

# Slums and stencils in east London



**Start** Swanfield Street  
**Finish** Curtain Road  
**Duration** 1 hour

The worst slum of all Victorian east London was the Old Nichol. This small patch between Shoreditch High Street and Bethnal Green Road was the final rung on the ladder down for some 6,000 people. The slums were cleared in the 1890s, council mansion blocks went up from 1894 and the area is now known as the Boundary Estate. Life just got harder for the slum dwellers, though. When the Old Nichol was finally razed, residents were cleared out ever-further east, for the blocks were for the 'deserving poor', the working classes who were spilling over from the West End and the City.

**Swanfield Street (1)** is the eastern perimeter of the Boundary Estate, and old red brick buildings peer down on modern council terraces. The odd one out on this street is **No 74 (2)**. The last surviving weaver's cottage, it's now a foam cutter's workshop – cushions from £1.20! – and a far cry from the sub-divided



homeworkers that used to dominate the area. Brick Lane is on the far side of the park and new craftspeople – Tatty Devine's popular acrylic jewellery and Unto This Last's cabinet makers – help to keep the area creative.

From Swanfield St, turn into Rochelle Street and the **Arnold Circus bandstand (3)** is ahead of you. Often filled with local kids in the evening, a recent fire means it's currently not as pretty as it once was. Local volunteers and school kids tend the gardens – nodding poppies and daisies are out just now.

Locals will not like the sharing of this secret: **Rochelle School Canteen (4)**. Press the buzzer marked 'canteen' then go through the gate into a tranquil oasis. There's a decent-sized lawn, overhanging white roses in bloom and an alfresco café, thanks to Mrs Fergus Henderson. Head back outside and turn into Club Row. The wide, tree-lined streets and ochre-coloured bricks make it difficult to imagine the realities of slum-living little more than a century ago.

Go right into Old Nichol Street. **No 19 (5)** used to be the Old Nichol pub, long since boarded up. The double doorway is now a hotspot for street artists. Go back tomorrow and new paste-ups will be on show. Left into Chance Street and the final part of the block to Redchurch Street is also a hugely popular

graffiti site, no doubt helped in part by acclaimed gallery Urban Angel.

Right into Redchurch Street, undergoing yet another so-hot-right-now moment. From **Section Six Gallery (6)** – the squat which, if the new property boards are to be believed, isn't going to be around for much longer – right down to Terence Conran's new gaff **The Boundary (7)**, the street is changing every other minute. Walk towards Shoreditch High Street and, if you look up, you'll spy many of the best street art pieces. Turn right into Boundary Street then left into the Boundary Passage. This marks the westerly perimeter of the estate and was, local lore has it, as far as the constabulary would go into the Old Nichol slum. Look up and left as you walk in: there's an old stone-carved eye above the door. The Passage currently boasts some cartoon tiles by Dr Gee.

Turn right into Shoreditch High Street. The major thoroughfare is never going to be a pretty road but the boarded-up shops are slowly being occupied. Turn left into Rivington Street, which is full of look-up-there art. We love the framed mixtape that some joker has tagged 'I bet it's Mili Vanili [sic] innit'. To be fair, it's Shoreditch, so it probably is.

Look up to the Standard Place street sign and the row of torsos above the green octopus stick-up. Need a break? **Lat Ri (8)** is a quiet Rivington Place gallery-cum-café and boasts a courtyard most don't even know is there.

Out on to Curtain Road and Mills Court over the road used to be covered head to toe with graffiti. Now there's just 'Space Invaders' mosaic tiles and a couple of old pieces at the Charlotte Road end. You can still spy the leftovers from Banksy's coke-snorting copper piece: it's the trail of white paint on the ground.

There's plenty to see on the outside of **Cordy House (9)** – look up for Shepard Fairey's giant black-and-white face piece. At the Great Eastern Road end of Curtain Road, turn left and walk to the peach-painted Massage Parlour. Look up. A Pokémon-style character chomping on a pound coin stares out at the City.  
*Simone Baird*

