

Regeneration

'It's like a village again' ... Gritty east London district gets a smart new look

Maev Kennedy

A week ago two old friends, Jennie Murray and Jean Cooper, did something quite new. They enjoyed it so much they did it again this week: they met for a coffee at a table outside one of the cafes in Leyton High Road.

You'd still be pushing it to say that the East End parade of hardware shops, internet cafes, small grocers and estate agents has developed the continental cafe culture the local authority yearns for, but there are tables and chairs on the pavements outside the newly painted shops and below the smart new coloured awnings - and more importantly, there are people sitting at them.

There is still plenty of painting, paving and plastering going on and the reason for the improvements blocks the view at the end of many of the streets: the Olympic Park, so close to Cooper's house that at one point she could count 40 cranes from her front windows and lost her television reception completely.

On 21 July the Olympic torch will pass along the street; it will be touch and go, but Leyton will be ready.

Leyton has never, even in the wildest dreams of an estate agent, been a smart area, but it has a history of pulling its socks up when required. The Coronation Park - restored a decade ago from near dereliction with heritage lottery money, and still immaculate - opened in 1902, when the Leytonstone Express and Independent noted that "a disagreeable eyesore ... has in the space of four months been rescued from its former miserable appearance and transformed into a decidedly pretty and inviting-looking pleasure ground".

To the surprise of many residents, much the same could be said today. A young woman looking at engagement rings stepped back to peer up at the shop sign and confirm that the elegantly lit window really was still H&T the pawnbrokers - "the smartest pawnbrokers in London", manager Susan Elsey said proudly. At SnS hair and beauty, Kristina Sobieska Kriger stepped out for a cigarette, leaving the newly decorated interior full of customers and picking her way carefully around the painters still working on the shop front. "It's like a village again," she said. "It's really, really nice."

In David Daniels estate agents they were slightly peeved that their dark blue facade is already so smart they are not getting a new free one from the council, but they are getting a handsome new sign, and the upper floors have been replastered and painted primrose yellow. "We are seeing a nicer kind of tenant move in, and lots of them," Joseph Solomons said. "Always good for us when people are moving," Hardeep Plaha said

After



Before



Before and after: Leyton High Road may not yet have developed a continental-style cafe culture, but the improvements are clear
Photograph (top): David Levene

in the Key Shop locksmiths. "Landlords and tenants always want new locks." The pavements have come up and the old plastic shop signs have come down. Flower baskets have broken out like a rash. The handsome Edwardian library now lights up at night. The scuffed black facade of the locksmiths goes next week: Plaha showed with pride the architect's designs for a bottle-green traditional corner shop front as smart as any West End wine bar.

The Olympics authority did the pavements and street furniture, and the council spent £475,000, from the government's Working Neighbourhoods fund, completely restoring the facades of 41 shops, jetwashing Victorian brick, restoring or replacing traditional features and excavating stucco decoration and marble columns from under layers of plastic and chipboard.

The improvement work is confined to a short stretch of the road, which straggles on for miles, but the council believes the effect will spread, and there

are some signs that this is happening. Although in one phone shop a man - behind a window so grimy it was almost opaque - said dismally that nothing was happening down his end of the street, there are many repainted doors and windows, and renovated shop fronts. While it will be some time before anyone thinks of the Coach and Horses as a gastropub, the entire facade has been repainted a startling combination of peppermint green and black.

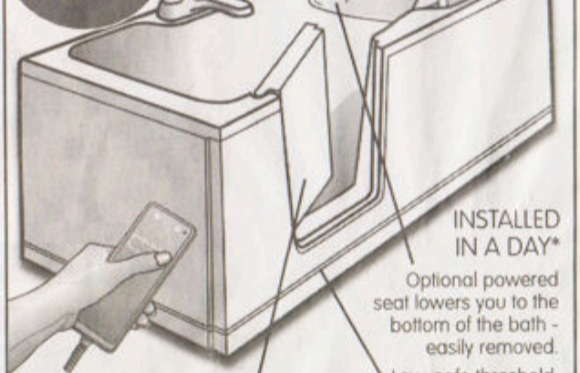
Murray and Cooper, a PA at an American bank and a retired PA at a whisky company, live at opposite ends of the long high street and meet in the middle once a week for coffee and a chat.

Traffic was chaotic during the road work, and the dust from the Olympic Park construction was so bad that when Cooper left a window open for a few hours to air a room for guests, she found the cream bedspread covered in black streaks. "But now, finally, we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel," she said.

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