

### **A walk down Essex Road, from Islington Green to Balls Pond Road**

This walk takes us down what was once Lower Road to the junction with Balls Pond Road. Much of this route was through open fields until the mid1800s, with settlements at the south at Islington and at the north at Balls Pond. The walk continues Andrew Clayton's series based on the updated version of Islington's register of Locally Listed Buildings, recently completed by the Islington Society.

Essex Road contains a distinguished patchwork of Historic England Grade II listed buildings and a sequence of locally listed buildings which add to the mix. We start at the junction with St. Peter's Street, and Alfredo's Snack Bar on the right, part of a terrace of early 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings which are nationally listed. The 1949 exterior of Alfredo's is relatively untouched, using materials like Formica and Vitrolite which were new at the time. Others in the sequence of shopfronts are locally listed. The best is on the corner with Colebrook Row. It retains most of its original features, including the leaded, multi-paned frosted glass above the transom

Essex Road has an extraordinary number of pubs, almost all of them on street corners. The best is at No. 44, The Queen's Head, which is nationally listed. The pub was rebuilt in the 1830s, with the tiling added around 1900, when many of London's pubs were tiled on the ground floor. The Queen's Head is magnificent outside, and even better inside, with an early 17<sup>th</sup> century plaster ceiling and fireplace from the original building on this site.



*The Queen's Head, Essex Road*

Further along, Nos. 66 and 68 Essex Road would have been among the first houses to be built along this section of what was then Lower Street, when the area round Popham Street and Britannia Row was developed. They are plain Georgian terrace houses, though as fashions changed in the mid-1800s stucco architraves and a cornice were added to No. 68. No. 70, on the other side of Britannia Row, is Historic England Grade II listed and contains some important early 18th century panelled interiors. H.E. suggests that No. 70 may have originally been built as a shop, rather than having the front inserted later, so perhaps the same might apply to Nos. 66 & 68.



*Nos. 66 & 68 Essex Road*

Cross to the left-hand side and at this point Essex Road begins to widen. Nos. 67 and 69 make a handsome pair of Georgian terraced houses. The facades have been renewed with dormers at roof level but their character remains. As you walk along, the road falls away to the right and the pavement is stepped higher, covering the course of the New River. This was one of the great engineering feats of early 17th century London, taking fresh water from springs in Hertfordshire to the New River Head near Sadler's Wells. Parts of the river were covered over, hence this area of raised pavement. Nos. 79 to 85 are nationally listed, late 17<sup>th</sup> century in origin, re-fronted in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and extended in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Inside, above the ground floor, the late 17<sup>th</sup> century interiors are largely intact.

On the corner of Cross Street is a sequence of seven single storey shops with a concrete balustrade, which curves round the corner of Cross Street and Essex Road. No. 4 Cross Street is locally listed as a shopfront. They were built at the same time as the South Library in Essex Road (nationally listed) and so can be dated to 1921. No. 4 is an important example of a shopfront of that era. Parts of the overall structure are in poor condition but enough remains to give this shopfront its value.

If you look back across the road you see another of Essex Road's corner pubs, on the junction with Popham Street, recently refurbished and restored. It was locally listed in 1993 as The Half Moon, but is now The Alpaca with the Taylor Walker fascia. It retains its green mottled tiling up to window level and plain green tiling up to the fascia. The leaded windows also remain. There was a pub on this site from the 1790s, but the current structure is later, with the tiled exterior late Victorian or Edwardian.

A bit further along is another fine pub, the Green Man. It dates from around the same time as the magnificent Peabody Square around the corner in Greenman Street, built as "model dwellings for the industrious classes" in 1864-5, by architect Henry Darbishire for the Peabody Trust. The pub was built on the site of the Lower Street Meeting House, a chapel for dissenters.

As with many urban walks, the interest level now drops a bit. Apart, that is, from the former Carlton Cinema on the left. It has a multicoloured Egyptian front, with recessed columns. Inside is equally magnificent, though now locked, in the Empire style. "Lavish" Pevsner calls it.

Stride on, across the junction with New North Road, until you get to Annette Crescent. This is now hard to see behind the vigorous growth of trees in the gardens in front, but if you walk round the

crescent road you can see its value. It is comparatively early for Islington terrace housing, 1819, with well- preserved details, particularly the ironwork.

Close by is No. 292 Essex Road, an important early 1800s landmark. It is also a memorial to a long forgotten industrial process, the manufacture of canvas based decorative floorcloth. It was built in 1812 and in 1829 was occupied by Samuel Ridley and Company, the leading manufacturer of floorcloth in London. Floorcloth was a precursor of linoleum and was much in fashion in the 1700s and the first half of the 1800s. It was laid on top of wooden or stone floors, often imitating complex tile, parquet and marble patterns. It was gradually overtaken by linoleum, invented in 1855, and by the late 1800s this building was occupied by Probyn's, a beer bottling company which used the elevation of the building to display giant beer bottles. No. 292 Essex Road was taken over by Islington Council in 1972 and turned into offices. It was at this point that the windows were inserted into the front elevation and they make a mess of what was once a coherent Georgian Baroque industrial structure. But if you mentally blank out the windows above the ground floor, you can get a good idea of what was a very grand building for Georgian and early Victorian Essex Road. Giant Ionic pilasters rise from the first floor carrying an entablature with a central pediment and balustrade at the top.



*No. 292 Essex Road, a 19<sup>th</sup> century watercolour showing the building as it was before the insertion of windows.*

The next major landmarks are Nos 324 to 328. They are hard to make out as they are set back behind later shopfronts. Cross the road and you can see a line of gable ends above the shops which are all that remain of the failed Islington Cattle Market. This opened in 1836 to challenge the cruelties and abuses of the Smithfield Market, where cattle were slaughtered close to the City of London itself. The Islington market was a well-designed enterprise. But it failed quickly, not because locals objected but because Smithfield's vested interests managed to get it closed down. The market itself was set at an angle to Lower Road and these buildings are marked on the map as market workers' cottages.



*Nos. 324-328, the last remnants of the 1836 cattle market*

We walk past two more fine former pubs at Nos. 382 and 412 until we get to what was the old village of Balls Pond, at the end of Essex Road. This had ancient origins but was given focus in 1826 with the building of St. Paul's Church by Sir Charles Barry. On the instructions of the Church Commissioners, it was almost an exact copy of Barry's St. John's Church at the top end of Holloway Road.

There are three buildings nearby which predate most other development and give a good idea of what the village may have been like in the 1820s and 30s before the development of nearby terraces from the 1840s onwards. Nos. 1 and 3 Newington Green Road are unadorned cottages. There is stucco moulding around the door of No. 3, but otherwise little decoration. No.4 St. Paul's Road on the other hand is an exceptional example of a late Georgian or Regency Tudor style cottage. At the time it was built, 1833/4, it stood by itself, with Nos. 1 and 3 Newington Green Road round the corner and 1790s terraces on the other side of Newington Green Road, of which traces survive at Nos. 16-20. This rural grouping makes a contrasting end to our stroll down the Essex Road and its nationally and locally listed buildings.