

Olympic odyssey

Ten years on from the 2012 Olympics, Homer Sykes has published a book that shows the site before its regeneration. **Peter Dench** learns more

On 6 July 2005, at its 117th Session in Singapore, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded London the right to host the games after it beat favourites Paris on the final ballot. The Olympic flame was returning to the Big Smoke. It was the first time the IOC had given the games to any city three times. This was news, and London-based photographer Homer Sykes was paying attention.

A year later, Homer made the pilgrimage to the Lower Lea Valley in the Stratford area of east London that would be at the centre of a radical transformation for the building of the Olympic Park. 'What really surprised me was just how close it was to the City of London,' he recalls. 'The area was impoverished, an industrial wasteland, in many ways it seemed to have been completely forgotten, which of course made it the perfect venue for the London Olympic Park. It was central and almost a clean canvas.'

This famous photographer of British culture arrived from Canada aged five in 1954 when his mother remarried (Homer's father was killed in China before he was born). Habitual outsider Homer did what he was born to do and roamed across the unromantic industrial landscape bisected by the historic Old River Lea, the Lee Navigation Canal, and the Bow Back Rivers. Access wasn't restricted, and local businesses carried on, many of them fighting compulsory purchase orders before the relentless planners rolled in.

Homer's epic journey took him over and under footbridges, into derelict buildings, through overgrown tracks, past scrapyards, along wire fences and into greasy eateries. Despite the often bleak subject matter, the images have life, colour and charm. A young woman in sandals reminiscent of a Roman legionary foot soldier runs past the permanently closed Lord Napier pub, its exterior daubed with bright graffiti that match

her clothes. A bare-footed young boy waits outside the Glory Life Church, Marshgate Lane, Stratford. A woman wearing beige walks her beige-coloured dog past an abandoned house cloaked in dense green foliage, Abbey Lane, Stratford. Multiple mechanics cluster around broken car parts. At Kings Yard, Homer photographed through a dirty windowpane with a crown-shaped piece missing. 'This reminded me of one of those paper hats you wear at Christmas,' he says, playfully.

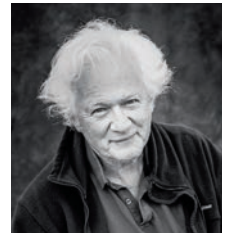
In July 2007, a wooden surrounding wall was erected and covered with thousands of gallons of blue paint. Anti-graffiti squads patrolled the perimeter fence. Security was put in place – entry to the 2012 London Olympics Park and the site of the games was no longer possible. Homer returned home.

All change

The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park has largely avoided the white elephant fate of many former Olympic parks across the globe. Now managed as a private site by the London Legacy Development Corporation, established in 2012, the former athletes' village, now known as East Village, accommodates the pseudo-public spaces Victory Park and Mirabelle Gardens. The London Stadium (formerly the Olympic Stadium) is home to West Ham United FC. Barges serve beer to hipsters in kayaks paddling along the canal. Visitors can ride the Slide at the ArcelorMittal Orbit or eat vegan and Greek cuisine and bubble waffle ice cream served from kiosks along Tessa Jowell Boulevard.

Before the Blue Wall is testament to lives and landscape swept away. Another important chapter in Homer's 50-year archive of documenting the British. His eye remains as sharp as his apparel. I wouldn't be surprised if he returns to document the rejuvenation of the area. If you see a dapper chap with a shock of white hair and camera pressed hard to his nose, give him a wave. AP

Before The Blue Wall is published by Fistful of Books, softcover, 56pp with 44 colour photographs. It is available in a numbered edition of 150 for £15. Visit www.fistfulofbooks.com



Homer Sykes

Homer Sykes is a Canadian-born British photographer who has been working in the reportage and documentary genres for more than 50 years. His work has been published in a variety of publications and has been exhibited dozens of times. For more information, visit homersykes.com



Clockwise from top: The Lord Napier, abandoned and graffitied, Hackney Wick; The Glory Life Church, Stratford; Jay. J. Autos, Japanese car parts, Stratford; Kings Yard, Stratford; An abandoned house, Stratford; The Cosy Cafe, East Cross Centre, Stratford.