

The New River

The New River is neither new nor a river. It was opened in 1613 and every inch was dug by hand. Its purpose was to supply London with fresh drinking water taken from the River Lea and Chadwell Springs close to Ware, as well as other springs and wells along its 40-mile course at the end of which it flowed into the Round Pond, in Islington. The finished channel followed a route along the western bank of the Lea Valley with a gentle slope of about 5" in each mile starting 10 feet above the 100-foot contour line and ending 8 feet below it. It was a tortuous route because each time a tributary entered the valley, the New River progressed along the northern bank until it could cross the stream on the level and then return along the southern edge. Over the centuries, as new civil engineering techniques were developed, the course was straightened and shortened, with embankments, aqueducts and tunnels. There is a marked walking route called the New River Path. It is a 28-mile footpath which follows the course of the New River from its source to its original end at New River Head, close to Sadler's Wells theatre - where water from the river was used to flood a large tank to stage an Aquatic Theatre at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1946, the water supply to New River Head was truncated at Stoke Newington with the, now 20 mile, New River ending at the East Reservoir as the Woodberry Wetlands.

The design and construction of the New River is wrongly attributed solely to Sir Hugh Myddelton. It was Edmund Colthurst who first proposed the idea, obtaining a charter from King James I in 1604, to carry it out – at his own expense. After surveying the whole route and digging the first 2 miles, Colthurst, having spent £200, (£42,000 today) encountered financial difficulties. Work stopped at Amwell Pool, for 5 years, while he tried to raise more funds. In the end, Myddelton, a London goldsmith, undertook to complete the work,

starting in late April 1609. He, very sensibly, appointed Edmund Colthurst to be the overseer of the project and paid him a regular wage. The channel, now 10 feet wide, progressed southwards through St Margaret's, Hoddesdon, and Broxbourne to reach Wormley, where work stopped again on 27th January 1610. This time it was Myddelton who ran short of money. In addition, he was being frustrated by two local landowners, who were strongly opposing the plans to cut the channel through their lands.

The project was rescued by the King personally, whose house and lands at Theobalds Park were to be crossed by the river. James proposed that he should provide half the costs of completing the New River – in return he would take half of the profits. Indeed, the King commanded that no-one should object to the work “...upon paine of his majesties highest displeasure...”. The landowners



rapidly withdrew their objections and work resumed in November 1611, crossing the King's lands at Theobalds in April 1612. There is a postscript to King James' involvement with the New River. On 9th January 1622 King James was out riding in his estate, when his horse stumbled. The king was thrown into the frozen New River and only his legs could be seen above the ice. The event is commemorated with a rondel displayed on the gates of Cedars Park, where the palace once stood.

Driving west along the M25, few people realise that the first bridge after Junction 25 is not an ordinary bridge – it's unique, it carries a river over the motorway.

Just south of where the M25 would be built, the New River turned westward around the valley of the Cuffley Brook on a 3½ mile diversion which went as far as Whitewebbs, before returning past

the Adath Yisroel Burial Ground in Enfield, to resume its southerly course. This loop was cut off by the mile long Docwra embankment in 1859.

Another westward loop soon follows, two miles long, around Enfield. Most of this route is still in water, but as a civic amenity; the water goes to waste at the end of the lake in Enfield Park. The New River water flows through three pipelines between Southbury Road and Park Avenue before crossing the Salmons Brook over the Clarendon Arch. It then makes its way through Winchmore Hill and Palmers Green to disappear underground at Myddelton Road in Bowes Green. It resurfaces near Alexandra Palace. This late 19th century route cut off two large original loops totalling 5 miles.

The New River then flows through Hornsey and down “the Ladder”, where ten suburban residential roads cross the river with less than 250 feet between each of them. It runs across Finsbury Park and goes under Green Lanes and Seven Sisters Road to arrive at its current terminus at the magnificent Stoke Newington Pumping Station or The Castle Climbing Centre, as it is locally known. It was built to resemble Stirling Castle, to pacify local residents who didn’t want an ordinary “pumping station” to spoil their neighbourhood!

Originally, from here, the 2¾ mile Holloway Loop around the Hackney Brook went west beyond Holloway Road, almost to where Holloway Prison would be built and returned close to the south of the future Emirates Stadium, to go under Green Lanes and into Clissold Park. This was the first of the loops to be shortened, in 1619, just 6 years after the River opened, by building an aqueduct over the Brook. Then, 250 years later, the loop was further shortened by piping the river under Green Lanes from the pumping station to the Park. The lake in Clissold Park is part of the original course. The remaining two miles to the Round Pond used to flow on the surface but was piped underground in the second half of the 19th century.

The broad grass centre of Petherton Road, where the River used to run, is the start of an easy-to-follow walk to Douglas Road and Colebrook Row and Duncan Terrace to the Angel, then on to the

New River Head and the Round Pond, where “ On 29th September 1613, was the first issuing of the water into the New River, before the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, Recorder, and a worthy company who stood to behold it”



Among that worthy company, were Sir Hugh Myddelton and Edmund Colthurst, the two men who had brought the New River from Chadwell Spring to Islington and provided London with fresh drinking water.

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WAMP (WASCZ 433)
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THE NEW RIVER

Original length 40 miles
Fall 16 feet or 5" per mile

Today's length 20 miles

