

Abney Park

Historical Timeline

Pre 1700

Prehistoric to Medieval

Prehistoric (2.5 million–10,000 BCE):

People have been living in Stoke Newington for many thousands of years. In the 19th century, archaeologists found evidence that Palaeolithic (early Stone Age) people lived in the Stoke Newington area, including in and around Abney Park. Finds included hand axes, various stones used in the production of tools, and other implements.

Roman (43–410 CE):

The Roman road known as Ermine Street ran just to the east of Abney Park, roughly along the course of the present-day A10. A handful of known Roman settlements, at Enfield, Ware and Cheshunt, believed to be mansions (Roman stopping places) were located along Ermine Street as it headed out of Londinium (the Roman name for London). However, there are no known Roman settlements located within the Stoke Newington area.



Saxon/Early medieval era (410–1066):

Saxon settlements following the disappearance of the Romans developed all over present-day Hackney, with many farms and villages developing along the line of Ermine Street.

Documentary evidence from around 940 AD details the gifting of the manor of Newington, (known as Neutone), by King Aethelstan to Saint Paul’s Church. The Domesday Book (1085-6) records Newington as under the control of Saint Paul’s, with enough land for 2 1/2 ploughs and a population of four villagers and 37 cottagers. There was a manor house and land here until the 17th Century.

Medieval (500–1500 CE):

The village of Stoke Newington continued into the medieval period, with Stoke Newington Church Street first recorded in 1329. It was also known as Newington Lane or Newton Lane and was the focus of the settlement, which also spread along the line of Stoke Newington High Street. This settlement would have been surrounded by woodland and fields, with several farm homesteads sprinkled throughout.

The manor house of Stoke Newington is thought to have been located along Stoke Newington Church Street, close to St Mary’s church, with the demesne (land associated with the manor) occupying most of the lands to the north.

01 | Abney House

Watercolour by J. Buckler, 1836

© Hackney Archives





02 | Fleetwood House

Watercolour by TH Shepherd, 1844

© Hackney Archives

Period: 1700–1843 Abney House and Fleetwood House

The site of Abney Park Cemetery was established in 1840 from the grounds of Abney House and Fleetwood House.

Abney House was built on a large piece of land that was bought in 1688 by Thomas Gunston. It included fields, orchards, houses and outbuildings. It was here that Abney House (Fig 1) was built fronting Church Street in 1700, the year of Gunston's death. The house was bought by Sir Thomas Abney MP (1640–1722), who was one of the founders of the Bank of England, and Lord Mayor of London from 1700 to 1701.

Later, Abney House was the home of the renowned nonconformist and hymn writer Isaac Watts and the family of Lady Abney.

In about 1638 Sir Edward Hartopp purchased land on the north side of Church Street. The building later known as Fleetwood House (roughly on the site of the present fire station) was completed by 1635. In 1664 Mary Hartopp married Lt General Charles Fleetwood (1618–1692), and the property became Fleetwood House. (Fig 2) It was one of the main centres of dissent against the established Church in the second half of the seventeenth century.



03 | View of Abney Park Cemetery

Showing the Isaac Watts statue and the chapel
Engraving c. 1840–1850

© Hackney Archives



04 | Isaac Watts

The Isaac Watts statue in Abney Park today

© Abney Park Trust

Period: 1712–1748

Isaac Watts

Dr Isaac Watts was a famous nonconformist English Christian minister and theologian. He was a prolific hymn writer, poet, and logician. He is credited with writing some 750 psalms, the most famous still sung in churches today, which earned him the title “The Father of English Hymnody”. His hymns have been translated into many other languages which makes him known internationally.

Watts’ connection to Stoke Newington lasted much of his life. He studied at the Dissenting Academy for nonconformists at Newington Green, tutored locally and spent 36 years living in the household of Sir Thomas and Lady Mary Abney until his death in 1748. The statue commemorating him can still be seen in Abney Park today. (Fig 3–4)

**Isaac Watts
lived at Abney
House between
1712–1748.**



05 | Giant Fan Palm

Originating from Mauritius, being taken from Loddiges Nursery to Crystal Palace, August 1854

© The Illustrated London News Group



06 | Veteran Tree with Bracket Fungus

© Russell Miller

Period: 1840–1890 Arboretum and Rosarium

Abney Park Cemetery was created as a garden cemetery in 1840 around the same time as the six other London ‘Magnificent Seven’ garden cemeteries. The idea was to create an arboretum to display trees from around the world in a public, urban green space, with burial plots in a beautiful setting. This was long before most of London’s Victorian parks were opened. Abney was planted with an extraordinary collection of some 2500 trees and shrubs, and some 1000 varieties of rose. Hackney’s Loddiges nursery supplied a specimen of every tree in its stock (Fig 5). In addition to the Loddiges planting of 1840, further planting

took place in 1890 when poplars and horse chestnuts were added. In the 19th century, garden cemeteries were places to walk and relax, as well as sites of mourning.

As the cemetery became crowded with graves, many of the Loddiges trees were removed to make way for burials.



07 | Veteran Tree

© Russell Miller



08 | Wild Rose

© Gina Brackley

However, around a dozen of the original Loddiges trees survive and can be found within Abney's more recent secondary woodland. These include rare hybrid oak trees.

Abney Park is a designated Local Nature Reserve and Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation. It is home to a remarkable diversity of birds, plants and insects. This is partly due to its history as an arboretum and the continuous presence of large, mature trees. As they age, trees develop veteran features such as cavities, hollow trunks, water pockets and complex relationships with decay fungi (Fig 6–7). All of these features offer habitat niches to bats, birds, fungi and a huge variety of invertebrates (Fig 9).

Abney Park supports over 1500 species including rare beetles, hoverflies and bracket fungi.



9 | Orange-tip Butterfly

© Gina Brackley



10 | Abney Park Cemetery Chapel

Lithograph by JR Jobbins c. 1840

© Hackney Archives



11 | The chapel today

© Abney Park Trust

Period: 1840 First stone laid for the Chapel

Abney Park Chapel, is a Grade II Listed chapel, designed by William Hosking and built by John Jay. (Fig 10–11)

It was built as a funerary chapel and is not consecrated for worship, meaning church services could not be held here. As the cemetery welcomed burials of people from all branches of Christianity, it was important that the style of building was inter-denominational, and includes inspiration from Gothic, Romanesque and Neoclassical architecture.

It has a porte-cochere where wagons brought the coffins, and two staircases leading up to a gallery. The steeple is 37 metres (120 feet) high and when built would have been the tallest in the area, visible from long distances.

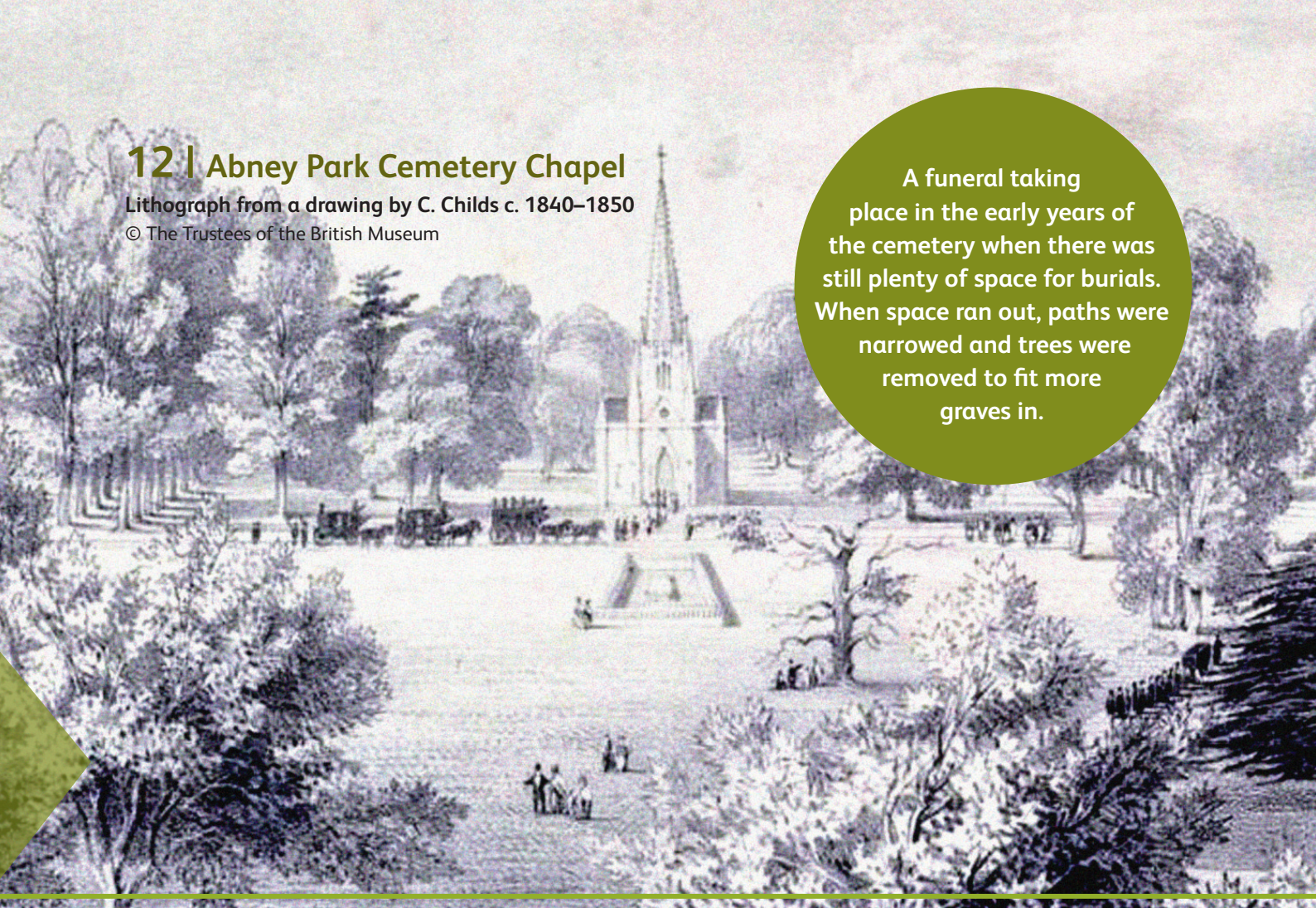
It fell into disrepair from the 1960s onwards, and the roof was repaired in 2017 with a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It will be refurbished and brought back into use as a venue during the current works.

12 | Abney Park Cemetery Chapel

Lithograph from a drawing by C. Childs c. 1840–1850

© The Trustees of the British Museum

A funeral taking place in the early years of the cemetery when there was still plenty of space for burials. When space ran out, paths were narrowed and trees were removed to fit more graves in.



Period: 1840–1979 Working Cemetery

When London's churchyards became full due to the rapidly growing population after the Industrial Revolution, a new solution was needed for the city to bury its dead. Abney Park was one of seven new cemeteries built outside the City to meet the new demand. Abney Park Cemetery Company ran the cemetery, and its first funeral was on 3 June 1840. Rev James Mather was the first person to be buried in Abney Park – his grave lies partially hidden to the north of the chapel. The cemetery company flourished, recording more than 5,000 burials in the first decade, rising to nearly 9,000 for 1850–55.

Between 1855 and 1875 a peak of over 2,000 burials per year was maintained before levelling off. The company prospered and there was an office in the City as well as at the cemetery. The company directors made few visits to Abney Park.

Abney House was demolished in 1843 and its site became part of the cemetery. The House's iron gate and railings to Church Street remained – and still remain – as a second entrance.

The demand for burial space and particularly common graves for the poor was such that in 1860 the burial area was expanded over the ornamental planting on the boundary. When Hackney Brook was culverted (put underground), the boundary wall moved



13 | Main entrance to Abney Park Cemetery

Engraving by JC Carter for the Abney Park Cemetery Company c. 1850

© Abney Park Cemetery Company

to the northernmost edge of the site to make more space for graves. The cemetery became less of a garden as it became filled with graves. At the Church Street entrance, the view into the cemetery became obscured by dense rows of monuments.

By the 1880s burial space was becoming scarce. Early twentieth-century photographs show a cemetery near capacity. After 1900 new grave plots were created by infilling between existing ones and by narrowing the paths. There appears to have been a significant re-use of old plots, in some places by raising the ground level. 1500 people were still buried each year throughout the next few decades.

From 1960 onwards there was very little maintenance because burial space had run out, causing a drastic drop in income. Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), sycamore, bramble and ash rapidly colonised the open areas. Save Abney Park Cemetery (SAPC) was formed in August 1974. In 1979 the cemetery company was declared bankrupt and Hackney Council purchased the land and buildings of the park for £1.



14 | Cowparsley

© Quinten Guers

Period: 1979–2017 Hackney Management

In 1979, apart from one forecourt building, the park passed to the local council as a burial ground and open space subject to the Local Authorities Cemeteries Order of 1977. For the next twenty-one years, there were only a small number of burials, where families had previously held deeds from the cemetery company; but by and large nature was allowed to take over (Fig 14).



15 | Jay

© Gina Brackley

16 | The Bostock family monument

© Abney Park Trust

This Grade II listed tomb is one of Abney's most famous and best-loved memorials. Frank C. Bostock was a showman and managerist from the turn of the 20th Century. It can be seen on the west side of the cemetery.





17 | Volunteering

© Abney Park Trust



18 | Litter picking

© Abney Park Trust

Period: 1990–current

Abney Park Trust

Save Abney Park Cemetery became The Abney Park Trust in 1991 with the ambition of promoting and preserving the unique heritage of Abney Park Cemetery.

The Trust is a non-profit charity that managed the site from 1991 to 2015. In 2015 Hackney Council took back management of the site and both are now successfully working together to preserve and improve all aspects of the site – the biodiversity, ecology, conservation and history.

It organises events such as tours and workshops which aim to bring the variety of wonder in the park to the public. It also puts on theatre productions and community events that make the most of Abney’s remarkable environment. The Trust is the on-site point of contact for any queries or questions.

The Trust’s volunteer groups maintain graves, funded by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and private donations. It organises and funds monument restoration and deals with grave search requests for relatives. The Trust also liaises with and supports the many local artists and institutions who want to use the park for projects and inspiration (Fig 17–18).

19 | Abney Unearthed

© Abney Unearthed



The Abney Park Trust wants to hear what you want from Abney Park and collaborate with local people.

You can contact the Trust at info@abneypark.org

The Abney Park Trust will continue to work with Hackney Council to protect and preserve this magical urban woodland, but it needs your help. If you'd like to donate to help the Trust continue its important work, please visit bit.ly/abney1840 or scan here



Abney Park Trust Donations

Find out more about the Trust at abneypark.org @AbneyParkN16



Abney Park Trust Homepage



Abney Park Trust Volunteering



Abney Park Events



20 | Abney Unearthed

© Abney Unearthed



21 | Abney Unearthed

© Abney Unearthed

Period: 2016–2023 Start of the Abney Unearthed project

Abney Unearthed is an important project to re-map Abney Park's 200,000 burials. Volunteers are working with a project manager to create an online searchable map of graves, to add missing information to the burial records, and to research and bring to light the life stories of the residents of the cemetery. The project initially began with funding allocated from the Heritage Lottery Fund (now The National Lottery Heritage Fund) and Hackney Council in December 2016.

Hackney Council continued to fund the project throughout 2019 and 2020. The current National Lottery Heritage Fund grant will allow the project to continue until 2023 (Fig 19–21).

Through 6000 hours of volunteer work, the project achievements so far include:

- Details checked of over 45,000 of the 200,022 names on the database
- 1750 records have been updated
- Previously unmapped areas have been mapped, allowing us to locate a further 1731 people

Abney Unearthed project achievements include:

- Checking the details of almost 43,000 of the 200,022 names on the database. 1650 of these records have had some details such as age, name spelling or the map section corrected.
- Drawing maps for previously unmapped areas. This has added several hundred graves and allowed us to locate a further 1731 people.
- The addition of 869 missing burial records, including 237 people buried in the 1970s. This is important as the records between 1970–1974 were damaged by water and details are missing from the database.

- 869 missing burial records have been added to the database
- Research undertaken into the lives of 200 of those buried here
- 700 people with common grave headstones have been noted
- A new site-wide digital map has been created

Abney Unearthed continues to inform, engage and educate people about the history of Abney Park and its people. There is much more to be done. If you would like to volunteer, please email info@abneypark.org and for more information see



abneypark.org
info@abneypark.org



Abney
Unearthed



22 | Abney Park in autumn

© Gina Brackley

Period: 2017 **Start of the The National Lottery Heritage Fund bid and appointment of the design team**

In 2017 Hackney Council submitted a bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Parks for People programme to fund the Abney Park Restoration Project. They initially awarded the Abney Park Restoration Project £315,000 to move the project forward with the appointment of a design team.

Abney Park is a beautiful and unique landscape and wildlife haven. These qualities will be retained throughout the current restoration works and beyond, while we improve the two entrances and the chapel.





23 | The start of the restoration work, September 2021

© Quinten Geurs

Period: 2021 Start of the restoration works

Abney Park's historic chapel will be brought back into use as a venue after Hackney Council was awarded £4.4m by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the National Lottery Community Fund.

Funding will enable improvements throughout the cemetery, including the building of a new cafe and classroom at the park's main entrance and a new accessible entrance on Church Street. As part of the improvements, an environmentally friendly heat pump will be installed in the park to provide heat and hot water to the park's new buildings.

The Council is contributing an additional £710,000 to the National Lottery Heritage Fund funding, which brings total investment to over £5m.



Children from two local schools and a community centre took part in workshops to help design new stained glass windows for the chapel in September 2021. The windows will be installed in spring 2022.

24 | Children from Jubilee Primary School

© Quinten Geurs

Period: 2022–2023 Completion of the restoration works and start of the activity plan

A two year activity plan will start when the restoration works are nearing completion. This programme will include new volunteering opportunities, walks, talks, tours and events that have been developed to improve health and wellbeing, upskill young people, engage diverse communities and people of all ages to celebrate the heritage, nature and human stories of Abney Park.

