THE PECKHAM COMPLEX 2013
A Cultural and Social Snapshot of Inner London
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Editors’ Introduction

The Peckham Complex aims to give an honest portrayal of a complex community. It is not a government or academic report. Rather, it is a snapshot of the area, offering insights into different aspects of people’s lives – cultural, economic, social. We also comment on the relationship between residents and their surroundings, the ways in which cultures overlap and the realities of young people’s engagement in public life.

Peckham’s fortunes have fluctuated over the years and its public image has shifted accordingly. Stigmas once attached to Peckham have, in recent years, given way to a better understanding of the area’s development, though this process is far from complete. We do not wish to rose-tint nor denigrate life in the area – we do, however, hope that we can play a role in identifying mythologies and discouraging misconceptions.

Geographically, ‘Peckham’ is understood in different ways by different people. Situated in the middle of the London Borough of Southwark and lying in the Camberwell and Peckham parliamentary constituency, the area lies roughly two miles to the south of London Bridge, between Camberwell to the west and New Cross to the east. Our focus centres on the Lane ward and its surrounding areas, including South Camberwell, Brunswick Park, Peckham, Livesey, Nunhead, Peckham Rye and East Dulwich [see map].

Our thoughts developed out of discussions with friends and residents who live, work and socialise here. Every conversation revealed a deep sense of attachment to the area and hopes for its success, as well as an understanding of the challenges that Peckham faces.

Much of the research is based on publicly available material, and we have attempted to link to sources and further reading where possible. We intend to build upon this initial work and would welcome any feedback from readers that could feed into future research, as we pursue opportunities for an in-depth project covering all aspects of life in Peckham. We believe that the area would benefit enormously from further study over an extended period, and hope to give a direct voice to parts of the community that currently feel under-represented.

If you have any thoughts, share them with us by emailing: feedback@peckhamcomplex.com
Southwark Electoral Ward Map
Peckham is on the move: you can see it, feel it, and sense that the shape of London’s map is soon going to be different.

Stephen Bayley, Peckham resident
Peckham society, shaped over the years by a combination of changing economic fortunes and waves of immigration, has its own aspirations and expectations. Many factors have contributed to the area’s identity – industrial decline and the fragility of the post-war settlement; stigmas attached to its northern estates towards the end of the last century; the emergence of an artistic youthful image in recent years. A diverse citizenry adapts to change, yet a number of groups and individuals continue to experience disadvantage and isolation.

Most residents are generally satisfied with Peckham as a place to live. Despite real and perceived worries – levels of respect, clean streets, access to public services – neighbourhood relations are robust. Community members want more opportunities to participate in local decision-making, with concerns sometimes addressed through grassroots initiatives or familial support networks. ‘There’s always been people doing good things in Peckham,’ commented one woman who grew up and continues to live in the area. ‘It’s much more “village-y” now, though we were quite a close-knit community here in the 70s. The 80s were pretty brutal, but there seems to be a spark coming back to it.’

Southwark remains one of the most deprived boroughs in the country, and Peckham is the most deprived part of the borough. There are high rates of economic inactivity and above-average levels of unemployment – Camberwell and Peckham as an area has only three available jobs for every
four working-age residents. Employment growth has been historically weak and the job market is precarious, especially for younger people.

Peckham has a high number of entitlement claimants, many of whom are in work or volunteering, yet recipients of state assistance are at risk of eliciting unsympathetic reactions. Some residents have no qualifications, yet anxieties around ideas of ‘fairness’ and ‘responsibility’ can turn into resentment. In a difficult economic climate, the delivery of welfare risks becoming a desperate scramble for resources.

People are concerned about civility and crime in the area – from antisocial behaviour to violent activity. ‘I think Peckham Rye needs updating and maybe some type of rules against littering, especially if you own a shop and a salon,’ one local woman commented. In terms of crime, Peckham is among the 10% most deprived areas in the country. This is frequently understood as a law enforcement issue, but it should also be considered as a symptom of jarring economic and social change. Outbreaks of public disorder, as demonstrated by the 2011 disturbances which affected a number of urban areas across England, can often lead to calls for punitive state measures to reimpose stability. However, Peckham launched a community response, symbolised by the ‘Peace Wall’: thousands of largely hopeful post-it notes on hoardings covering the broken windows outside Poundland.

The often-hidden groups in Peckham attract far less public attention, and many are marginalised from community participation. The 1 in 10 people over the age of 65 – some born or married into the area – can feel
overwhelmed by changes taking place over the decades, though others embrace the area’s development. Mental health admissions in the borough are higher than the national average, and many disabled people and those with long-term health problems experience *multiple disadvantages through social exclusion, lack of resources and barriers to work*. Refugees are among the most disenfranchised: rules restricting their access to employment, benefits and other services during the application process put them at further disadvantage.

As austerity and the effects of post-modernity increasingly prioritise individualism over commonality, Peckham remains broadly *inclusive*, with *residents encouraged to feel ownership of their area*. Newcomers and visitors are drawn to Peckham for many reasons, including its facilities and location, but above all its people and their sociability. Though there are serious issues still to address, Peckham society has demonstrated its ability to adapt to social and demographic change. Discontent can be transformed into unified, positive action.
The reality of living in Peckham, and most probably many inner city areas, is completely different from the picture portrayed by lazy journalists who class it as dangerous and unfriendly. People here are good to each other, generous with their time and resources and smile a lot.

Polly Raymond, Peckham resident
As a socially mixed, gentrifying area at the fringes of inner London, Peckham is a diverse, overlapping cultural milieu. 'Multiculturalism' as a concept has taken a knock in recent times, eliciting anxious noises from political figures across Europe, in part driven by tabloid editorials bemoaning its perceived failures. But these criticisms fail to understand the reality of everyday interaction between different cultures in the same geographic space – at schools and surgeries, on buses and trains, in parks and crèches, at the high street or in the workplace.

Significant demographic changes took place in the latter half of the twentieth century London, with first generation migrants arriving from all corners of the globe, attracted to life at the edges of a modern metropolis. Newcomers settled in Peckham, joining families resident in the area for generations and those who arrived from neighbouring boroughs, staffing public services, opening businesses, and enrolling their children in local schools and colleges. Changing public attitudes over the decades towards immigration and migrants themselves (some from former British colonies) offered ample opportunity for stirring up cross-cultural tensions. Yet unlike a number of other ethnically-mixed urban areas with high levels of deprivation, the far right failed to find a foothold in local politics.
Peckham continues to welcome migrants from overseas, and a high proportion of current residents were born outside the UK and the EU. Around 4 in 10 pupils in local schools have a first language other than English, with over a hundred different languages spoken in the wider borough. Peckham is now home to a host of nationalities – for example, the largest Nigerian community in the country. Conversations held in Yoruba may resonate in Nigerian-owned businesses and some of Peckham’s newer churches and mosques.

Rye Lane’s economy of independent small businesses, whose owners and staff come from different national backgrounds, finds Ghanaian, Kurdish, Caribbean, and Afghan outlets successfully operating alongside each other. ‘There is no tension here,’ commented a longtime Kurdish stallholder beside one of Peckham Rye’s railway arches. ‘I work here for 10 to 11 hours a day and I love it. A lot of my customers are African-Caribbean, so I get to find out all about their cultures.’
In recent years, Peckham has undergone a degree of gentrification, increasing both business rates and house prices, and altering its image. For London’s economically better-off, many holding graduate-level jobs, the relative affordability of property (in newly-built private apartments, for example), and good transport connections to central London prove highly attractive. Many newer residents are working to win greater recognition for their neighbourhood, challenging externally-imposed narratives around ghettoisation and supposed stagnation. Speaking to the BBC, Emma Jackson (an academic studying the areas around Rye Lane and Bellenden Road) argued that the new gentrifiers were not ‘ignoring’ long-standing residents, but instead championing the area’s cultural diversity. People would proudly tell her ‘we are a very vibrant multicultural neighbourhood. We’re very different from East Dulwich up the road…’

In Peckham, people are not preoccupied with difference, and there is a measure of solidarity between newcomers and those based in the area for a generation or longer. As one young woman who has lived in the area for the past 8 years commented, ‘You tend to get a mixture of people in Peckham which is good, rather than just one set of people.’ Cross-cultural friendships between people continue to develop – be it in economic, educational or social arenas. Diversity drives Peckham’s potential.
Peckham is becoming one of the most talked about cultural scenes in London – long may this continue!

Rohan Silva, No10
In the middle of a borough that is home to the world’s most visited modern art gallery – Tate Modern – Peckham plays a unique role in what has been called London’s ‘artists’ quarter’. Its cultural scene has been internationally praised for its originality, and in an industry routinely dismissed as elitist or exclusive, there seem to be attempts to broaden the social base of artists involved in projects.

Peckham has established itself as a creative-cultural hub populated by an innovative community of artists. An informal network of creative organisations has formed, in industries including architecture, fine arts, crafts, design, music, the media, film, and publishing. By drawing attention to an area, creative agencies can contribute to its local economy. Benefiting from comparatively low rents, proximity to artistic educational institutions and support for public art, Peckham’s ‘creatives’ act as employers, provide activities for residents, and run projects considered by the wider community. Goldsmiths University and Camberwell College of Arts educate and train hopeful art students – former alumni include Damien Hirst, Sam Taylor Wood, Mark Wallinger, and RB Kitaj, and the musicians Florence Welch, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Syd Barrett.

Peckham’s residents are interested in seeking out culture, with over half visiting the borough’s museums and galleries. Public art, it is sometimes claimed, provides non-exclusionary access to culture, inspiring citizens and improving community wellbeing. Whether this can be quantified is questionable – however, it does have a real effect on existing spaces, such as the revitalised zone around Bellenden Road, which features artwork designed by local artists including bollards by Antony Gormley and mosaics by Tom Phillips. There have also been attempts to launch cultural outreach programmes for young people in the area – for example, South London Gallery’s ‘Art Assassins’ programme.

A number of initiatives in Peckham have attracted international audiences, helping change public perceptions of the area for the better. These include the award-winning Peckham Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and Turner Prize-winning Gillian Wearing’s conceptual art. Away from the spotlight, Peckham’s artist collectives organise nights for friends with whatever they can lay their hands on – projectors, art supplies, PA systems. ‘It’s all very home grown – a lot of people do things for free,’
commented one former Camberwell graduate working in the area. Student loans ‘appear to be totally ubiquitous’, with people often finding themselves financially stretched – on the cusp of the ‘reluctant service class and part-time precariat,’ as our commentator described.

Mentioning that ‘institutions themselves take on different characters depending on the night’, she gave the example of Canavan’s pool club off Rye Lane, which ‘most days of the week caters to local pool players but is occasionally heaving with every young thing in the south east.’ Events in the area are hosted by the scene’s most enterprising groups – some established, some nascent – including Auto Italia, the Review Bookshop, Lucky PDF, The Montpelier, Nutbrook Studios, Hank Dogs, CLF, Garudio Studiage, Public House Projects, Off Modern, Copeland Book Market, Arcadia Missa, Rhythm Section and Scrawl. Like Katy B and Giggs before them, a number of Peckham musicians perform in the area – Midland, Ben UFO, Dan Avery, Night Slugs, Cage and Aviary, Dauwd and Pictures Music. ‘There’s a great dance scene around here,’ commented one local young woman. ‘You can always go out and have a bit of a boogie.’

There is no doubt that Peckham’s cultural scene has played a role in transforming its public image, especially amongst younger people unburdened by past negative associations and less inclined to buy into an idea that above-average levels of economic deprivation should necessarily stymie an area’s potential. Peckham residents are, generally speaking, cultured, and creativity is largely self-initiated, with cultural entrepreneurs often given space to try something new.
Transport is brilliant…
It’s an ok place to live
because of all the shops
– just a few tweaks here
and there!

Sharnte Edwards,
Peckham resident
Built Environment

London’s developing skyline of ‘competing icons’– the Millennium Dome, the Gherkin, and the Olympic Stadium, all taking their place alongside St Paul’s Cathedral, the Palace of Westminster and Battersea Power Station – can be seen as an exercise in showy triumphalism at a time of declining influence. Peckham’s urban scenery is more modest, retaining a distinct identity amongst the surrounding neighbourhoods. The area possesses its share of striking buildings, many of which dominate the landscape. At the bottom of Rye Lane, for example, the former Jones & Higgins department store building bears a remarkable resemblance to the 15th century clocktower at the Piazza San Marco in Venice – with Peckham’s commuters, shoppers, and schoolchildren standing in for gawping crowds of tourists.

Though poorly designed and neglected spaces still exist, Peckham is home to buildings and streets of considerable character. There is an eclectic mix of architectural styles: visitors to Peckham High Street can view architecture dating from the 17th through to the 21st centuries within the space of a few metres. With its high residential density, the area’s mixed housing sees social, rental and privately-owned housing occupying Georgian properties and glass-fronted new-builds, often on the same street.
Significant features of the built environment include the multi-screen cinema and multi-storey car park set back from Rye Lane on Moncrieff Place. Developed on the site of a former supermarket, PeckhamPlex is an innovative and inexpensive independent cinema. The upper levels of the car park have hosted Bold Tendencies, attracting half a million visitors over the past 6 years with specially-commissioned sculpture, artistic events and the famed Franks Café, with its panoramic views across London.

The architecturally award-winning Peckham Library and its adjacent square – a ‘deliberately modern, highly visible project’ developed between 1993 and 2000 – was the subject of heavy investment, intended to appeal to diverse sections of the community. There are over half a million annual visits to its premises, mostly by local residents. It currently houses a mediateque, a ‘one-stop shop’, educational facilities, a health centre and a creative arts zone, Peckham Space – an attempt to encourage the local community to interact with the public realm, with an aim to increase participation in the arts and encourage public expression.

Well connected to central London and its suburbs by road and rail, passengers on public transport can get to Vauxhall, London Bridge, Shoreditch or Victoria in under 20 minutes. The latest transport initiatives intended to open up the area include the London Overground extension in December 2012 to Peckham Rye and Queens Road Peckham. Occupied premises near transport hubs have often been seen as undesirable, yet under the arches near Peckham Rye station are popular small ventures like Bar Story and the Sunday Painter studios, demonstrating an innovative use of space.
Another creative entrepreneur took over nearby premises five years ago: ‘I thought, how can I help put Peckham on the map?’ His space hosts theatre, workshops, concerts, and club nights in a previously-threatened building. ‘I proposed we do stuff that really mattered to the community,’ he commented. ‘When we got going, my wife and I painted the place, started building stuff, got our friends in to help put on events – the longer it was open, the better the profile with more money coming in that we could invest in the project.’ The initiative is now self-supporting.

Affordable, decent-quality housing is a priority for many people in the area and a high percentage of Peckham residents live in social housing. The UK’s housing system has fundamentally changed since the ‘right-to-buy’ scheme of the 1980s extended home ownership, in turn having a huge effect on affordability, and creating social housing supply shortfalls. At the same time, housing estates in the borough developed a reputation for poor quality, design, and maintenance, increasingly associated with poverty, crime and antisocial behaviour. The 21st-century gentrification of the area has seen rent hikes stretching some low-income households initially attracted to the area by affordable living costs. This has been accompanied by the demolition of certain neglected complexes – the Wood Dene Estate on Peckham High Street-Queens Road for example.

A product of disparate forces, Peckham’s built environment is changing but retains a unique character developed over many years. Though dense and built-up, with several neglected areas and poorly maintained edifices causing concerns, Peckham does not simply house a collection of worn-out structures and crumbling facades, as its former public image would have you believe. Rather, it is home to a number of striking landmarks – new and historic – marking it out from surrounding neighbourhoods, and existing space is often put to original uses.
A few words on Peckham’s sharp decline? The lure of the suburbs in the post war period, de-population, slum & street clearance and ‘comprehensive re-development’ in north Peckham. The winding up of industrial activity in Peckham...

Benedict O’Looney, local architect and historian
Economic Development

Peckham is only a few miles away from the symbols of London’s economic strength. Just over the River Thames lies the City of London to the north-west, and Canary Wharf to the north-east. The decline of traditional industries and a growing emphasis on the ‘knowledge economy’ posed a potential threat to Peckham’s local economy of co-existing independent retailers and microbusinesses. A commuting workforce, taking advantage of relatively affordable housing and transport links to a rejuvenated Docklands area, could well have taken its spending power elsewhere. Taking into account these economic pressures, Peckham’s ecosystem of distinct and varied trades seems to have coped remarkably well – indeed, its economic diversity is one of the area’s major attractions, with residents and neighbours often favouring local stores rather than travelling outside the borough.

There are a couple of thousand businesses based in the wider Peckham area. The vast majority are micro- or small-medium enterprises, including town centre start-ups and independent initiatives founded by migrants from overseas, and often staffed by family and friends. These smaller ventures play a unique role in sustaining employment, and provide social networks
for the staff and customers. The popular commercial zone around Rye Lane and Peckham High Street hosts around 400 businesses. Rye Lane is one of south-east London’s busiest shopping streets – an energetic high street of market stalls, converted houses, occupied railway arches and purpose-built facilities. Grocery shops, low-cost retailers, takeaways and African-Caribbean beauty parlours exist alongside identikit chain stores and shopping malls such as the Aylesham Centre. Khan’s Bargain store, serving the locality with its vast array of foodstuffs and household essentials, operates down the road from the budget international supermarket chain Lidl.

The nearby Bellenden Road area is quieter and more residential, with restaurants, delis and boutiques set among corner shops and residential properties. Peckham is home to a large number of specialist stores which are making a name for themselves outside the local and neighbouring areas. Food outlets Persepolis (a small store selling Persian produce on Peckham High Street), No 67 (a lively café/restaurant next to South London Gallery on Peckham Road) and Melange (an inventive chocolatier on Bellenden Road) are examples of ventures attracting regional and national attention.

Due to good transport links, Peckham also deals with a large number of commuters. The lively night-time activity of pop-ups, exhibitions and free gigs draws in younger crowds from other parts of London, especially during summer. Noting the ‘great variety of small independent businesses
in Peckham’, the owners of a popular cafe commented, ‘We should be wary of following the blueprint that other parts of London have shown – Spitalfields, for example. We don’t want small traders pushed out in a drive for aggressive redevelopment and gentrification.’

Clusters of disassociated companies successfully work in the same spaces. The Bussey Building – a narrow factory building alongside the railway line, built on the site of a rifle range in the mid-19th century – and Copeland Industrial Park house a café, artist studios and theatre groups alongside faith centres, storage and shipping companies. The relatively affordable business rates which make the area enticing for the creation of new work are now rising, yet distinctive start-ups, many in the light manufacturing or creative industries, have demonstrated their potential to flourish in Peckham given the chance.

Community support for the local economy – diverse and distinct – and investment in skills training are critical for Peckham’s future prosperity. Although superficially localised, its self-initiated businesses started by creative entrepreneurs have shown that they can attract admiration from far afield. Against the prevailing discourse that surrounds regeneration – whereby faceless national chains are lured in with the promise of cheap rates and large profits – Peckham’s economic diversity and connections with local people could prove its main draw.
I don’t think I’ve known any contemporaries who haven’t been, at one point or another, flat out broke.

Isabella Toledo, working in Peckham
In 21st century Britain, young people find themselves in a difficult position – chastised, infantilised, feared. They must put up with accusations of apathy and an aversion to public engagement, yet under-21s in work can legally be paid well below the minimum wage, and 16-17 years olds are not able vote in general elections. Simultaneously, while lurid tales of ‘teenage gangs’ regularly feature in the popular press, England and Wales has an age of criminal responsibility far younger than its European Union counterparts or by long-standing international human rights standards – 10 years old. For most of your adolescence, you are old enough to be punished, but too young to have equal citizenship rights.

Furthermore, London – the world’s fifth richest city – has one of the highest child poverty rates amongst developed countries and the one of the lowest levels of child wellbeing in Europe. In inner London, 4 in 10 children live below the poverty line. Yet this background of deprivation and generational inequality does not necessarily lead to young people’s social marginalisation – and nowhere is this more evident than in Peckham.

Young people make up a significant proportion of residents in the area – around 1 in 4 people living locally are under 16 – and Peckham is projected to remain youthful in future. ‘Our midwife was a legend,’ commented one recent father. ‘Peckham breastfeeding café was ace,’ he continued, discussing the support workshop based on the 5th floor of Peckham Library. ‘Non-judgmental and effective.’ For some raising a family
in the area, finding childcare support that adequately meets their needs can be a cause of stress. At a time when state services are in danger of being reduced, families may find themselves paying £50-£80 a day or around £1000 per month for a private nursery place.

There are thousands of children and young people progressing through local schools and colleges in Peckham. Many embrace learning and personal development in Peckham’s classrooms, and educational outcomes have improved in recent times. Others are more indifferent to education – a quest for grades can be disheartening in a schools system where achievement is often measured by exam results. The majority of pupils excluded from schools in Southwark are from Peckham and the area has a high number of young people at risk of offending.

But this is not the whole story. Young people are aware of the complexity of their area and are keen to address its problems – littering and antisocial behaviour, drug use, crime and violence. The economic concerns of children worried about their family’s financial security include the cost of transport, educational accessories, sports kit. But there is also an understanding of the community and its development. ‘Peckham has come a long way,’ commented one young woman who grew up in Peckham. ‘It used to be looked down upon, but I’ve always felt safe here.’

The wellbeing of children and young people is a concern. Significant deprivation affects the standard of living in the area, increasing the risk of social marginalisation and emotional traumas. Alongside material factors, family relationships play an important role in child wellbeing – with the
most vulnerable in need of proper care and attention in order to achieve their goals. A study of the wider area by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted that, given sufficient support, some Peckham residents are willing to sign up to voluntary parenting programmes, which may help play a role in improving child educational and behavioural development.

Peckham provides a fertile creative space, and young people’s experience of cultural and social life here seems largely positive, though improved activities for teenagers and better sports facilities remain priorities for many residents. There are established centres offering sport and recreation facilities for young people –the Damilola Taylor Centre and Bradfield Youth Club in North Peckham for example – yet occasionally people create their own informal campaigns and networks. Projects such as The Movement Factory, a street dance social enterprise, and SE15 Young Filmmakers Competition have provided some teenagers with creative activities to immerse themselves in. Environments crossing age and social groups allow young people to better explore their identities. ‘You meet loads of people from different backgrounds,’ commented one young woman. ‘For example, I’m really into art and it has allowed me to follow my interests and get involved.’

Despite high levels of deprivation, young people provide Peckham with much of its potential and excitement. It is a stimulating environment, where young people can find space to create their own identities. Background or family income should never be an obstacle to young people’s participation in the public realm.
Conclusions

• In-depth primary research into Peckham is needed to gain a better understanding of the area and its residents. There is a wealth of public material available on Peckham’s history, but not enough on Peckham’s present. Developing a local story must be inclusive and driven from the grassroots, especially to engage with historically marginalised social groups.

• Civil society organisations should be given a voice in order to influence decisions about the place they live. People often show a willingness to participate in improving the area and tackling social problems. Initiatives should look to reflect the needs and concerns of Peckham’s diverse make-up.

• Focus attention on the area’s children and young people - Peckham’s greatest asset. They are well-placed to address Peckham’s current challenges, demonstrating a clear understanding of the area’s complexity. Narrowing economic inequalities and opening up space to explore identities should be at the heart of any strategy to improve young people’s wellbeing.

• Unlock the potential of the existing built environment. Many of Peckham’s new and historic buildings add to the area’s character, and although a number of places suffer from neglect, residents often put space to innovative use.

• Investment in skills, training and job creation programmes is needed for those in precarious economic positions, including many young people. This will better protect residents from fluctuations in the local and national economy.

• Social cohesion should not be jeopardised by cutting essential services and loosening the safety net for the area’s most vulnerable. Economic policy decisions should consider the effects on the community as a whole, not simply benefit a small number of groups and individuals.

• Support sustainable creative-cultural industries, which are a driving force in the area. The cultural scene has played a crucial role in shifting perceptions of Peckham in recent years. Creative organisations should seek to be inclusive and where possible their projects should connect with hard-to-reach groups.
• In relation to local retailers, residents should be asked how they want their town centre and high streets to look like. Peckham’s independent and diverse local economy is one of the area’s major attractions.
Endnotes

Society

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Connecting Voices: CHILDREN PLEDGES FOR A BETTER COMMUNITY Report, 2009
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Peckham and Nunhead Free Film Festival website
Movement Factory website
• Called ‘Pecheham’ in the 11th century Domesday book, by the 18th century the area was widely famed for its market gardens. Peckham and its surroundings underwent significant suburbanisation during the 19th century – economically active and home to a prospering population.

• The poet and artist William Blake claimed to have seen a vision of angels in Peckham Rye as a child. In his notebook he described ‘A tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough with stars.’

• As the population increased and commercial activity intensified, Peckham became an active business, trade and transport hub. A branch of the Grand Surrey Canal was built, benefiting industry, and an omnibus service began in the mid-19th century, just before Peckham Rye railway station opened. Employers who put down roots in the area included the Peckham Mutual Permanent Building Society; a brewery; a piano factory; athletic goods, shirts and corset makers; gas-fitters; dry-cleaners; a herbalist, a pewterer; a carver, and a gilder.

• Peckham became renowned as a major shopping district from the mid-19th century. Large stores co-existed with small competing outlets. Jones & Higgins on Rye Lane was a leading department store, attracting
shoppers from miles around. In 1914, the west side of Rye Lane featured 13 tailors; eight shoe shops; six tobacconists; four confectioners, butchers and hairdressers; three ironmongers, glass and china dealers, watch-makers, chemists, and coal merchants; two photographers, fishmongers, newsagents and undertakers; and one music seller, florist, and light fittings dealer.

- The cultural history of Peckham is rich and varied. The Rosemary Branch tavern in Southampton Street hosted cricket, horse racing and pigeon-shooting, and a flourishing theatre could be found on Peckham High Street in the late 18th century. By 1914, 10 cinemas were located on Rye Lane and Peckham High Street. In 1940, residents holed up in the Odeon cinema embarked on seven hours of community singing to keep spirits up during an air raid.

- The Peckham Experiment was a groundbreaking health study conducted in the early-mid 20th century and based around the Pioneer Health Centre on Queens Road. 950 local families signed up to be monitored, and were given access to a range of facilities including a gym, boxing ring, swimming pool, dance hall, crèche, library and café.

- Migrants arrived from all corners of the globe, attracted to life in the modern metropolis. Newcomers added to the area’s diversity, staffing public services, and opening businesses, with their children studying in local schools and colleges.

- The latter part of the 20th century saw a prevailing public discourse of decline and impoverishment develop around Peckham. The industrial
base collapsed, leading to diminished employment prospects and a range of social problems.

- Public understanding of Peckham was overshadowed by stories related to crime. In 2000, a 10-year-old Nigerian schoolboy, Damilola Taylor, bled to death in the stairwell of a block of flats in the North Peckham estate, and the area became the focus of press attention for instances of gun and gang violence. In 2011, Peckham was one of the areas where the London riots occurred. The disturbances had the potential to create further tension but instead the local community responded positively.

- The 21st century has seen a remarkable shift in the way the area presents itself, challenging previous negative images. Peckham is now a cross-cultural home for optimism, excitement and creativity, and a destination for lovers of inter-cultural life.
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