

Replanning London: 1945 to the present



By Alex Grant

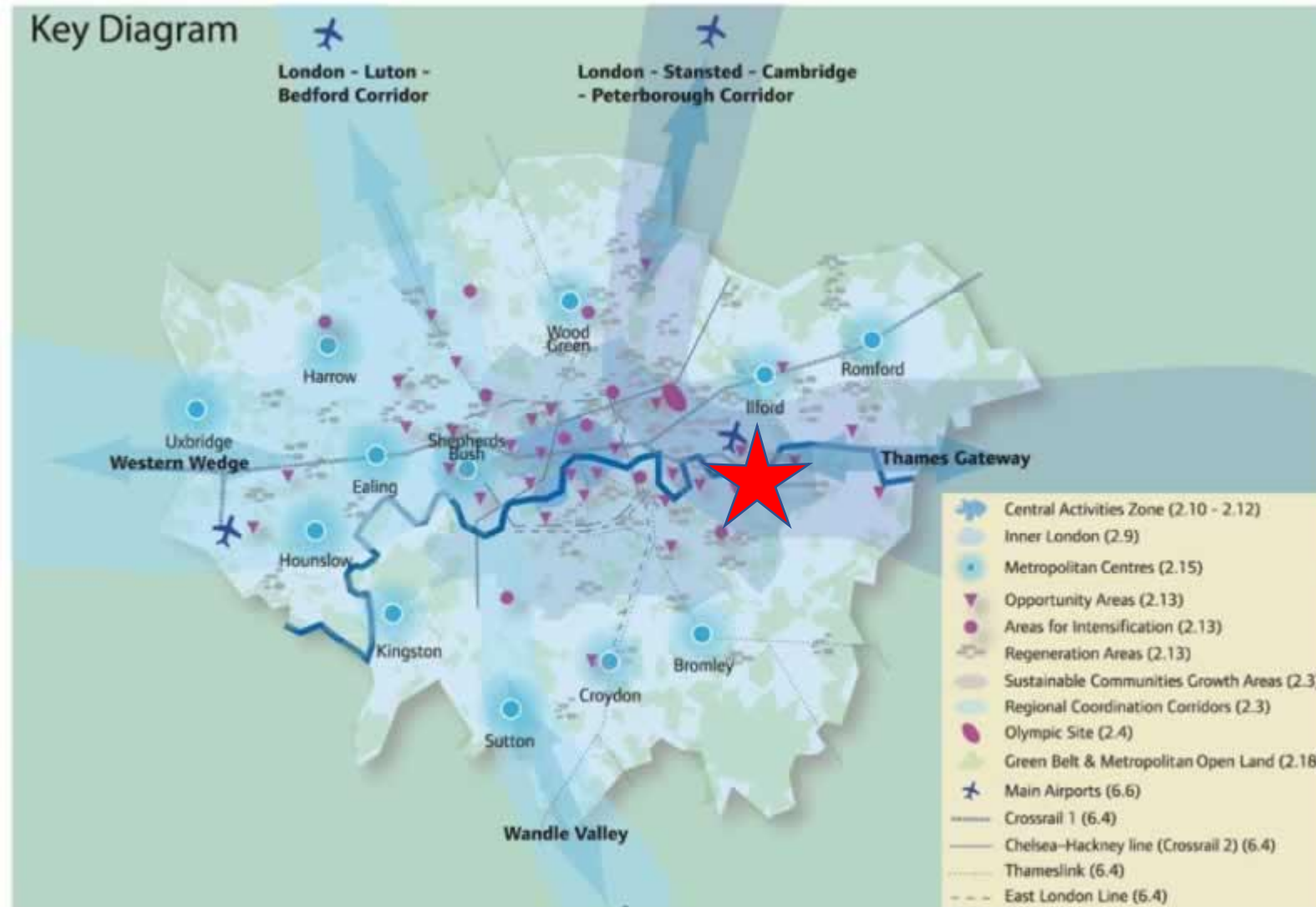
Part 2

Today, we'll look at three parts of London that are undergoing huge change: Woolwich, Victoria and Stratford.

We'll then try and draw some conclusions from the three case studies, and finally turn to London's future Challenges.

Case study one: Woolwich

Woolwich in context

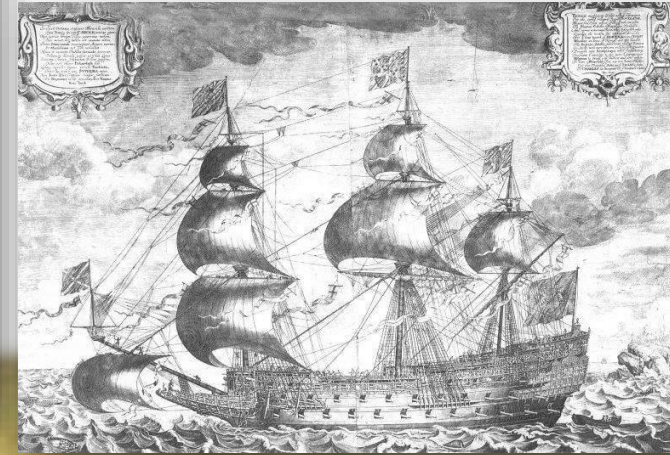


Woolwich: a brief history

Woolwich is not just a suburb: it has been a place in its own right for centuries. There is evidence of an iron-age settlement, and a Roman fort. Woolwich had a ferry across the Thames since the early fourteenth century. But it was only a small village until the late middle ages.



A Royal Dockyard from 1512. Many of England's finest ships of the C16 and C17, including the *Great Harry* and *Sovereign of the Seas*, were built there



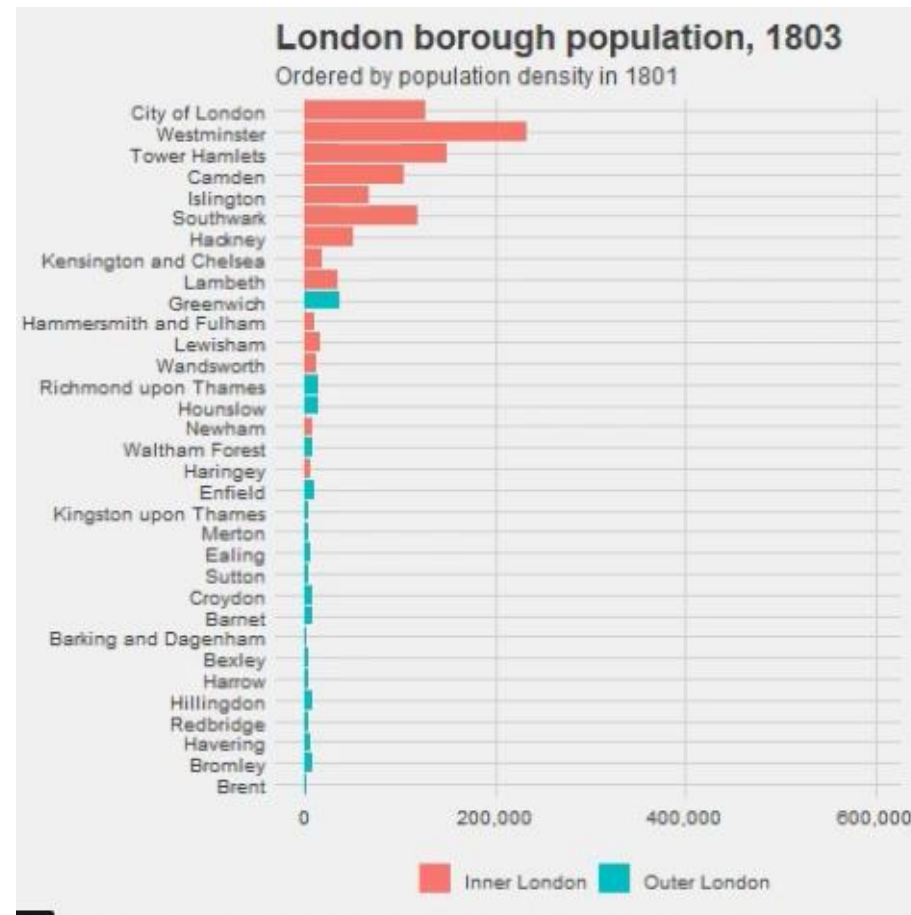
The Arsenal and the Royal Artillery: the spur to Woolwich's growth

- The Regiment of Artillery was formed in the Arsenal in 1716. The Royal artillery moved from the Arsenal to new barracks on the Common between 1776 and 1802 and the Royal Military Academy moved to another new building, also on the Common, in 1808.
- The Arsenal rapidly grew to become a place where munitions were built, not where soldiers were trained
- Although Woolwich's Royal Dockyard closed in 1869, the Royal Arsenal had already overtaken it in terms of jobs and importance

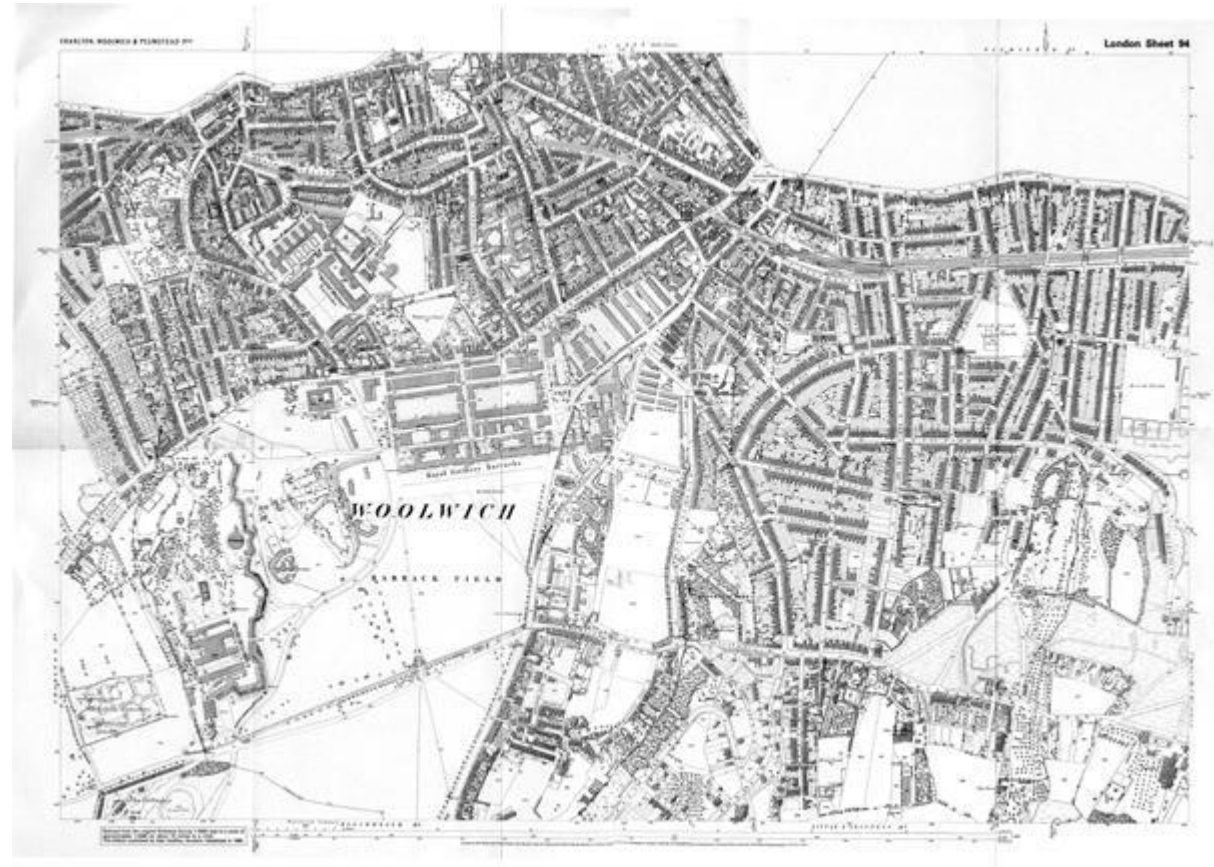
1741: John
Rocque's map
shows
Woolwich is
still a small
village along
the Thames



By the start of the nineteenth century, Greenwich (which covers Woolwich) had by far the highest population of all of London's modern outer boroughs

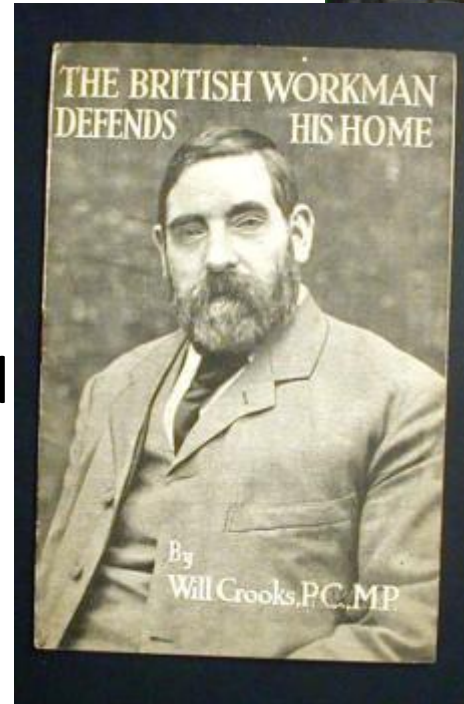


By 1869, expansion of the Arsenal meant Woolwich had grown hugely and its population had reached 70,000



19th century: New Woolwich institutions were mutual, not commercial. It was an important birthplace of the Co-operative and Labour Movements

- The Royal Arsenal Co-Operative Society (RACS).
- The Woolwich Equitable Building Society
- In 1903 Woolwich became the first place in Britain to have both a Labour MP and a Labour council. It has had both a Labour MP, and a Labour council, almost continuously ever since



Pub Quiz Question

- How many people worked at the Royal Arsenal in 1918?

Answer

- 80,000 – 38% of them women

The Royal Arsenal

- From its origins in the seventeenth century, the Royal Arsenal grew to be the largest factory in the world at the time of WW1 – employing 80,000 people and covering 1,200 acres



By 1906, Woolwich was a confident, grand town with a confident, grand Town Hall to match



Woolwich had a linear High Street (Powis Street) lined with department stores – and because of its economic decline in the late twentieth century it never got an indoor shopping mall



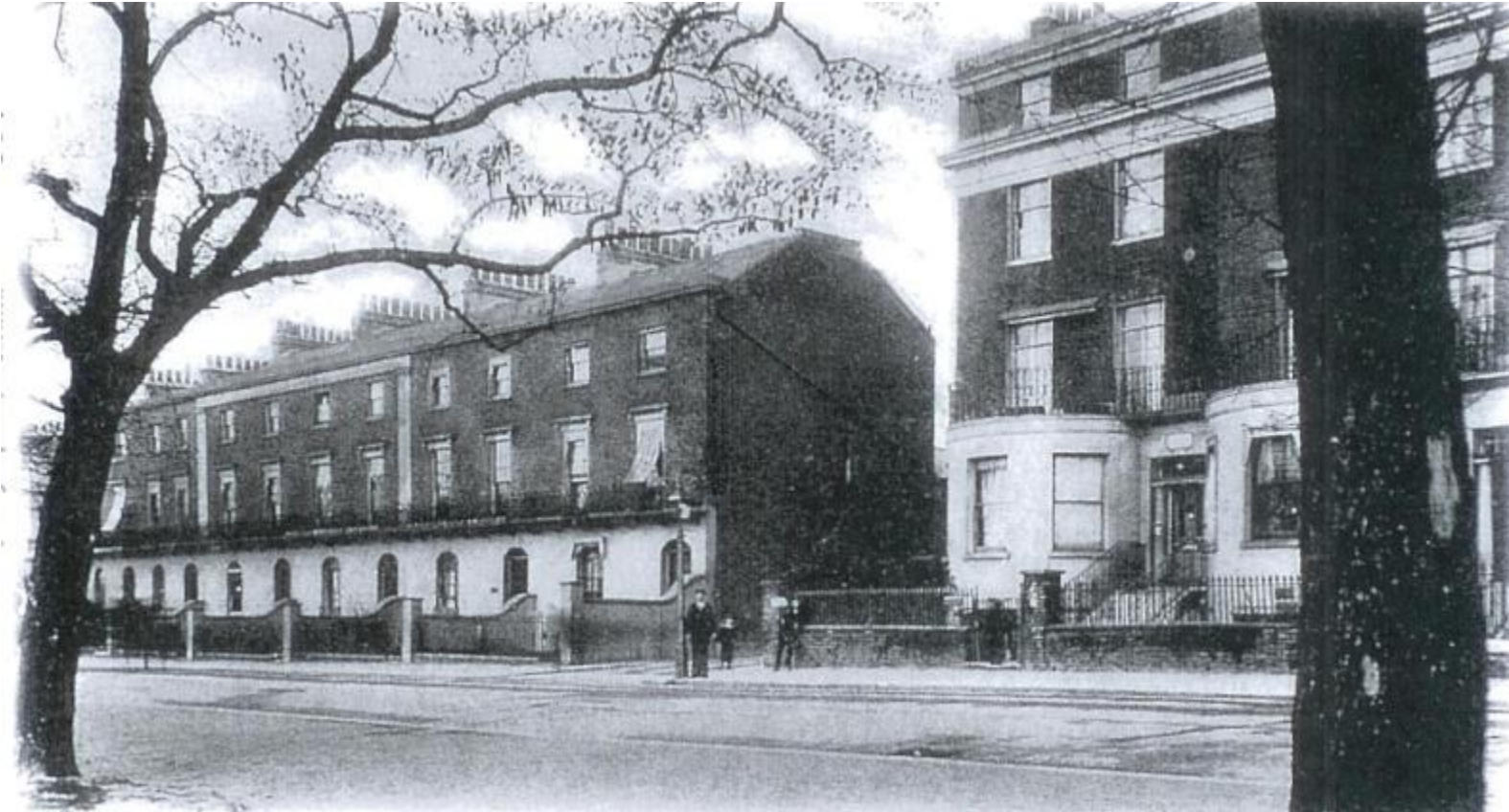
Ian Nairn on Woolwich in the 1960s:

*“[Woolwich is] a commercial gold mine
[which] has come down from the
Midland cities and in the process lost
its Midland drabness and taken on
alertness and savoir faire”.*

1960s onwards: economic decline

- The Royal Arsenal, which had gradually declined since WW1, began to shut down completely from the 1960s onwards
- Loss of other major manufacturing employers, e.g. Siemens
- Woolwich's biggest department stores – Cuffs and Garretts – both close down
- Labour council was increasingly insular and unimaginative until the mid-1990s
- Woolwich of little strategic importance or interest to the GLC or central government

Much of historic Woolwich demolished in the 1960s and 1970s – including the Regency House where General Gordon was born



1980s and 1990s: isolation and stagnation

- Woolwich excluded from London Docklands development area: little new development in the 1990s
- RACS merges with London Co-op and shuts down its Woolwich department stores
- A non-policy of unmanaged decline
- Major employers pull out – the University of Greenwich, magazine publisher Miller Freeman, and Woolwich Building Society all quit in the 1990s. Even the Royal Artillery almost pulls out as well
- Further collapse of remaining manufacturing in 1990s: in 1994 the Arsenal ward (which covered the residential streets uphill from the Arsenal itself) had a male unemployment rate of 62%, the highest rate of any ward in mainland Britain.
- Arsenal shuts completely in 1994

2000s: Woolwich's shaky recovery

- Royal Arsenal redeveloped from late 1990s onwards – though increasingly as Housing, not Mixed-Use
- DLR link opened in 2008
- Crossrail station secured after a long struggle. Woolwich will be just 40 minutes from Heathrow, 20 minutes from West End once trains start running, though this has been delayed from 2018 to 2019 and again to 2020
- London Plan envisages Woolwich being a “Metropolitan Centre” on a par with Bromley, Croydon and Stratford by 2031 – a very ambitious target indeed
- Woolwich's stigma still applies - Marks and Spencer closed in 2014 and its building is now a Pound shop. Shrinking retail base and hardly any upmarket openings. Little evening economy.
- Marketing very poor
- Some new institutions fail – Firepower Museum never attracts enough visitors and closed in 2017



Woolwich's
recovery was
not aided by
the riots of
2011 or the
killing of
drummer Lee
Rigby in 2013



Immediate
hinterland of
Woolwich town
centre is a mix of
failed council
housing (some of it
now being
redeveloped) and
ungentrified early
Victorian housing



The Woolwich Central site: formerly a Cavalry Barracks, visible in the bottom left hand-corner of this 1961 aerial view



Site previously occupied by Peggy Middleton House, Crown Building and Post Office – all demolished in 2008-2011 to make way for a huge new Tesco



New Council Offices (the Woolwich Centre) built on Wellington Street in 2010. Generally seen as a success. Replaced the unloved Peggy Middleton House, whose site was then freed up for Tesco



In return, Spenhill (Tesco's development arm) built a Tesco store and flats above on Peggy Middleton House site. Winner of *Building Design's* "Carbuncle Cup" for the worst new building of 2014!



Collado Collins – the site's original masterplanners – saw the site as part of a “Woolwich Ramblas” all the way from Woolwich Common to the river



Original plan envisaged a very tall building of 26+ stories at northern end of site, where Post Office had stood. Council ignored CABE advice and approved tower in outline only.



2008: the downturn strikes

- Economic challenges meant a “fundamental review” of the scheme started a year after planning permission was granted in January 2007.
- No work started on site until 2009, and many changes made to the original planning permission between 2007 and 2010.
- Collado Collins dropped as Masterplanners – Sheppard Robson now the sole architects

The 26-storey tower was dropped for the time being. As a result, Tesco itself dominates



Problem #1: In place of the tower, the Post Office site has been given “temporary” landscaping, far inferior to General Gordon Square alongside



With hindsight – and foresight -
the demolition of the Post office
building was a huge blunder



Problem #2: Most of the small retail units at front of building remain unlet



Astonishingly, this was all built across the road from a Pugin Church (St Peter's) of 1842-43....



Further phases, now under construction, will be even higher and denser. Views of the Town Hall clock tower from Woolwich Common will be lost.



Image: GVA/Meyer Homes

Plans for a 27-storey, Flatiron-style tower were submitted but turned down in 2018 as not enough affordable housing was proposed, and then rejected at appeal. It was better than the original plan, but with hindsight maybe it would have been best to leave the Post Office building well alone.



A conservation area for central Woolwich is now being proposed, which is welcome but arguably closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. It will probably come too late to save the atmospheric streetscape of Mortgrammit square, where this 'turning Torso' tower is planned



Just to the north of Tesco, General Gordon Square was revamped by Gustafson Porter in 2011 and can look great...



... Particularly if viewed from above



But is let down by a “Big Screen” that blocks views to and from Woolwich Arsenal station, poor signage and a lack of maintenance



Woolwich's DLR station still has temporary buildings and the damage it inflicted on townscape is plain to see. The recession put the “above-station development” on hold for years



In the “civic core” 100 metres from Tesco the listed former Police Station and Magistrates' Court are being converted to residential uses. Nearby the Old Town Hall, Town Hall annexe, swimming baths and Polytechnic buildings are poorly-maintained, underused or empty. There is little sign of the promised conservation area, or a proper plan for their future. The proposed “cultural quarter” is now destined for the Royal Arsenal, not here



While the 1950s Regal Cinema next door to the Town Hall may not have been a great building, there were exciting plans to turn it into an arts centre...



...but sadly it is now demolished,
and the block of flats that has taken
its place does not inspire or excite



With M&S closed and changed to a 99p store, Woolwich needs to look beyond retail for a sustainable future. Ambitions for Woolwich to be a “Metropolitan Centre” by 2031 are pie in the sky



Some historic buildings on Hare Street, that were rotting until recently, have been restored but await new retail uses.



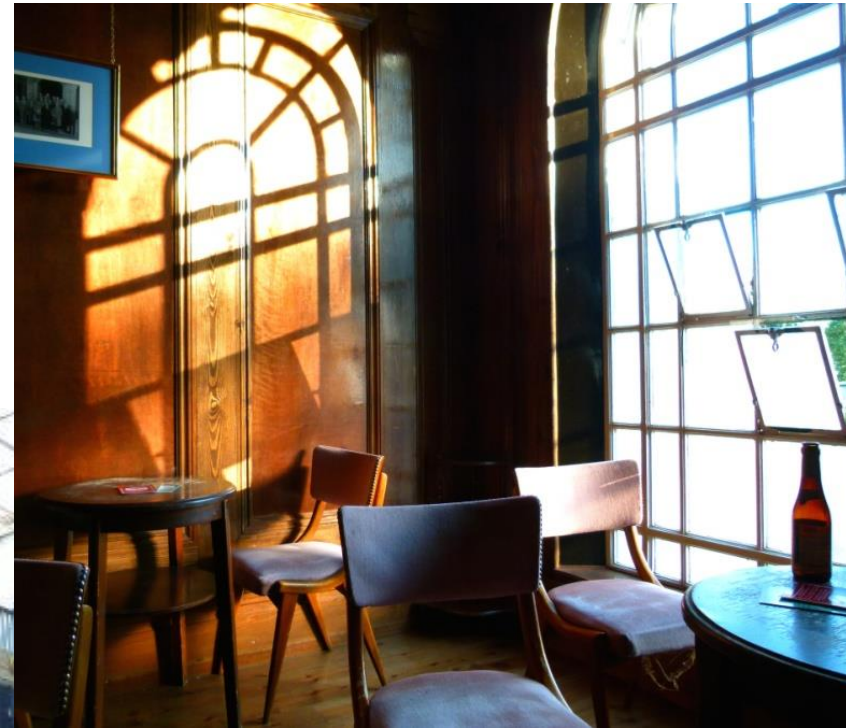
Restoration of the Art Deco Co-op – as flats - has come in the nick of time



One tiny new Eritrean restaurant – Blue Nile – is a tripadvisor hit and has arguably done more to put Woolwich on the map than Tesco ever did



Likewise with the “Woolwich Equitable”, a new pub in the defunct Building Society’s old banking hall. The hipsters are arriving!



Final phase of the Royal Arsenal will be incredibly high density – more than 1,000 habitable rooms per hectare. The price to pay for a Crossrail station!



More towers have now been built along Plumstead Road above the new Crossrail station, to be followed by a redevelopment of the Covered market and a new hotel above the DLR station. But will their quality be up to scratch? And with the Firepower museum closing, will Woolwich be more than just a dormitory with good rail links?



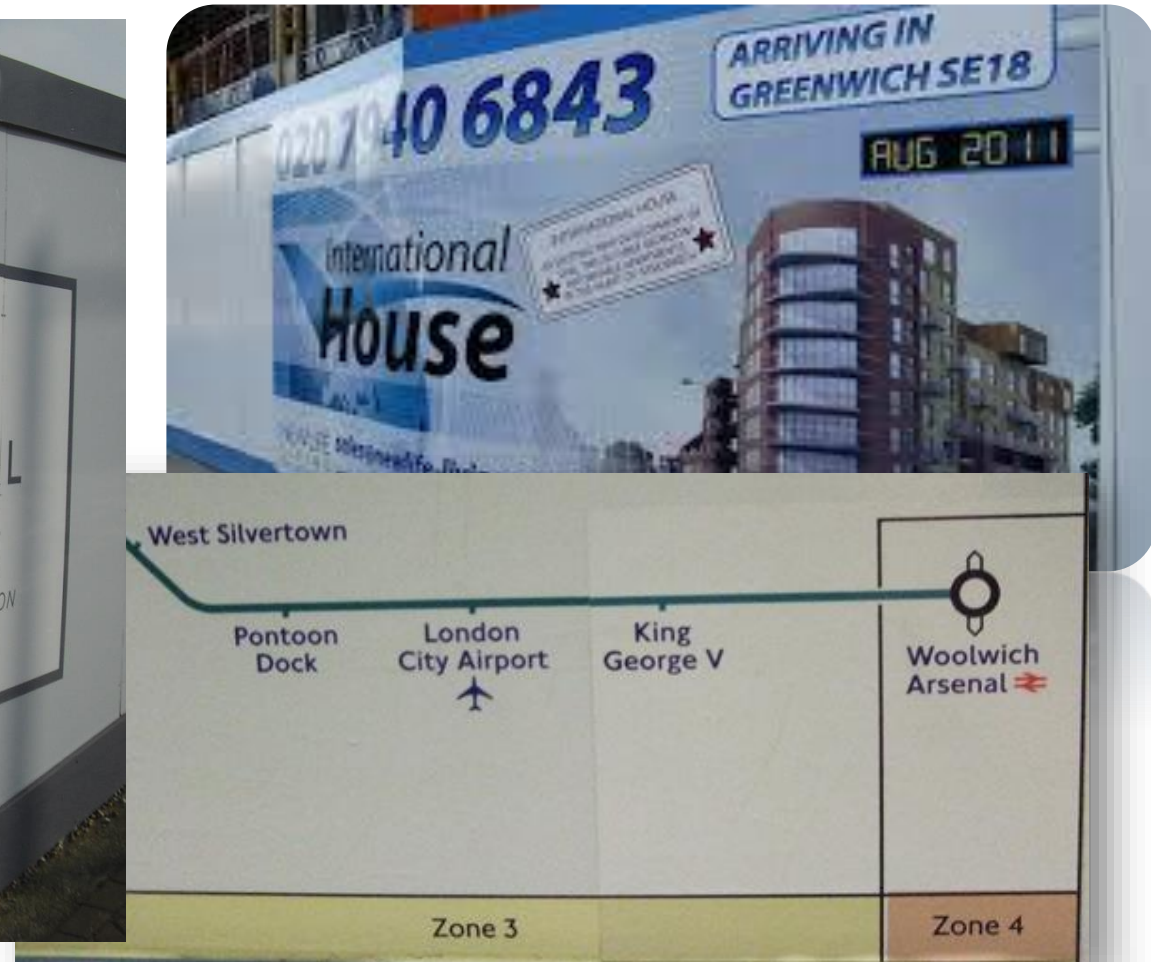
The proposed new 'Cultural Quarter' at the Arsenal looks great. But none of its new tenants –including the Chineke orchestra and theatre company Punchdrunk - are big names, and one is relocating from elsewhere from Woolwich. Boasts that it might be London's 'second South Bank' sound far-fetched



Plumstead Road – the dual carriageway that separates the Royal Arsenal from the town centre – causes as much severance as ever



Woolwich still faces stigma. The town at the end of the line in Zone 4 that dares not speak its name and wants to really be Greenwich instead



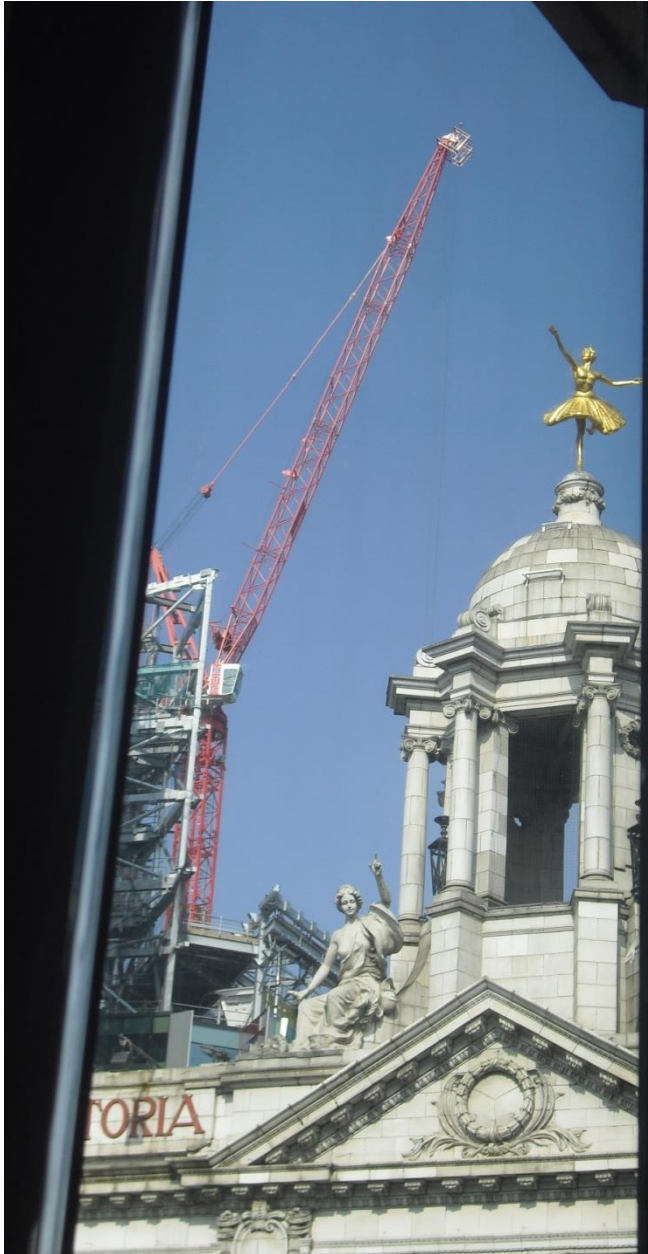
Coolwich! A new pop-up “Street feast” opened in the impressive 1930s covered market in the late 2010s. It’s been saved from demolition...



But the new “Woolwich Exchange” proposals for the area may make the market a duller place, and the artists’ impressions of the interior look more like an airport terminal than a public space



Case study two: Victoria



Victoria: an entity that did not exist before the 1860s. Previously a border-land between Westminster, the Grosvenor Canal and Chelsea



The area north of the station was developed by the early 1700s. Georgian terraces can still be seen around Catherine Place, just few blocks north of the station



Belgravia followed. A relatively young district – only developed from the 1820s onwards



But south of the station was still open fields and
canalside wharves until the station arrived as
these 1837 maps show



The station was a relative latecomer – not opened until the 1860s. Other London termini had been built in the 1840s. And Victoria lacked the majesty of Paddington or Kings cross.



Originally two competing stations –
whose impressive buildings seen today
were not built until the early 1900s



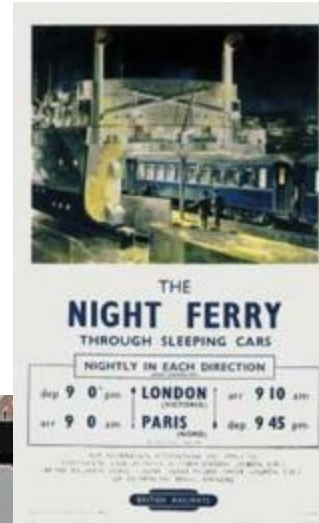
Until then the
station hotel
– the
Grosvenor –
had much
more
presence than
the station
itself



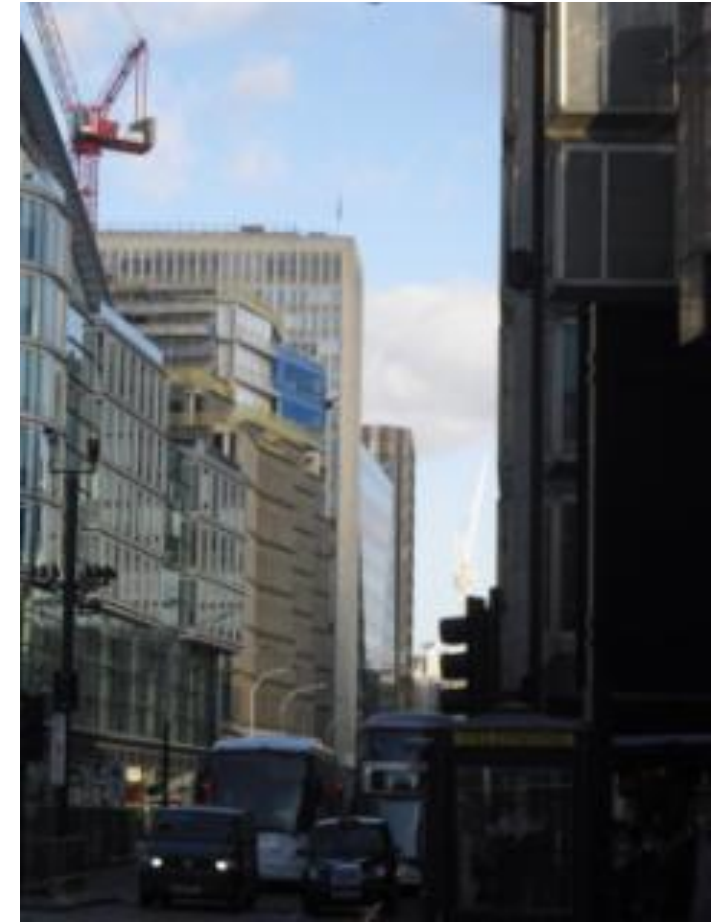
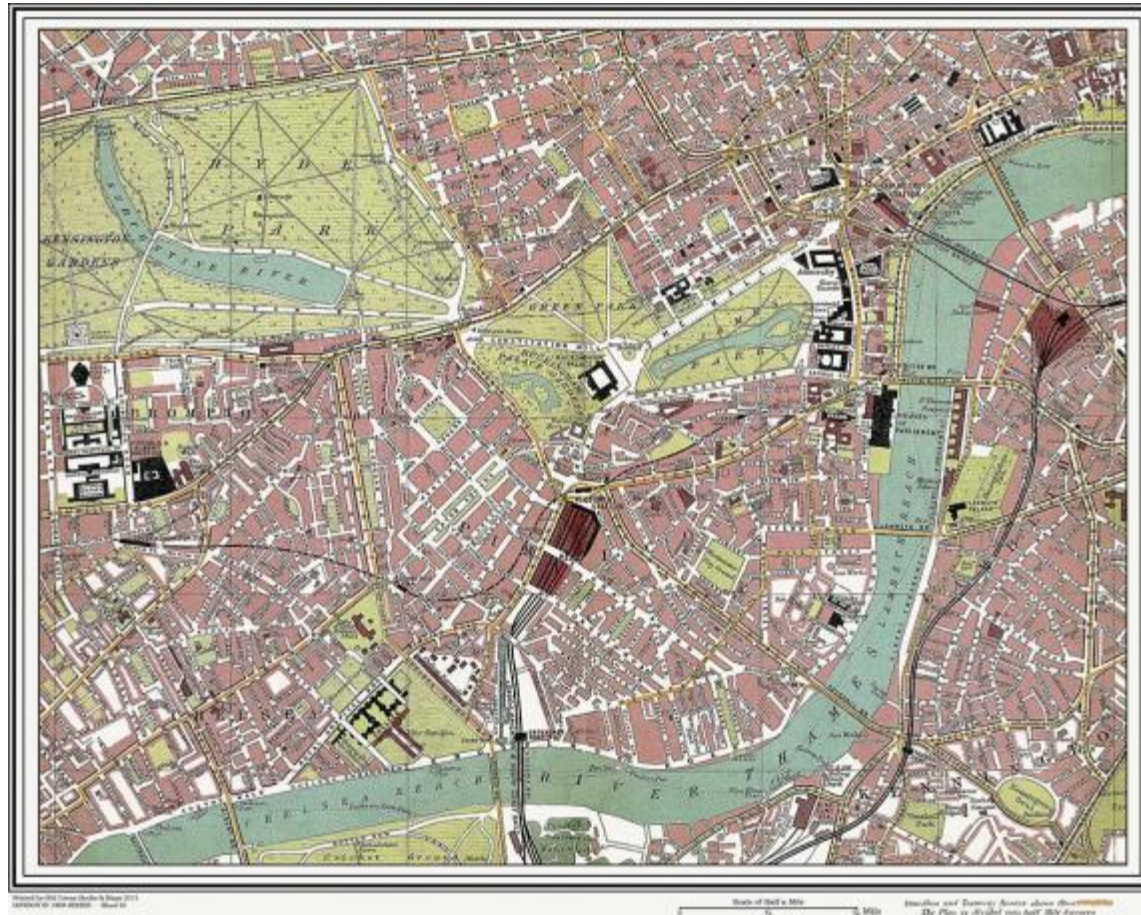
Station was only served by one tube line until the Victoria Line opened in the early 1970s



Victoria was historically the gateway to France – via the boat train - and the whole area still retains a French feel



Rather than a wide, straight Parisian boulevard, Victoria Street is quite narrow and isn't quite straight



But because of competing land ownership, the presence of a prison and the Stag Brewery, the station never got the public space in front of it that deserved



London. — Victoria Station.

Terminus Place was, until very recently, a cramped space in front of the station, thanks to all those buses and taxis



Victoria was primarily residential before World War Two – most of its streets were lined with mansion blocks, not office blocks



And the area was never very poor – this Booth map of the 1890s shows that most residents were wealthy or well-to-do



In the 20s and 30s Victoria acquired some Art Deco classics, such as the coach station and the Imperial Airways terminal (now HQ of the National Audit Office)



Contrary to popular belief, most of Victoria Street survived bomb damage and, as RG Mathews post-war watercolours show us, most of it was redeveloped after the war, not obliterated during it





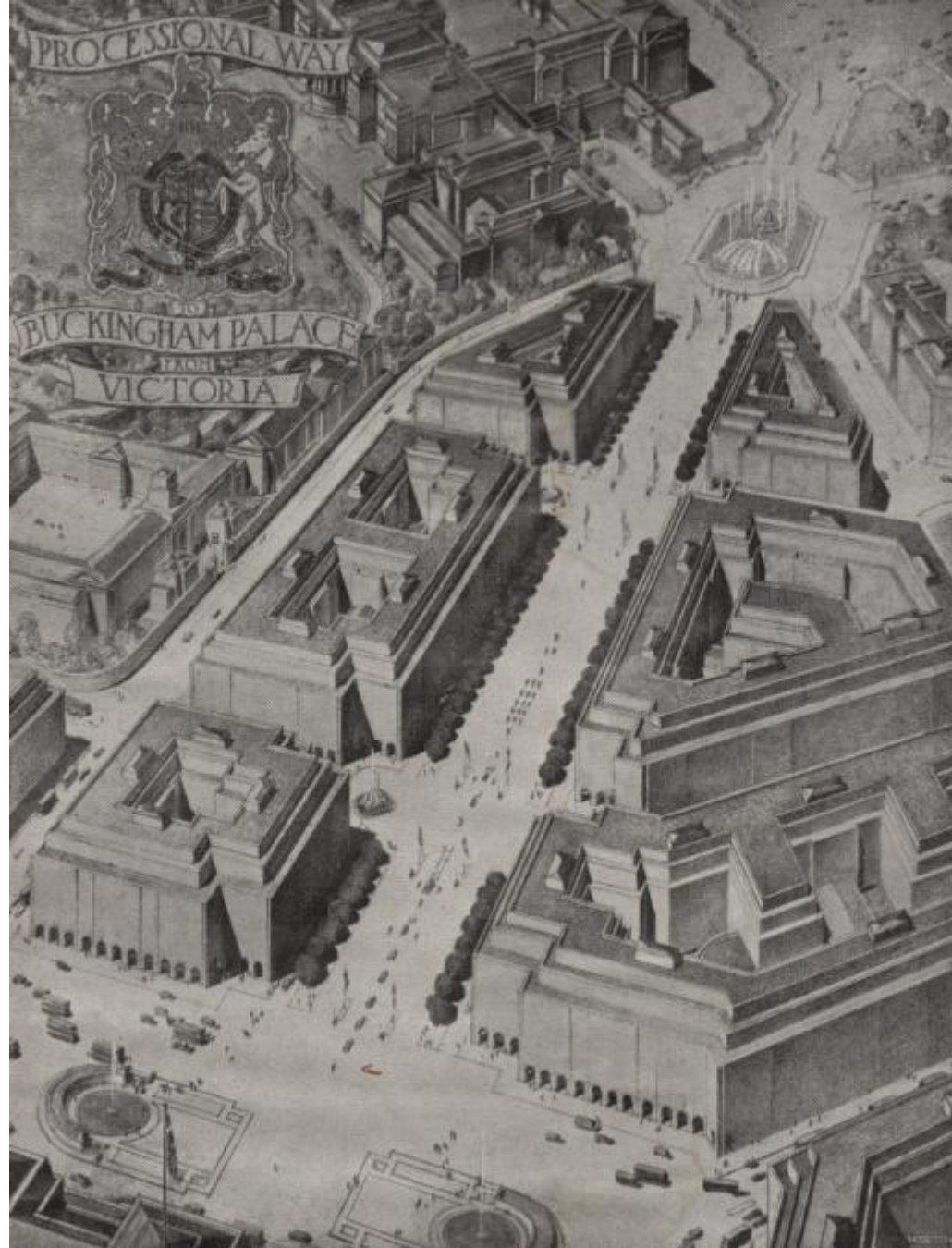
Digital Image © Museum of London

One of the most iconic images of the London blitz is often captioned as Victoria Street. In fact it is Queen Victoria Street, three miles away in the city of London

The tower of
Christ Church,
Broadway – a
huge church
half way down
Victoria Street –
survived the
war and was
not demolished
until the 1950s



Lutyens' 1943 proposal to rebuilt the station and create a huge "ProceSSIONal Way" linking it to Buckingham Palace came to nothing



Instead, post-war development was speculative and led by the private sector- in particular, the new Land Securities Trust, who redeveloped the old Stag Brewery site



Kingsgate
House –
one of the
first big
office
blocks,
built at
the very
start of
the 1960s



Land Securities built both the main public buildings of Victoria Street – New Scotland Yard and Westminster City Hall – in the mid-1960s



They also built Portland House - whose lozenge floorplan owes much to the Pirelli Tower in Milan, and the Pan Am building in New York





It is easy to understand why Pevsner said Westminster City Hall is "utterly mute in civic expression"



.....but eerily similar
blocks have just been
built at Victoria Street's
western end.



The 1970s legacy is not all bad – such as Cathedral Piazza, and the generous arcade that runs along most of the southern side of Victoria Street



Later 1970s buildings, such as the Household cavalry Barracks, don't always address the street well



1980s and 1990s speculative office developments were generally unimpressive



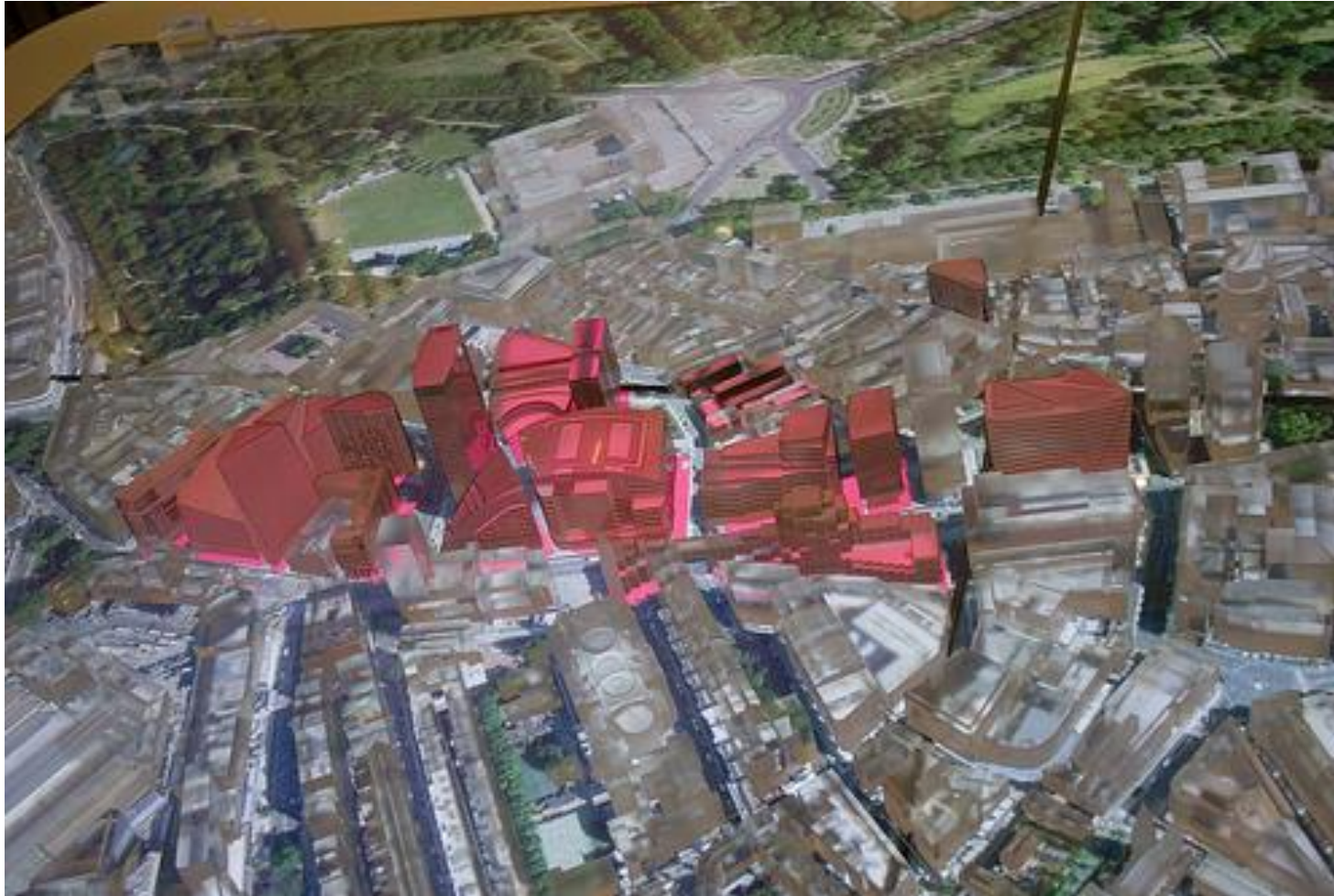
Michael Hopkins' plans for a huge tower on Terminus Place died a death in the early 1990s recession. Now somewhat forgotten about



Tatty tourist souvenir shops are still a common feature of Victoria – a good thing or a bad one?



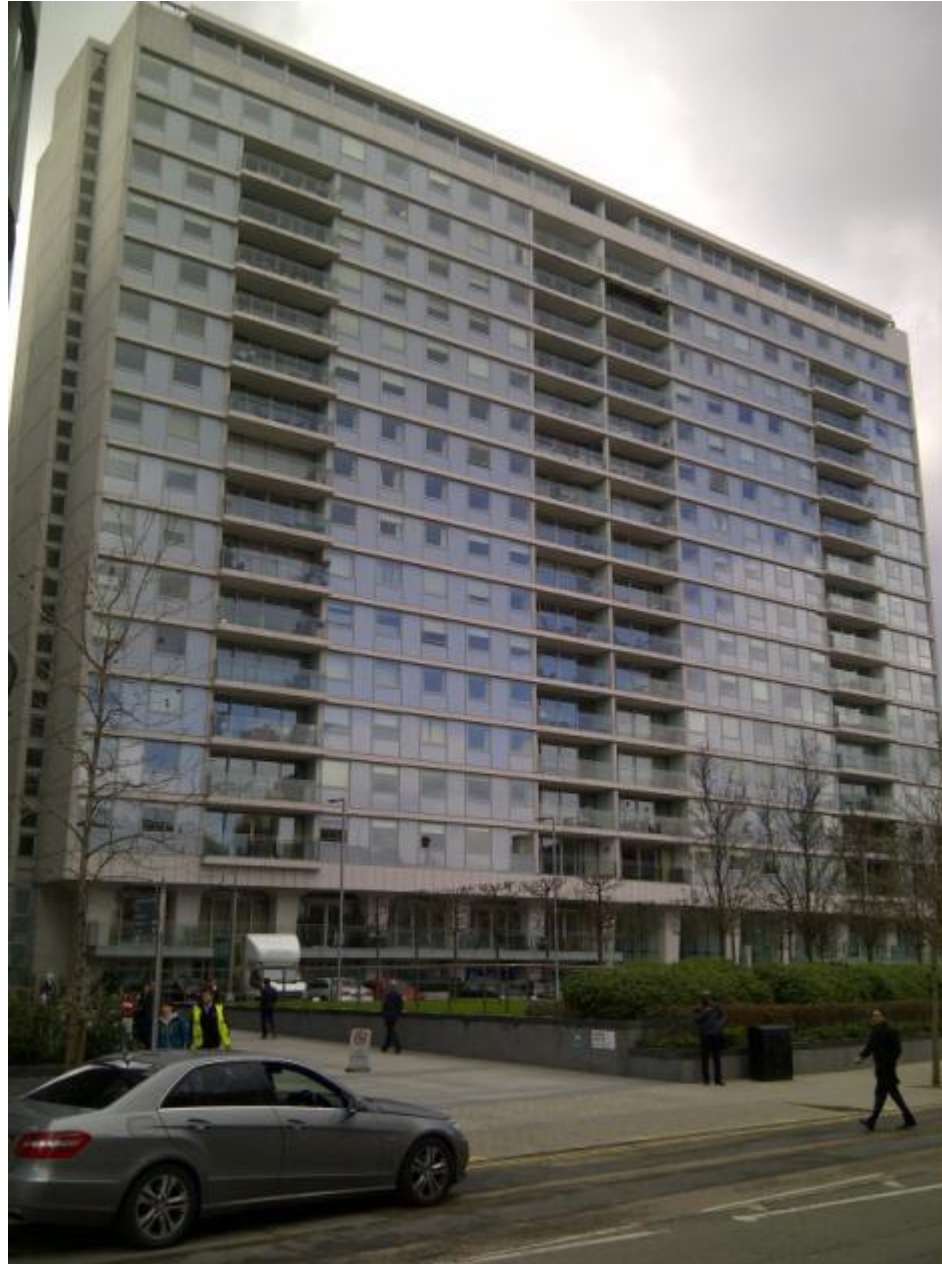
But since the Millennium Victoria has seen more intense redevelopment than in the 1960s



Why?

- Victoria was identified as an “Area of Intensification” and then an “Opportunity Area” in the 2004 London Plan, with ambitious targets for 8,000 new jobs and 1,000 new homes by 2026.
- The area is increasingly seen as an area for new housing as well as offices.
- The council wants to encourage the exodus of Government offices and their replacement by high-end finance, fashion and creative businesses.
- Victoria is no longer dominated by oil companies and overflow from Whitehall: it wants to be an upmarket shopping precinct to compete with Bond Street

Roebuck House
seen in the [title
sequence of
1960s TV series
The Prisoner](#) –
has survived,
been re-clad and
converted to
residential use,
and renamed as
“The View”



But most of the Stag Place complex has been redeveloped as the Cardinal Place shopping centre



Since the 1990s the environs of Portland House have changed from this...



...To this



It may soon be reclad with curved facades,
and become unrecognisable



The new Nova development may be welcome, but it has entailed wholesale demolition of historic fabric at the western end of Victoria Street



In place of this 20s Midland Bank, this has
been built



The cinema where the film scene in “Brief Encounter” was shot has also been lost

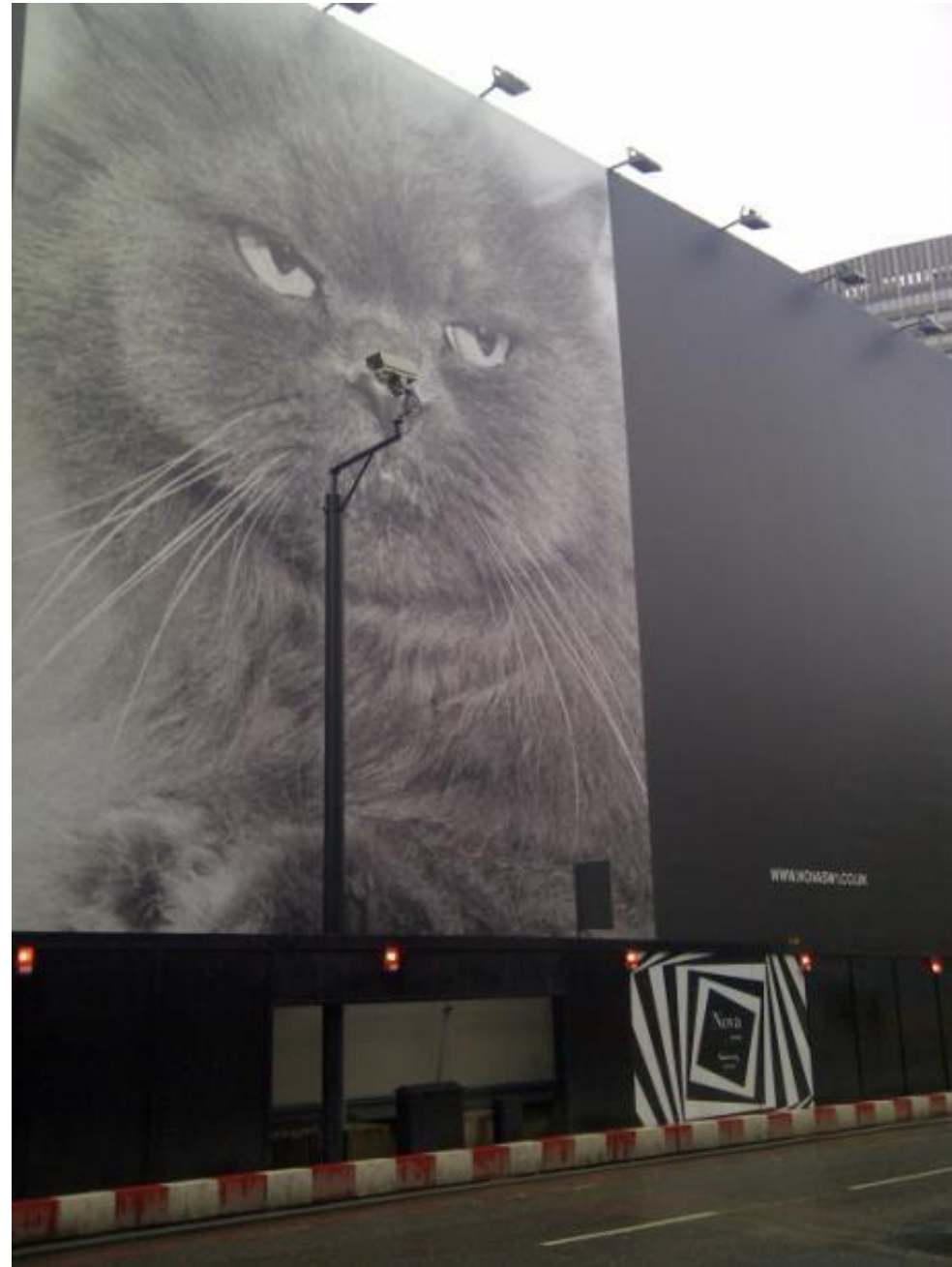




The only fragments to be saved are the 1935 frontage of Suttons Pawn shop and an animal sculpture above the entrance of a 1990s office block, Allington House – arguably the least important architectural feature on the site



From behind
the Fat Cat
hoardings....



... Emerged a
huge
development
much higher
than
anything
Land Secs
built in the
1960s





Overshadowing
the Grosvenor
Hotel and
buildings on
Terminus Place



... And the
stucco
terraces of
Victoria
Square and
Buckingham
Place Road



Now
completed,
the new
development
dwarfs
Victoria
Station and
many of its
neighbours



Even though it is less gaudy and colourful than the CGIs implied, it is just as bulky



In 2017 – three years after Woolwich Central had won the accolade - the Carbuncle Cup was awarded to Nova, described by the cup's judges as “one of the worst office developments central London has ever seen”. They added that it “sets a new benchmark for dystopian dysfunction”, and reserved special criticism for “the bright red prows that adorn various points of the exterior like the inflamed protruding breasts of demented preening cockerels”.



Amidst all this building work two of London's biggest theatres still did a roaring trade, until Covid struck



The Victoria Palace Theatre survives, but apart from the pub facade next door, its neighbours haven't



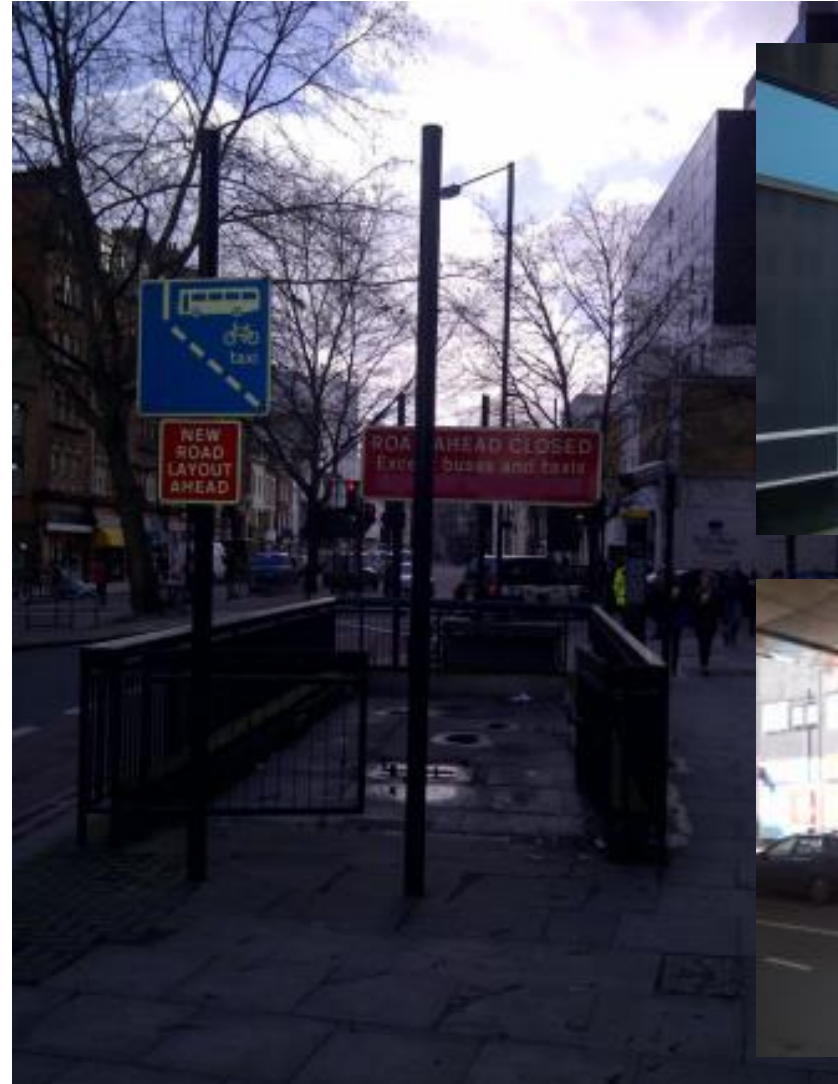
Now its
completed, it's
not clear that
the new
Kingsgate
House is any
less forbidding
than the old
one



In the meantime the pedestrian environment is not too great



Indeed, much of the public realm is frankly awful



Much of Vauxhall Bridge Road remains a mish-mash of different styles and periods



The buildings between Terminus Place and Victoria Street, including George Sherrin's Victoria Arcade - thankfully listed since 2014 - survive for now



Plans for new buildings on the north side of Terminus Place are on hold since the last recession - but for how much longer?



Although one train shed has been built over, Victoria Station retains much of its Edwardian character



... While one of its main entrances has recently been cleared of clutter



John Fowler's double-span trainshed of 1862 survives behind the Edwardian terminal buildings



Its interior has recently been restored



Modern insertions, such as this 1970s British Rail glass box, could easily be removed



Round the corner of Hudson's Place, a large part of Fowler's original 1862 Terminal building survives



...but again,
much if its
historic
character has
been
compromised



Elsewhere,
some respect
is paid to the
station's
historic
character



.. But not too much



What do foreign visitors arriving from Gatwick airport make of all this?



1990s
additions to
the station
were no
better than
earlier ones



Terminus Place is at last being improved...



And once buses and taxis have been moved away it will function better as a public space



Bur recent developments alongside, such as the Peak by Shepherd Robson, are bland and could be anywhere



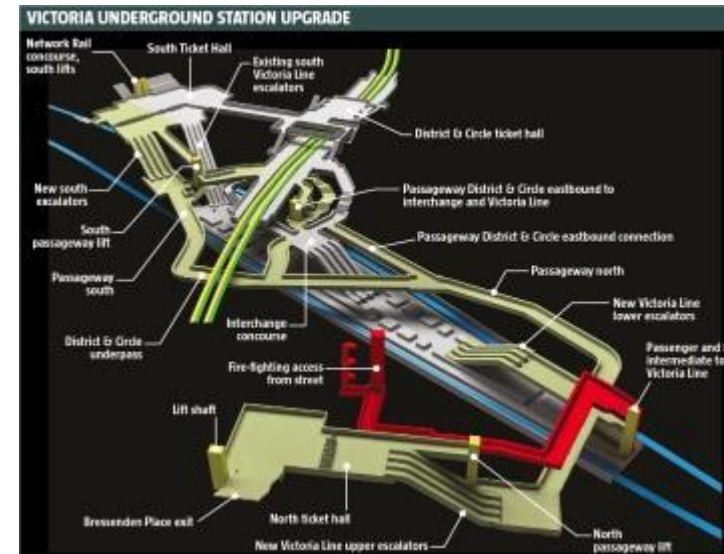
There's still no clear plan for the station. Although it is less used for international traffic because of the Channel Tunnel and rival Thameslink rail services to Gatwick....

It is still, by some measures, the busiest station in London – or at least second to Waterloo - with 72 million passengers arrivals and departures a year.

Victoria tube station is often closed because of dangerous overcrowding....



Yet there's no plan to redevelop the station – or to provide any extra tube capacity other than escalators and a bigger ticket hall. Crossrail Two won't reach Victoria until the 2040s, if at all



The developers claim that they are enhancing Victoria's "village feel"



Victoria has never been a village. But it is somewhere where you see the unexpected, like people queuing in the rain for a Mexican cantina on a backstreet



It has delightful churches hidden away



And some good modern infill, such as John McAslan's Wellington House



But villages don't look like this!



The crucial question is what the new development feels like at street level – and whether the station itself gets the revamp it deserves



Case Study Three: Stratford City

Until the 1980s Stratford was east London's main railway maintenance yard



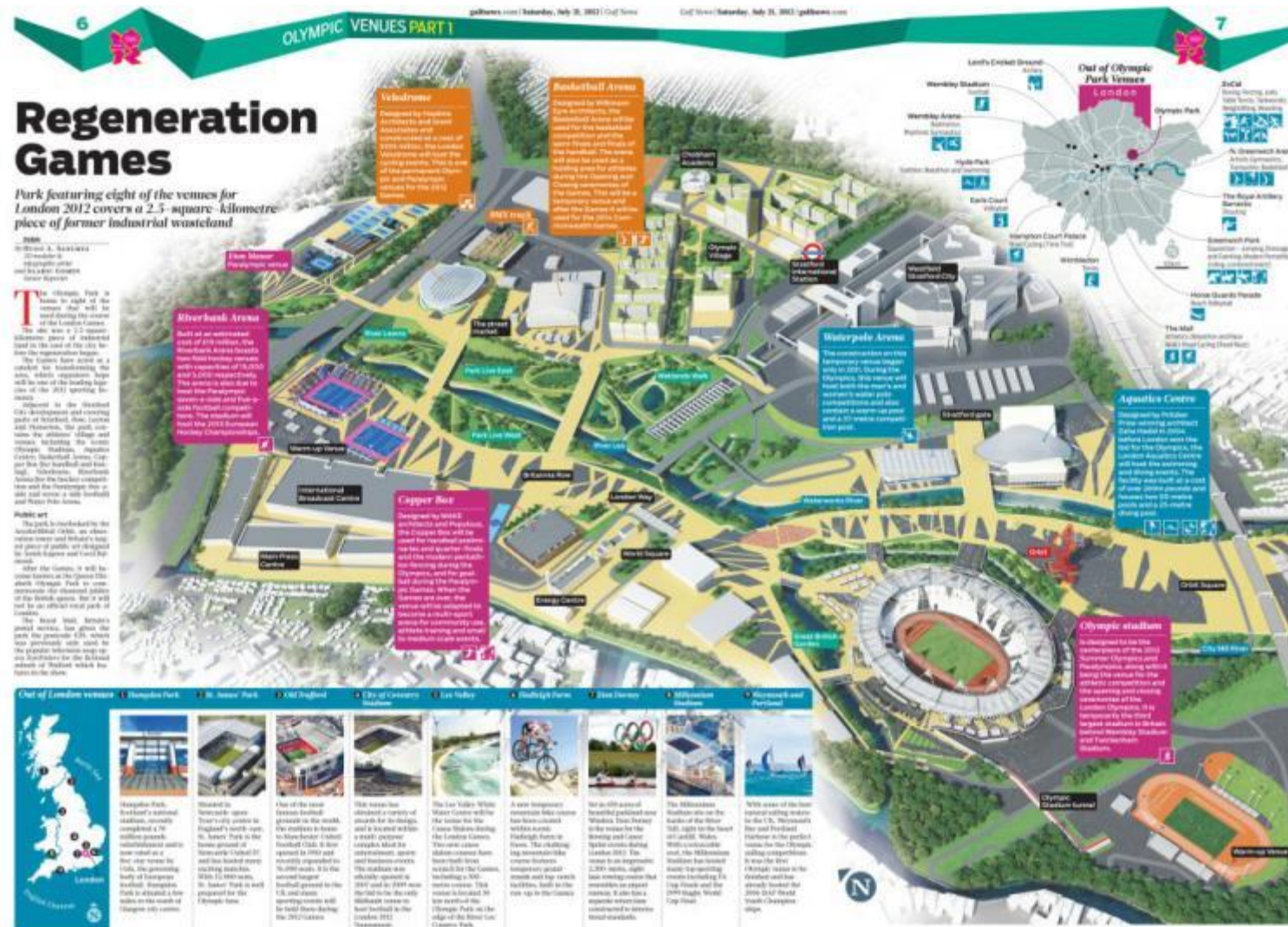
Pub Quiz Question

When did the Stratford locomotive-building works of the Great Eastern Railway finally close down?

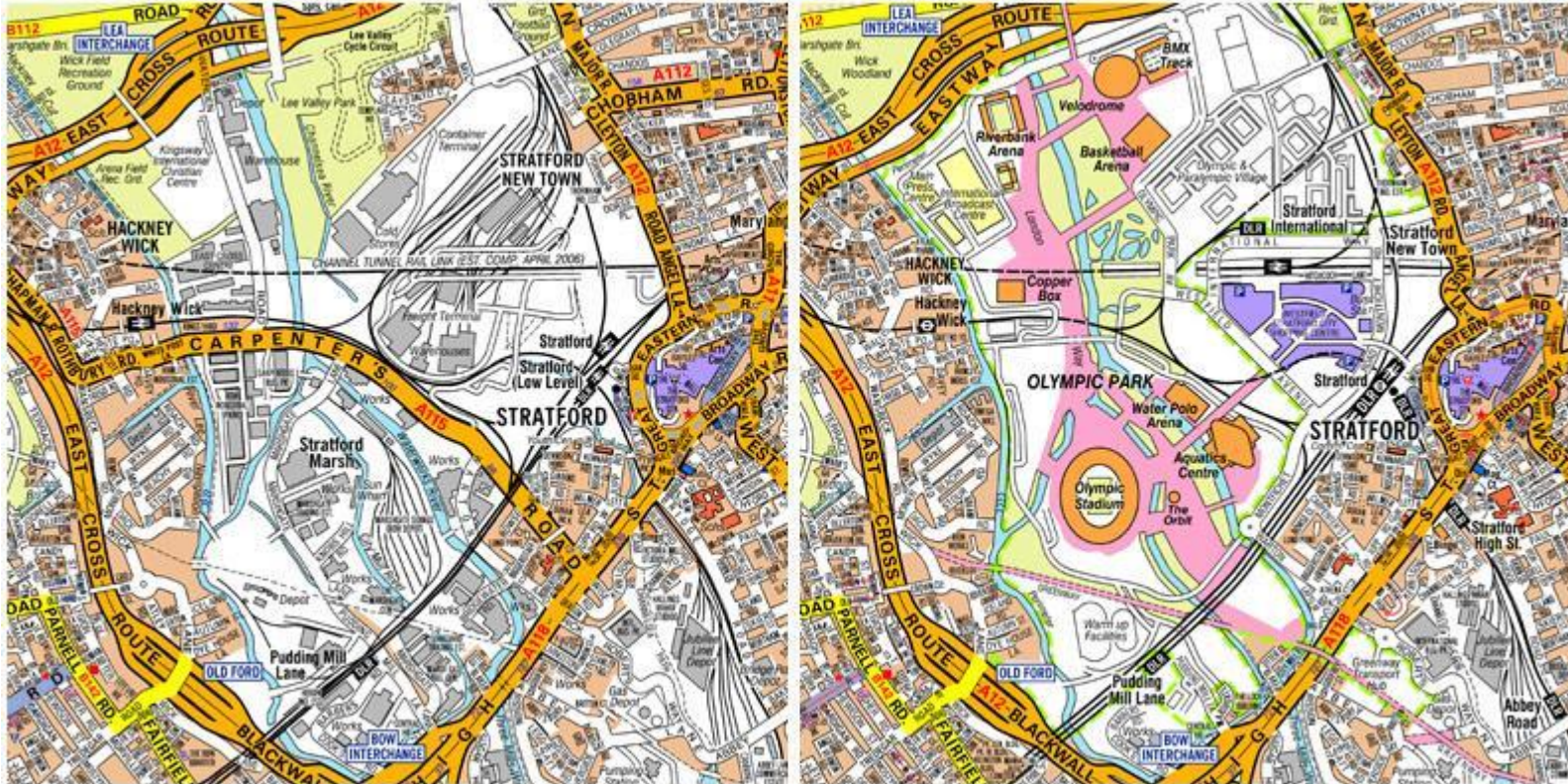
Answer

The last part closed in 1991 – more
than twenty years before the
Olympics

Since 2012 Stratford will be associated forever with the Olympics...



...which have completely redrawn the local map



... And above all the landscape



Memories of July 6th 2005 – the day London won the Olympic bid...



Are overshadowed by the terrorist attacks that took place the following day (7/7). The story of joy followed by tragedy, and London bouncing back to host a successful Games, acquired almost Biblical resonance



It's often forgotten that few expected London, faced with strong competition from Madrid and New York as well as Paris, to win the bid to host the 2012 Olympics



It's often forgotten that London was considered a long shot for the London Olympics. Paris was considered the favourite. Britain's bid was delayed by 6 months because of the diplomatic fallout from Britain's involvement in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Disputes over funding, venues and the ability to compete the on time were rife in the media right up until 2012.

London's official bid video made no mention of London – let alone Stratford. Despite the later rhetoric about the “regeneration games” the masterplan for the Olympic site was cobbled together at great speed.



In 1979 GLC councillor Ken Livingstone had attacked a Tory bid to host the 1988 Olympics at the Royal Docks as 'A gimmick'. How times change. In 2005, with Livingstone as London's first elected mayor, there was no doubt where the Olympics would go: only East London had the spare brownfield land for the park and Athlete's village. Livingstone played a key role in London's successful bid.



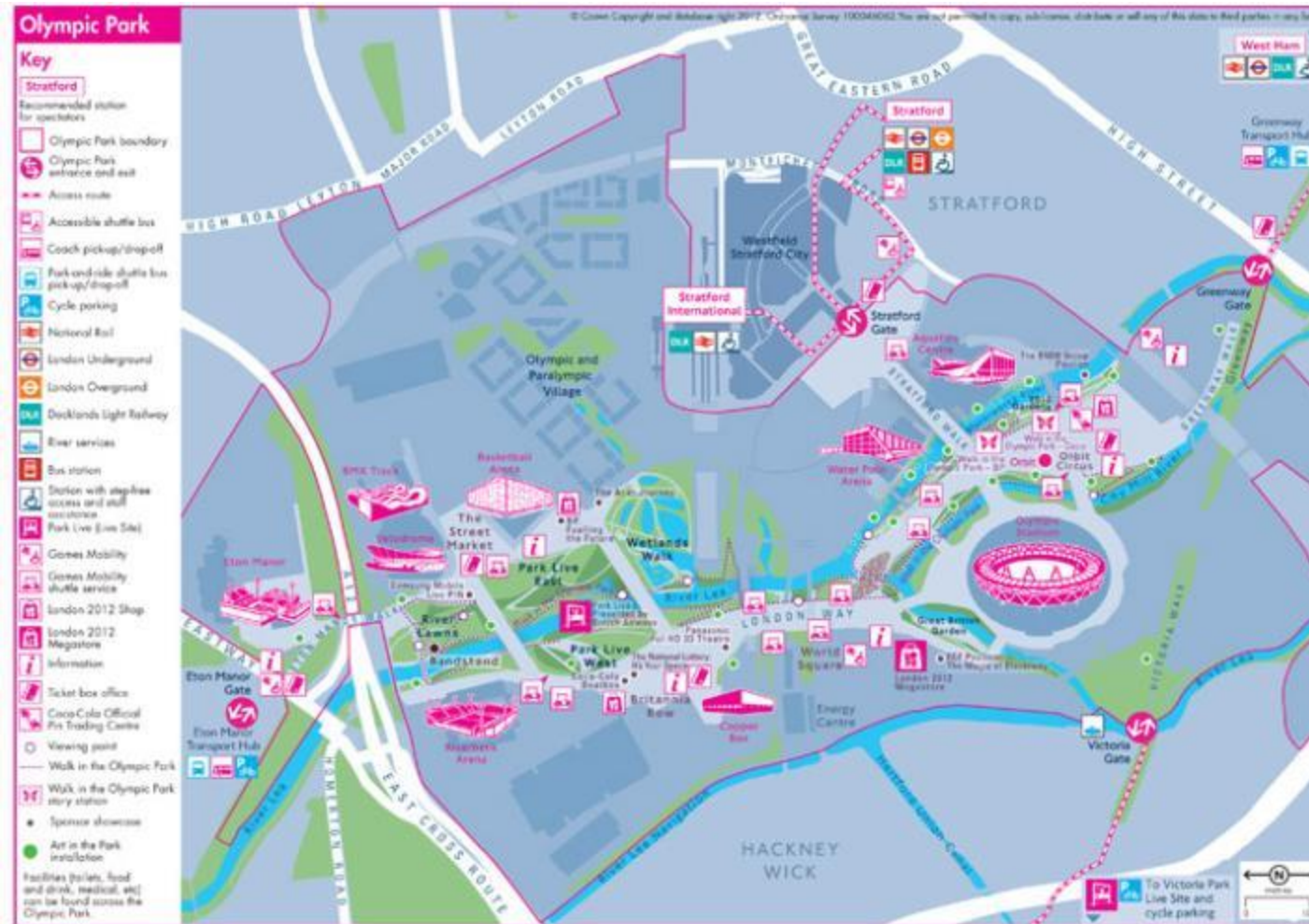
In the end the games were a triumphant success and showed London can lay on a party, and handle big infrastructure projects s well



The Olympic venues have justifiably got a reputation as good architecture



.. But the Olympic Park masterplan, like the bid, had to be cobbled together in a bit of a hurry



Stratford's excellent transport connections were made even better: DLR extensions and new high-speed Javelin trains from St Pancras



The station, rebuilt in the late 1990s for the Jubilee Line extension, is impressive



It now has an “International” station alongside – something of a white elephant as no trains from France or Belgium stop there, only domestic services



But the price to pay was a huge shopping centre.
Westfield Stratford City, much larger than the Olympic
Stadium, helped to pay for the Games



But Stratford is also a major station on the overground rail line – where lines from Southend, Colchester and North London all converge



This means there has to be a huge footbridge to get people from the station entrance to the Olympic Park, and Westfield, on the wrong side of the tracks



The steps are functional – they have to be climbed, and do not need to invite people towards them



Once you've climbed them you've no option but to walk through Westfield to get to the Olympic Park....



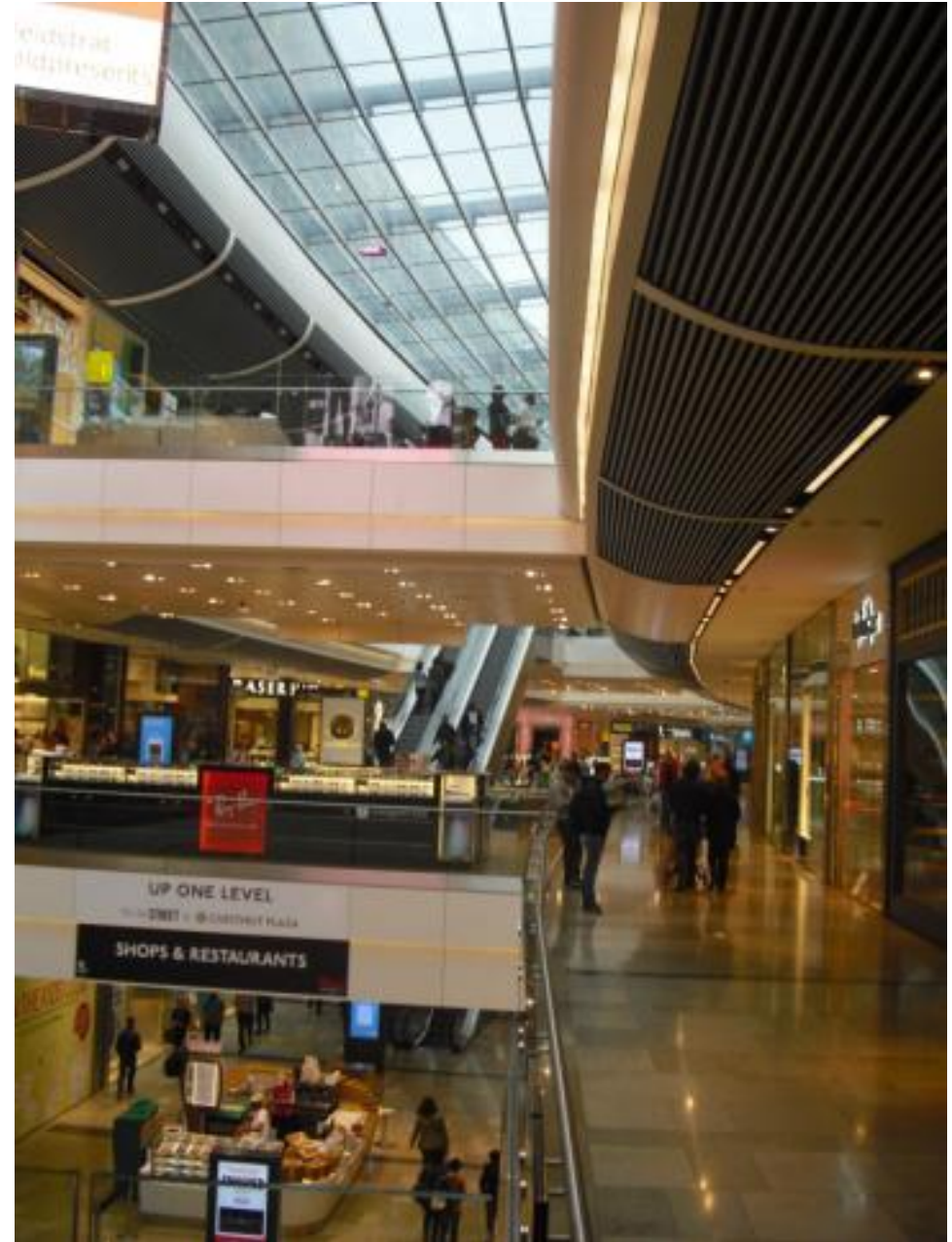
Resisting the
temptations
of the Ice
Cream van
and the
Aspers
Casino...



The indoor mall is darker and less airy than the CGIs first promised



And because it is a
crescent, you can't see
from one end to the other



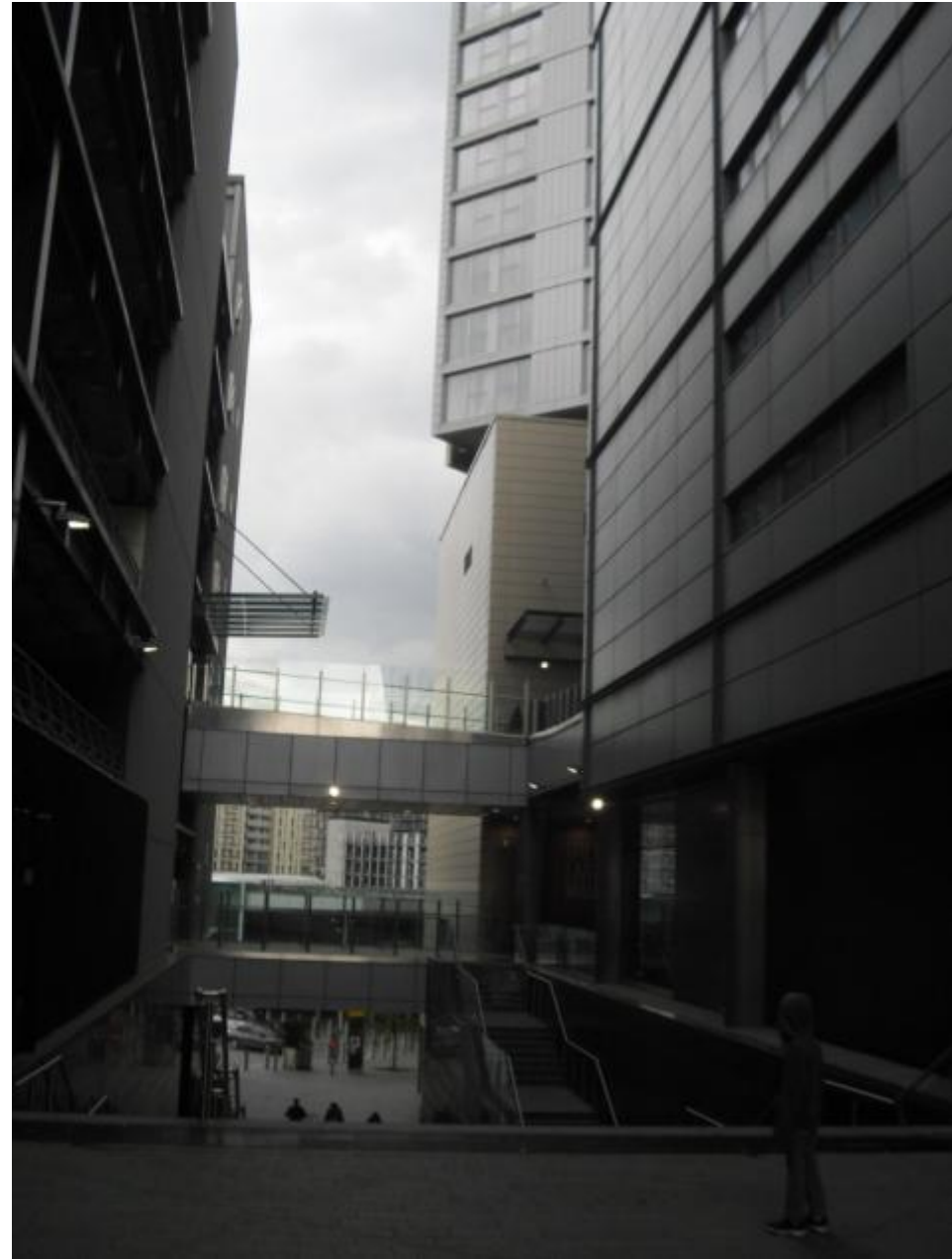
Very different from traditional shopping malls,
which you can see from one end to the other of



Far from being a “town” the mall is surrounded by orbital access roads and impenetrable facades



The best part
may be the
gangways
leading to the
car park, not
the mall itself



The Athletes' village is more of success, but looks forbidding when seen from a distance...



... Although closer up you can see well-designed balconies, and the benefit of planting semi-mature trees



There's an odd mismatch between the immensity of the blocks of flats, and their leafy names such as "Chobham Manor" – more suitable to a cul-de-sac of executive homes in Surrey than the new E20 postcode



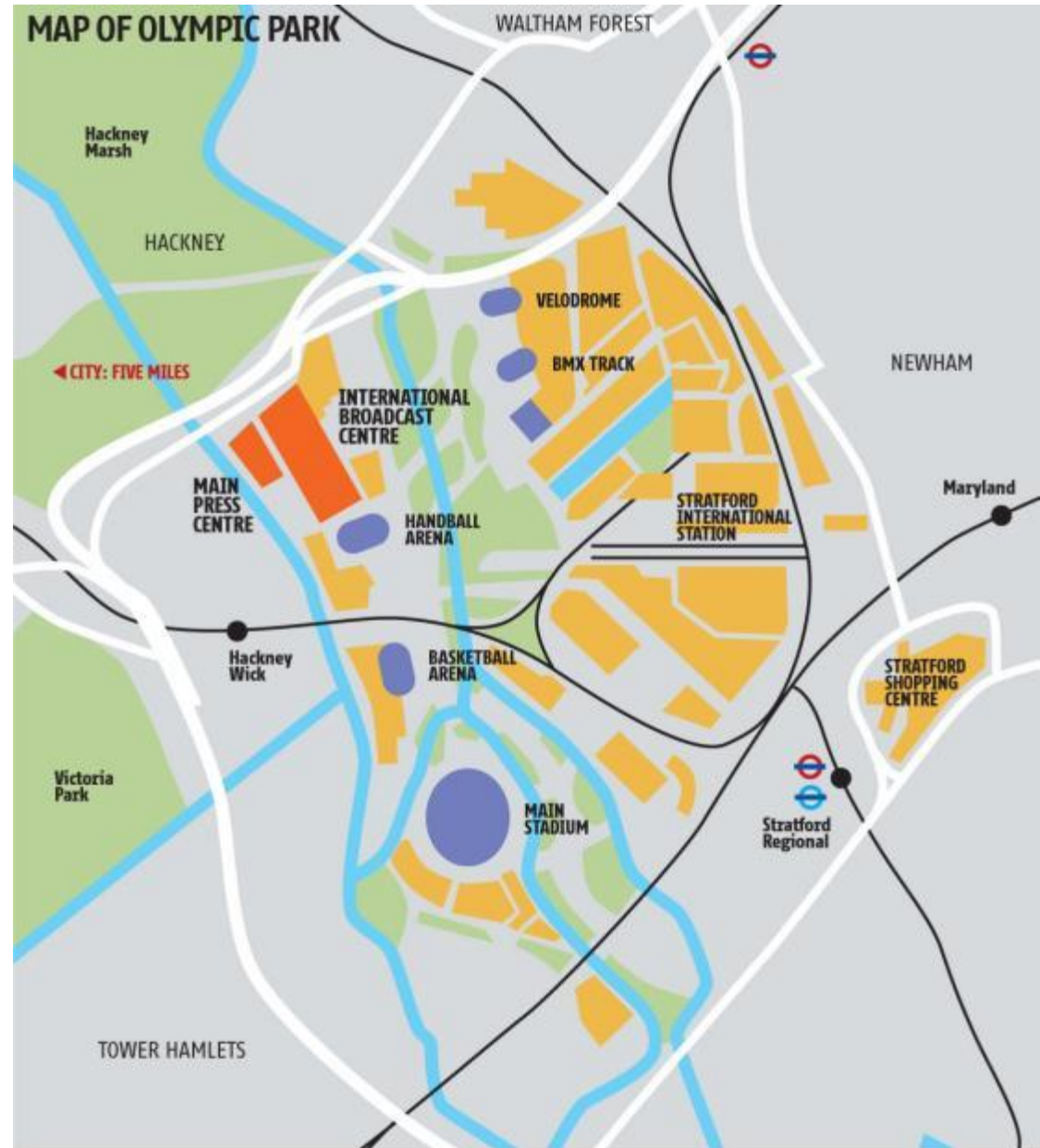
This is not an “East Village” by any stretch of the imagination



Nearby is some shockingly bad architecture, such as this student housing block, “Unite Stratford City” by BDP, which was shortlisted for the Carbuncle Cup in 2014 and does nothing to “unite” the site



In many early maps of the Olympic masterplan, the Shopping centre is not identified....



or is named
only as a
"Town Centre
district" with
a grid street
pattern, not a
shopping mall



Despite being branded as “The Street”, the mall’s main thoroughfare does not feel like any other street in London



The irony is that Stratford already had an indoor mall – which is now disguised behind a sculpture of flying fishes....



A quick and dirty
refurb in time for
the Olympics...



To any visitor's surprise, at the other end of the mall is Stratford's historic town centre, with a Victorian Town Hall



And a fine
church in the
middle of a
Green



Back in the Olympic Park, some of the trees are already maturing....



... And there are some excellent playgrounds



The final destination will be fantastic



...but in the meantime there is a lot of dead tarmac awaiting transformation into grass.

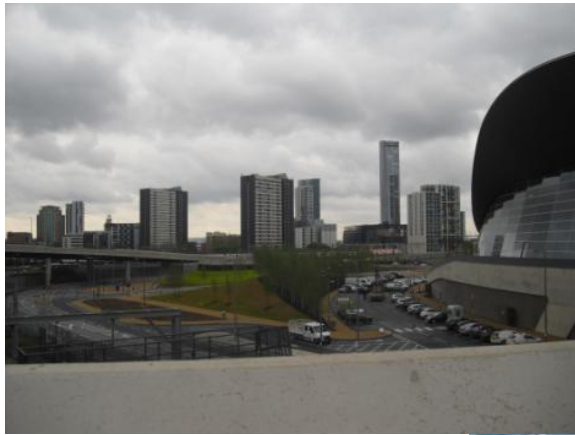


But in the
meantime,
much of it
resembles
an airport
runway
rather than
a park



...and somebody forgot where to put the utility boxes





Further west
down Stratford
High Street is
another
Olympic legacy
... A forest of
blocks of flats

Which are an uninspiring preparation to the Olympic Park behind. At first glance they look like something from 1980s Berlin



Despite all the rhetoric, the lower Lea Valley south of the site is largely untouched by the Olympic effect



OLYMPIC LEGACY MASTERPLAN

And other shops and facilities in Stratford town centre become run-down, or are demolished



After a short break, we'll discuss some conclusions we can draw from these three case studies about how successful they have been, and how best to regenerate London in the future

10-minute break

Conclusions

1: Strategic, long-term plans can be short-lived, and are often worthless. Prior to 2006 there was no policy favouring the redevelopment of Peggy Middleton House in Woolwich for retail use. The strategic plan suddenly changed simply because Tesco made the council an offer it could not refuse. Plans for Victoria and Stratford have also changed completely in response to external factors

2. The brutal decline of places like Stratford and Woolwich since the 1960s blind councils and GLA to many of these towns' intrinsic qualities, and made them believe that “regeneration” was needed at any price. Even in Victoria – the local High Street for a large chunk of central London – the council assumed that everything that was there already was worthless

3 The “Town Centres first” principle for large retail developments may be **counter-productive**. Very little thought was given to how the Tesco in Woolwich, could be accommodated on a Town Centre site, or how Westfield in Stratford could be a proper “town” at all. Despite the rise of online shopping there is a reluctance to think beyond retail to how the town centre of the future will look and feel

4 Good transport infrastructure can be blessing, but also a curse: it can create demand for excessively high density, as in Woolwich. Old infrastructure does not always get upgraded at the same pace as new development, as in Victoria. In Stratford, existing railway lines meant that Stratford City has a poor relationship with the town centre, and the International Station has turned out to be a costly white elephant

5 London is still uncomfortable with its own urbanism – high-rise blocks of flats are called “villages”. We do not seem to have yet got the knack of building well at very high densities. And it’s still unclear whether the flats being built now will have a longer shelf life than what it was built in the 1960s. Complete new settlements – like Stratford City and East Village next door – do not successfully follow best practice on mixed use, or embody high-quality innovation. They do not do familiar things, or new things, well.

6 Proper design review needs to happen right at the start, certainly not only after planning permission was granted. Too little scrutiny is often given to planning applications in places like Stratford, Woolwich or even Victoria, which are considered peripheral and of little historic or architectural importance. **The devil is ALWAYS in the detail,** particularly in ambitious schemes which are vulnerable to cost-cutting.

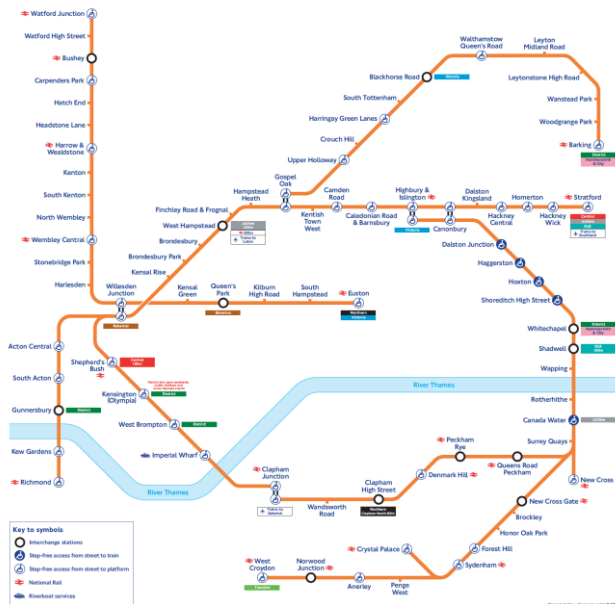
London's future challenges

1: Infrastructure and transport

- Since World War Two the expansion of public transport has been patchy and has not kept pace with rising demand: the new Crossrail line is being built 30 years after many other large cities gained high-capacity, high-speed underground lines. There was very little London-wide planning until the late 19th century. When large-scale masterplanning did take place this was fraught with problems, compromise, and penny-pinching.
- As a result, London has evolved very differently from most other large European and American cities. Improving London's infrastructure is now one of the City's most pressing challenges.

How can London's nineteenth-century infrastructure be dragged into the twenty-first century? London Overground and DLR are welcome, but are often just extension of existing capacity, and DLR extensions to Dagenham Dock, Victoria, Euston and Forest Hill have been delayed or dropped

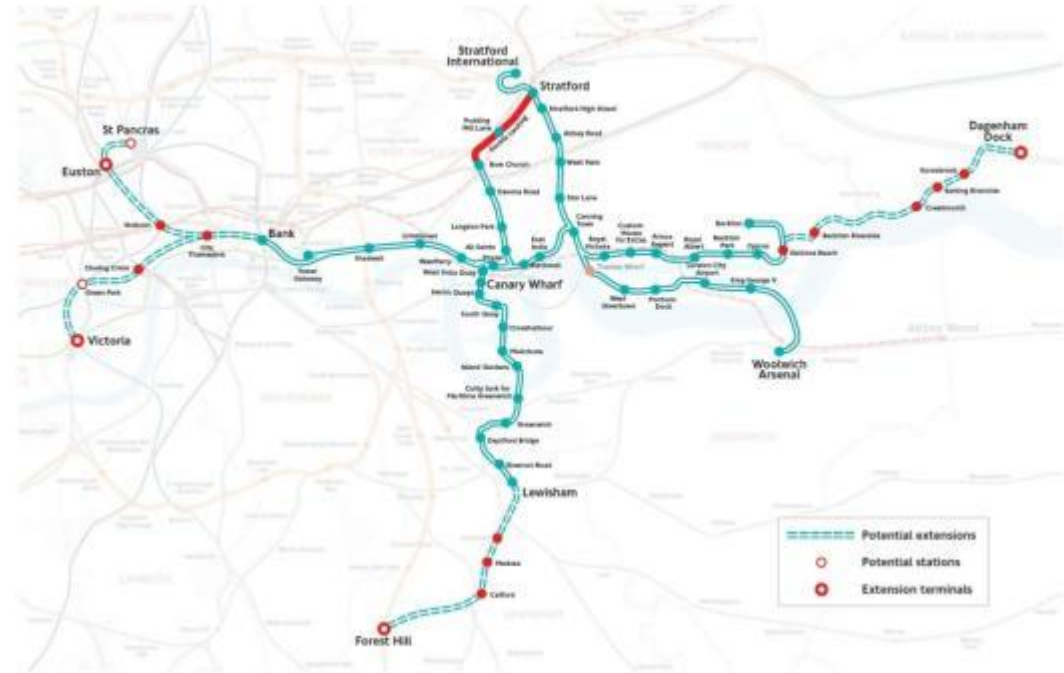
London Overground



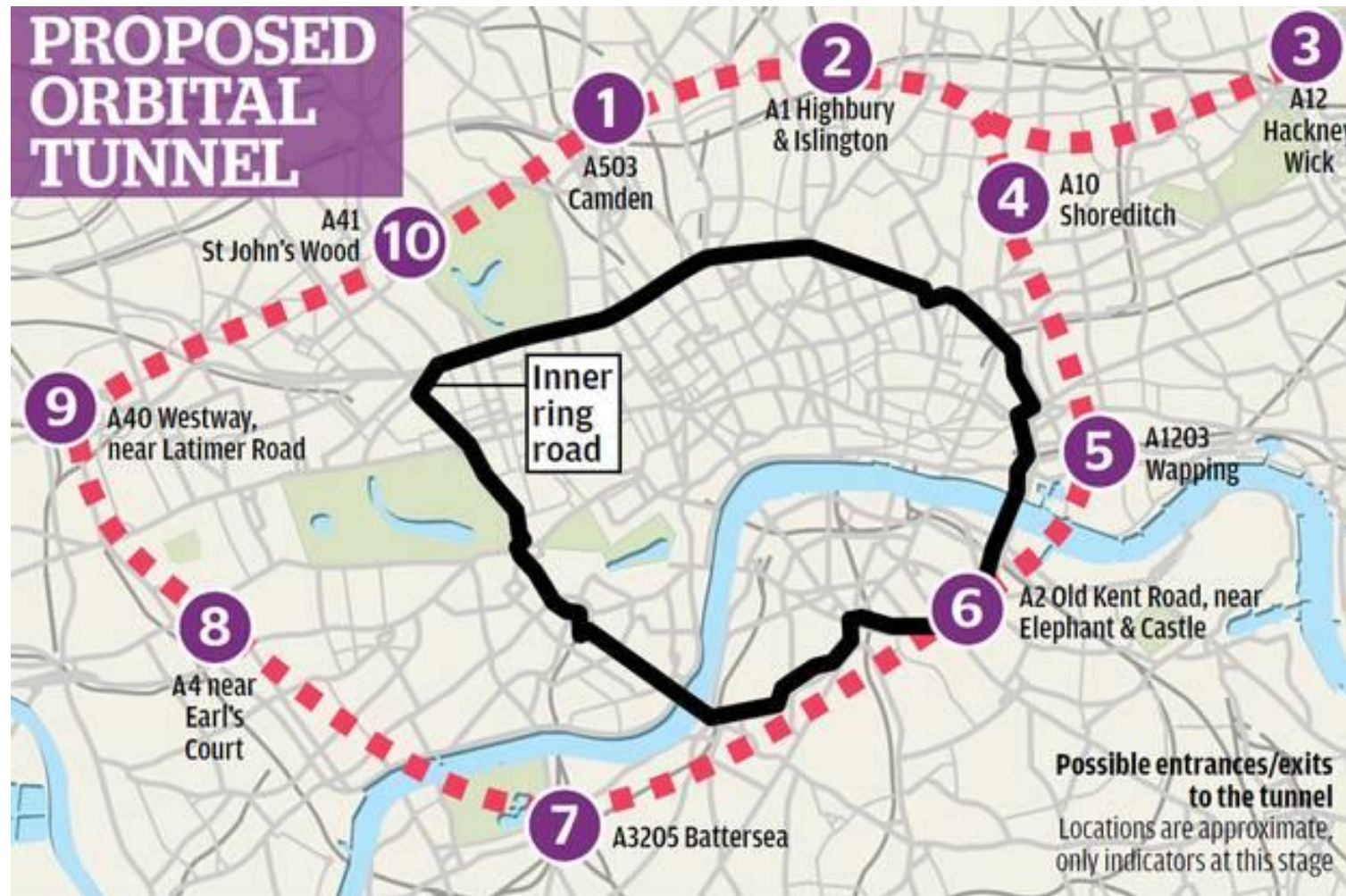
MAYOR OF LONDON



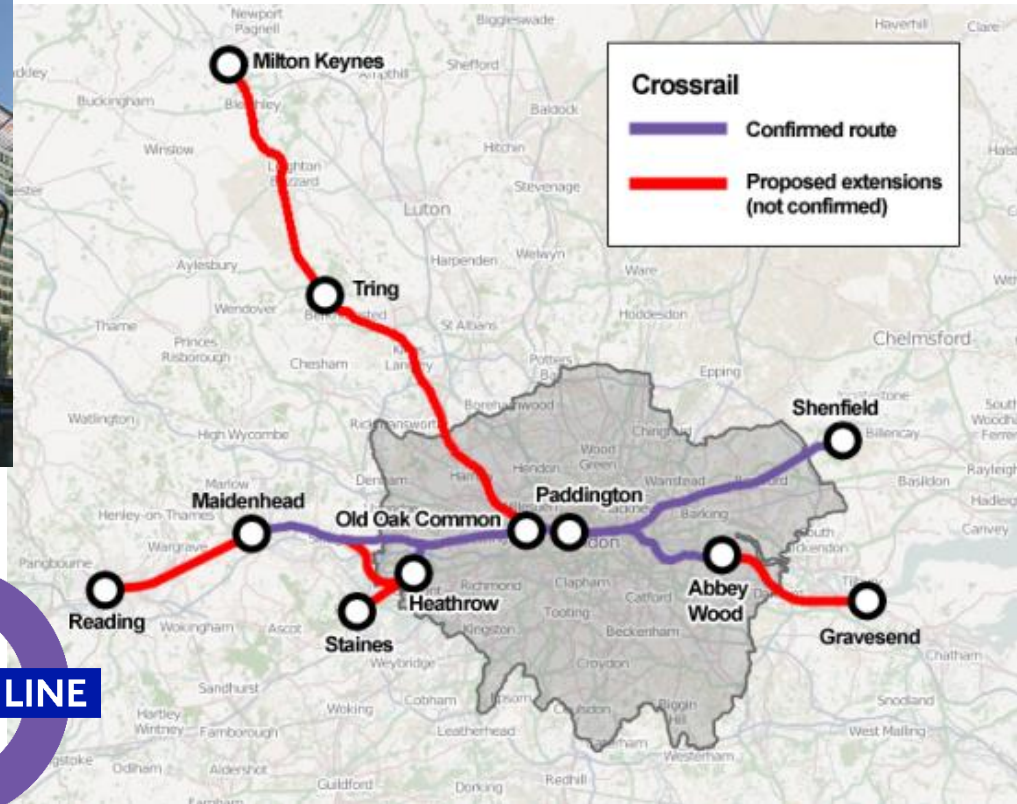
Potential DLR extensions



Is a new orbital road tunnel, as Boris Johnson once proposed, the answer? Probably not

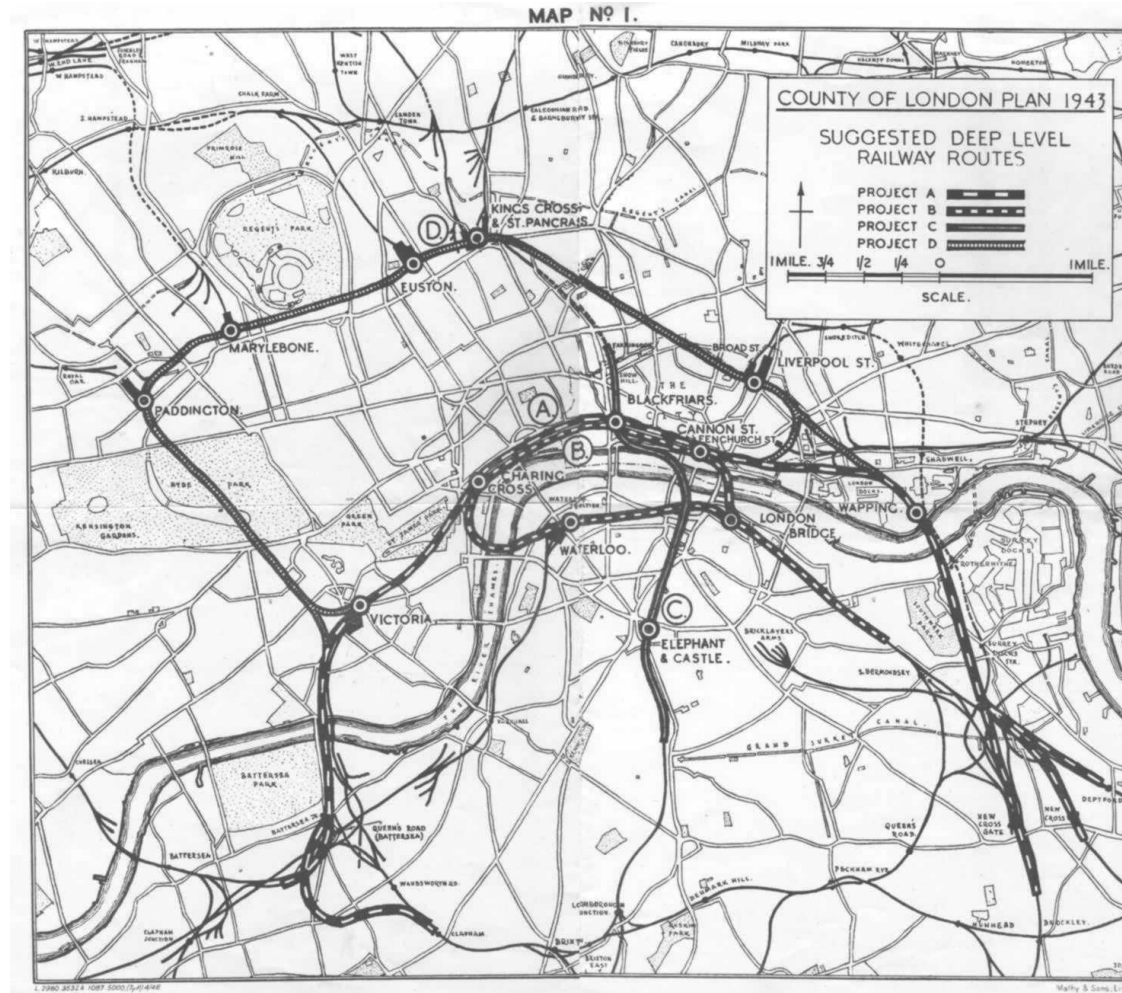


Crossrail/ The Elizabeth Line will transform London's transport and see overall rail capacity increased by 10%



ELIZABETH LINE

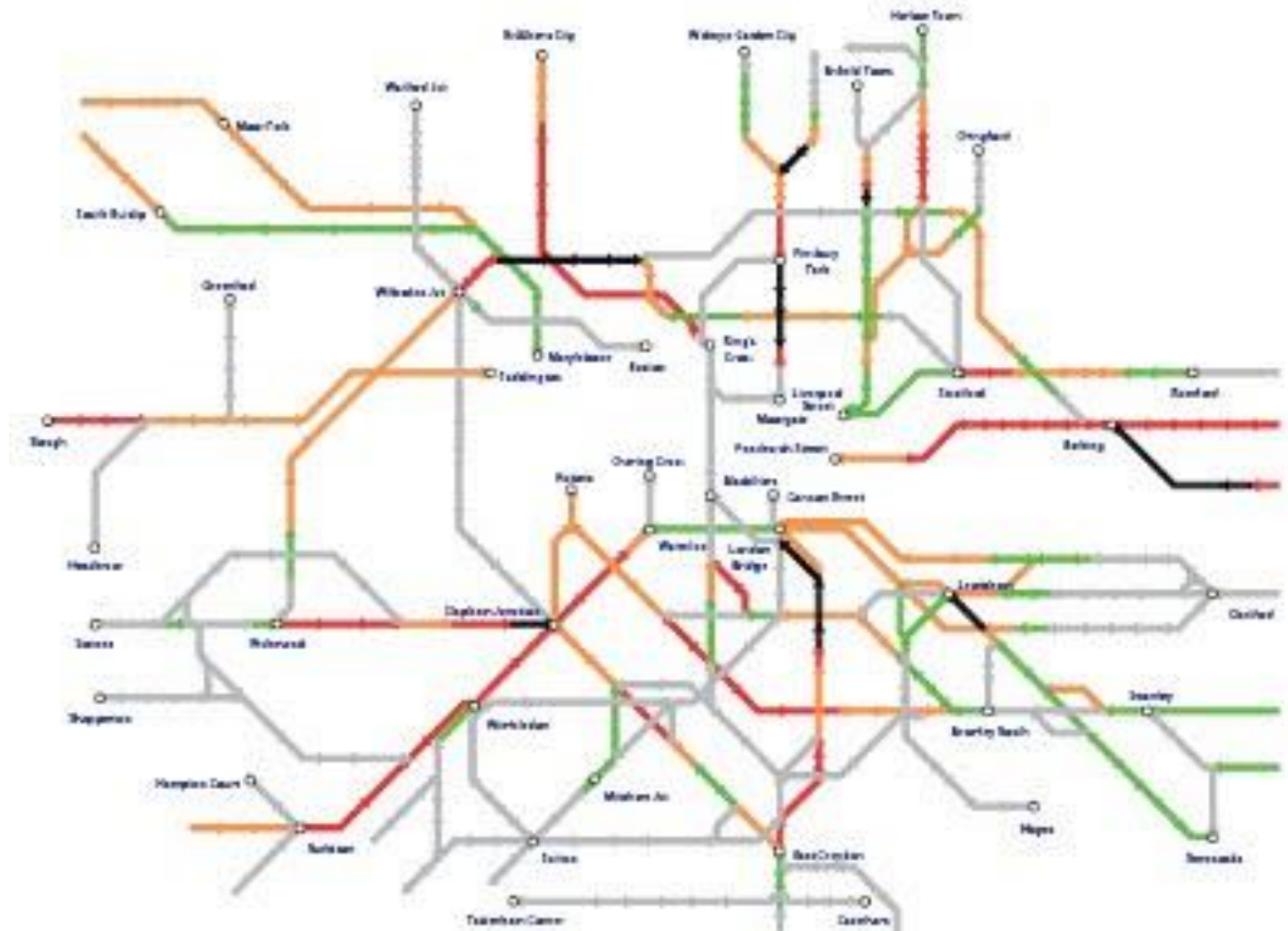
But Crossrail is arguably being built 60 years too late: it has its origins back in Abercrombie's Plan of 1943. Its full opening was delayed from 2018 to 2019, then 2020, and it has now been delayed again until at least 2022.



Rail map of Berlin – railway lines converge on a central Hauptbahnhof, despite more than 40 years of partition



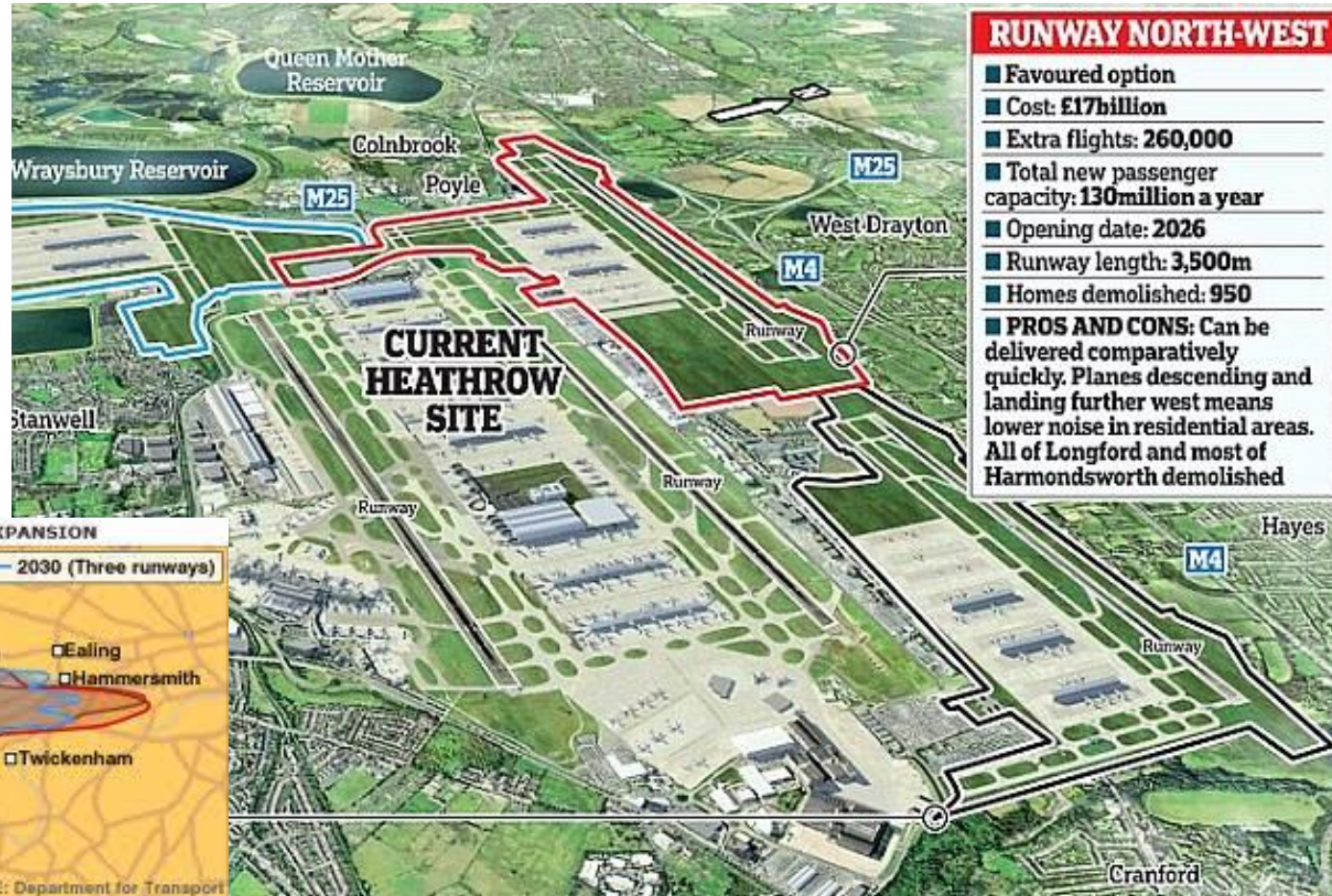
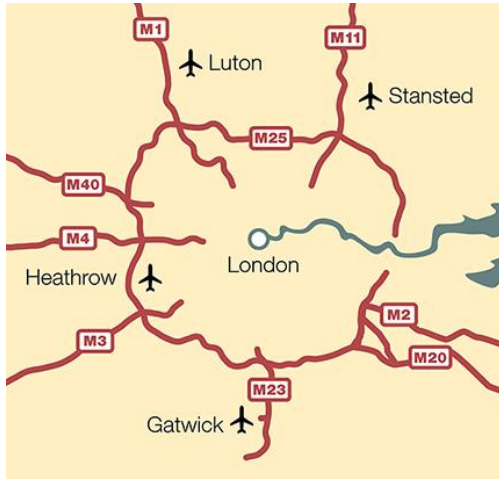
Rail map of London: to this day, rail lines terminate at 12 termini around edge of city centre. The River Thames has proved to be a more formidable barrier than the Berlin Wall



And even if Crossrail had been opened on time, the map below shows severe overcrowding (shown in red and black) predicted on most London Tube lines by 2021, assuming Covid had not struck



Airports: London has five runways spread between four airports, all of them poorly located and full to capacity



And there is no sign a solution is close: although the 3rd runway at Heathrow has overcome legal challenges recently it is nowhere near being built, and may yet be canned because of Covid



One answer – a brand new airport in the Thames Estuary – failed to be shortlisted by the Airports commission, despite Boris Johnson's strong backing



2: Housing

- Rapid rises in property prices, and private sector rents, have made much of inner London unaffordable to live in. People on average or low incomes have to commute further, causing recruitment problems and placing more pressure on transport infrastructure

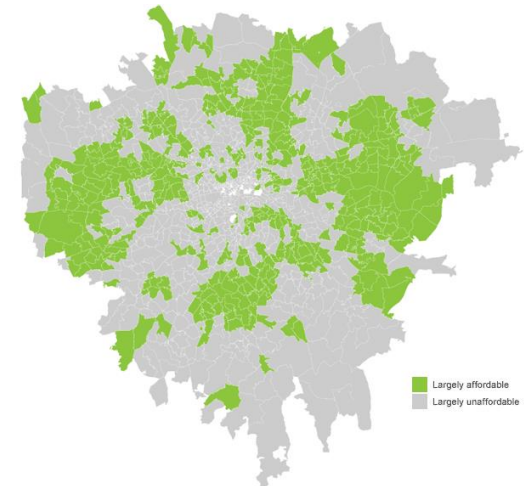
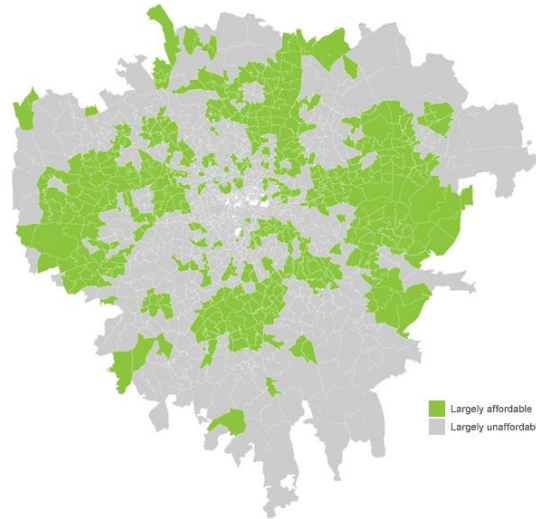
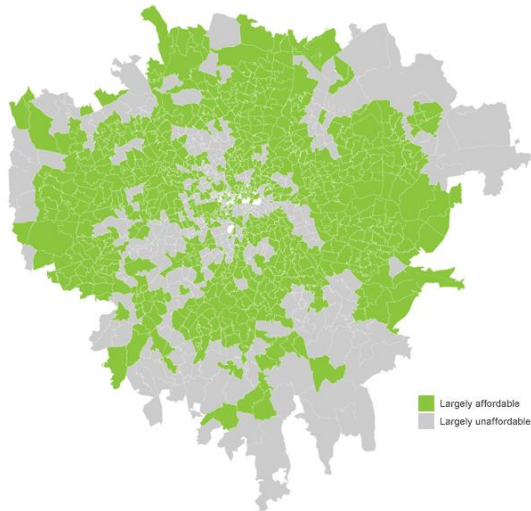
In much of inner London, a “New London Vernacular” style has emerged in new development – brick, rectilinear, and inoffensive – if sometimes a bit boring



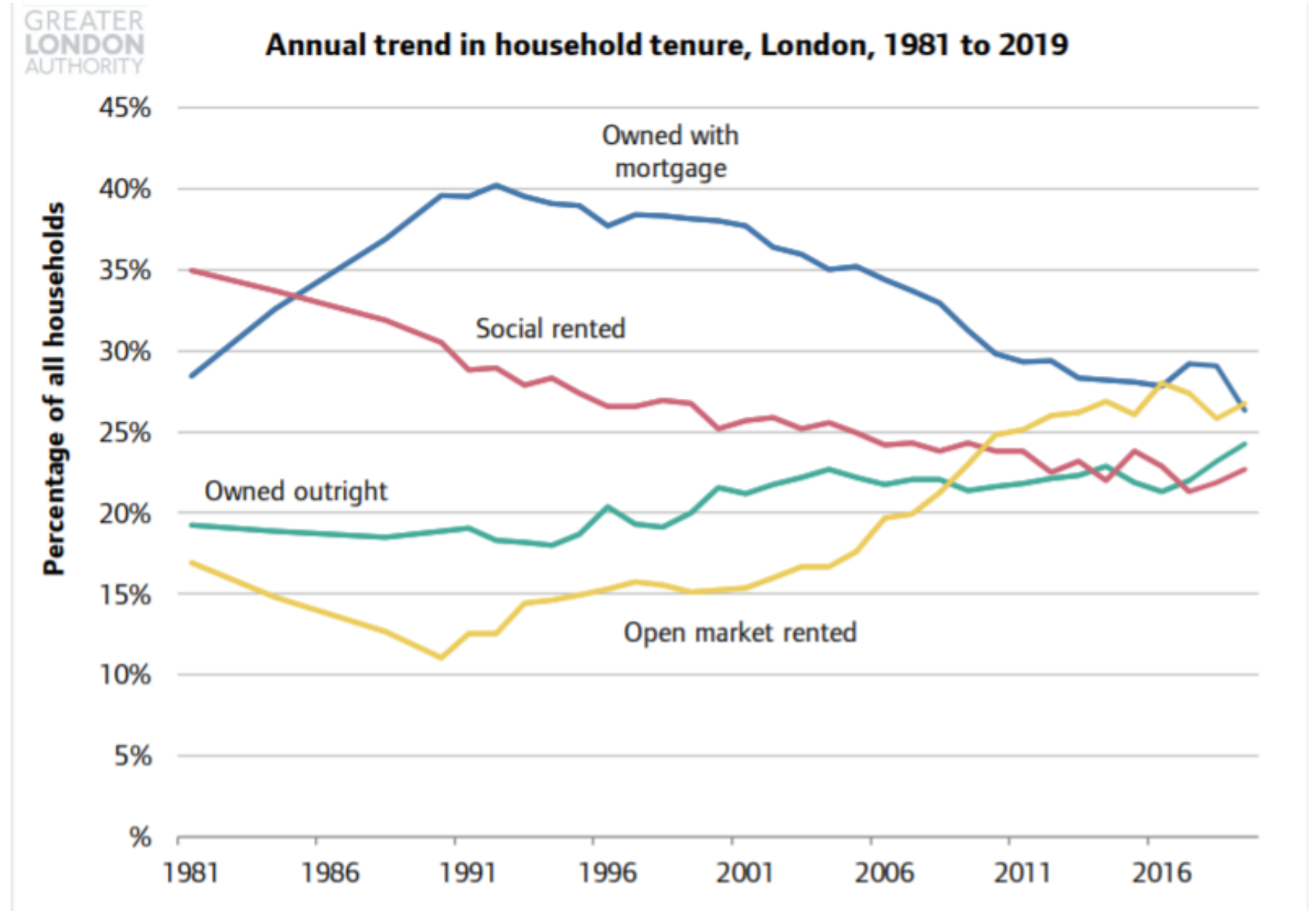
But in areas of London with lower property prices, the quality is lower and the new high-density developments of today could easily become the slums of tomorrow



How can London still continue to grow, without making its even less affordable as a place to live? The maps below show how areas of London that are affordable to people on average income, shown in green, are shrinking from 2010 to 2011 and 2016



In the last 40 years, the proportion of London's homes rented from private landlords has increased sharply, as the number of "social rented" homes has fallen



Pub Quiz question #4

What is the median (average)
annual salary in London?

Answer: the median salary of Londoners was £38,000 in 2020 (most recent reliable data) – the highest of any British region

Pub quiz question #5

What is the average price of a home in London?

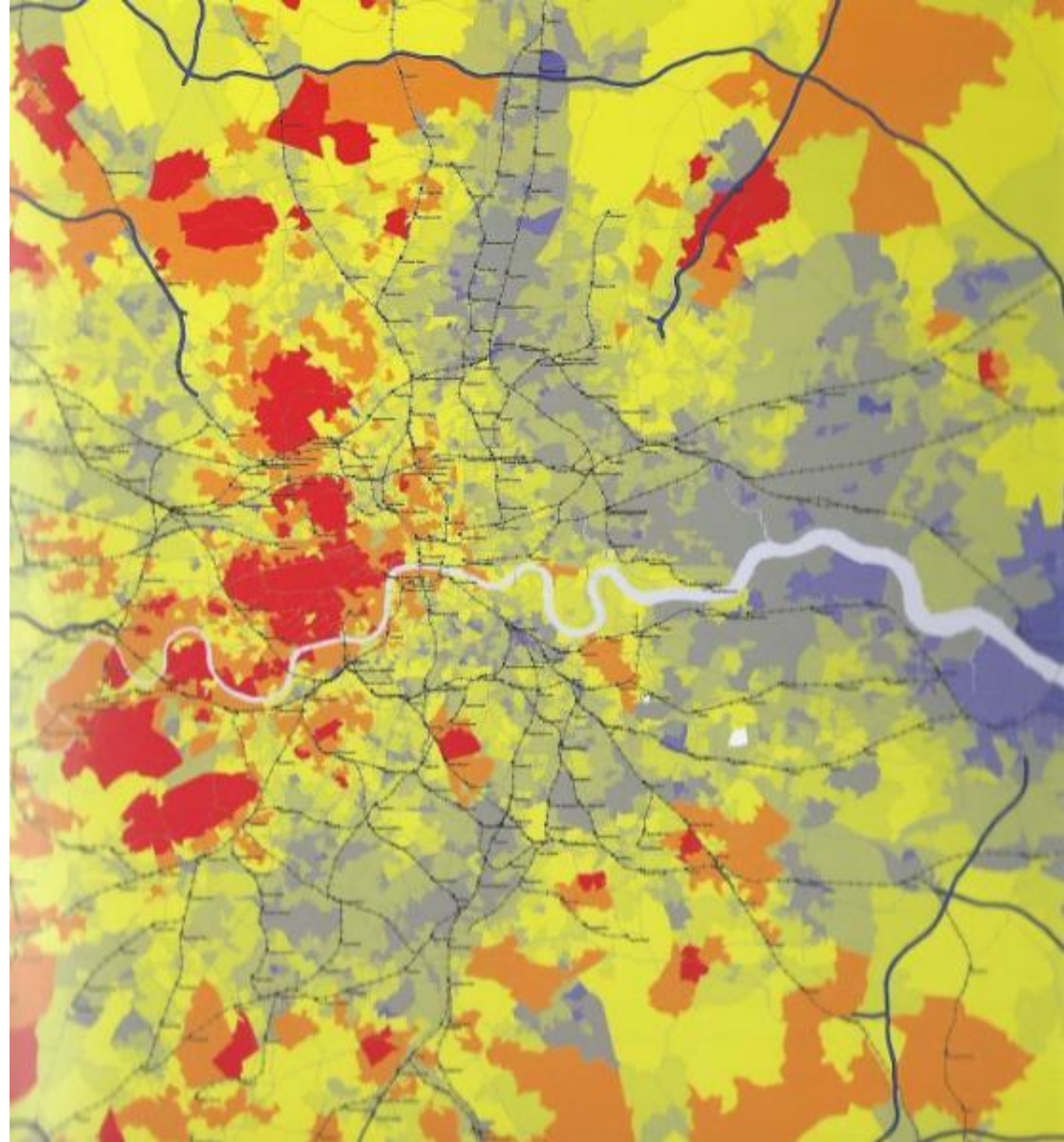
Answer: the average price of a home in Greater London is now £514,000 - more than thirteen times the average annual salary.

Although Brexit jitters meant that property prices have fallen in some inner boroughs, and rents have fallen in some areas because of Covid, they are not becoming affordable anytime soon

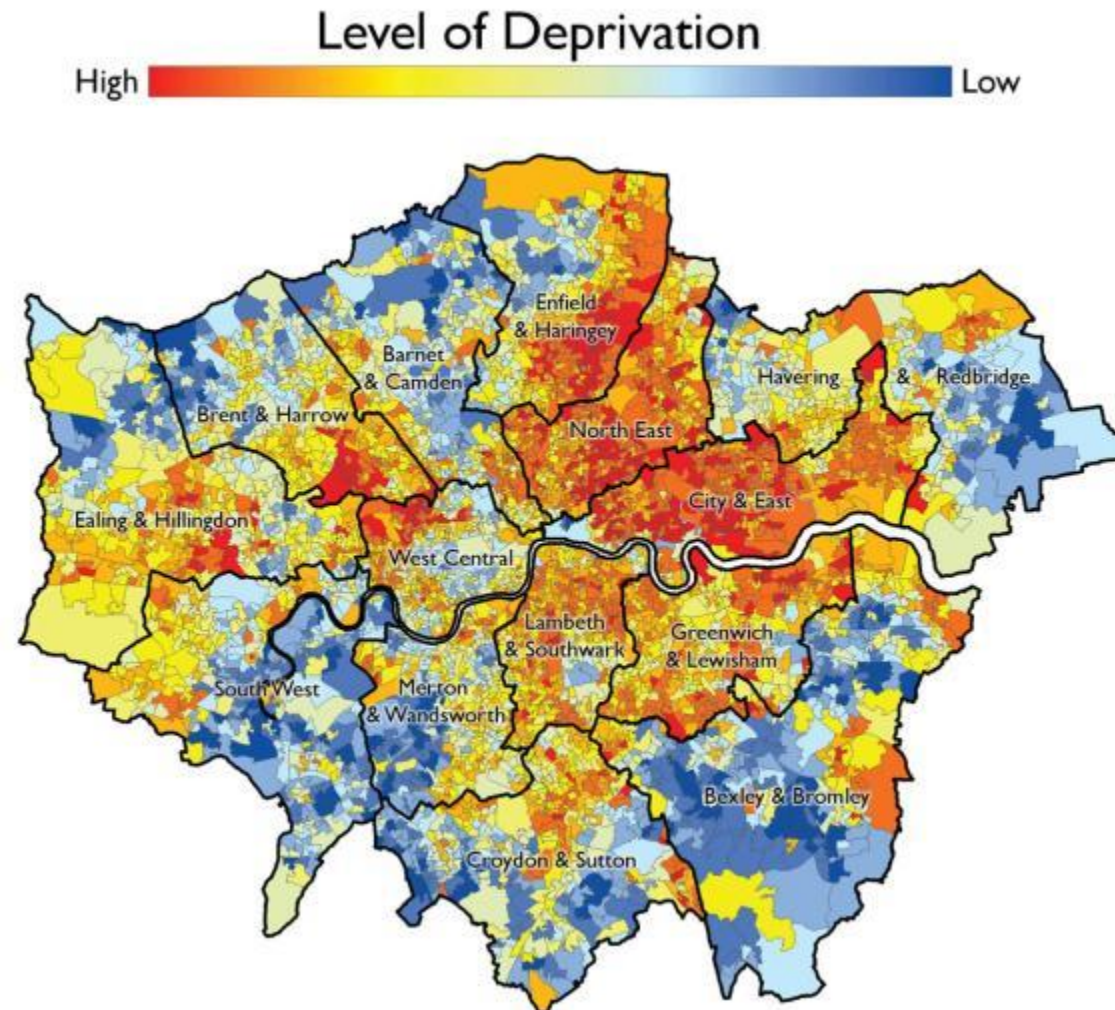
Charles Booth's map of Holborn and Covent Garden from 1889: Yellow and red indicate wealth; properties marked black are "Vicious, semi-criminal". Note how wealth and poverty were often side by side.



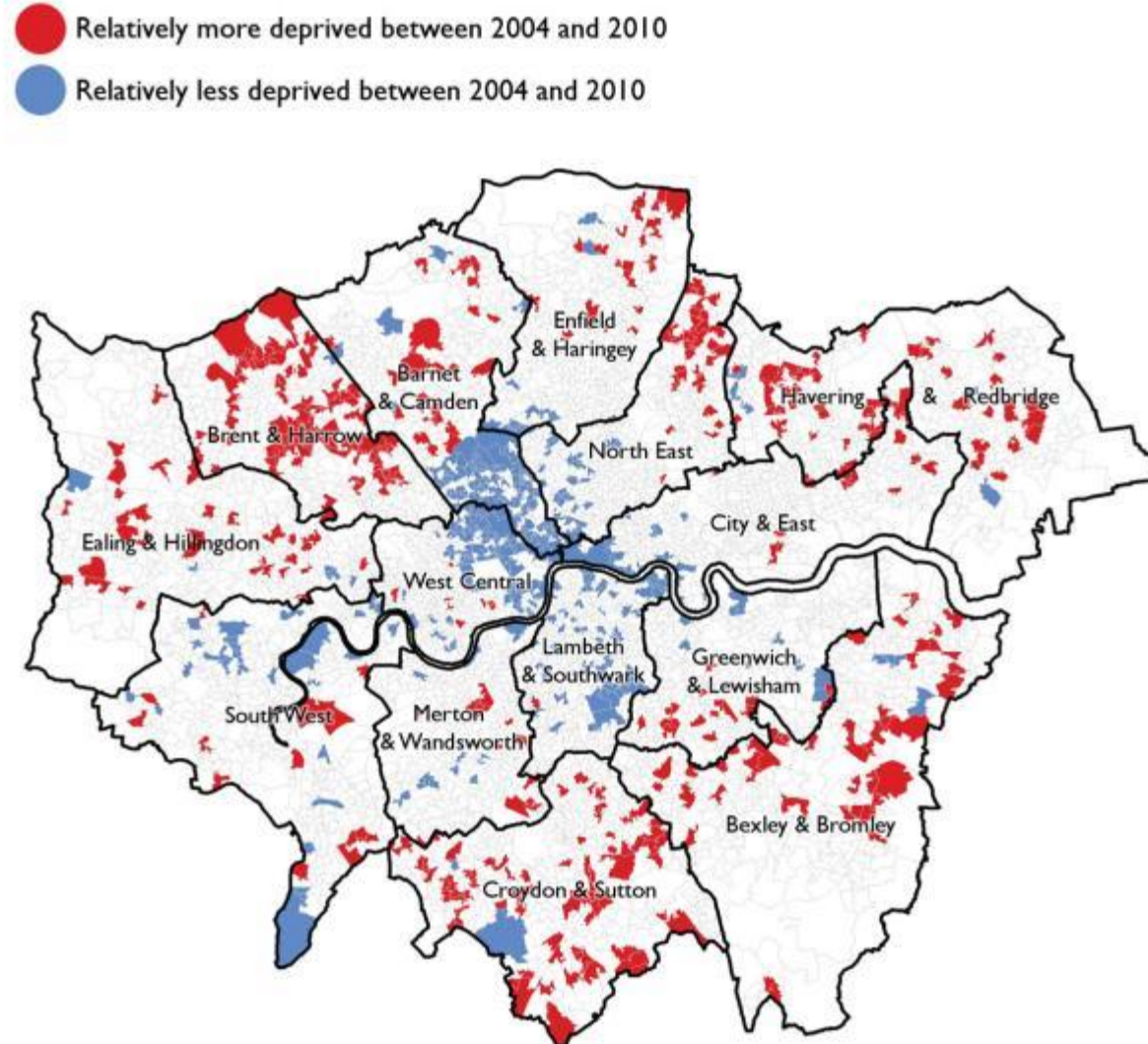
A modern “heat map” of London property prices shows that poverty and wealth still sit side by side: but there is a tendency for poverty to move outwards and eastwards



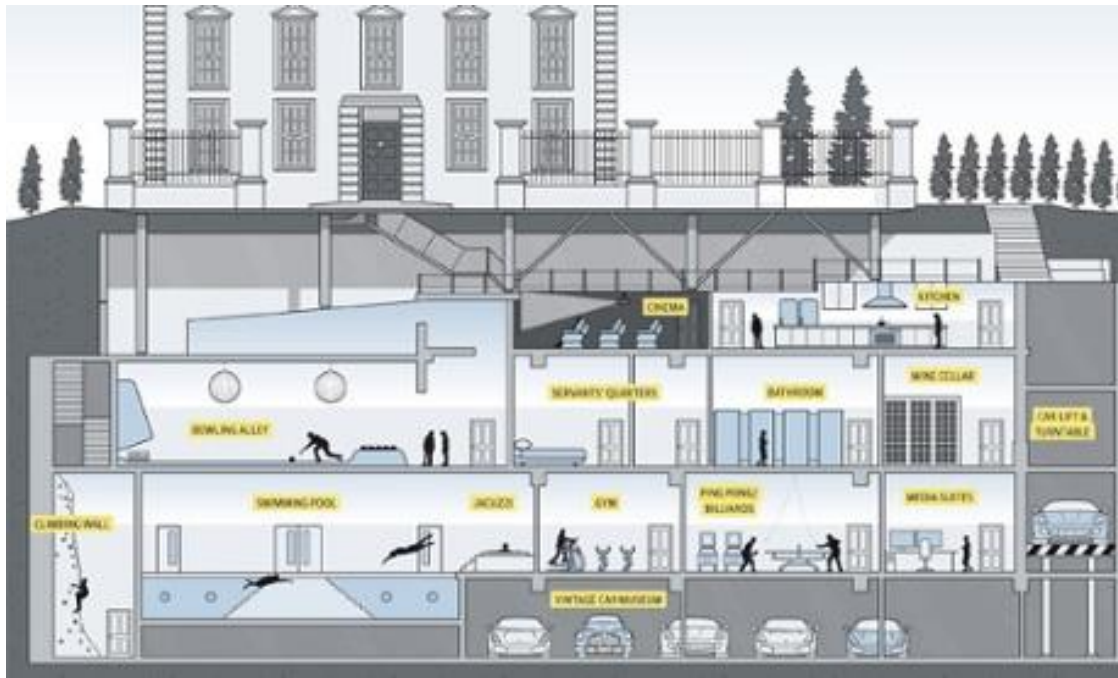
This 2010 map of deprivation in London shows that the poorest parts of London are still in the East End – but also in supposedly “leafy” outer suburbs



...and poverty is rising in many outer suburbs while in most inner districts it is static or falling



Soaring property prices mean that many Londoners who don't qualify for social housing, and who can't afford to buy, have to rent insecurely – while the super-rich build mega basements under their homes



London needs at least 50,000 new homes a year to keep up with its growing population. In 2019 only 36,000 were built – but only about 4,000 of them were genuinely affordable.



Changes to London are not just about a shortage of affordable housing, but also a loss of its soul

As the novelist Sadie Jones has recently said, 'I'm a Londoner, born and brought up in World's End [in Chelsea, west London], and when I was a child it was populated by butchers with sawdust on the floor, and writers... really scruffy. Of course there were bourgeois people and smart people up the road, but it was bohemian and cheap enough, and people actually lived there. People lived all over central London. I do grieve for that. Now it all looks like *Mary Poppins*: gorgeous buildings everywhere but there are no lights on, and it's sad. '

London is also draining power and investment and influence from the rest of the UK

Nicholas Shaxson: The City of London is now “like a mediaeval Italian city-state.... The political outcome of financial crisis in the UK has paradoxically consolidated the power of London as a kind of ‘City State’ within the national economy and with its own internal inequality”.

“We may now see a new kind of relation between city state and host nation because... London both benefits from (and contributes to) the weakening of such larger national entities”

[City State against national settlement: UK economic policy and politics after the financial crisis](#) (Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC), 2011)

Reform of the Corporation of the City of London – which owns huge swathes of housing in London, lobbies for London to be a low-regulation financial centre, and is mostly controlled by big business – may be long overdue



Many of London's vital jobs are done by migrants from eastern and southern Europe, who are willing to share rooms, commute long distances and work long hours. What will happen once the changes caused by Brexit have bedded in is anyone's guess



Will Brexit harm London? Lots of corporations cutting jobs – but if Brexit further cools London's overheated housing market that may be a good thing.



J.P.Morgan

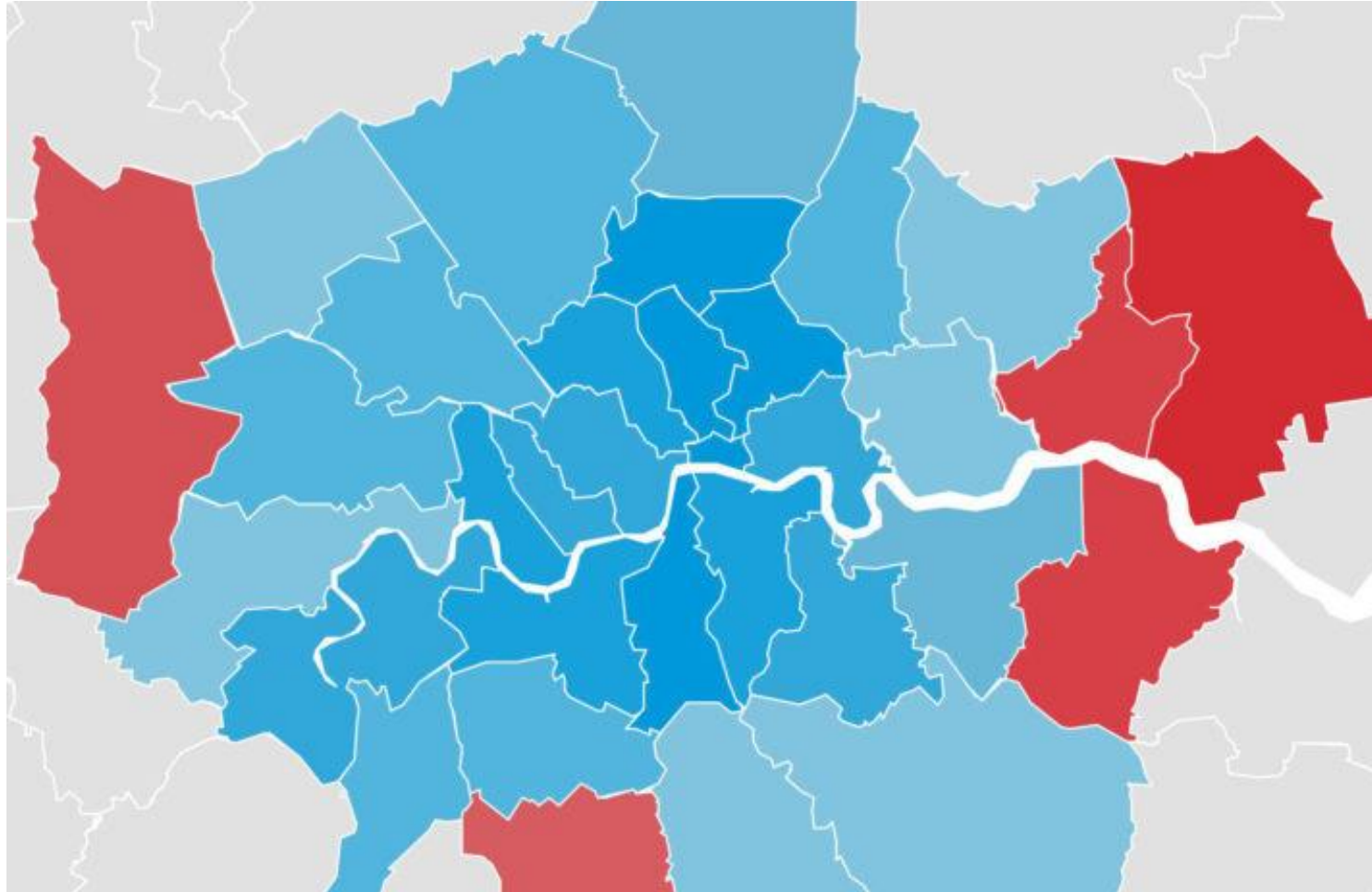


HSBC

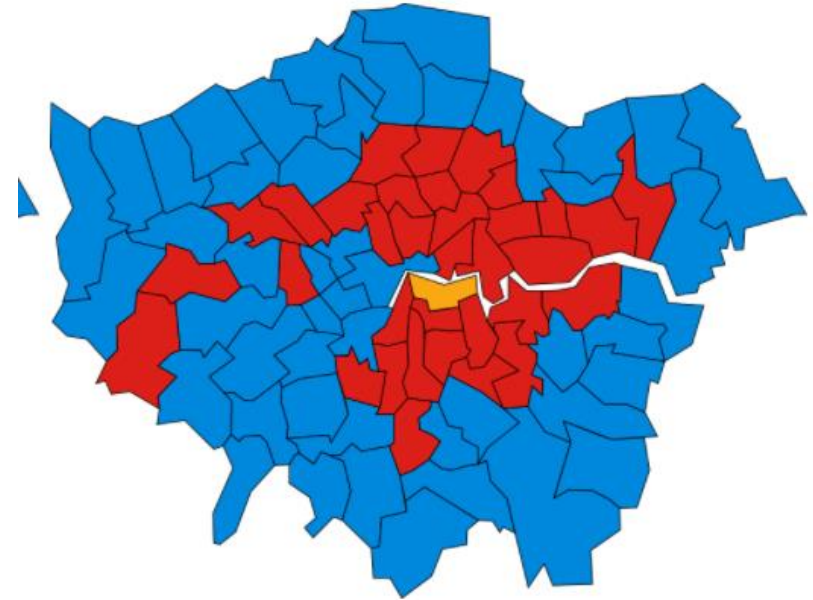


UBS

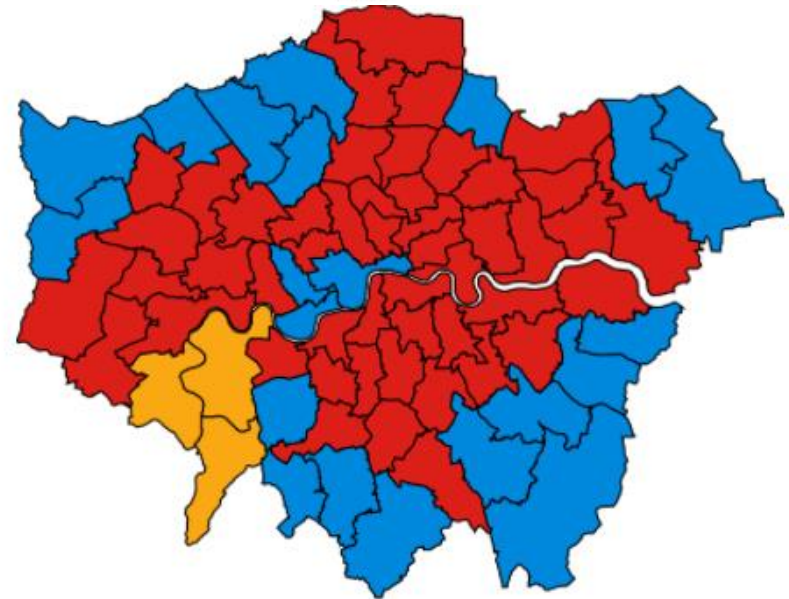
Only five out of London's 32 boroughs voted for Brexit. London is increasingly out of step with the rest of England politically



The politics of London are increasingly out of step with the national picture. In 1992 – an election that Labour lost narrowly – a clear majority of London MPs were still Conservative. In 2019 a clear majority were Labour, even though Labour was heavily defeated nationally.



1992



2019

3: Identity, heritage and design

- Despite the strengthening of the conservation movement since the 1970s, a lot of demolition of London's historic fabric is underway – some of it not well-justified
- London, and Londoners, are still having difficulty adjusting to living in high-density flats. The days when most people could afford to buy or rent a house with a garden are over
- New development and regeneration can lead to the character and distinctiveness of neighbourhoods being lost, not enhanced

Regeneration can lead to loss of character and historic fabric, and unaffordability: Hoxton, Shoreditch, Camden and Dalston are undergoing rapid gentrification and development pressure



Spitalfields Market – how can the City of London expand and thrive without destroying the character of its hinterland?



The disused western end of Smithfield Market faced similar challenges. After two redevelopment plans were stopped by the Secretary of State, the Museum of London is now headed there



But more edge-of-City development in areas like Shoreditch means loss of historic fabric, and less edginess



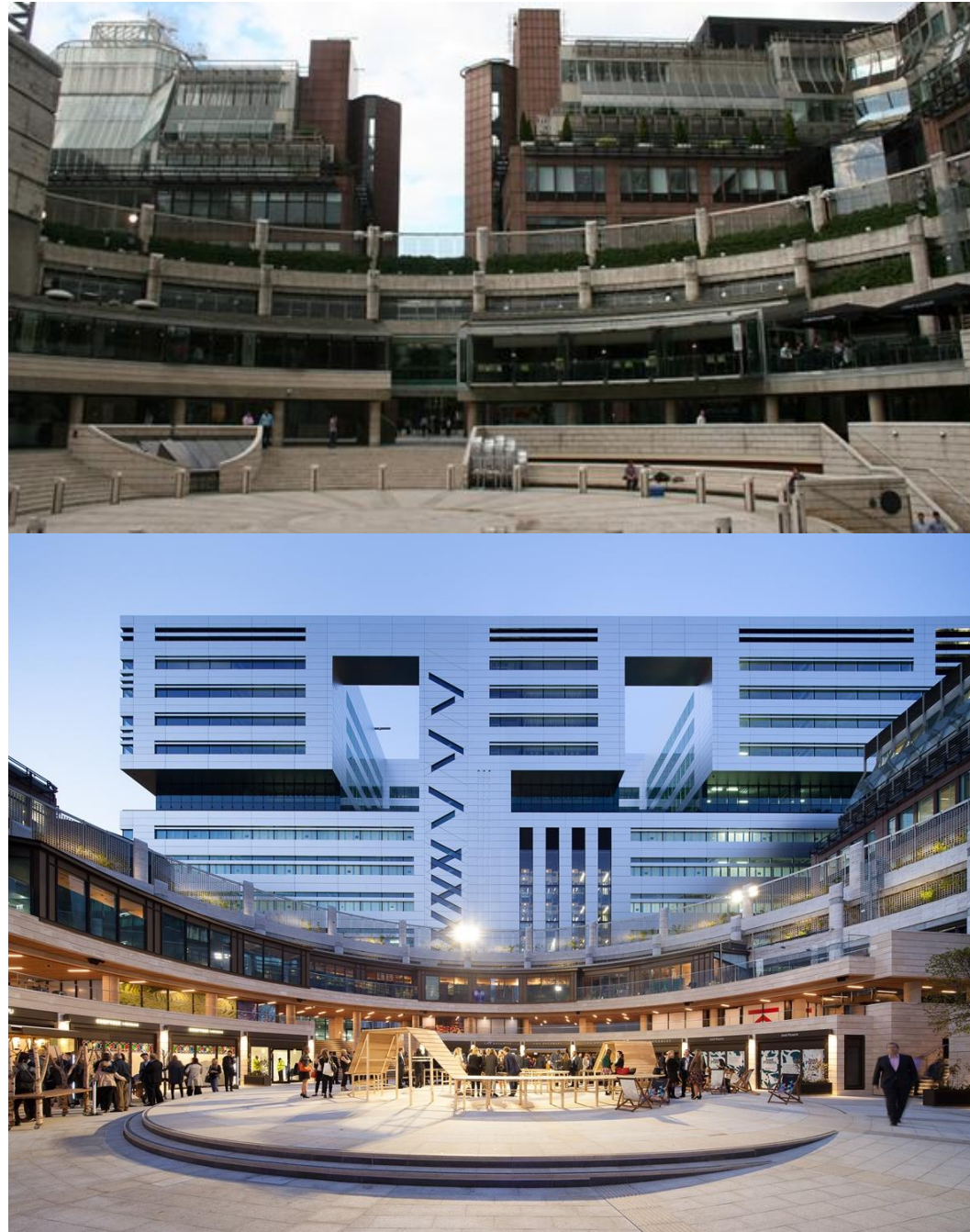
Are we at risk of losing an important – if not universally popular – period of London architecture if the recladding of Portland House goes ahead?



St Helen's Tower (GMW Architects, 1968) – London's answer to Mies van der Rohe's Seagram building in New York – is about to be pulled down and replaced by Eric Parry's 'Trellis', almost as high as the Shard



Office blocks
built as recently
as the early
1990s are now
being
redeveloped –
for example,
Make's
redevelopment
of Peter Foggo's
5 Broadgate



It is a similar story on Gracechurch Street nearby, where a huge block built as recently as 2002 is proposed to be knocked down and replaced by this “triple tower block” by architects KPF



And on the Greenwich Peninsula, the iconic Millennium Sainsbury's has been knocked down and Foster's North Greenwich bus station could soon follow, to be replaced by a new above-station development by Calatrava



New development sometimes includes replication of long-lost Victorian landmarks, such as at Holborn Viaduct



But Leicester Square's oldest surviving cinema has just been torn down to make way for yet another hotel



In Brixton, regeneration is conservation-led. Its centrepiece is the recently-restored restoration of the 1906 Bon Marché department store – a mixed-use scheme including the new HQ of the architects of the building's restoration, Squire and Partners



But in Westminster, the very same architects intend to demolish the 1920s Townsend House on Greycoat Place, once HQ of the Girl's Friendly Society, for yet another soulless office block



The Brutalism of the 1960s and 1970s is now back in fashion, with Erno Goldfinger's Trellick Tower in west London, and its east London sister Balfron Tower, now venerated, not hated. The latter has been expensively refurbished as private flats, not affordable homes



BALFRON TOWER IS THE EMBODIMENT OF MODERN URBAN LIVING. THIS LANDMARK BUILDING WAS DESIGNED BY THE MODERNIST ARCHITECT ERNŐ GOLDFINGER IN 1967 AND FORMS A BOLD, SCULPTURAL PRESENCE IN LONDON'S EAST END. PLANS ARE NOW UNDERWAY TO COMPREHENSIVELY AND SENSITIVELY RESTORE BALFRON TOWER. UNDOUBTEDLY INNOVATIVE UPON INCEPTION, THE ORIGINAL DESIGN UNITY WILL BE REFLECTED IN THE WORK OF THE DESIGNERS OVERSEEING THE PROJECT TODAY; SERVING AS THE GUARDIANS TO ONE OF LONDON'S MOST ICONIC POST-WAR BUILDINGS.

At the same time, London's more conservative pre-war and post-war C20 architecture, such as Clothworkers' Hall on Mincing Lane, completed in 1958, is increasingly under threat. Plans have been approved to demolish the "Wrennaissance" Hall and its fine neo-Georgian interiors.



By St Paul's,
Victor Heal's
Bank of
England
offices have
been
demolished,
to make way
for One New
Change by
Jean Nouvel



It is a similar story across the road from St Pancras station, where the low-rise Belgrove House – built as a coach station in 1930 - faces redevelopment as a “Life Sciences centre” that will mostly be commercial office space



Planning policies today see well-connected suburbs as hubs for high-density development of up to eight stories. The locals still see them as villages.



but some suburbs are now less appealing now than they were when first built



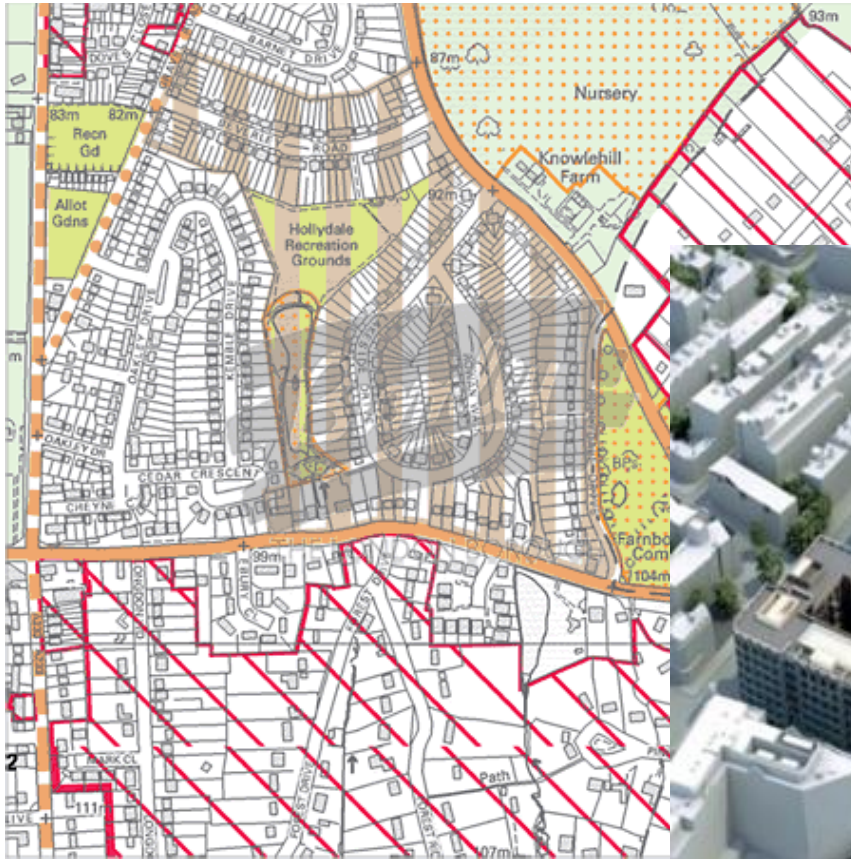
Planning policy now favours large retail developments in city and town centre, but the results are very mixed in design terms



High density need not mean high-rise: but developers have been slow to deliver the kind of homes that families want or need



Local authorities' plans, and the London Plan, are increasingly undermined by the new “presumption in favour of sustainable development”



And many dense developments are enthusiastically welcomed by councils keen to see “regeneration”



On the south bank of the Thames, particularly on the huge Nine Elms development between Vauxhall and Battersea, “pencil towers” have started to predominate



Has a backlash against tall buildings started? Plans for Renzo Piano's 'Paddington Pole' prompted an outcry. The tower was then changed into a cube, 54m x 54m x 54m, which the government has just given the green light to. Edwardian sorting office on the site will still need to be demolished, however



4: Public spaces

London does not have a tradition of good-quality public spaces



London's
famous for its
garden squares
– but many of
them (like
Bedford Square)
are still
inaccessible to
all but a
privileged few



Garden squares are private spaces, often with insurmountable railings



Planning and highways strategies galore deliver streets that are complicated, cluttered and unwelcoming



Parliament Square: an opportunity missed



No other city would build a major public square that pedestrians cannot access safely. Plans for pedestrianisation were , unforgivably, dropped in 2008



Trafalgar Square is a lot better than it was – but differences in levels, and heavy traffic, mean it is not a world-class public space



5: Environment and sustainability

How can London respond to the challenges of climate change once the Thames Barrier outlives its usefulness?



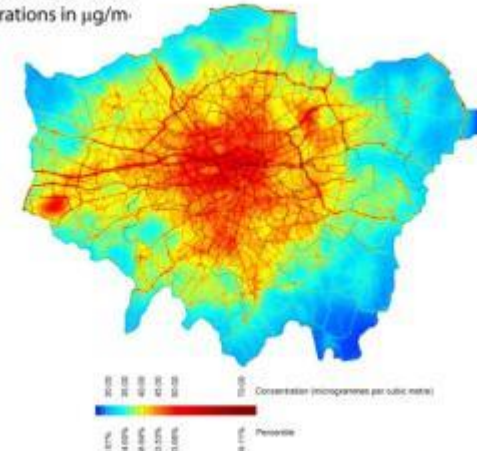
Politicians are still reluctant to take on the motorist, as the shrinking of the congestion charge zone in 2010 showed



London's air pollution levels are still high: Oxford Street is the most polluted street in the world by one measure



Modelled 2003 annual mean
NO₂ concentrations in µg/m³



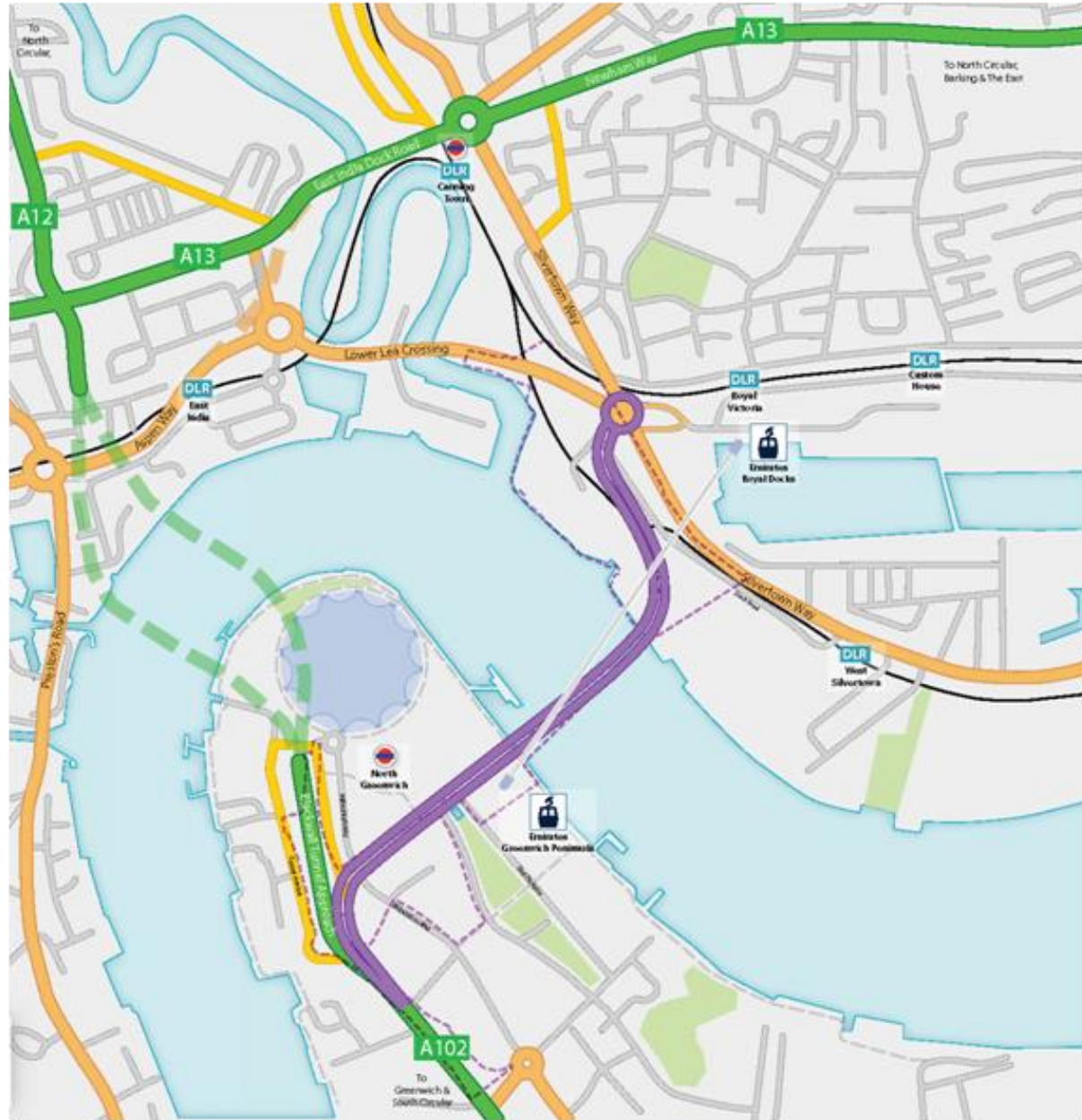
© Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence No. 100017171

Diagram: U.K. Air Quality Plan - consolidated with decisions since 2004 (2006)
www.airquality.gov.uk/airquality

The mayor's new Ultra Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ) – bringing an extra £12.50 charge for non-compliant vehicles – is forecast to cut nitrogen oxide emissions from road traffic in central London by 45% in 2020. It was expanded to heavy goods vehicles London-wide in 2020 and will cover all cars within the North and South Circular roads in October 2021.

But the ULEZ will be, some commentators say, Sadiq Khan's "Poll Tax moment". The car lobby remains powerful

Although Sadiq Khan has made air pollution a top priority, in east London he's pressing ahead with Boris Johnson's plans for a new Silvertown Link – a new road tunnel alongside Blackwall

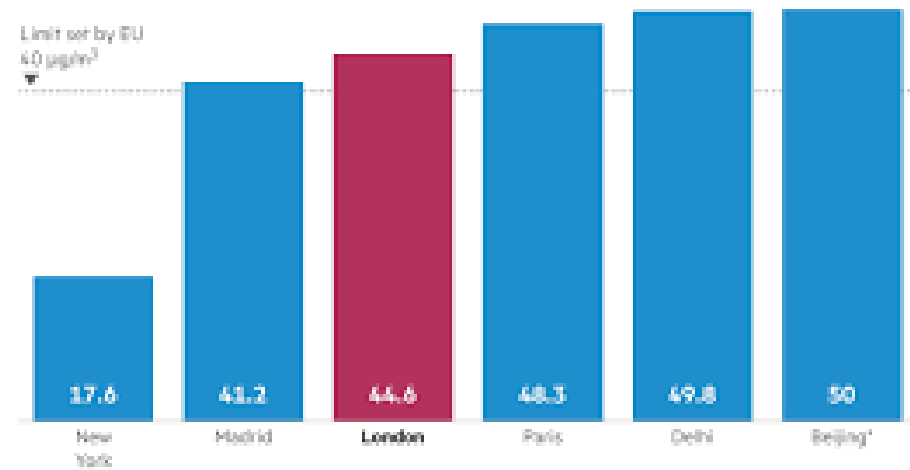


With delays to Crossrail reducing TFL's farebox income, Tube and bus ridership falling, and cuts to grants from central government, Khan's public transport achievements in 2016-20 were pretty modest – and frequencies of some bus routes were cut. Covid has only made TFL's funding crisis worse



Despite the Congestion Charge, more cycle lanes and better public transport, London has exceeded legal pollution limits continually since 2010. NO₂ levels are now amongst the highest of any major world city

London among the most polluted cities in the world by NO₂
Nitrogen dioxide levels (annual mean 2016, µg/m³)



Sources: EEA, Aerosol and Air Quality Research; Central Pollution Control Board
© FT

* 2015 data



Coronavirus

When the pandemic started in early 2020 London was hit much harder than any other part of the UK.

This underscores what an important, globally connected economic centre London is, but also shows how vulnerable it can be to pandemics, terrorism and other extreme events.



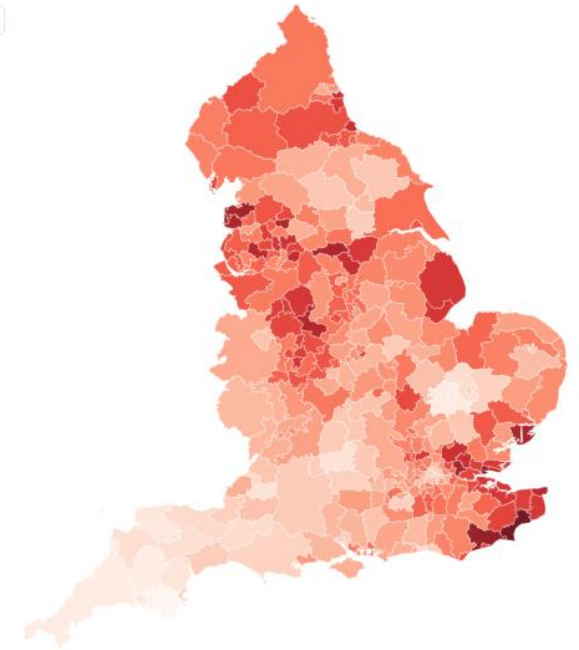
However, in the 12 months since then London has had a lower death rate than all other English regions, apart from the south-west

Deaths with COVID-19 on the death certificate by area

Total number of deaths since the start of the pandemic of people whose death certificate mentioned COVID-19 as one of the causes. The data are published weekly by the ONS, NRS and NISRA and there is a lag in reporting of at least 11 days because the data are based on death registrations. Only data available for the latest reported date are shown.

[UK](#) [Nation](#) [Region](#) [Upper tier LA](#) [Lower tier LA](#) [About](#)

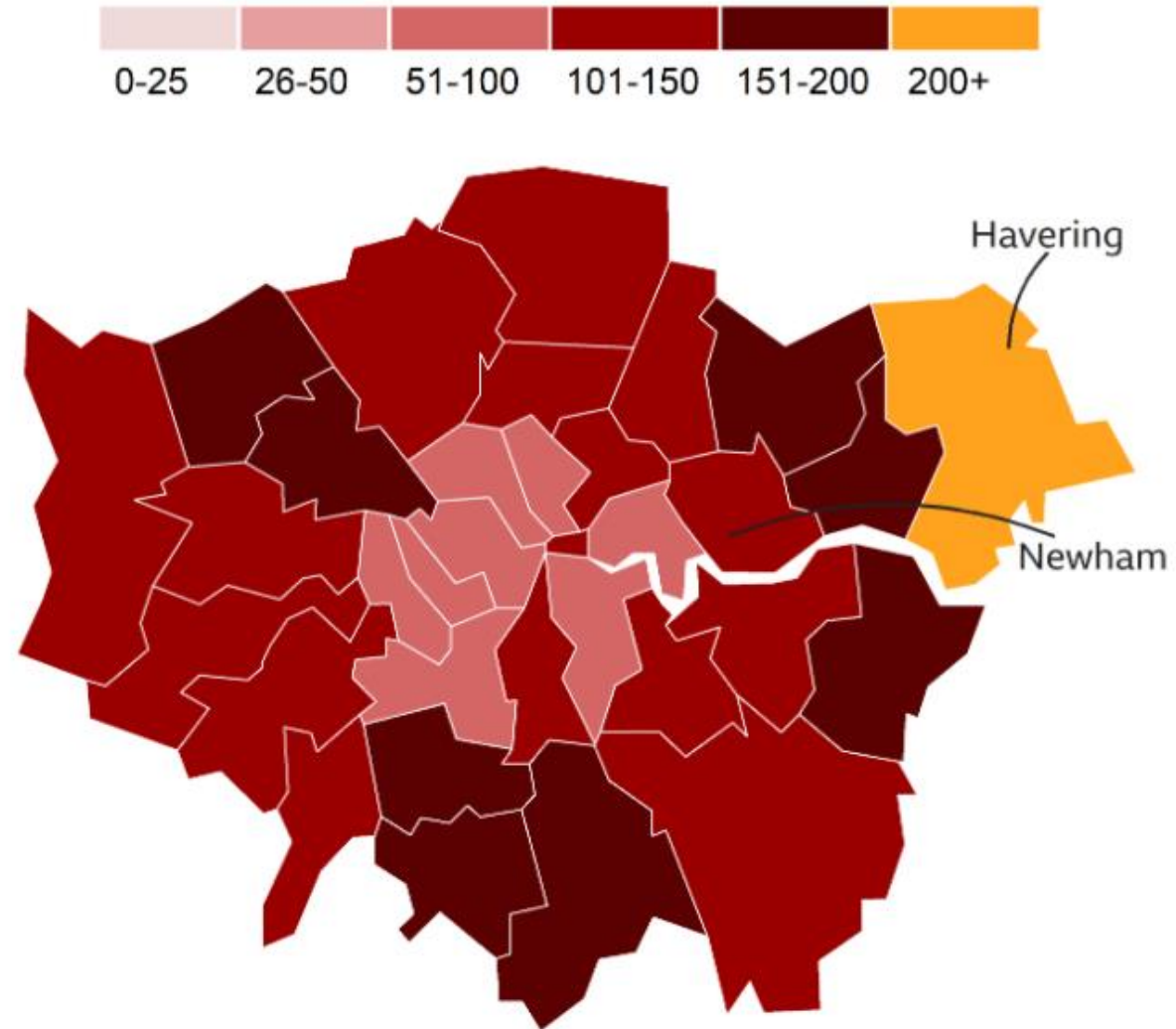
Area ▼	Deaths ▲	Rate per 100,000 population ▲
Yorkshire and The Humber	12,255	222.7
West Midlands	14,623	246.4
South West	7,913	140.7
South East	20,031	218.2
North West	19,525	266
North East	6,690	250.6
London	18,541	206.9
East of England	14,587	233.9
East Midlands	11,111	229.8



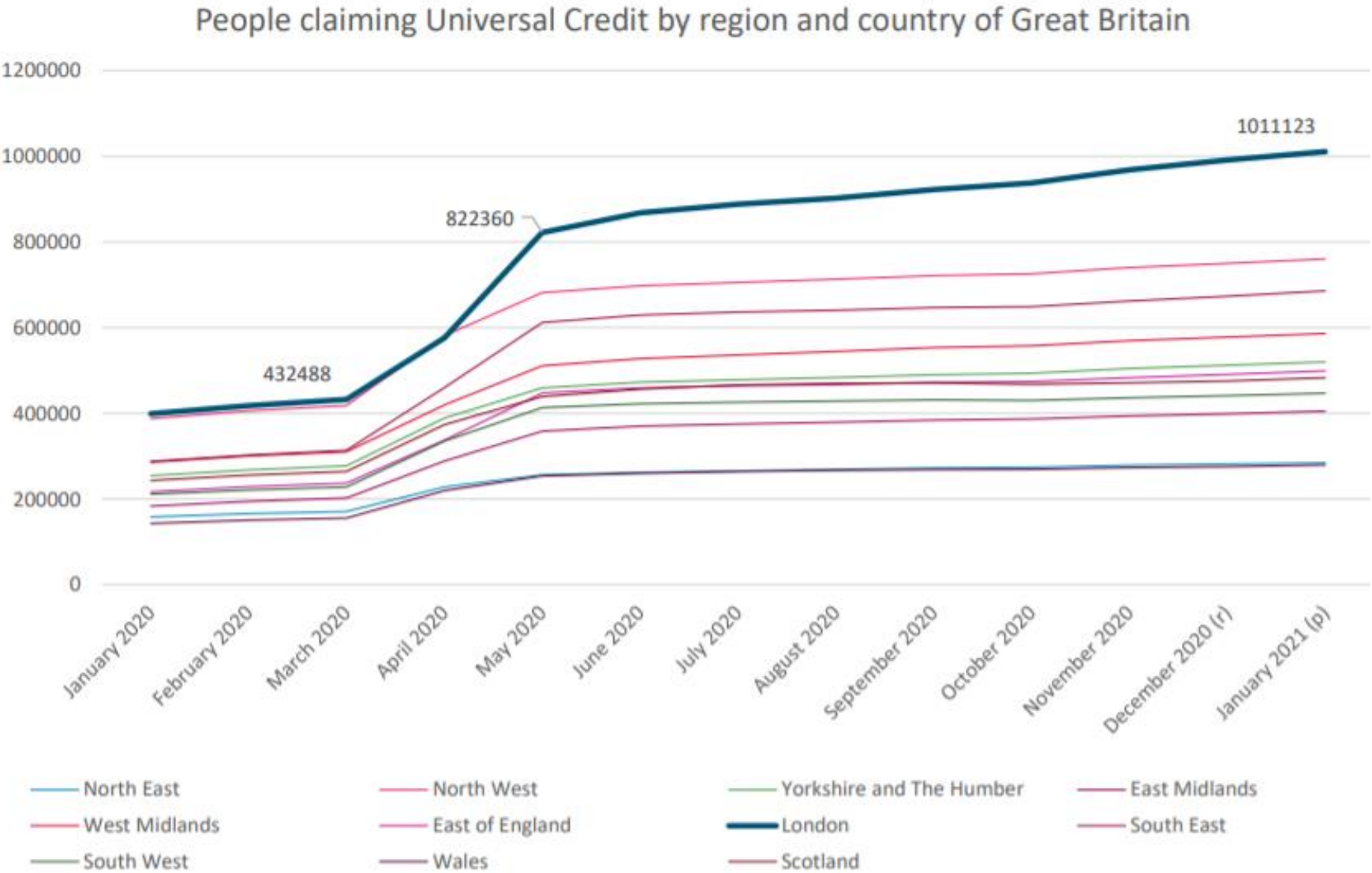
And within London, inner boroughs (whose population is younger) have seen much lower death rates than outer ones. The highest death rate of all is in Havering, the easternmost borough, which has the highest proportion of over-65s of all 32 boroughs. Hackney, the most deprived borough, has seen about average death rates

Total coronavirus deaths in London

Deaths per 100,000 people since the start of the pandemic of those who died within 28 days of a positive test



Although Covid's health impact on London has been less bad than other regions, the economic impact is worse. London has seen a much bigger rise in Universal Credit claims than any other region



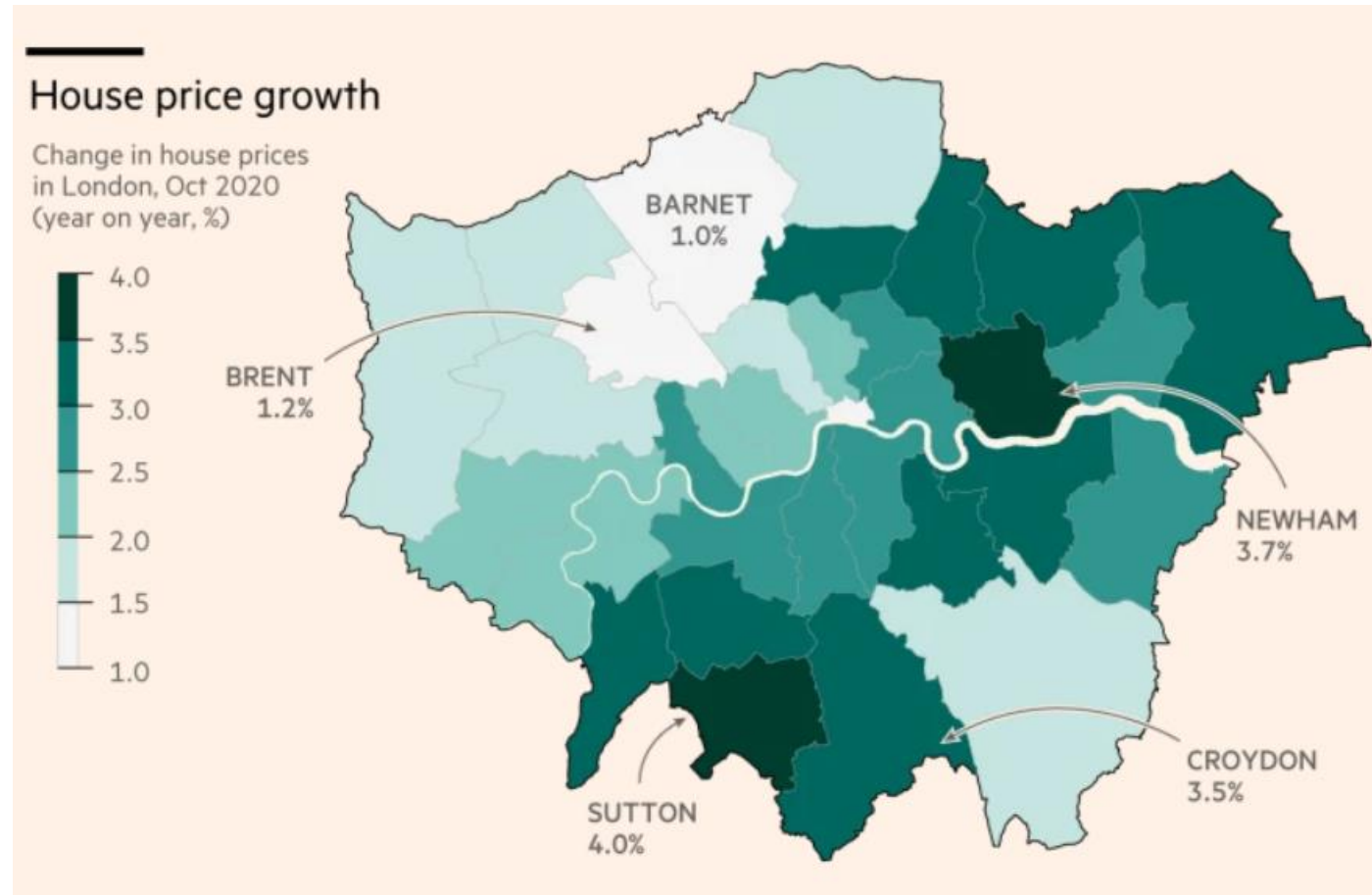
Some estimate that for the first time in 30 years, London's population fell in 2020, by up to 8% (700,000), as younger people moved to family homes outside the capital, and foreign-born residents left. Coronavirus both stemmed the flow of migrants into the capital and created new reasons for residents to depart.



Although some private sector rents have fallen, rents in some outer boroughs have continued to rise, and in most inner boroughs the fall has been 10% or less



And property sale prices continued to rise, especially in eastern and southern boroughs, in 2020



The dominance of the service sector in London's economy means that a slightly higher proportion of workers have been furloughed than any other part of the UK

Figure 13: Employments furloughed as a proportion of eligible employments at 31 December, by Local Authority

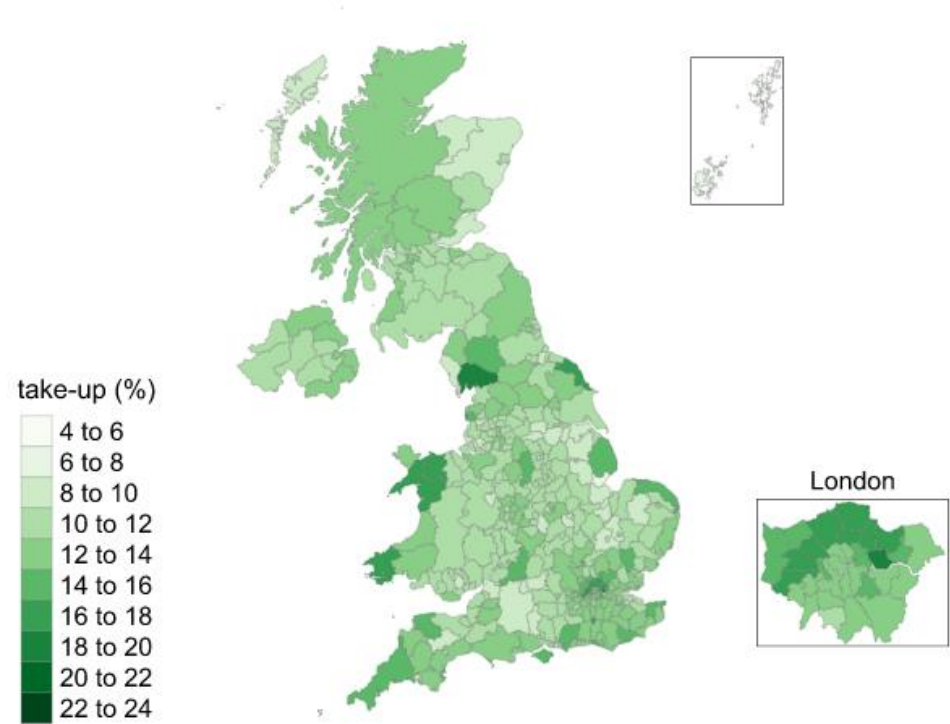
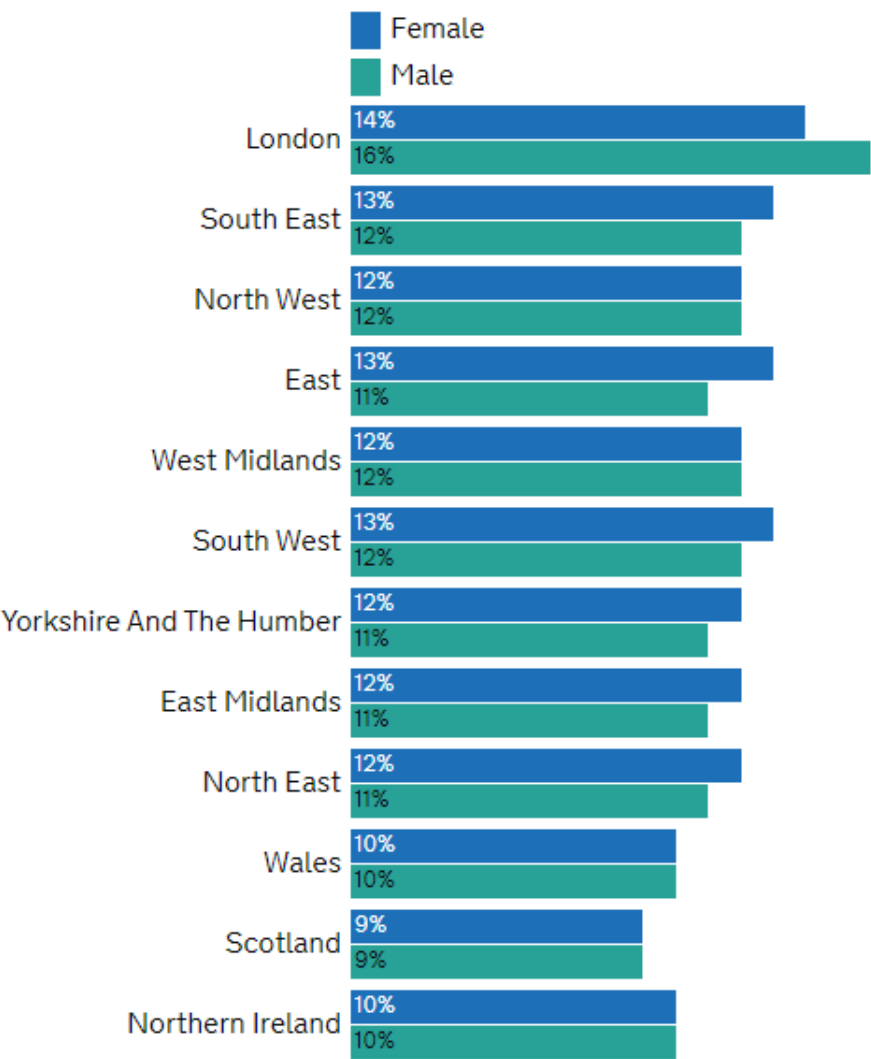
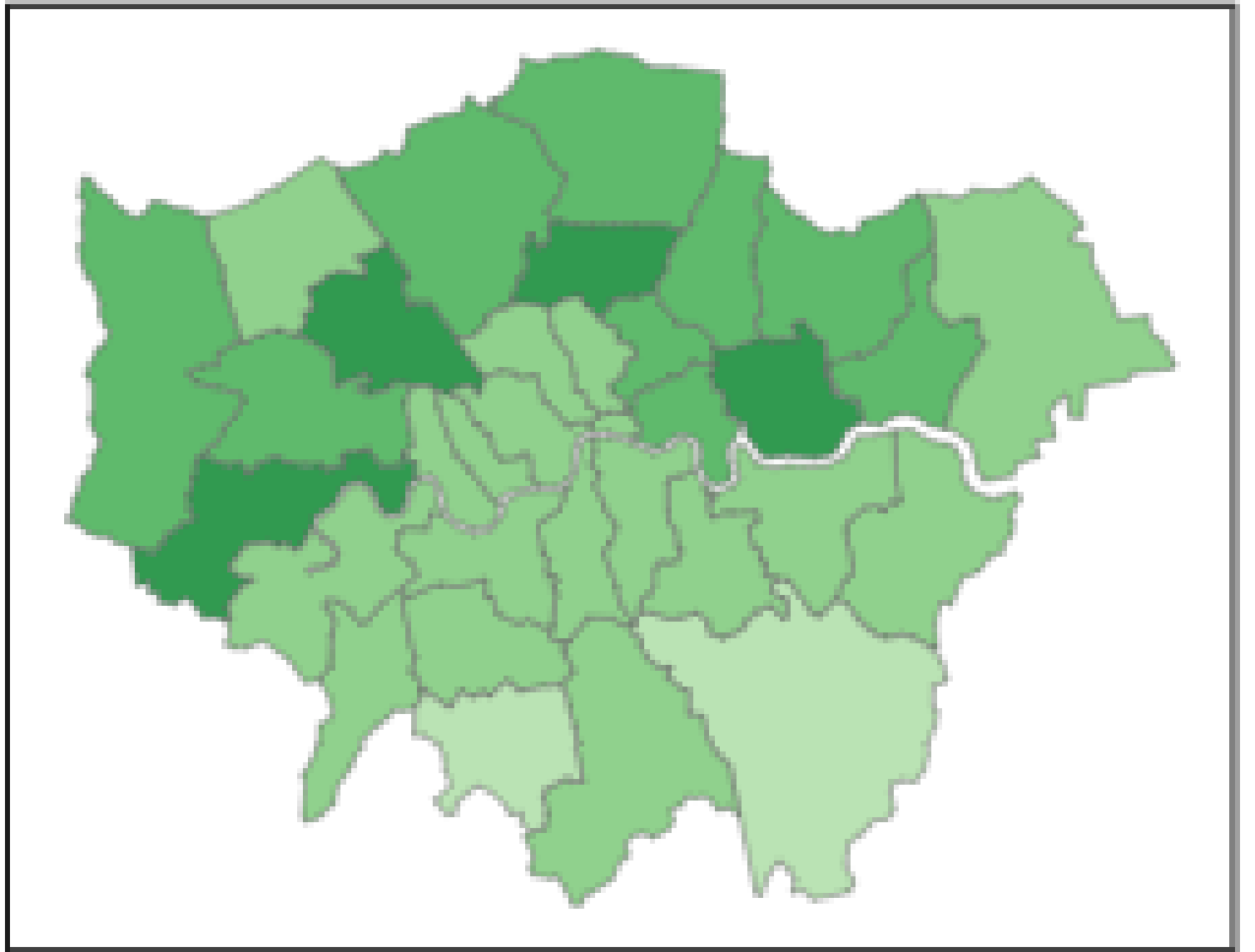


Figure 10: Employment furlough take-up rate at 30 November, by Country and Region and gender

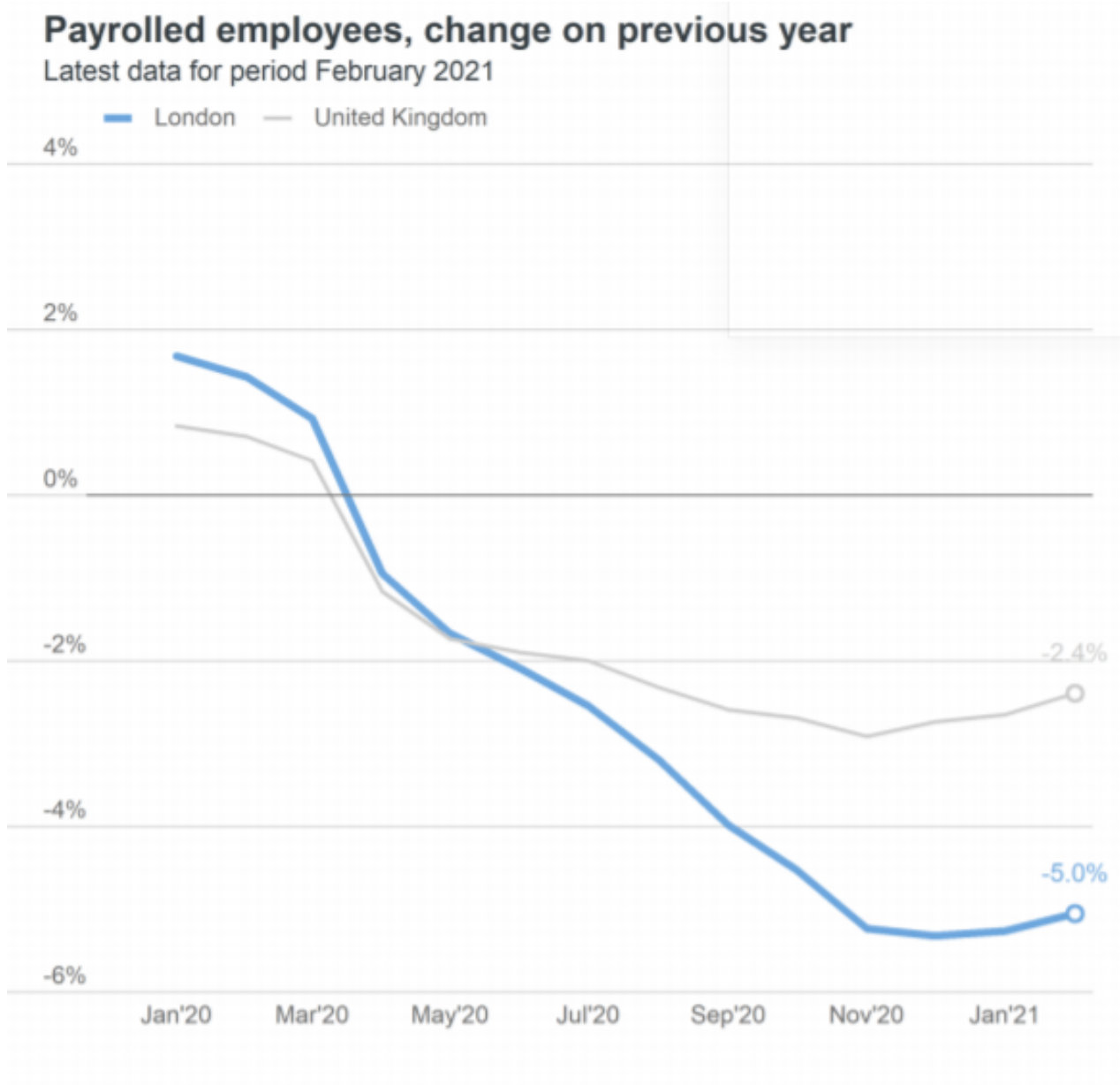
[Change to table and accessible view](#)



For reasons that are unclear, furlough is much more common in north London boroughs than south London ones



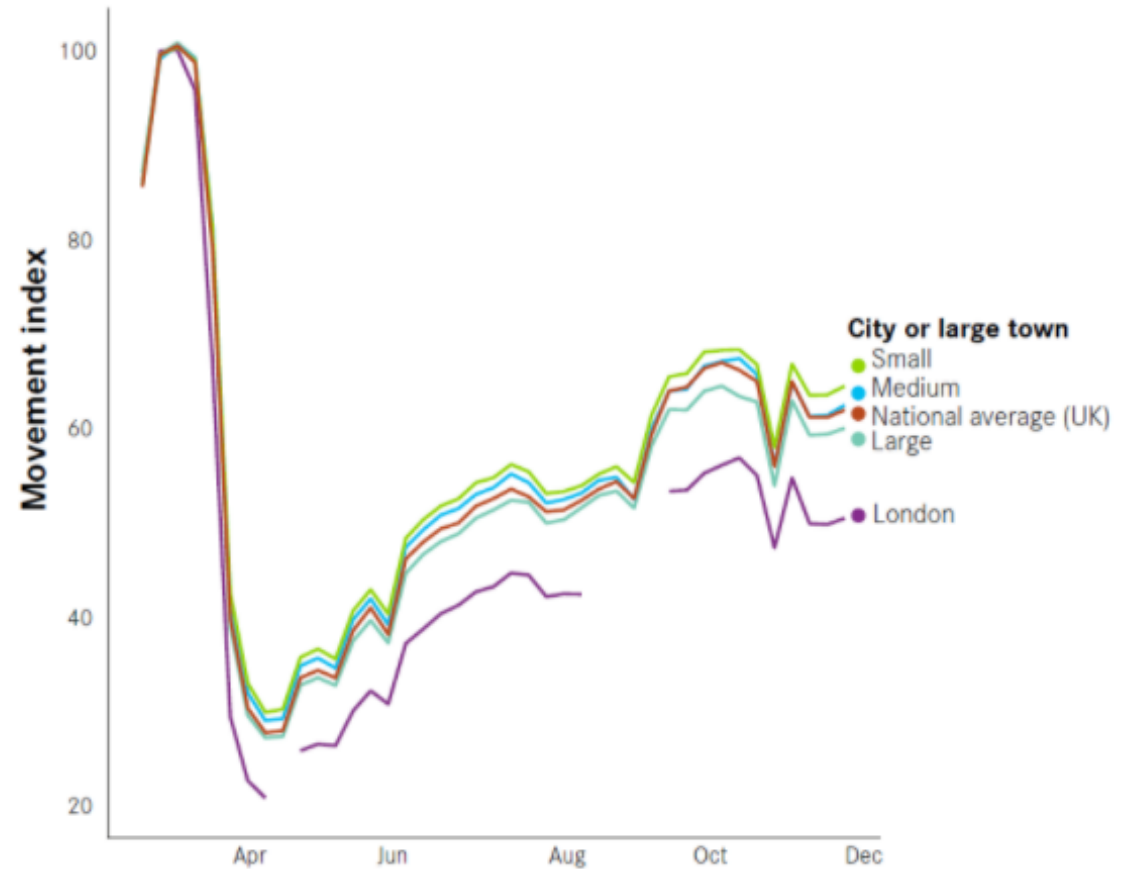
Worryingly, the number of jobs permanently lost seems to be greater than the rest of the UK. London saw a much bigger fall in employee numbers in the last 12 months than other regions



During 2020
London saw the
UK's biggest fall,
and then the
weakest recovery,
in numbers of
people going to
work

Figure 2: London has seen the largest drop and weakest recovery in people at their place of work

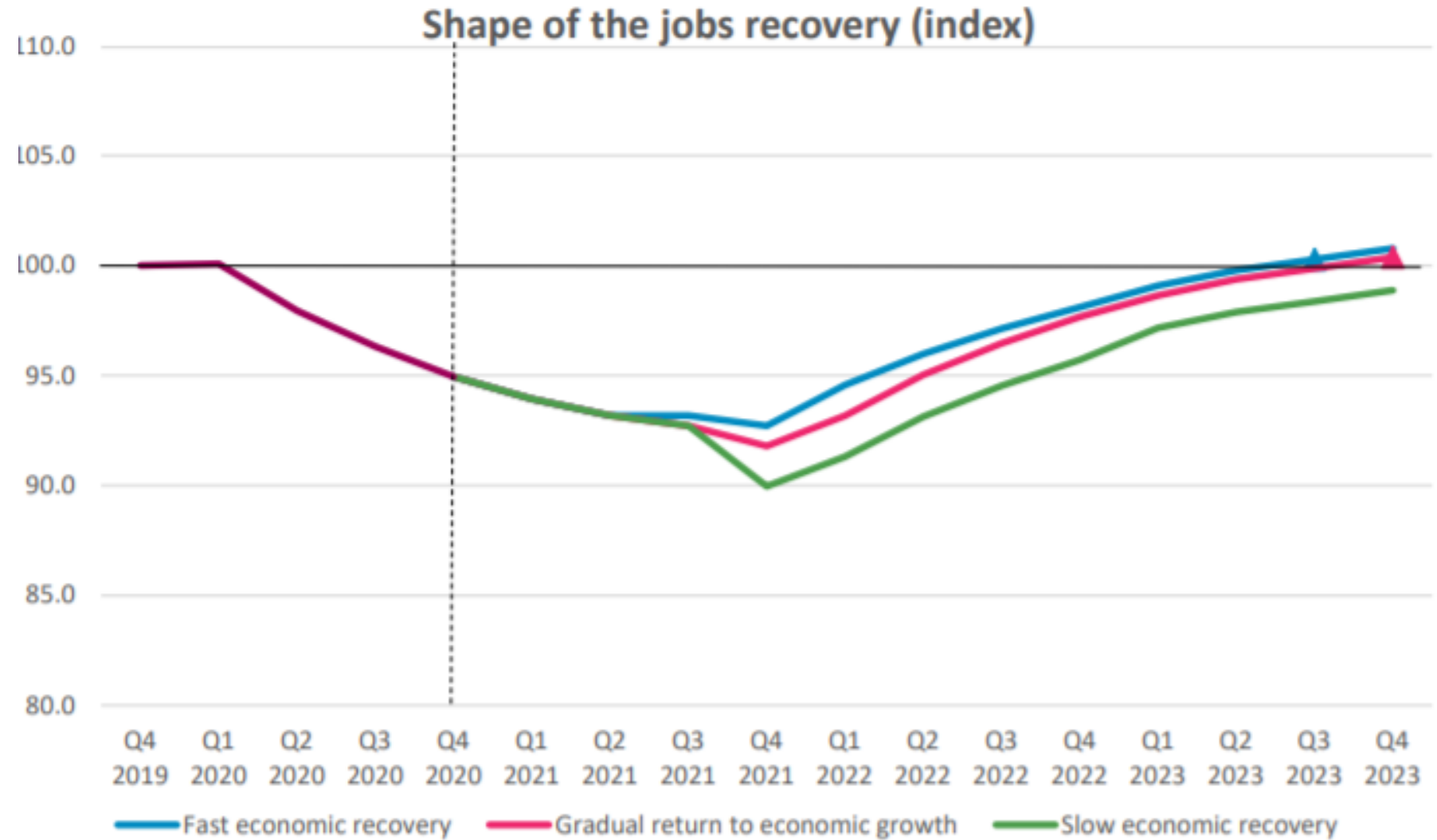
People in their workplace



Source: Google Mobility, 2020. Index = 3 January - 6 February 2020.

Note: Gaps represent unavailable data.

GLA
Economics
predict that
even with a
slow
recovery,
London's
employment
levels will
return to pre-
Covid levels
by the end of
2023

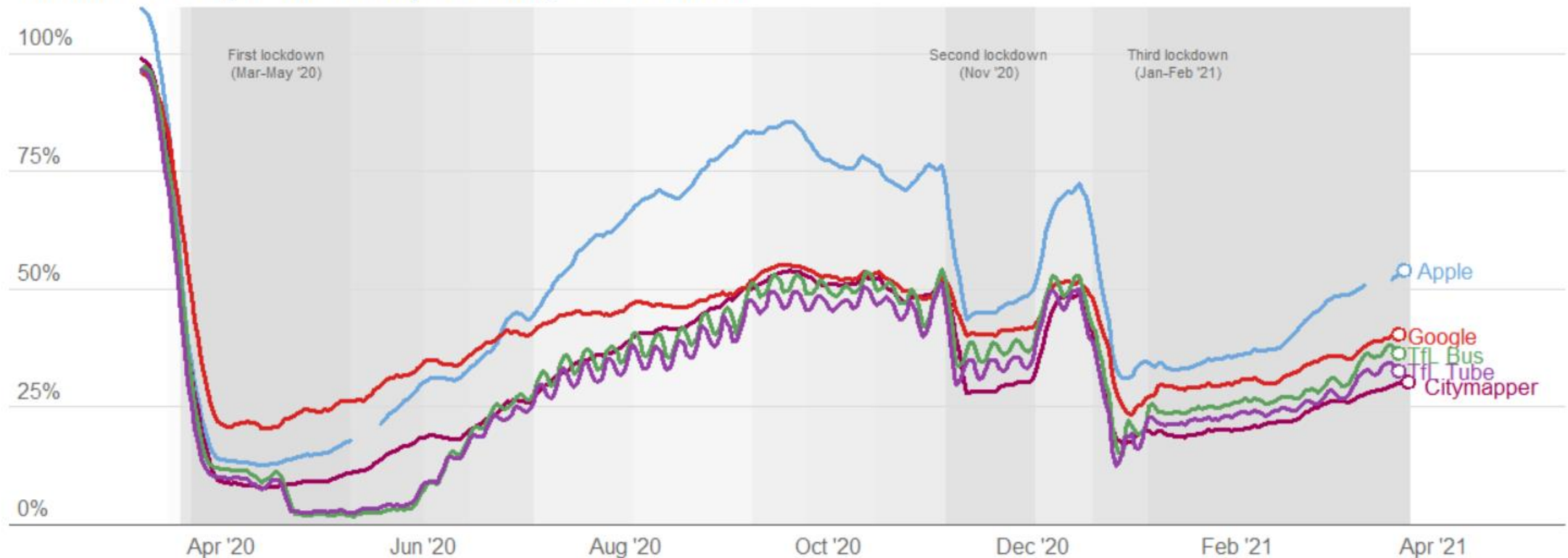


But if lengthy travel restrictions mean that foreign visitors don't return, or another wave of Covid delays the reopening of hospitality venues, the prospects could be much worse



Public transport use plummeted in spring 2020 and has only recovered slowly, blowing an even bigger hole in TFL's finances. Any decrease in air pollution seems to have been only temporary, as many people who have returned to work now commute by car

Indicators of public transport usage in London

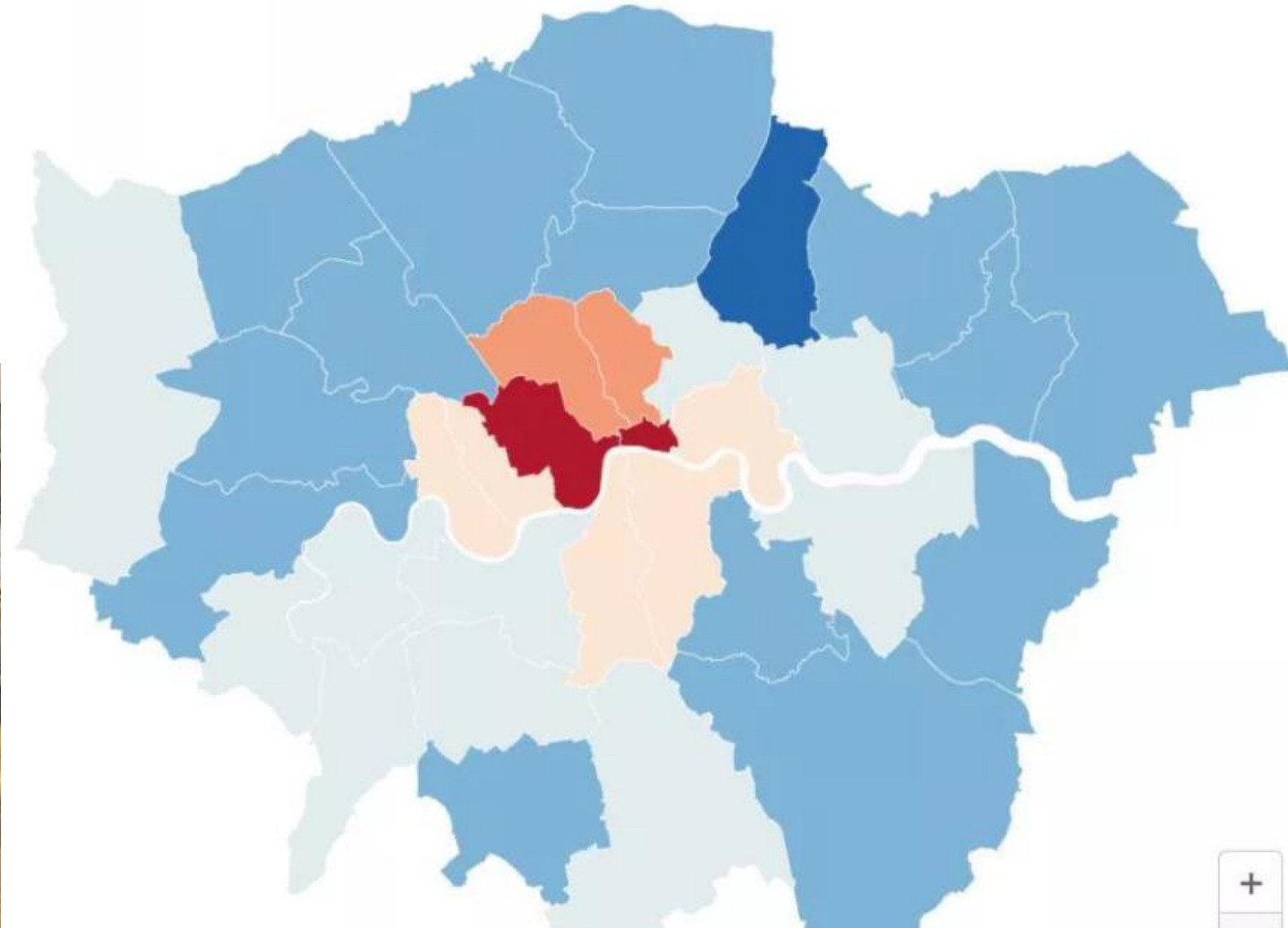


Sources: Citymapper (all journeys), Google (transit stations), Apple (public transport)

More WFH (“working from home”) may mean that suburban town centres have a renaissance, at the expense of central London. Philip Hubbard of KCL has even predicted that “Coronavirus could turn cities into doughnuts: empty centres but vibrant suburbs”.



London Retail/Recreation Overall Ave. % Change in Visitors (Feb-Nov 2020)



What are Covid's impacts on London development?

The effect on Housing development has been minimal so far – but may still bite later

- Molior report that the number of new starts on larger schemes (those with 20 or more private homes) in London fell to 17,860 in 2020, down from 19,640 in 2019 and the lowest annual total since 2012.
- The number of new homes completed also fell, from 22,210 in 2019 to 19,900 in 2020.
- Homebuilder's Federation data on the “planning pipeline” indicate that the number of new homes approved in London fell from a total of 50,350 in Q4 2019 and Q1 2020 (the highest six-month total on record) to just 28,150 in the following six months – a near 50% drop

Commercial development stalled

- Investor spend on central London commercial property tumbled by £3.9 billion in 2020 – a fall of 30% - though demand improved in the final quarter
- The City of London saw a 47 per cent year on year rise in the number of vacant commercial property units
- London's status as a financial capital may mean it recovers faster than other cities, however

Some predict that 20% of Oxford Street's shops will be permanently closed and boarded up post-Covid, because of the collapse of Arcadia, Debenhams and other retailers, though Topshop's new owner Asos says it may reopen on Oxford Street. It is a similar story on London's other high streets. There is as yet no clear plan what to do with all this redundant retail space.



Office space of the future will be more flexible, with more hot-desking and meeting space, as fewer and fewer people commute five days a week



Plans for many prestige towers in the City of London, at Finsbury Avenue and “Wodge” at 22 Bishopsgate, have not been derailed



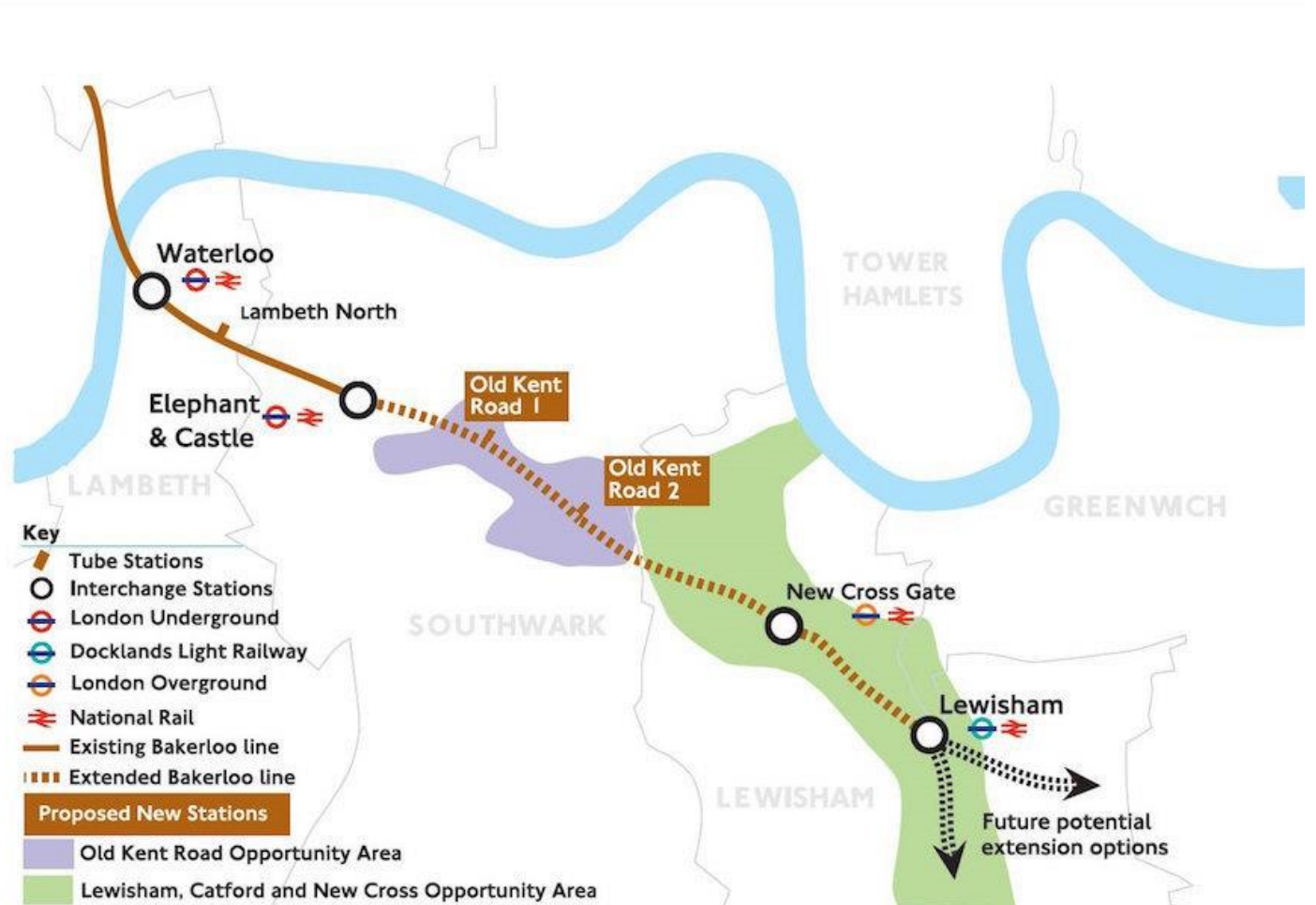
But some big mixed-use projects have been completely abandoned, such as the proposed new concert hall on the Museum of London's current site at London Wall, by the Barbican



Other plans have been scaled back, such as the redevelopment of Euston station for HS2. The new terminus, designed by Grimshaw, will now be “de-scoped”, with fewer platforms and more “oversite” development



Two new transport infrastructure projects – Crossrail 2 and the Bakerloo line extension to Lewisham - have been postponed yet again, and possibly won't ever be built. The news came just after the Bakerloo extension's route was safeguarded!



Covid's impact on retail has been so great that even Marks and Spencer's flagship Marble Arch store – right next door to Selfridge's on Oxford Street - faces redevelopment, with a huge reduction in retail floorspace and much of the upper floors being offices and flats



But some big plans are going ahead regardless – such as the Corporation of London's proposals to relocate Smithfield, New Spitalfields and Billingsgate markets to a single site on Dagenham Dock in 2026. Billingsgate was relocated to the Isle of Dogs in the 1980s, and Spitalfields moved to Leyton as recently as 1991!



Perhaps Covid's biggest long-term impact in London will be the many "Low Traffic Network" (LTN) experiments that have sprung up.

If this makes the city more walkable, liveable and less polluted it will be a big silver lining – as long as the opposition of some motorists is overcome



London has been a metropolis for 2,000 years. People love living in cities, and the loss of things we take for granted as city-dwellers has made us nostalgic for them



Further reading/ research - websites

- www.postwarbuildings.com – a very helpful guide to new buildings in London
- www.peterberthoud.co.uk – “DISCOVERING LONDON” – nuggets of London history from a practicing tour guide
- www.iwm.org.uk – the Imperial War Museum’s website with loads of resources about the impact that both world wars had
- www.derelictlondon.com/dereliction-and-beyondthen-and-now-photos.html - a fascinating look at how derelict buildings in London have been torn down or reused
- www.mappinglondon.co.uk – what it says on the tin
- www.londonist.com – off-the-wall stories about London past and present
- www.museumoflondon.org.uk – maps, artefacts and insight into London’s history from its biggest and best museum
- www.onlondon.co.uk – a blog by Dave Hill, formerly the Guardian’s London columnist
- data.london.gov.uk - the London Datastore, a good source of up-to-date data from the GLA

Further reading/ research - websites

- www.centreforcities.org – UK thinktank devoted to improving the prosperity and liveability of cities
- www.centreforlondon.org – ‘We are the capital’s dedicated think tank. We develop new solutions to London’s critical challenges and advocate for a fair and prosperous global city’.
- www.open-city.org.uk – Open City not only organises the London’s annual Open House festival, but also holds events and is a good source for films, books and podcasts
- Create Streets - www.createstreets.com – ‘Create Streets exists to help solve the housing crisis and to help communities and developers create beautiful street-based places of sufficient density that will be popular with the wider community’
- My own website – www.alexgrant.me – which carries several stories about development in London

Further reading/ research - Books

- **London: A Social History by Roy Porter** (Penguin, 1994) – a good single volume history of London – a bit out of date but still essential and lively reading
- **A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain By Owen Hatherley** (Verso, 2010) – a sardonic and very critical look at contemporary development in London and elsewhere
- **London's Contemporary Architecture – An Explorer's Guide by Ken Allison** (Architectural Press, 2006) – a detailed, offbeat and funny guide to new developments putting them in their historic context
- **Mapping London: making Sense of the City** by James Foxell (Black Dog, 2007) - a good guide to maps of London past and present
- **London 2001 by Peter Hall** (Unwin Hyman, 1989) – a 1980s forecast of what London would be like in 2001. Despite the erudition of the author he is more often wrong than right!
- **Concretopia by John Grindrod** (Old Street Publishing, 2013) – a fresh, generally sympathetic look at post-war development in London and elsewhere in the UK
- **Hugh Casson's London** (Little. Brown, 1983) – a personal look at London landmarks illustrated with the author's own watercolours

Comments and questions