

# Antique Survivors of a Lost Postal District

## The Hunt for Hackney's N.E. Signs

**By the N.E. Signs Appreciation Society (NESAS)**

Late on a sunny morning in April 2018, members of the N.E. Signs Appreciation Society gathered at The Clapton Hart on Lower Clapton Road. Their mission for the day was to seek out and document Hackney's surviving street signs referencing the former North Eastern (N.E.) postal district. This was the culmination of a careful planning process, which we describe in this article, alongside the results. But first it is worth setting the broader historical context for the work.

## The N.E. Postal District: A Brief History

Simon Morris has provided an excellent account of the history of London's postal districts and we recommend both of his articles.<sup>1</sup> We will avoid repeating much of what he says, but instead offer this potted history and timeline.

In 1856 London was divided into ten postal districts, comprising the eight points of the compass, plus the East and West central districts (E.C. and W.C.). This was to aid the more efficient sorting and delivery of letters across the Capital. (The experience of the service in those days was profoundly different to what we have now: posties in the Victorian era were doing hourly rounds, versus today's single daily delivery.)

In 1866, the N.E. postal district was folded into E., followed in 1868 by S. being split between S.W. and S.E.. This was ostensibly done as a cost-saving exercise, in part justified by the N.E. district being particularly small in terms of the number of addresses. However, there may be more to it given relations between the system's creator, Secretary to the Post Office Rowland Hill, and Surveyor to the Post Office Anthony Trollope who proposed the changes. In Simon Morris' detailed history of events he notes that Trollope was "supposed to have taken pleasure in undoing his [Hill's] work."<sup>2</sup>

While technically abolished, new signs adorned with N.E. continued to be manufactured and installed in Hackney well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, far beyond the formal implementation of the changes in 1869. In addition, the Post Office Guide allowed the use of N.E. on addressed letters from 1889 until the adoption of numerical postcodes in 1917. This later change is what finally brought an end to the postal district, although Morris notes Miss Bagust's recording of the local post office at Clapton Common still using a stamp with N.E. in 1921.<sup>3</sup>

There is evidence that public opposition to the change played a role in this continued use of the N.E. initials. There was first a failed petition in 1881. Objections were then raised about being

---

1 Morris, S. (1989) *The London Postal Districts*, in the London Topographical Society Newsletter, No.29, November, published by the London Topographical Society and Morris, S. (1990) *The London Postal Districts*, in The Terrier, no.18, Spring 1990, published by Friends of Hackney Archives.

2 *ibid*

3 Morris' Terrier article (*ibid*) cites this without reference.

branded as ‘Eastenders,’ and the impact of this on property values and insurance costs. In 1889, it was observed that residents and property owners:

“Have ever since been suffering from the place being associated and included in a district which is supposed to be unfortunately much lower in the social scale, and as of a work-a-day rather than of a genteel residential character.”<sup>4</sup>

It seems that this snobbery won out, at least in the medium term. Although it lives on through some of Hackney’s street signs, the N.E. postcode is now an irrelevance in London. It was subsequently given a new lease of life when it was assigned to Newcastle, with S being gifted to Sheffield.

## The 2018 Scavenger Hunt

Following initial meetings of the N.E. Signs Appreciation Society (NESAS) it was decided that a thorough survey of surviving N.E. signs was needed. A public ‘scavenger hunt’ was scheduled for 21 April 2018 and preparations began for tramping the streets.

Detailed online and printed maps identified the search area, which was divided into 19 sections for surveying. This process suggested that the surviving signs existed only within the overlap of the former Metropolitan Borough of Hackney and the one-time N.E. postal district. The hypothesis was later verified by data from the scavenger hunt, with signs found at most of the extremities, but not beyond, the former Metropolitan Borough. Given that the principal source of objections to the change were from those living in Hackney, and that the borough had responsibility for the management of street signs, this isn’t surprising.

On the day itself a dozen NESAS members turned up for the initial briefing, and to be armed with maps, clipboards, and details of how to record and share their findings. While most were from Hackney, other members came from West London and even up from Brighton to participate. With 19 sections to cover, most individuals and pairs had to take on two and this led to some holes in the initial coverage of the streets.

The scavenger hunt successfully identified 55 surviving N.E. signs. Work then continued continued to fill some of the holes, via a mixture of social media<sup>5</sup>, google streetview, and ongoing street walking. By early 2021, an additional ten signs had been verified and added to the google map used to plot the research results, bringing the total to 66.<sup>6</sup> One of these, on Adley Street, was thought to be lost at the time of the initial survey, but had in fact only been temporarily removed while redecoration work was undertaken on its host property.

## Design & Production

Alistair Hall’s excellent *London Street Signs*<sup>7</sup> provides a thorough account of the myriad sign formats and production methods across history in the capital. This has allowed the identification

---

4 Hackney and Kingsland Gazette, 9 January 1889, p.3

5 See the #NESigns hashtag on Twitter: [twitter.com/hashtag/NESigns](https://twitter.com/hashtag/NESigns)

6 The map can be accessed via [ghostsigns.co.uk/nesigns](https://ghostsigns.co.uk/nesigns)

7 Hall, A. (2020) *London Street Signs: A Visual History of London’s Street Nameplates*, Batsford.

of some of the core features of the surviving N.E. signs. The majority of these are vitreous enamel nameplates, set in a metal frame. This technique, invented at the end of the 1850s, was deployed extensively across London from the early 1860s. In 1869, at the time they were due to be amended, the Hackney Board of Works had 700–800 such signs within the N.E. postal district.<sup>8</sup>

The lettering on these vitreous enamel signs was designed by hand, bespoke for each street. This allowed different length names to fit within a standard width for the signs. The results are ultra-condensed forms on roads such as Colvestone Crescent, versus the generous space in evidence on April Street. Stylistic differences can be seen in the san-serif letterforms found on the signs, with some featuring characteristic curved letters with upright stems and angular terminals e.g. C on Cornthwaite Road and S on Wattisfield Road.<sup>9</sup> This style can also be found in many other London boroughs.

Another category of surviving signs are milk-glass nameplates (often referred to by the brand name Vitrolite), and these came after 1900. Their production involved the etching of glass which had been treated to make it opaque, and then pouring paint into the shallow recesses. The sign on Meynell Road is produced in this way, and its lettering is unique among the collection. However, this technique wasn't infallible – the paint has since fallen out of one sign on Victoria Park Road, and the same has happened to two on Bushberry Road, although at the time of writing one of these has its initial B still holding on.

A handful of signs deviate from these two main production techniques and lettering styles. A pair on the corner of Christie Road and Victoria Park Road (then Grove Villas) are set as tablets within the structure of the building, and would have been installed by the original developers. The tablets appear to have been cast in moulds, but successive layers of paint has led to the letters losing most of their definition. They are easily missed, and indeed they were during the live scavenger hunt.

Another pair, at different points along Richmond Road, are ceramic tablets set in simple cast iron mounts. This style, once prevalent in West London, can also be found on the two surviving street signs for the now-lost S. postal district.<sup>10</sup> These are likely contemporary, dating from between the introduction of the original postal districts in 1857, and the abolition of the N.E. district in 1866.

A final anomaly is found on Martello Street, which until 1938 was called Tower Street. In this case the new sign with the E.8. postcode is set above the vitreous enamel sign for Tower Street, separated by a panel with the word 'formerly' on it.

## Saving the Signs

Although the loss of the Adley Street sign proved to be a false alarm, these signs are potentially at risk. All that remains of one on Ickburgh Road is a rusting frame opposite Clapton Overground station. There are also unverified reports that some specimens on the map have been lost since

---

<sup>8</sup> *Tower Hamlets Independent*, 3 July 1869, p.6, cited in *London Street Signs* (ibid).

<sup>9</sup> Some of the signs executed in this style are found on roads that were built later than others, and it is possible that this style was also a later adoption in the borough.

<sup>10</sup> These are The Pavement and Lark Hall Rise, SW4

Pre-publication text from the N.E. Signs article in [Hackney History](#) (Volume 21).

the scavenger hunt.

There is definitely a market for vintage signs of all kinds, and one for Abbey Road NW8 was recently sold at auction for £30,000. It's not clear if our own efforts may have drawn unwelcome attention to the surviving N.E. signs by documenting their age, history, and value. Malicious actions can never be ruled out, but good news came in October 2020 Hackney Council acknowledged the signs' value, with the street management team lead taking direct action:

“I have given instructions to my team that any future heritage nameplates should not be removed without having first consulted Planning.”<sup>11</sup>

This was in response to a wider campaign looking at historic street signs across the borough, led by Amir Dotan from History of Stoke Newington, and the Hackney Society. It is a positive outcome in the context of N.E. signs, and we sincerely hope that many of those documented here will survive until their second centenary, and beyond.

## A Note on NESAS Membership

The N.E. Signs Appreciation Society (NESAS) is a very informal membership organisation that can be joined by simply declaring, out loud, “I appreciate N.E. Signs”. Fellowships are granted to those that alert the society to undocumented N.E. signs via email ([sam@ghostsigns.co.uk](mailto:sam@ghostsigns.co.uk)), with the inclusion of directions to allow verification.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone that participated in the 2018 scavenger hunt, and to the founding members of the N.E. Signs Appreciation Society.

---

<sup>11</sup> Private correspondence.

## **N.E. Timeline**

**1857**

London divided into ten postal districts.

**1866**

N.E. sorting office closed, and reassigned to E.

**1868**

Post Office guide formally replaces N.E. with E.

**1869**

Public instructed to use E. on former N.E. postal district addresses.

Hackney District Board of Works instructed to amend street signs.

**1881**

Resident and business petition opposing change rejected.

**1889**

Post Office permits continued use of N.E. on addresses.

**1909**

Lingwood Road built, and N.E. sign installed.

**1917**

Introduction of numbered postcodes.

**1921**

Last recorded use of N.E. postal district at Clapton Common post office.

**2018**

N.E. Signs scavenger hunt.

## Index of N.E. Signs

A map of these locations is maintained by the N.E. Signs Appreciation Society at [ghostsigns.co.uk/nesigns](http://ghostsigns.co.uk/nesigns).

1. Adley Street (West side, between Ashenden Road and Homerton Road)
2. Albion Square (Northeast corner)
3. Appleby Road (corner of Wilman Grove)
4. April Street (corner of Seal Street)
5. Bakers Hill (at the River Lea)
6. Banbury Road (corner of Groombridge Road)
7. Brett Passage (on Brett Road)
8. Bushberry Road (at the bend in the road)
9. Bushberry Road (far Eastern end)
10. Cassland Road (corner of Gascoyne Road)
11. Chailey Street (corner of Millfields Road)
12. Chelmer Road (corner of Glyn Road, North side)
13. Chelmer Road (corner of Glyn Road, South side)
14. Christie Road (corner of Victoria Park Road)
15. Clarence Place (corner of Clapton Square)
16. Clarence Road (opposite Hindrey Road)
17. Colne Road (corner of Roding Road)
18. Colvestone Crescent (corner of Cecilia Road)
19. Cornthwaite Road (corner of Thistlewaite Road)
20. Downs Road (corner of Powell Road)
21. Dunlace Road (corner of Median Road)
22. Durlston Road (just off Northwold Road)
23. Edenbridge Road (corner of Penshurst Road)
24. Elderfield Road (corner of Blurton Road)
25. Elderfield Road (corner of Clifden Road)
26. Elderfield Road (North East corner of Rushmore Road)
27. Elderfield Road (South East corner of Rushmore Road)

28. Eleanor Road (on pub, opposite London Lane)
29. Goulton Road (corner of Clarence Road)
30. Grove Villas (now Victoria Park Road, corner of Christie Road)
31. Lingwood Road (corner of Spring Hill)
32. London Fields West Side (just South of Richmond Road)
33. Malvern Road (North East corner of Middleton Road)
34. Malvern Road (South West corner of Middleton Road)
35. Mapledene Road (corner of Lansdowne Drive)
36. Median Road (corner of Clifden Road)
37. Mentmore Terrace (corner of Lamb Lane)
38. Meynell Road (corner of Cassland Road)
39. Mildenhall Road (corner of Chailey Street)
40. Millfields Road (opposite South East corner of Clapton Pond)
41. Millfields Road (corner of Chippendale Street)
42. Navarino Road (corner of Wilton Way)
43. Newick Road (opposite Northern corner of Clapton Pond)
44. Northwold Road (opposite Rossington Street)
45. Northwold Road (corner of Briggefords Close)
46. Ramsgate Street (opposite Ghent Way)
47. Richmond Road (corner of Malvern Road)
48. Richmond Road (South East corner of Eleanor Road)
49. Roding Road (corner of Colne Road)
50. Rossington Street (corner of Upper Clapton Road)
51. Rushmore Road (North West corner of Elderfield Road)
52. Rushmore Road (North East corner of Elderfield Road)
53. Rushmore Road (corner of Glyn Road)
54. Saratoga Road (corner of Mayola Road)
55. Sewdley Street (corner of Millfields Road)
56. Springfield Gardens (corner of Springfield)
57. St Philip's Road (North West corner of Forest Road)

Pre-publication text from the N.E. Signs article in [Hackney History](#) (Volume 21).

58. St Philip's Road (North East corner of Forest Road)
59. Stamford Grove West (corner of Oldhill Street)
60. Terrace Road (corner of Church Crescent)
61. Thornby Road (corner of Thornby Road)
62. Tower Street (now Martello Street, corner of Martello Terrace)
63. Victoria Park Road (corner of Redruth Road)
64. Victoria Park Road (on pub at roundabout with Lauriston Road)
65. Wattisfield Road (corner of Cotesbach Road)
66. Wattisfield Road (corner of Thornby Road)