

Following the demise of the London County Council, the area passed into the care of Tower Hamlets Council. Later, a children's playground with swings, slides and a climbing frame was built where once stood the Bakers Arms.

Today

In keeping with the terms of the 1894 lease, a separate shrubbery and garden have been retained on the site occupied by the original Ion Square Garden. This

is still enclosed within an iron railing and still locked each evening by the caretaker.

Thus, the charitable intentions of the MPGA and the Kyrle Society, coupled with the generosity of the Pritchard family, have ensured that generations of East Londoners have enjoyed and, we trust, will continue to enjoy the benefits of Ion Square as a place of healthy relaxation.

Postscript

The foregoing notes on Ion Square are the result of an attempt to put flesh on the bare bones of my wife's family history. Her grandparents moved to Ion Square in 1897 and her father was born and grew up at number thirty-six. Some members of the family were still living in the square in the late 1930s.

A family historian is concerned with the social history of their family as much as the names and dates on their family tree, the latter being the sole concern of a genealogist. Because of this the notes include, not just the history of the garden enclosure but also some details of the housing conditions, numbers and employment of the residents of Ion Square.

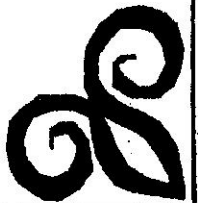
In preparing these notes and display, I have received considerable help from Mrs J Bellamy, the Secretary of the MPGA and Mr C Lloyd, the librarian at Bancroft Library, Tower Hamlets. The "artist's impression" is the work and gift of Mike Barton, a noted artist.

My only regret is that I have so far been unable to locate any photograph of the square (apart from the aerial shot taken in 1963 and obtained from Aerofilms Ltd., Borehamwood). My wife and I would be particularly keen to see any photograph taken before 1940.

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A Brief History of Ion Square Bethnal Green



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The Early Years

Ion Square was built around 1845 on the site of Nags Head Yard, Hackney Road, Bethnal Green. It was built by the local firm of Pritchards who owned a nearby brick and tile works and was named after a member of the Pritchard family. The square consisted of thirty-eight small terraced cottages, each barely fifteen feet wide. They were set out on three sides of the square and faced onto a central garden. On the fourth side, to the south, was a brick wall: the subject of later difficulties.

The cottages were probably "two up, two down" with a back kitchen and a small outside wash-house and privy. All had back gardens or yards and six of them had very small front gardens. The remainder opened straight onto the narrow pavement which divided them from the central gardens. Compared with the nearby Simpsons Place where eleven single-storied two-roomed cottages shared two privies and one outside tap and were little more than hovels, Ion Square must have seemed a very green and pleasant oasis.

Study of the 1851 census reveals three teachers, a doctor, a dentist and a local minister living in the square as well as cabinet-makers, milliners and boot-binders. Five families even had a servant. In total, 248 people were living in the square on the night of the census.

Decline

By the end of the 19th century, the over crowded East End of London was going into further decline.

became a rubbish tip. The Kyrle Society, (founded by Miranda and Octavia Hill), and the recently formed Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA) joined forces in trying to secure open spaces against speculative development and to restore any derelict gardens. These gardens were then handed over to the civic authorities (usually the local Vestry) to be maintained as miniature public parks.

The First Attempt

In 1886, the Kyrle Society first approached the Vestry of St. Matthews, with a scheme for Ion Square. This was on condition that: a) the public were admitted daily; and b) the Freeholder made an annual contribution of £10 toward the upkeep. The Vestry declined the proposal but suggested that if the Freeholder removed the wall separating Ion Square from Durant Street, the Vestry would be willing to consider the matter. The Kyrle Society tidied the garden but a further eight years would pass before anything substantial happened.

By 1891, the population of the square had risen to 325 (an average of nearly 9 per house). The Census shows thirty-four residents engaged in the furniture trade, twenty-eight in the boot and shoe trade and eighteen in the print or paper trades. There were 102 children under ten years old and the infant mortality rate in the whole area was extremely high. By now, no household had a servant; in contrast, many were now taking in lodgers or boarders to help pay the rent.

Success

At last, in March 1894, the MPGA managed to secure a forty year lease of the garden area at a peppercorn rent. The terms of the lease provide that the ground should be properly enclosed, laid out, planted and maintained as a Garden or Shrubbery, and used for no other purpose. The brick wall to the south was replaced by an iron railing with an entrance from Durant Street. The Kyrle Society contributed £120 for the laying-out of the garden and the Vestry provided a caretaker. The gardens were finally opened to the public in the spring of 1895.

"A great amenity"

In 1926, the Metropolitan Drinking Fountain and Cattle Trough Association made a gift of a large granite drinking fountain and dog trough and in 1928 the garden was conveyed to Bethnal Green Borough Council without any monetary consideration by the executors of Mr C F Pritchard.

The report of the Royal Commission on London Squares published in September 1928 described Ion Square as "a great amenity to the dwelling houses overlooking it from which it is separated by a pavement only. Congested neighbourhood."

For over forty-five years, the inhabitants of the area enjoyed the pleasure of using the garden. Children no doubt played around the drinking fountain and on warm summer evenings, neighbours sat gossiping. In winter, snowmen would have been built and snowballs

thrown at passers-by. All this was to come to an abrupt end.

1939-1945

At the height of the Blitz in November 1940 and again in March 1941, the square suffered extensive bombing. Most of the houses were damaged beyond repair and at least nine lives were lost. By 1945 only five houses were still standing. The site was cleared and twenty prefabs erected. However, the gardens remained much as before; still set out as a miniature park complete with the gift of a new drinking fountain.

Millicent Rose, in her book "The East End of London" published in 1951 wrote ".....Bethnal Green, as might be expected, is particularly loving in its care of its public gardens, and the local cult of flowers is revived every summer on the Green itself and in such smaller oases as the charming Ion Square".

Reconstruction

In 1953, Bethnal Green Council agreed with the London County Council that the land around the square should form an extension to the garden. Two years later the ownership passed without monetary consideration to the County Council. The prefabs were to remain for a further seven years until 1962.

By 1963, one side of Warner Place, the adjacent road to Ion Square, had been demolished. This was followed by the demolition of some properties in both Hackney Road and Durant Street. The whole open area was then cleared, levelled and laid to grass.