

# From Artisans to Artists: THE STORY OF THE ACME BUILDINGS

Bethnal Green's Robinson Road is not perhaps the most obvious place to find one of London's liveliest communities of artists. Indeed you would be forgiven for not even knowing that the buildings exist, hidden away as they are behind the traditional East End terraces of Robinson Road, E2. But the history of the Acme site in many ways encapsulates the story of London's industrial history. From the boom of the 19th century, through to the gradual economic decline of the late 20th century and now finding a new artistic role as part of the regeneration of the city in the 21st century, the Acme site is both historical and forward looking.

Originally a brush factory, some of the buildings date back as far as the 1790s. Built at the height of the Industrial Revolution, it's proximity to the nearby Regent's Canal would have provided easy transport links to the rest of the country in the pre railway era. The factory prospered in the 19th century and indeed the Ordnance Survey map of the area for 1914, still shows the site as being used for the production of brushes at that time.

At some stage during the inter-war period the usage of the site appears to have changed from brush to bedstead manufacture. Records with the local Estate Office show the factory as being in active use through the 1950s and into the mid 1960s. The climate of the times had however moved away from the traditional 'heavy' industry of London's East End. Not only were the great docks closing down, but also a myriad of smaller but no less vital parts of the working life of the capital - including the Acme bedstead factory.

For some years the buildings stood idle. Their use as an outright industrial area was no longer felt to be acceptable, given the proximity of the residential properties nearby and the lack of easy access. The same factors also precluded the site's development into residential units.

The solution, when it came, was from an unusual source. All through the 1980s, the East End had begun to attract a new wave of artists attracting more and more media attention as the decade wore on. In 1981, the Acme Housing Association, an organisation dealing exclusively with the accommodation needs of artists, made an approach to use the now derelict site. The Crown Estate saw this as an ideal way to bring back into use these historic, yet now run down buildings.

The buildings were leased for an initial period, which was renewed in 2001 for a further 30 years. Extensive spending has been undertaken by the Acme Housing Association to the buildings to bring them up to modern standards and some 40 work studios are now rented to a wide range of artists working in a variety of media. One of the more famous names to be associated with the studios is Tim Stoner, who recently won the Beck's Futures prize for being the 'most promising artist'.



Exhibitions are often held in the site gallery in Bonner Road, as well as the nearby 'Approach' pub in Approach Road, E2.

Covering over 200 years of Bethnal Green's history, The Crown Estate is proud to endorse the new uses of these former industrial buildings.

The Acme factory, is managed from the Victoria Park Estate Office. For further information of the work of the Acme artists, please call Acme on 020 8981 6811.

## Housing Web Watch

### Tenant Participation Advisory Service

A non-profit making organisation, TPAS provides information, advice, training, consultancy, seminars and conferences, on all aspects of involving tenants in their housing management. [www.tpas.org.uk](http://www.tpas.org.uk)

### Equal Opportunities Commission

The EOC challenges and acts as a catalyst for change in employment practices, equal pay, retirement and pensions, rights for pregnant women and part-time workers, education and training. [www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk)

### Shelter

The national campaigning charity for homeless and badly housed people. [www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk)

### Metropolitan Police

The website for London's police service. [www.met.police.uk](http://www.met.police.uk)

### Tenants Online

Getting communities online and driving services forward. [www.tenants-online.co.uk](http://www.tenants-online.co.uk)

### 'Inside Housing'

For the news, views and jobs in the world of housing: [www.insidehousing.co.uk](http://www.insidehousing.co.uk)

### Crown Estate Housing

Our very own website. [www.crownestate.co.uk/housing](http://www.crownestate.co.uk/housing)

### Savill Garden

The website for the 'oasis of tranquillity' located within the grounds of Windsor Great Park, one of the top horticultural centres in the country - and furthermore part of the Crown Estate. [www.savillgarden.co.uk](http://www.savillgarden.co.uk)

# DID YOU KNOW?

### John Islip Street

*Did you know that this street, which contains some 23 Crown Estate owned flats, was named after John Islip, a former Abbott of Westminster Abbey from 1500 - 1532. He was responsible for the addition of the Jesus Chapel off the north ambulatory, as well as completing the nave vaulting and glazing the west window.*