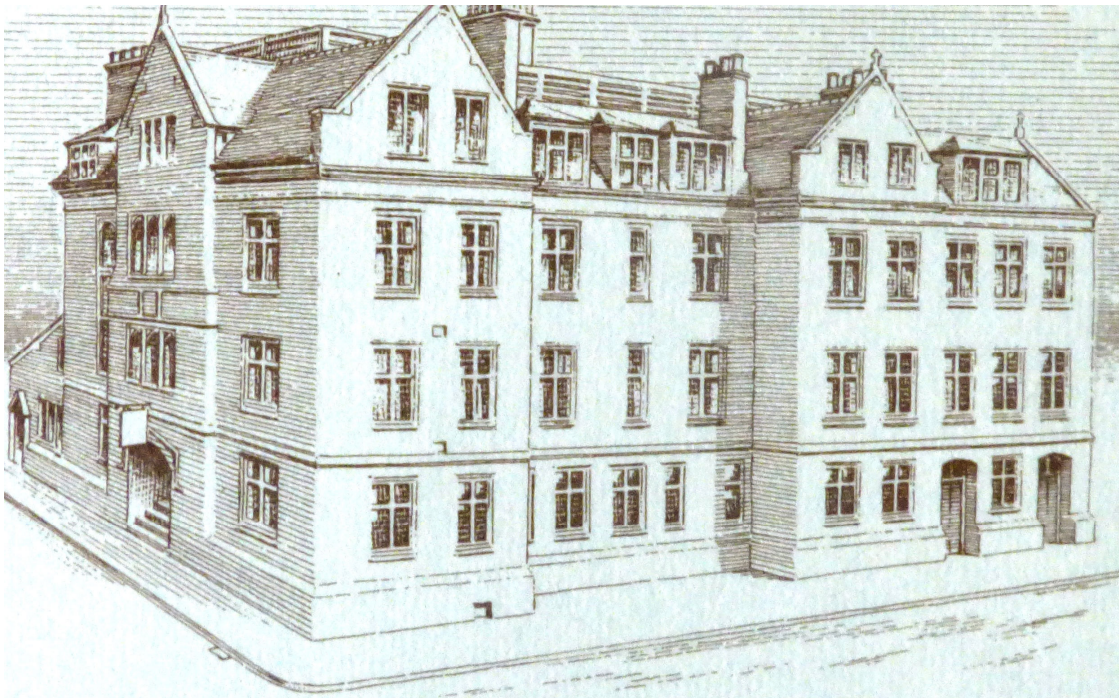


Oxford House in Bethnal Green



From Victorian Gap Year to Community Hub; heritage and community at Oxford House

Project summary

Oxford House opened in 1884 as the first Settlement house. It is still at the heart of Bethnal Green as a heritage space that engages the diverse communities of east London.

'Victorian Gap Year to Community Hub; heritage and community at Oxford House' will conserve, reveal and interpret this heritage and provide a narrative to our place in this changing and quintessentially east end London neighbourhood.

Using our expertise and knowledge of communities, culture and volunteering we will develop a comprehensive programme that showcases the hidden stories and strands of community life since 1884. We will interpret this history in a range of formats that will be widely accessible, within the House and beyond.

An accompanying capital programme will transform public access to heritage and open our Victorian chapel, roof-top walk and provide a new cafe space in the original Library and Refectory, opening directly onto Weavers Fields.

About us

Oxford House is a community, arts and heritage centre. Our mission is to be the place in east London where people come together to work, learn, explore, create and celebrate arts, community and heritage."

There are three strands to our work:

1. Provide a community hub that is open daily community activities; provide office space to 26 community organisations (e.g. Zimbabwe Association; Kayd Somali Arts); provide community activity programme (e.g. after-school clubs/education, dance for elders & parent/toddler groups); provide support/free to new/emerging groups.
2. Provide volunteering programme that tackles youth employability & pathway to employment: skills based volunteering/work experience for 16/26 year old to build skills/confidence
3. Provide a hub for the creative/cultural arts: programme of weekly activities in studio theatre, dance studio & gallery.; offer space to visiting companies; weekly activities (e.g. performing arts for young people); partnerships (e.g. jointly developed youth repertory company & Somali Week Festival).

Our heritage

In September 1884 Oxford House was the first Settlement to open. Developed from a growing interest in voluntarism, Settlements were a new model of philanthropy where university graduates sought to uplift the lives of the urban poor through social action. Volunteers lived among the urban poor, housed in residential communities, modelled on Oxbridge colleges, such as Oxford House. 130 years later the House is still at the heart of an east end neighbourhood that is characterised by a strong community identity, diversity, deprivation and change.

Our project, 'From Victorian 'Gap Year' to Community Hub', will conserve and interpret this heritage by revealing and interpreting an architectural and social history fused with the heritage of community and place.

Architectural heritage:

The Grade II listed House, was designed by Arthur Blomfield (architect Royal College of Music, Selwyn College Cambridge and spokesman for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings). In its listing English Heritage (EH) notes the House's 'historic interest: a building redolent of the moral fervour and paternalism that characterised Victorian ideas about the causes and remedies of poverty... [and] although austere is of a traditionally-styled Tudor Revival building, that testifies to the Settlement Movement's aspiration to be the 'squires of East London'.

The star of the House is undoubtedly the largely hidden 3rd floor chapel, noted for its art and craftsmanship; containing a painting of the crucifixion by Alfred Soord, set into a brightly-painted Gothic tracery reredos and a fine Neo-Jacobean oak screen. EH notes, "the attic chapel is a very special for both its design and craftsmanship."

The architecture is in the domestic style of the 16/17th century. The design underpinned by a vision of a traditional order of rural society (where the benevolent gentry supported and moderated the behaviour of the working classes). The majority of the windows are original: timber mullion/transoms with diamond-paned leaded lights. The attic dormer windows, also timber mullion and transoms, have tiled hipped roofs. The original concrete staircase is a fine example of cantilevered design. A sympathetic extension completed in 2004 provided a new entrance and arts centre.

Social History:

The House was closely connected with Keble College, Oxford who sought to recover the Catholic heritage of the Church of England. This purpose promoted High Church spirituality alongside social action. 'Settlers' were instrumental in shaping early welfare state provision; activities included Poor Man's Lawyer, youth/boxing clubs and labour exchanges. They also heavily influenced the growing UK/international settlement movement helping to develop University Club, St. Margaret's House and St. Hilda's settlements in Bethnal Green.

The House grew throughout the 20th century, becoming a landowner in Bethnal Green to enable it to run the many clubs core to its mission. This hidden history included ownership of the Excelsior Hall/Swimming baths, University Club buildings Victoria Park Square, Webbe Club and recreation grounds in Walthamstow that later became the foundations for the National Playing Fields Association.

Clubs and societies were established to support community life and included amateur dramatics, arts/crafts and youth clubs. Notably, in 1928 Queen Mary visited Bethnal Green and attended a performance of the opera I Pagliacci by the Oxford House Choral Society at the Excelsior Hall. The Excelsior Hall subsequently became the Excelsior Cinema, a popular local cinema now demolished

and operated by the House. The final programme shown at the Excelsior was screened in August 1961.

Our heritage includes the role of key personalities linked to social, political and religious life. In 1931 on his visit to Britain Mahatma Gandhi gave an impromptu speech at Oxford House which attracted a crowd of 3,000 people outside to cheer him. Other notable figures were Arthur Winnington-Ingram (Bishop of London), David Lindsay (Earl of Crawford & Balcarres and the only man to serve as a private soldier and a cabinet minister in WW1), Guy Clutton-Brock (founder of Cold Comfort Farm, Rhodesia), Sir Wyndham Deedes, A. J. Webbe (Captain of MCC/Founder of Webbe Club), William Archibald Spooner (famous for his Spoonerisms), David Kynaston (Social historian), Lord Peter Goldsmith (former Attorney General) and Derek Hatton (leader of Liverpool City Council in the 1980s).

Community and neighbourhood heritage:

The heritage of the House also embodies the diverse heritage of community life and place-making characteristic to Bethnal Green. The project will explore strands of this heritage including the role of the Webbe Institute (our youth wing) and the development of youth clubs and their impact on childhood, sport (especially boxing) and performing arts. We will explore the impact of World Wars on the House and neighbourhood (it was used as a civilian shelter from Zeppelin raids and during the Blitz). We will develop our existing relationship with trustees and volunteers of the Bethnal Green Tube disaster 'Stairway to Heaven' project funded by HLF.

The heritage of place and the development of our community partnerships and their communities is critical. We will explore and reveal our role in supporting the Somali diaspora to east London from the 1980s onwards. This strong association is still reflected in the annual Somali Week Festival held at Oxford House during Black History month. We will develop exhibition opportunities at the House with the Zimbabwe Association/BCA Twelve years Project.

We will also explore the impact of change on place by post-war redevelopment of neighbouring weaver's cottages that were central to the Huguenot silk weaving industry. These were demolished and the site is now occupied by Weavers Field, a 15 acre park adjacent to the House.

Our project

The project will transform public access to the heritage spaces of Oxford House, conserving and interpreting our heritage and that of the communities of Bethnal Green. A programme of activities will interpret these 'hidden' stories highlighting themes that bind our diverse communities together; it will provide the heritage 'glue' that links people and place. We will target new audiences, especially those not engaged in heritage; young people, elders and the Somali community creating a 'living archive' that makes use of our complementary resources such as gallery. A new and outwardly facing café will open up the House to Weavers Field.

Capital Works

Envelope repairs will safeguard the exterior of the House and protect the chapel. We will renew the current roof using existing tiles, improve insulation and carry out window/brick repairs including the installation of a temporary roof. Mechanical and electrical plant will be replaced.

The ground floor will be opened up and we will create a new café and heritage space in the former library/refectory. A new structural opening in the existing south elevation, new solid timber traditional doors and alterations to the lightwell, will form a new entrance to Derbyshire Street Pocket Park with the existing railings retained and repaired.

Internal works will remove more recent partitions to create two new doorways and new traditional panelled doors to create a link between the former library and refectory. Two fireplaces and hidden wooden flooring will be revealed and restored. The current kitchen space will be upgraded and the new café will be restored, decorated and refreshed forming a new heart to the House.

The original entrance and staircase will be restored to highlight heritage hidden by 1970s additions, with a new historically appropriate door and the current fire screen replaced by hidden fire safety features that showcase the original cantilevered staircase. We will remove modern metal and timber safety barriers to windows and replace with traditional iron ferramenta bars, renew lighting throughout the staircase and redecorate the staircase to enable installation of future interpretation panels. Suspended ceilings/lighting throughout will be replaced and redecorations including making good original plasterwork.

Works on the third floor and approaches will showcase the chapel. We will reveal the hidden leaded landing windows and oak bannister to create a new and well lit landing space by removing recent partitions and altering access to the existing WC/kitchenette. We will provide two new accessible toilets for users of the chapel and settlement room. The current Stannah lift will be replaced.

Adjacent to the chapel and accessed through this new space we will create a Settlement Room; a new public/learning space for further heritage interpretation and break-out space for events in the Chapel.

We will complete essential repairs and restoration of the chapel including treatment/varnish to wooden panels, repairs to water damaged areas, hardwood flooring, new lighting, decorations and making good original plasterwork.

Finally, we aim, as part of roofing renewal works, but subject to separate fundraising/contract not currently part of this project, to reinstate the witches walk railings on the flat roof and provide a lookout area/terrace. This will require a new staircase from third floor to cupola by opening up access to the loft from the Chapel lobby.

Activity Plan:

A two-year activity plan will interpret our heritage and animate the newly restored and expanded public spaces creating a permanent heritage programme.

This programme will have three inter-connecting themes:

1. Revealing/sharing stories of Oxford House, founders, residents, and local people's experiences
2. Illustrating how communities in Bethnal Green have influenced Oxford House's history; especially the role of new communities
3. Revealing the heritage of Weavers Fields; from pre-clearance to Green Flag Park

The programme will be led by our new Heritage Curator/Programmer and delivered by community partners including core team of A Different Drum Productions (ADDP); Green Candle Dance (GCD); Kayd Somali Arts & Culture; & Young & Talented.

The structure of the programme will comprise three phases:

(1) Research and development of heritage stories/interpretation of new spaces, including cataloguing and preserving archival material and training, volunteering during capital works to support heritage interpretation of new spaces; the creation of learning materials and activities for our partner schools.

(2) Heritage Festival Season 1 to focus on our re-opening – beginning with a joint programme by A Different Drum Productions/Green Candle Dance; and series of digital media workshops using research material gathered by volunteers and participants. The programme will engage a range of groups working with our partners, and be inter-generational.

This will include:

- oral history workshops;
- production of 7 radio 'plays' in which participants will improvise and write series of short radio/audio soundscapes illustrating historic turning points in the life of Oxford House e.g. Mr Blomfield planning his designs for the building, scenes during the outbreak of WW1, life for the women of the House.
- film/photography sessions in which participants will take historical illustrations, photographs and use the Louise Soloway mural as basis for a series of short films that bring the images to life using some of the oral histories and soundscapes created by other groups.

All the content produced will be curated under the guidance of Heritage Curator/Programmer and the ADDP/GCD teams. The project will culminate in a series of 5 site-specific performances in a week-long festival of heritage to celebrate 're-opening' the House.

(3) Heritage Festival Season 2 will feature a commissioned programme using Heritage themes from Phase 1. We will offer production budgets to each partner to produce heritage based learning and participation activities drawing on materials and experience from Phase 1 and 2. These will be agreed as part of the Activity Plan during the Development Phase.

Additionally these will include public events to animate Weavers Field, and a possible series of cycling heritage events/training opportunities including Cycle Hacks, and workshops for heritage bicycle conservation and cycling fashion.

External partners include: Tower Hamlets (Heritage, Archive, Parks); Friends of Weavers Fields; Toynbee Hall; Local Schools (Bethnal Green Academy, Columbia Road & Hague Primary Schools) Cycling groups, QMUL – Student Volunteering Unit and The Centre of the Cell

Volunteering and participation opportunities include: Archival skills, Oral history, Creative writing, Photography and film, Dance and drama, Exhibitions/curation, Heritage Conservation apprenticeships and volunteering, outdoor heritage events and walks, Cycle Hacks and heritage bicycle conservation workshops.

The programme will use our existing gallery/theatre spaces and newly created space for heritage interpretation including new ground floor café, outdoor seating area in Pocket Park, historic entrance hall/staircase, 3rd Floor Chapel and Settlement Room and (subject to funding) historic roof walk.

We will also collaborate with LBTH on a programme of public events in Weavers Field celebrating the heritage of this historic public space.

Draft outputs for the project include:

- Anticipated additional visitors include 25,000 exhibition visitors Year 1; 20,000 Library/Refectory Café users Year 1;
- 10,400 heritage space venue hire customers (including chapel, roof, ground floor); 1,200 audience at Heritage Festival performances;
- 2,000 attending 4 outdoor public events in Park;
- a schools programme engaging at least 10 local primary/secondary schools attending workshops and activities over 2 years, reaching at least 900 local children;
- 200 training participants over 2 years;
- 150 volunteers;
- 2 Heritage Conservation apprenticeships

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