The New River was built 1609-13 in an attempt to alleviate but also to cash in on the shortage of water in the City of London. In the early modern era water was a precious commodity. It was mostly obtained from wells, or fetched by hand from the nearest river, usually the Thames; later it could be carried from water conduits, pumps from pipes run into the City from water sources outside.

**FREE AS CONDUIT WATER**

These water conduits, so important to daily life, became practically and symbolically central to the areas in which they were situated. They were places people had to go, especially the poor, who could obtain no private supply. They became centres of gossip, rumour, meeting points, where collective feeling and strength could become action and protest & riot could arise. A neighbourhood’s common interest was expressed here – collective sanctions against local ‘offenders’, petty crims and moral transgressors were often enacted around the conduit. The importance of water made the conduits representative of the moral economy of a neighbourhood. Water was seen as something that should be freely available: “free as conduit water” was an expression. Like bread it was viewed as an essential and there was collective opposition to its commercial exploitation and sometimes direct action to maintain a recognized right to access to it.

They were also resorts of the young (especially young apprentices) and of women, as carrying water was seen their work. Apprentices resented being forced to carry water; but apprentice culture also built initiation rituals and bonding, mythology around the conduit. Women also clearly found conduits places of meeting, discussion, an alternative power centre maybe in some way? By the Sixteenth Century those who could afford it usually paid water-bearers to collect it for them.

The conduits became places with their own ritual – their inspection by city officials became heavily ritualized and potent. Punishments were also often carried out by the authorities near to conduits.
WHERE THERE’S A QUILL...

The wealthy could obviously get around the hassle of collecting water from conduits (apart from the fact that they’d send their servants!) – those who didn’t have their own wells could often pay to have a private pipe or ‘quill’ branched off the supplies to the City. These big users would however often be targeted at times of water shortage, accused of hogging the flow of water or wasting it on frivolous pastimes… Private quills could be cut off by City officials due to the moral pressure from the lower orders.

...THERE’S A RIOT

Water riots: in 1547, during a time of water supply problems, 2 girdlers were imprisoned for gathering a crowd at the Cheapside Standard and issuing seditious words on the subject of water… There was a plan for a water riot in 1561, by young men and waterbearers, aiming to destroy the private quill of Lord Paget, which had caused the Fleet St conduit to dry up. The riot was prevented by aldermen.

CASH FLOW

Gradually this moral economy was eclipsed by new waterworks… By the end of the Seventeenth Century many people were purchasing water from new capitalist water companies… this had arisen during the Century as demand increased. The New River was built by Hugh Myddleton & Partners 1609-13… It brought water from springs at Amwell and Chadwell in Herts to reception ponds in Islington, from where it was piped into the City. The Company had difficulty in getting investors to support them, many thought it a bad prospect. Landowners also opposed the river being cut through their area. However king James I bought shares in the Company and as a result leaned on Londoners to get connected! By 1638 it was supplying 10 per cent of water to houses in the City of London’s jurisdiction. Customer paid a yearly rent for access to water, £1 a year in 1629. This was beyond the means of many even middling households.

Many people even those who could afford to buy from the new River Company, refused to do so; the old conduit system and paying waterbearers to carry water had been strongly linked to charity and social bonds of cohesion. Many bearers were ex-servants, charity cases, the very poor. Water carrying was in some ways a ‘make work’ scheme, a complex mix of charity and moral obligation. The idea of a water conduit was even used as a symbol for charity in literature. Taking New River water meant severing these bonds and even many middle class house-holders were reluctant to do this. In the early years Myddleton had to set up standpipes in the street for waterbearers under pressure from this morality.

COCKNEY ****IN’ TANKARDS

The London tankard bearers or water carriers were an organized force, a fraternity who had their own hall in the 1490s, though they had to sell it in 1560 when the fraternity split between freemen and non-freemen. They campaigned around water and their right to carry it… In 1621: they complained to City officials against the New River after a lack of water at the conduits. On Midsummer Day 1654 waterbearers of St Leonard Eastcheap conducted a mock
funeral to mourn absence of water. They were still agitating in 1682: a petition was sent to aldermen about neglect of the conduits. In the same year “poor men and women that used to get their Bread” as watercarriers were destitute. Clearly they were losing the battle though, piped supplies were taking over and the conduits were being run down. A financially stretched City had totally privatized water supplies and resources for five miles around London. In 1693 the City leased ponds and springs at Hampstead, Hornsey and St Pancras to a consortium. The following year ponds in Dalston, Marylebone and Paddington were leased. In 1698 tankard bearers of St Giles Cripplegate petitioned the water should be restored to the Conduits. By 1700 the conduits were on their way out. In 1730 many were demolished as a nuisance and obstruction… But for many people piped supplies were still totally out of the question due to poverty. The moral economy of the water supply survived into the 1820s; sympathy to water carriers and preference for carried water as against piped supply was grounded in notions of a communality.

It has been claimed that the increase in piped water supplies changed the nature of women’s domestic work… this may be so… it has also been pointed out that piped water led to higher expectations of domestic cleanliness, which would have had a knock on effect on women’s work…

As the tankard bearers died out, the rituals of conduit culture were taken over by other groups – the spaces they had occupied were colonized by other collectives. For example the Conduit of upper Cheapside became the haunt of chimney sweeps by the Eighteenth Century. This was partly because it was a good place to tout for business, but also a symbolic reversal. The sweeps had overturned the milkmaids old rituals for Mayday and taken them over in an ironic reversal of cleanliness, ruralness and purity associated with milkmaids to ‘filthy urban waste’; placing themselves next to the ‘cleansing waters’ may have been a similar ironic move.

SOMETHING IN THE WATER

Possible threats to the water supply led to rumour paranoia & official panic. Papists were said to have turned off the stopcocks on the New River just before the 1666 Great Fire! And during the (partly in origin anti-catholic) Gordon Riots in 1780 the military was stationed to protect the New River & London Bridge waterworks after rumours that those damn papists were at it again and planned to attack them…!

In 1803, at a time of great fear of French invasion and/or radical revolution/uprising, “persons employed to supply the Metropolis with water... are mostly Irish and... have been heard to declare that in the case of invasion or insurrection they should... assist the enemies of this country by preventing the supply of water in cases of fire.”

Acid in the water supply anyone?
**Oh, and by the way...**

Some places the river passes, as it wends its artificial way

**Enfield Chase** was an ancient royal hunting ground. Its many acres comprised arable and grazing land as well as a deer park and over the years legal agreements with tenants of the royal estate had granted rights of common such as grazing and wood collecting, which were of great importance to the local economy in an area with a very high rate of poverty. Not that such rights benefited the very poor, who were unlikely to be commoners paying rents and taxes. The Chase was surrounded by villages and hamlets; Edmonton and Tottenham were close by and the largest was Enfield. There were also estates, manors and farms as well as large mansions and lodges. Small rural communities existed at South Mimms, Hadley, Potters Bar and along the road from Southgate to Cockfosters. Barnet provided the nearest significant town although London was only a day away.

The huge pressures on the poor in the 17th Century, with enclosures and the Civil War hitting their livelihoods, and the spread of radical ideas in the Civil War, found expression locally. There had already been a petition here against enclosures in 1575, followed by a riot in 1589.
In 1649 there were riots on the Chase against enclosure of part of the open land here. Around 1650 Digger groups appeared in both Barnet and Enfield. Small groups began digging up common land for squatter communes, inspired by the St George’s Hill experiment. The Diggers’ appearance scared richer locals. Such communities, although very small, were made up from the very poor and thus represented a threat to social order and local tradition. Many Diggers were apparently from squatting families who had come to the Chase during the war and just after. They may even had had a blind eye turned to them by Parliament, hoping to disrupt traditionalist opponents of the new regime. Either way, rioting certainly occurred during the Digger occupancy although we do not know if Diggers were involved with the disturbances. It is quite likely they were. Accused of killing deer and of assault, fifteen men, including a furrier, cordwainer, weaver, butcher and group of labourers, were indicted for the disturbances. These men were almost certainly recently discharged soldiers as all had access to firearms; they also represented the poorest of the area.

1659: there were more anti enclosure riots. Commoners levelled barns, burned fences on land sold to speculators, and led cattle into corn. This led to a pitched battle with the militia.

1666: there was an alleged Fifth monarchist conspiracy here and in Epping Forest. The Fifth Monarchists were defeated Civil War millenarians, big in the 1650s, part old testament, part anarchist, who had been driven underground and plotted revolt and restoration of a republic into the 1680s.

Writing to his friend Francis Manley, in 1666, Enfield resident Henry Eyton mentioned his fears regarding the Fifth monarchists, the “... restless enemy amongst us ... I mean the whole fanatic party, the head of which serpent lies in and near London especially upon the confines of Essex and Hertfordshire ... taking either side of the Ware river from Edmonton down to Ware and particularly those retired places of Epping Forest and Enfield Chase ... About the road near Theobalds there is a crew of them lie concealed ... that should there be the least commotion in London we should find to our cost that they would be too ready to second it.”

About 100 squatter cottages grew up on the Chase between 1670 & 1700, regarded by the authorities as inhabited by ‘loose, idle and disorderly persons’.

1720s. General Pepper, who had leased the Chase, was shot at during a long bitter ongoing struggle with poachers, during which several poachers were hanged for ‘blacking’ ire going disguised to steal game.

Between 1777 and 1801, Enfield Chase was finally enclosed.
The Enfield Ordnance factories, 1917: in four week long national engineers’ strike 1917 directed against the extension of dilution (the use of nonskilled men on skilled work) and the reduction of the exemption of skilled engineering workers from conscription. This struggle affected thousands of workers’ in London. In some cases there were quite serious clashes with the Police and what seem to have been organised mobs of ‘patriots’, yet there was little reference to this struggle in either local or national press, as the government had placed an embargo on all news of the strike until ‘it was virtually over.

Enfield, 1911: School kids struck in local schools, part of London-wide school strike wave.

Winchmore Hill Tory Club, Set alight 26/12/1988. £10,000 damaged caused.
Broomfield Park/Aldermans Hill, 23 April 1977: After the NF march through Wood Green, there were fights between fascists and anti-fascists here. A sizeable number of anti-fascists did make it to near Arnos School in Wilmer Way where the NF held their rally. By this stage it was late afternoon. Several hundred fascists were able to re-group after the Turnpike Lane ambush. The march continued on past the Cock at the North Circular Rd to Palmers Green triangle. Here Enfield Trades Council and some local Communist Party activists rallied in opposition to the nazis. The NF then continued down Powys Lane into Wilmer Way from the north, skirting the edge of Broomfield Park. Fascists and anti-fascists clashed in the park.

Wood Green, 23 April 1977: A 1200-strong National Front march through Wood Green opposed by 3,000 anti-racists, including delegations from Haringey Labour Party, trade unionists, the Indian Workers’ Association, local West Indians, Rock Against Racism & the SWP. While Communists and churchmen addressed a rally at one end of Duckett’s Common, a contingent composed of more radical elements in the crowd broke away and subjected the NF column to a barrage of smoke bombs, eggs and rotten fruit. 81 people nicked, including 74 anti-fascists. As soon as the NF march moved into Wood Green High Rd, counter-demonstrators attacked and the march was split, with some NF supporters scattering. As the NF moved into Wood Green High Rd they were bombarded with flour, eggs, tomatoes and the shoes from racks outside the front of a shop on the High Rd.

Palmers Green/Bounds Green, 1980s: Squats on North Circular rd in houses emptied for road widening... some still there.

New Southgate Tory Club (Green Lanes somewhere), 21/11/1988: Rubbish set alight causing damage... Petrol bombed 4/1/89, £10,000 damage. Unlucky folks!

Palmers Green UB0 Office, (was on corner of Green Lanes/N Circular) set on fire by ne-er-do-wells 4th April 1987. Sadly never rebuilt!

New River Sports Centre, 12 May 1976: Half an hour of fighting between cops and youth, in Perth Rd, after 200 black kids leaving North London inter-schools athletics finals, local schoolkids & unemployed there to support them get narky with cops.

Haringey Town Hall/Civic Centre: Occupied 8/5/1987 by 120 claimants/Tottenham Claimants Union, during civil servants strike. Bernie Grant called the cops, who evicted the claimants. 80 then occupied the finance dept, talking to workers... cops arrived; the rest marched down the high rd. 30 then occupied SS office. Many anti poll tax demos: Feb 5 1990 HAPTU demonstration in response to the Council fining 7,000 people for non-registration. 5 March 1990 Haringey Council met to set the Poll Tax. 1,000 demonstrated - people invaded the Council Chamber and blocked road outside. Haringey II arrested. Meeting adjourned. March 1990: Reconvened Haringey Council meeting sets highest Poll Tax in Britain (£572). 4 March 1991: Protest at Council Poll Tax setting meeting - bills burned outside Civic Centre. 24 May 1991: Strike by Haringey council workers against cuts imposed by Poll Tax budget: demo outside Council meeting & burning of Poll Tax bills.

Alexandra Palace & Park:
• 1880s: Protests against the company that owns the Palace’s plans to sell it for development. The plans were shelved.
• Used as an internment camp for Germans and other suspect foreigners, especially radicals & subversives, from 1915.
• 29 March 1967: 14 Hour Technicolour Dream event held here... international benefit, extravaganza. Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, the Move, Arthur Brown, Alex Harvey played; conceptual art, light shows, 10,000 or so attended. Was attacked by mods!
• 5 Nov 1990: Fireworks display at Alexandra Palace. Poll Tax demands and an effigy of Thatcher burnt.
• 1997: Michael Portillo’s 10 years as an MP party disrupted by 100s of locals and friends who harassed Tory partygoers with flour, paint and fists, and did some kwikfitting on their cars.

Hornsey Art College, (Crouch End Hill), May 28 - July 12 1968: Art students occupied the College. Some of them began to question the whole art world... “I say shit on their art world...it is totally irrelevant to the lives and struggles of the great mass of the population...” “At Hornsey - a college which suffered from all the diseases of art education in their most extreme form - a sense of communal being was created originally by the officially sponsored student demonstrations against inclusion in the proposed North London Polytechnic. Although smiled on by authority, this agitation had the effect of generating the one thing the system normally conspires to keep hidden: a feeling that it was possible to change things by intelligent, direct common action. A few months later; the fruit was harvested in the shape of the famous sit-in. This sit-in, and the one at Guildford, which very quickly followed, produced a great response throughout the art-school world. There were sit-ins, active discussions and demands for radical reform in a large number of colleges. The Hornsey and Guildford students founded the Movement for Rethinking Art and Design Education (MORADE), which held a conference in the Roundhouse in London in July.”
Parkland Walk: Saved from proposed development 1990 as a 6 lane highway (including demolition of 300 houses), by mass campaign, including 1000-strong demos at Haringey Town Hall. Famously site of first Anarchist Walking Group outing 2001...


Finsbury Park: Created 1857 after 7-year local campaign for a public park. Summer 1912: Mass open air suffragette meetings. 1914-16: The North London Herald League held open air meetings against World War 1, which were at times popular, & at times were broken up by jingoist crowds. At a 1914 meeting, in response to official appeals to the upper class to release servants to the army, a speaker asked a crowd: “Have you got a sweating employer or a rack-renting landlord you can spare? Let him join up to fight for humanity, for civilisation, for democracy, for the women and children, for all those causes in which he has always been so enthusiastic.” John Arnall, of the British Socialist Party, was imprisoned for three months in for seditious’ statements made in French, uttered at a meeting in the park. Later he was the unsuccessful Labour Party candidate for North Islington in the November 1918 general election.

June 1936: A British Union of Fascists public meeting attacked by antis in the park.

Crouch Hill Recreation Centre, Hillrise rd, Haringey & Islington Claimants Union met here, 1980s-90s.

a past tense
up north london production
for a loverly walk down the New River
July 2006
email: mudlark1@postmaster.co.uk
Red Rose Club, 129 Seven Sisters Rd: Long-running lefty club, pub & meeting space: Still there!

Highbury Fields: Traditional meeting place for demos. 1795: London Corresponding Society held mass rallies of radicals. 1851: popular agitation prevented development of fields for posh housing... 20 October 1885: Unemployed march to here & demonstrate outside house of Joseph Chamberlain, President of the Board of Trade. May 1913: A contingent marched from Highbury Corner as part of London-wide anti-militarist demos.

Pentonville Prison: Tim Evans, innocent of murdering his wife, executed here in 1990. “It was Christie was the murderer, the Judge and Jury too. Go down, You murderer, Go down...” 1972: Dockers mass picketing. Murderer, Go down...” cutted here in 1950.

Highbury Corner: Speakers corner & meeting point for socialists for years. Unemployed & meetings here, early 1900s. WW1: Anti-war rallies. Still used for meetings 1928.

1842: Chartist demo turned into a riot. 7 March 1990: Poll tax demo at town hall erupted into rioting.

29/37a Grosvenor Ave: Squats here, home late 1970s - early 80s of infamous collective that ran Anarchy magazine (among other dodgy projects)

New Pegasus Pub, Green Lanes, top punk gig venue, late 1980s - early 90s... Squatted as New Pegasus 1995

2 St Paul’s Rd: Advisory Service for Squatters used to live here. Also local alternative paper Islington Gutter Press, c.1980.

Mollies, 287 Upper St: Squat centre/ cafe 1984-87

313 Upper St, City Limits set up by striking Time Out workers, c. May 1986: became Blut Blut squat centre.

The High Bury: Prior’s House in Essex Rd trashed by poll tax rebels. 1981. The prior was Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury, later beheaded by rebels...

Red Rose Club: Unemployed mass meetings held here, and much more! 1990s: Scene of alternative Hackney Homeless festivals alternative Lesbian & gay

Southgate Road, Brotherhood Church: radical socialist chapel, from 1882. Congress of Bolsheviks in exile & Anti-WW1 meetings held here. July 1917, national DWorkmen’s & Soldiers Councils Conference, was to be held: it was bursted up by a D鸌agistic crowd, with great violence. Continued to be a centre of leftwing activity till 1914.

Southgate Road: Squat Centre, 1995–6. Cafes, galleries and a cool place to be.

57a Mildmay Park: Lovely Squat Centre, 1995–6. Cafes, galleries and a cool place to be.

Mildmay Rachel Club, 1, 1888: V year of St Matthews attacked it for its “pernicious influence among the young...” 1914: Home & Colonial Stores Shop assistants met here to organise against discriminatory conditions, surveillance of workers, expat & fines.

Peter Lilley, Tory Social Security dole campaigners; graffitied by poll tax rebels, house in Essex until 1981

Time Out, City Limits, 1984-87

207-33 Stoke Newington Church St: squatted after dereliction, 1980s

Nevi Arms, Squatted pub, 1991-2

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