

What is the margin?

Today I set out for a walk on Hackney Marshes, my route taking me along a small section of Segment 7 of the Inspiral route on the towpath of the Lea navigation canal at the edge of Hackney. I won't stay on the towpath too much today to observe social distancing. I walked Segment 7 with the Inspiral group twice before. On both walks we stopped at boats for refreshments. The first time we had tea on a narrow boat owned by friends of one of the Inspiral group. We discussed the issues of living on the canal and having to regularly move the boat to a different mooring. The second time we bought beer from a boat turned into a bar, on a hot Sunday afternoon, near The White Building. More people than ever live here on boats on the canal.



Lea Navigation Canal looking south from Middlesex Filter Beds Nature Reserve



Wattisfield Road London E5

On the way to the canal I pass a sign informing the public of the two metre social distancing rules with a double-ended arrow. I remember this symbol from engineering drawing; the trouble is it applies to stationary objects more than moving subjects. If you reverse the direction of the arrows you create an optical illusion in which the line appears longer, as if to emphasize the fuzziness of human perception and the complicated realities of life. It's Spring and the two-metre separation is like a human version of how plants and seedlings are separated out and replanted. I am hoping we humans can also grow back together soon.

How am I to walk along the towpath today in the Covid 19 epidemic? The Inspiral walks increased thinking about walking, and walking for thinking. Walking involves a balance between going from A to B and what you do in between. Today I must drift from the straight line to maintain social distancing and walk with a heightened awareness. Therefore - do walk on the grass and do not walk on the path, do not walk on the desire line, instead walk in unoccupied spaces in the margins of the well-trodden path. The spiral route of the Inspiral path already creates a new path and imposes a tangent onto the 'one foot in front of the other' straightness of travelling by foot.



Today I choose to step sideways off the towpath onto Hackney Marshes with its 88 football pitches. The large area of grass provides an experience of the sky not available everywhere in the city. The goalmouths stand empty but have not been taken down like the tennis courts I just passed, the nets removed as a precaution against Covid 19. This iconic mass of goal posts is only busy at weekends and this gridded landscape often stands silent bearing lonely witness to wider events as they do now with no football fixtures.

When I came here on my bike yesterday I travelled across the marshes onto another margin at the edge of the Olympic park, a road known to Cycle Club Hackney as 'the runway'. This road nestles between the A12 and the Velopark and was briefly used to take traffic to the Westfield shopping centre, with a security checkpoint, before the 2012 Olympic games. No traffic has travelled along its half-mile length since 2012. It appears to be unnamed but turns into Lesney Avenue at one end, named after the now demolished Matchbox toy factory on the towpath route of Inspiral segment 7.



‘The Runway’ with Velopark Velodrome on left, A12 out of sight directly right.

Some of the Inspiral routes have raised issues of landownership and rights of way, for example where parts of the Thames Pathway have been closed. The Ramblers Association are currently responding to government attempts to take away access to lost paths. The ‘runway’ could be described as disused but not lost; a half-mile piece of pristine road, but who can use it? When Cycle Club Hackney asked for a reduced community rate to use the adjacent road track they were refused and started to use the ‘runway’ for free instead, but then the Velopark tried to charge them for that. It wasn’t in my plan, but yesterday I cycled up and down ‘the runway’ on my clapped out old bike for the first time. I spent many Saturday mornings here several years ago watching my kids do the same with the cycle club. The ownership of the Olympic park seemed murky after control was ceded from the boroughs bordering the site. At this time of heightened awareness of social space, and its control, we can reflect on the extent of permission to be in space, the right to roam, and to inhabit space at this time when our daily movements repurpose the margins of space.

Richard Couzins 30th March 2020