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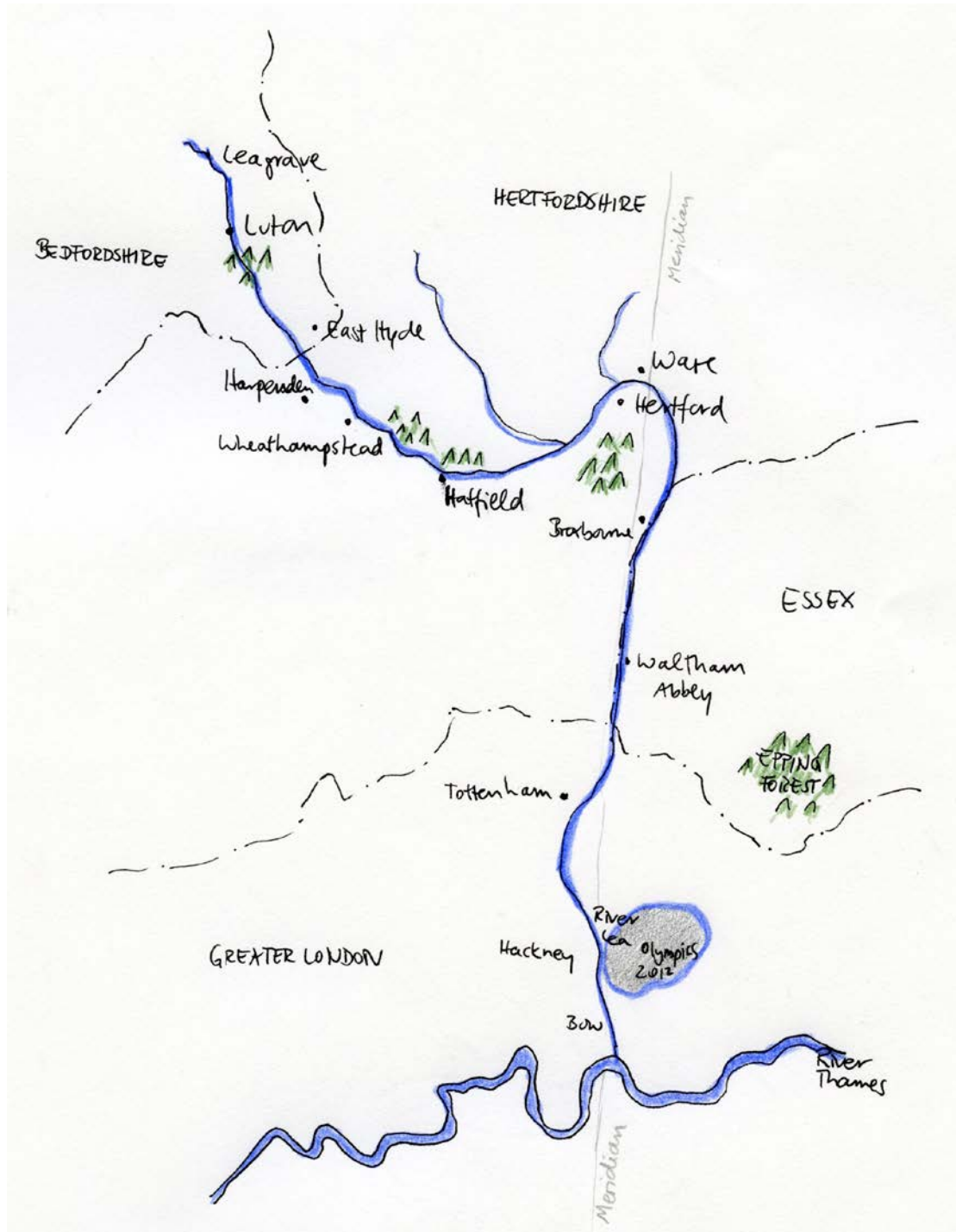
London-Luton: A Photographic Exploration of the Lea Valley

1. Introduction

The Lea River rises in Luton (Bedfordshire) and exits into the Thames at Bow Creek, in East London. For roughly the last half of its 85 km (53 miles) length, the river runs almost vertically, North-South, marking a series of boundaries: administrative (between the counties of Essex and Hertfordshire), geographical and temporal (the Meridian closely follows the Lea here) and topographic (the fertile valley of former market gardens and medieval towns as opposed to the adjacent higher ground, with its remnants of ancient woodland). It defies boundaries, such as the notion of an ‘urban edge,’ allowing the ‘rural’ to penetrate the ‘urban’, as it flows through former industrial areas of East London. It also provides a constant in the vertiginous change being created by the 2012 Olympic site around Stratford and Hackney.

Central to our approach is the concept of ‘psychogeography’ (cf Debord, 1955), where we use (relatively) unplanned walks to discover places and their links to social and cultural history. Traces of these walks are recorded using photography and interviews. The photographs are partly documentary, reflecting both the enduring character of the Lea valley and the boundaries it materialises, as well as the

ephemeral, in the face of rapid and massive change. The images are also the reflection of very personal visions of the two authors.



2. 2012 Olympic Development (Gesche Würfel)

In 2005 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that London had won the bid to host the 2012 Olympics. Since then the Lower Lea Valley in East London, which has been designated to host many of the sports venues and the Olympic park, has received much attention. In the meantime, construction work is disrupting established relationships between residents and their natural and built environment, mainly through the three meter high blue fence that creates a boundary between the ‘old’ outside world and a new dream world being created by the IOC and its selected architects, inside.



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3 The Meridian (Gesche Würfel)

The Greenwich Meridian, established by Sir George Airy in 1851, runs through the site of the 2012 Olympics. In the 19th century, the Lea Valley provided London with essential raw materials and industrial output that contributed to the power of the British Empire. During this time the Meridian was established as a literal and symbolic expression that this land was the centre of the world. Images of the Meridian along the Lea Valley show placid nature, mundane leisure sites, and relics of the industrial past that are no longer teeming with Imperial force. Meanwhile, the temporal and geographic boundary that the Meridian ‘indicates’ is not visible at all....



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4. Memory (Peter Coles)

The entire Lea Valley, including many of its more rural stretches, has seen successive cycles of social and economic change, each leaving its mark. Vestiges of the rural past, like veteran trees, watercress beds and ancient hedges, are sometimes juxtaposed alongside the new, inviting an exploration of what Oliver Rackham (1976) has called the ‘archaeology of landscape’. The source itself, at Leagrave, on the outskirts of Luton (Bedfordshire) is channelled in a concrete pipe beneath a car park and recycling centre serving the Five Springs tower blocks. A few hundred metres away is Waulud’s Bank, a Neolithic site now popular with local dog-walkers. Brocket Hall, near Lemsford (Hertfordshire) with its ancient pollards and bluebell wood, is now a conference centre and golf course, traversed by the Lea Valley walk. A remnant of Ermine Street, a Roman road flanked by old hornbeams, runs through Broxbourne Wood, on the western ridge of the Lea Valley, near Broxbourne. And Epping Forest (formerly Waltham Forest), with its ancient beech, oak and hornbeam pollards, lies on the Lea Valley’s eastern ridge. Now used for recreation, it once supplied fuel wood for Londoners and, from the 13th century, provided hunting for the king. Meanwhile, the Lea is an example of a ‘green corridor’, providing ecological continuity for plant seed and animals to migrate, when urban development would otherwise threaten their sustainability.



The source of the Lea



Brocket Hall



Hackney Wick



Mill Green



The O2 Centre from Bow Creek

References

Debord, G-E (1955), Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography, first published in *Les Lèvres Nues*, reproduced by Situationist International, 2001

Rackham, O. (1976), *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*, J.M. Dent, London.

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