

CHAPTER 2

A Walk In The Park

*“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”*

Percy Bysshe Shelley

We were somewhere around the middle of Stratford High Street, on the edge of the proposed Olympic Park, when the bile began to rise in Angry Bob’s throat and take control of his tongue. Saturday 27th May 2006 was a bleak day in Stratford. The sky was a shade of grey that suggested colour would never return, and the rain felt like morse-code. The walk down the High Street – a grimy tarmac ribbon framed by dirty buildings of differing shapes but uniform drabness – was long enough for Bob and me to wonder why we were bothering to do this in the first place. Bob was answering these doubts with a stream of consciousness vitriol directed at the various bodies he saw as being responsible for our excursion. I pointed out that nobody had forced us to leave the dry warmth of our homes on this foul morning, but he was having none of

it. Bob was a man prematurely disappointed with the future. There was no question in his mind that the Olympics coming to town was a bad thing. Any good things would certainly be outweighed by this bad thing which, he explained, was made up of a combination of many different bad things, the prime one being 'greed'.

There were no signs of life on the High Street aside from us. As we slowly trudged along, leaning into the wind and rain, we might have looked like characters in a sparsely populated Lowry painting. All other breathing things were indoors (and hidden, as if simply being indoors wasn't enough; staying well away from windows was the only true sanctuary from the conditions outside), or safely encased in passing cars and the odd bus. Even the birds had stayed at home.

As we walked we passed several local landmarks, including the Stratford Rex, a building that even when in use had the ability to look shut down. On the corner opposite was the shell of the old Stratford Market railway station. Further down on the opposite side of the High Street, past early signs of transformation in the shape of new blocks of flats, the image of the Yardley flower girls remained on a side wall of a large building, a reminder of its previous existence as a box making and printing factory for the perfume and cosmetics company. This was a detail only the observant might notice and only the curious ponder, but another clue to the history of this stretch of road. Finally we reached the end of the High Street. Here the road is overshadowed by the Bow Flyover as it is intersected by

the Blackwall Tunnel Northern Approach Road. Here the strata of history are laid bare.

The Bow Flyover opened in 1969 and takes traffic from Stratford and the London Borough of Newham to Bow Road and the borough of Tower Hamlets. Traffic heading south flashed past, entirely ignorant of life on either side. Here was the ugly brutalism of Twentieth Century road construction, ripping through swathes of flats and housing from an earlier era, much of it in the polluted dark brown of industrial times. To one side stood the building that was once the Bryant and May match factory. In this direction we looked into the almost mythical history of the East End, the one most people are familiar with – one of poverty and industry; little match girls and Jack the Ripper; the Kray Twins and the Siege of Sidney Street. This East End history has been so deftly packaged over time that our very idea of a cockney has become firmly located here, despite the cockney-defining Bow bells actually being located in what is now called ‘the City’. Technically the City is where the East End begins, but ask most people in this wealthy business enclave to define themselves and their workplace, and you won’t get anything remotely akin to rhyming slang by way of reply. People here refer to stairs as stairs, not hard fruit.

On the other side from Bow lies Newham, whose history is a blank slate to the vast majority of people. On one side of the flyover were billboards, the splashes of colour mirrored on the other side by the drive-in McDonalds. The landscape here was industrial and ugly. Walls and buildings

decayed, while grass and weeds grew through the cracks in walls and the gaps in corrugated iron roofs. On the left was an open air gas container storage facility, beyond which lay our destination. To the right, running beneath our feet but hidden by concrete, was the River Lea. It is difficult to describe the banal ugliness of this spot, one perfectly framed by such grey and wet weather. Industrial Estate meets motorway flyover meets decaying, blackened Victorian brickwork meets polluted waterway; this makes it sound more interesting than it is in reality. Perhaps only J G Ballard might have found any artistic merit in it, and could certainly have used it as a setting for one of his post-apocalyptic novels of the early seventies.

So amid all this ugly, faceless concrete it is hard to imagine that, in the words of cliché, this was once all fields. Or more accurately fields, marshes and waterways. That is what the Romans would have seen here as they planned one of the first Roman roads in Britain, leading from London Bridge to Colchester, their initial capital city during the occupation. Indeed, a paved way had existed here even prior to the Romans' arrival, leading to the crossing point over the Lea river that gave Stratford its name². Depending on the weather conditions, this crossing could be treacherous. According to legend Matilda, wife of Henry I, took a tumble here in 1110 on her way to Barking Abbey. As she fell into the water, several church spires and the odd windmill may have flashed before her eyes. Both types of landmarks were evidence that small settlements had grown here.

² *Strat* meaning road, and *ford* being a crossing over water

But mostly, there were fields. The aristocracy made good use of this land for their own leisure, amongst other things. As this was still the main route into London from Colchester and the important trading city of Norwich, it was inevitable that a safer passage over the Lea would have to be devised. Matilda, perhaps still smarting from her drenching, ordered a new bridge to be built: a bow-shaped, three arch construction that was something of a marvel for the times. The bowed bridge leant itself to the new name for the area – Stratford-atte-Bow. Over time, in order to avoid confusion with Stratford Langthorne which was situated on the Essex side of the water, the crossing became shortened to Bow, while on the East side the name was eventually shortened to Stratford.

Bob, rant over, merely commented on the almost comical ugliness of our surroundings as we continued our walk along the edge of the Northern Approach Road, one of those stretches of pavement that exist seemingly to ridicule the mere pedestrian in the face of fast traffic. For a hundred yards or so we seemed to be trespassing in an area designed purely for vehicles. It was a dusty, dirty and noisy procession until we reached Hancock Road, which runs below the Approach Road as it rises and arcs to the right on its relentless passage towards the Blackwall Tunnel. Hancock Road exists in my memory as the location of a rather dodgy-looking nightclub called Echoes, which ran late night acid house and rave parties in the late 80's and early 90's. That and a Tesco supermarket. This was a supermarket that you had to drive to, and at the time it was built seemed huge – an early sign of the impending Tesco-isation of the

landscape. As Bob and I approached, we made out a marquee erected beyond the supermarket car park, over the bridge at the end of Three Mill Lane. This was our destination.

A small crowd of people encompassing all ages was gathered outside the marquee. Inside were tables piled with cloth bags displaying the 'Walk The Olympic Park' logo, each containing a pamphlet that doubled as a route map, a bottle of water, a carton of juice, fruit and a snack bar. Down at this level, by the water, a different perspective is afforded. The contrast between it and the ugly industrialisation we had just left behind was quite startling. Before us lay the Three Mills.

Beyond an inlet of water was the Clock Mill and opposite, on the left, the House Mill. Mills have a long history in this area: eight were recorded in the Domesday book, with windmills added later. These mills were in the possession of the Abbey of Stratford Langthorne until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. In medieval times, when the site was known as Three Mills, flour was milled for the bakers of Stratford-atte-Bow who supplied bread to the City of London. For most of urban history, towns and cities have been fed by the produce of the surrounding land. Until the industrial revolution and later arrival of the railways, this was the predominant function of the land that we now call Newham.

In 1728 Peter Lefevre, a Huguenot, bought Three Mills in partnership with Daniel Bisson and others. The mills were operated in conjunction with a distillery on neighbouring Three Mills Island. A piggery was also established, and the animals fed on waste products. The current House Mill was

built by Bisson in 1776 between two houses occupied by the miller and his family, hence the name. The current Clock Mill dates from 1817, although the actual clock tower dates from 1750. A third mill, a windmill, no longer survives.

Grain was transported to the mills along the waterways. During medieval times the tidal flows allowed for three to four hours of milling per tide. By 1938, with the addition of sluice gates, this was increased to 7-8 hours. The grain was then either transported for delivery, or taken to the distillery. It was illegal after 1820 for alcohol to be produced and rectified into gin on the same premises, so it was stored in a large bonded warehouse on the island. The convenience of this set-up led to the acquisition of Three Mills in 1872 by J&W Nicholson & Co. This Clerkenwell-based gin maker, founded during the Gin Craze in the 1730s, had provided the Gin palaces of central London with their fuel of ill-repute. Gin was big business. Despite the imposition of high taxes on the sale of gin via the Gin Act of 1736 trade was helped by the ban on imports of French wine and spirits. Before this the government had encouraged the distilling industry in order to prop up grain prices. Early supporters of such moves, including Daniel Defoe, soon changed their opinion when the devastating effects of the drink were felt, primarily among the poor. When the tax was abolished in 1743 the trade was free to flourish once more, and by 1750 over a quarter of all residences in St. Giles parish were gin houses. A year later Hogarth published his famous Gin Lane and Beer Street prints, which took an enlightened view of the problem. Like Dickens

much later, Hogarth saw poverty, rather than gin, as ultimately responsible for the misery he so deftly depicted. Alcohol, for many, was a way of life. As social reformer Francis Place put it, “[the poor] have recourse to only two enjoyments: sexual intercourse and drinking... and drunkenness is by far the most desired as it is cheaper and its effects more enduring.”

Booze continued to remain high on the list of working class enjoyments, though the popularity of gin waned over time. Although J&W Nicholson and Company did not sell The House Mill until 1966, it had ceased functioning as a mill by 1941, when the area was bombed during the war. The old water wheels and millstones that turned on the captured high tidal flows up the Thames Estuary and Bow Creek survive to this day, and House Mill is the largest remaining tidal mill in the world. The distillery is now a film studio where much of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* was filmed (“Shit film,” according to Bob), as well as the *Big Brother* television series (don’t start Bob on this one), an irony not lost on anyone who, upon getting too close to the perimeter, found themselves informed by the disembodied voices of bored security guards emanating from speakers on poles that they were close to trespassing. As experienced by Bob one afternoon. “Trespassing? Fucking trespassing?” he had said, when first relating this story. I imagined him waving an angry fist at the pole on the perimeter of the studio site. But that wasn’t enough for Bob, and the next day he came back with a borrowed megaphone and shouted back at the film studios from behind a bush, telling ‘them’ their product was shit,

and that the security guards should get a proper job or come out and face him. “But you were behind a bush!” I pointed out. “Only because they were talking through a speaker on top of a pole,” he responded. At this point I decided to retire gracefully from the topic of conversation.

I was worried that Bob might try to tell this story again, such was his habit of repetition but thankfully he didn't. I wondered if his ranting into the wind on the High Street had sated his appetite for the day, as he didn't even pass comment on the small crowd of the curious we found ourselves in, and which our two fresh-faced looking tour guides (“Bloody students,” according to Bob), were trying to herd together.

Although the route printed on the map suggested otherwise, our tour guides led us past the mill and round the perimeter of the Mills complex, the thin muddy path sandwiched between the high perimeter walls of the film studio and the Channelsea river. In the distance a westbound district line train rattled across the green painted iron bridge that spans the river, which widens considerably here. We passed a colourful flourish of graffiti on the wall, echoed in style by spray painted tags on the underside of the distant bridge. As the path curved around, we entered another place entirely, cocooned from the grimy metropolis. The tributaries of the Lea here wind through a hidden landscape of industrial decay, overgrown with nature that in parts threatens to overrun it. Another train passed by, and this time we were near enough to see the people inside, avoiding eye contact with each other as passengers on the tube do. Behind the red, white and blue

train rose the huge cylindrical tanks of the old gas works. The tank of one had collapsed, and the rusting steel framing looked like the rib-cage of a long dead animal. This walk off the beaten track was something of a well-kept secret, a strange little oasis either side of Stratford High Street and bordered by the Blackwater Tunnel Northern Approach road. For some people, it was the threat to this area that provoked their initial resistance to the very idea of the Olympics. Now that idea was to be turned into reality, the people on our walk – many already familiar with the area – took in these surroundings in the knowledge that they would be changed forever, and beyond all recognition on the other side of the High Street where the Olympic Park will be located.

The path curved again, and our party crossed a narrow bridge over the Prescott Channel, part of the waterway that runs between Three Mills Green and Lee Valley Park. The view become more verdant here, with half of the island that sits in the middle of Channelsea River resembling a jungle. I half expected to see Fitzcaraldo's boat float past blaring Caruso from its gramophone. "At least this bit will stay as it is, I imagine," Bob said, as we slowed to a halt and made way for a lone man wheeling his bike in the opposite direction. "I doubt anyone coming to the Olympics will walk down here," he added.

"Hmmm, they would get a bit of a surprise if they ended up on Manor Road heading towards Canning Town," I mused, picturing a tourist in a bright red windcheater with a large camera round their neck, consulting a map in confusion.

The man with the bike had now passed, nodding to several of us on his way in acknowledgement of fellow travellers. We walked on and, for a brief stretch, were protected from the rain by overhanging vegetation. As we made our way up a slight rise the Abbey Mills pumping station could be seen, flickering between trees and bushes to our left. Ahead of us as we reached a clearing was 'The Snail', a large piece of disused pumping machinery shaped like a snail shell. It was covered in graffiti. Nearby, wild flowers, like a burst of fireworks amid all the green, shimmered in the breeze on the river side of the muddy path. On the other side were tall daisies. Beyond was a wire fence and the flat, well kept lawn of the pumping station. Here we left the path and put foot on Abbey Road, walking along the pavement for a short stretch, before doubling back on ourselves where a tall electricity pylon towered above a green metal sign bearing the legend "The Greenway".

The Greenway is a nice name for the cycle and footpath that runs above the Northern Outfall Sewer. When I had first arrived in London fifteen years before, I would often use a short stretch of The Greenway. In the company of friends, I would join it by cutting up the embankment next to the railway bridge on Manor Road, walk along it until the point I had reached with Angry Bob and the rest of the curious on this rainy day, then walk down Abbey Road towards the Adam and Eve public house. Back then we simply referred to it as the sewer pipe. The pub was an oasis of calm in the concrete jungle, and approaching it on a darkening evening you could imagine you were out in the country. The principle reason

for us choosing it as a watering hole, apart from saving on a longer walk into Stratford, was the inevitability of a lock-in and a quiet beer garden out back.

The pub was built amid the remains of Langthorne Abbey around 1732, with some of the Abbey's remains incorporated into the building. It was, according to the Essex Naturalist, "a rendezvous for fellows and wenches in the summer". Rebuilt in 1900, it was still described by its 1968 landlord as 'a summer house'. In the 1991 CAMRA guide to East London pubs, a simple one line entry records with mild disgust that no real ales are served. Three years later it was demolished to make way for the Jubilee Line railway depot. The depot now dominates a stretch of landscape that once housed Stratford Market and acted as something of an impromptu playground for local kids, who would get up to various adventures in and around the market stalls, the railway lines, the sewer pipe and the rivers. In a few short years the view was set to change again, with the opening of the Abbey Road DLR station.

As our group climbed the stone steps onto The Greenway, Bob commented on the architectural merits of the two pumping stations before us. One, the original Victorian version, a magnificent and ornate brick building with Moorish style chimneys, built between 1865 and 1868 and nicknamed "The Cathedral of Sewage". The other a bland, silver affair resembling a grain silo. The inside of the former contains a glut of cast-iron glory, testament to the wealth and taste of the Victorian age when form appears to have been held in as

high regard as function. “They don’t use the old building,” a tall and thin man in a green windcheater informed me, just before one of the guides informed the whole group. “Except in emergencies,” he added. “Extra pumps,” he finished, somewhat elliptically, before getting to his point. “When that one reaches its sell-by-date,” he nodded at the new pumping station, “they won’t keep it standing will they? Bloody ugly thing.” He looked at it with a curious expression and I noticed a raindrop bulbing itself on a curl of his fringe. I wanted to watch it drop off but it was stubbornly suspended and I was worried the man might get nervous at me staring at him like this. A couple of the party took snapshots with their cameras of Bazelgette’s marvel, but nobody bothered to take a photograph of the new pumping station.

We continued our walk, spreading out now. Those of us to the rear could barely hear the two guides over the crunch of sandy gravel underfoot. The rain had now become a fine drizzle, but was just as relentless. Occasionally a cyclist or lone walker passed us. The guides ahead had stopped, and our party paused at a marker on the ground that indicated the presence of the Greenwich Meridian Line. It was only a green and yellow compass point logo, but this was enough for more cameras to appear. It is hard to imagine how you might render visible an imaginary line, but there was something bland and disappointing about this little logo. It didn’t really do justice to the impact the meridian line has had on mankind’s perception of time. As well as symbolising the point where the eastern and western hemispheres of the globe meet, the

concept of the meridian line introduced standardised times. Noon wasn't now a vague time that shifted according to when the sun was overhead, but was given a fixed point. It wasn't the only such line in existence; the French, for example, had their own line which passed through Paris. But the Greenwich Meridian Line was the one used most often – by Britain and, significantly, the USA, where in 1884 a conference took place to decide which line was to become the standard. Votes were cast, and the British line won.

Meridian crossed, we continued our walk through the misty drizzle, the depthless white sky feeling like a giant, urban snow globe. Our party had split into different groups, some listening to the two young guides. We were approaching the point where The Greenway is bisected by Stratford High Street, a point Bob and I had passed earlier. On the other side we would be entering the territory of Bob's ire. Our journey until this point, one we had both undertaken many times before, had seen us walk through scenery that is under less threat of drastic change. On the other side of this busy road, the human impact of the Olympics would be somewhat different; the Olympic legacy there would begin with displacement.

Ever since 1749, when the Bow China Works was established on the East Side of the Lea, somewhere between Cook's Road and Marshgate Lane, there has been industry here. Free from the regulations of Metropolitan London and conveniently downwind of the City, dangerous, foul-smelling and polluting industry was attracted to the area in increasing numbers. The residues of the entire industrial revolution have

been deposited in these soils, much of it to be uncovered in the excavations for the Olympic Park which, for the sake of a three week circus has brought an era to an end.

The traffic wasn't particularly heavy on the High Street, but sufficient to split our party into three groups as we crossed, the quickest and boldest making it over first. On the other side we walked westwards until we reached City Mill Lock on Blaker Road. Here we walked past the flats at Otter Close towards the Greenway once more, but instead of rejoining it, we descended a staircase that led us down closer to City Mill River. Walking through a low tunnel that took us under the Northern Outfall Sewer, and then under the Docklands Light Railway, we found ourselves in another hidden part of London. Here it was still and quiet. The water didn't move, algae fringing its edges. To our left, on the other side of the waterway, was the back of the Marshgate Lane industrial estate. It was ugly, and in stark contrast to the fecund greenery everywhere before it. This walk wasn't going to win any awards for beauty or gain National Heritage status, but there was something compelling about it. Despite the severe and often decrepit industrial architecture that constituted the human legacy on this once marshy land, the natural world that clung to these ancient waterways was somehow profound. It wasn't a man-made representation of nature within a city, like the great Victorian parks, but the last vestige of the natural history of this piece of land. And it had long been unknown to, and ignored by, the vast majority of this huge city's population.

We suddenly stopped, and as we grouped round our guides, one of them pointed to a huge corrugated shed, long enough to host the 100 metres sprint, on the other side of the river. “That’s where the stadium is going to be,” he said. We all stared and tried to imagine this view looking any different, but it was impossible. No artist impressions sprang to mind.

Slowly we continued our walk, our path taking us round a corner onto Marshgate Lane, affording a view in the other direction towards Carpenters Road. A guide pointed out which businesses inhabited the various buildings. He was unsure of some detail and consulted with another guide, a young woman. She couldn’t shed any light on the matter, but the point was that all these businesses were going to disappear, some the victims of compulsory purchase orders.

Bob shook his head and let out a snort. The subject of relocating the businesses from this area was one that irked him to say the least. It was common knowledge that businesses felt they were being offered a raw deal in monetary compensation, much less than the market rate. Many also feared that relocation destinations would be so far from their customer base as to jeopardise their futures.

“We are all proud to be guardians of this dream,” Bob muttered to no-one in particular, but he was looking back towards the area where the stadium would be located. Then he looked at me. “Yup,” I agreed. Bob was using then Olympic Minister, Tessa Jowell’s much-quoted line about the Olympics, from the re-celebration of winning the bid that had taken place the previous September. He spat on the ground and we moved on.

After following Marshgate Lane, home to many of the businesses that would be relocated by the LDA, we rejoined the narrow waterway path, this time alongside the Lea, and approached Old Ford. This point is where, according to historians, the Romans crossed the Lea. The name of the river comes from the Saxon *lygan* which means fast flowing, and depending on the tides and weather, the stone causeway they built could be a precarious crossing point. Although it was an area of strategic importance, overcoming a major obstacle on the way from London into the surrounding countryside and eventually to Colchester, there was no major settlement here.

It is believed to have been a spot where the practice of ‘fulling of cloth’ was carried out. This is a cleaning process, a stage of woollen cloth making. It involved walking on, or fulling, the cloth to get rid of dirt and impurities. The process once involved urine, but by medieval times fuller’s earth was employed and the work was usually carried out in a water mill called a fulling mill. Wooden hammers took the place of human feet to cleanse the wool. If fulling did take place here, the surrounding area would have seen the wet lengths of cloth that had been cleaned, stretched out and suspended by hooks in frames called tenterhooks. This is supposedly the origin of the phrase ‘to be on tenterhooks’ – literally being held in suspense.

What isn’t in dispute is that the area was visited on at least three occasions by Samuel Pepys, who records the fact in his diaries. On June 2nd 1668 he records visiting Old Ford

where he “walked in the fields, very pleasant, and sang: and so back again and drank at the Gun, at Mile End...”

And here, amidst the lush greenery, a strangely familiar house sat on the opposite bank. The scene was somewhat surreal. Less than 400 hundred metres away was one of London’s uglier roads. A high-walled, noisy, industrial concrete strip carrying traffic towards the Blackwall Tunnel. Behind us was an area with a history of industry stretching back to the 18th century. All around us, stretching for several miles through all compass points, was the deprived urban heartland of London’s industrial past, the East End. And yet here we were by a tranquil stretch of river, with trees and other greenery all around. Up ahead by the lock anglers sat patiently with rods arced like bamboo. And there sat a house with a garden leading to the river’s edge.

“That’s the Big Breakfast house,” I heard one of our guides say to the head of our party.

And so it was. Bob emitted a derisory laugh that perfectly expressed his opinion of the breakfast time television programme that had run for ten years on Channel 4. It had been rumoured that the show’s founder, Bob Geldof, was going to blow the house up on the day of the final programme, but this passed on 29th March 2002 without any explosions. The house familiar to TV viewers was built in 1946 to replace a terrace of cottages that were badly damaged by bombing in October 1940. These cottages had accommodated the lock keepers, and historical records offer glimpses of detail like flickers of light on a dark night.