoardings which I fully expected to see. I know there has been much local controversy about this site but it certainly looks much improved at the moment. However as the site is so large and so empty save for a few seats and flower tubs around the perimeter, I have the feeling this might only be a temporary arrangement. All of this does however beg the question of why was the prosperous and modern arcade that once stood on this site demolished in the first place? It was an arcade well used by thousands and which enhanced both visually and commercially this great shopping area.

Most of the remainder of Hoe Street to the Bakers Arms appeared unchanged but again it was sad to see the public house which gave this area its name was now a betting shop. As I was waiting at the traffic lights at the Bakers arms I could not help but notice a wide concrete column with a white globe on top standing on the small island where the public toilets had once been. I cannot help but think if there was one public amenity so much used by everybody as well as sometimes being desperately required, why so many

public conveniences have been removed across London. Their removal served no practical purposes and literally have inconvenienced many. I sometimes wonder if the toilets are still there underground with some sort of lid being placed over the entrances?

Leyton Baths which I knew so well have now disappeared and again by Leyton Green, growing overnight like a concrete mushroom appears to be another high rise block being built in Capworth Street. How nice it would have been for planners to have learned high rise building and suburban areas simply do not mix.

It was nice to see the old area again even if briefly, but such visits are always tinged with mixed emotions. Change is always an on-going process, most of what I saw was well done. Why on earth do planners have to spoil what is good with a few developments that quite frankly, appear so damn awful?

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