

# SAVE NORTON FOLGATE



*British Land were responsible for the destruction of the northern half of Elder St in the seventies*

**I**n 1977, the newly formed Spitalfields Trust including Dan Cruickshank and with the support of Sir John Betjeman and Tower Hamlets Council stopped British Land from redeveloping Elder St, but now British Land has come back to obliterate Norton Folgate under a hideous corporate plaza.

Frustrated by a consultation process that has delivered no significant change, the Spitalfields Trust is opposing British Land in a fight to save the buildings and life of this historic neighbourhood and Conservation Area.

In this exhibition, The Gentle Author tells stories of Norton Folgate – a place with a rich cultural and social history – and we present our alternative vision for the future of Norton Folgate created in collaboration with John Burrell of Burrell Foley Fischer, Architects & Urban Designers.



*Sir John Betjeman & Dan Cruickshank in Elder St during the Spitalfields Trust's first battle to defeat British Land in 1977*

Ours is a vision which respects rather than destroys history and architectural precedent.

We need you to help us save Norton Folgate by writing a personal letter of objection to Tower Hamlets Council. You can take away a copy of our simple guide to HOW TO OBJECT EFFECTIVELY and you can also find it online at [www.thespitalfieldstrust.com](http://www.thespitalfieldstrust.com)

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Join our campaign at [facebook.com/savenortonfolgate](https://facebook.com/savenortonfolgate) and follow the Spitalfields Trust on twitter @SpitalfieldsT

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# The Relics of Norton Folgate



Recorded in the Domesday Book in 1086, the nine acres north of Spitalfields known as Norton Folgate were once the manor of Nortune Foldweg – *Nortune* meaning ‘northern estate’ and *Foldweg* meaning ‘highway,’ referring to the Roman road north from London that passed through the territory.

Irrigated by the spring in Holywell Lane, this fertile land was within the precincts of the Priory of St Mary Spital until 1547 when, after the Reformation, it achieved autonomy as the Liberty of Norton Folgate, ruled by a court of ten officers described as the “Ancient Inhabitants.”

These elected representatives – including women – took their authority from the people and asserted their right to self-government independent of the church, maintaining the poor, performing marriages and burials, and superintending their own watchmen and street lighting.

The Officers of the Liberty were the Head Borough, the Constable who supervised the Beadles, the Scavenger who dealt with night soil, and Overseers of the Poor. And thus were the essentials of social organisation and waste disposal effectively accomplished for centuries in Norton Folgate – until 1900, when the Liberty was abolished at the time of the foundation of the LCC and became part of the Metropolitan Borough of Stepney.

Yet the minute books of Norton Folgate have been kept, detailing the activities of the court and nightly reports by the watchmen from 1729. Curiously, in spite of the rowdy reputation that this neighbourhood of theatres and alehouses enjoyed through the centuries, the watchmen recorded an unbroken sequence of “All’s well.”

A battered seven-sided alms box cut from a single piece of oak in 1600 and secured by four separate locks also survives. It is an evocative relic from Shakespeare’s London and three centuries of “alms for oblivion” were once contained in this casket.

Equally remarkable is the Constable’s staff of the Liberty with a tiny silver sculpture on the top of a four-bar gate – an heraldic pun upon the name of Norton Folgate. Bearing the inscription “Norton Folgate 1672”, it has the distinction of being London’s oldest staff of office, representing the authority of the people.





# Christopher Marlowe in Norton Folgate

Shoreditch and Norton Folgate comprised theatre land for Elizabethan London, with a monument in St Leonard's Church today commemorating the actors who once lived locally and tax records suggesting William Shakespeare was a parishioner of St Helen's, Bishopsgate, in 1598.

A warrant issued in September 1589 for the arrest of the mysterious yet charismatic playwright and poet Christopher Marlowe confirms that he was resident in the Liberty of Norton Folgate. He shared lodgings with his fellow playwright Thomas Kyd and his Cambridge friend Thomas Watson, the poet, lived nearby. Marlowe's plays were likely to have been performed at The Theatre in New Inn Yard and The Curtain in Curtain Rd at this time.

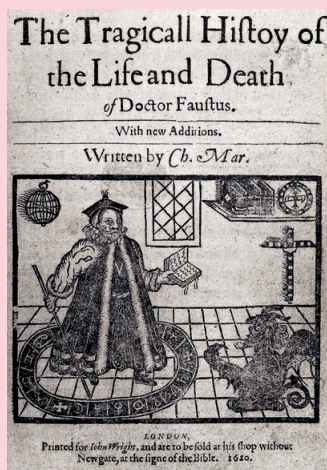
"Thomas Watson of Norton Folgate in Middlesex County, gentleman, and Christopher Marlowe of the same, yeoman... were delivered to jail the 18th day of September by Stephen Wyld, Constable of the same on suspicion of murder," reads the warrant of September 1589.

Marlowe was set upon in Hog Lane – now Worship St – by William Bradley, an innkeeper's son, over a unpaid debt and Thomas Watson

intervened with his sword to protect his friend, stabbing Bradley to death. Although Marlowe took flight, he was arrested and imprisoned in Newgate with Watson for a fortnight. On 3rd December, they were tried and, after Watson's claim of self-defence was accepted, both were discharged with a warning to keep the peace.

But in May 1592, Marlowe was summoned again to appear at the Middlesex sessions for assaulting two constables in Holywell Lane, Shoreditch – when the constables attested that they went in fear of their lives because of him. Once more, Marlowe was required to keep the peace or to appear before the magistrates at the next general session and receive a penalty of twenty pounds. There is no record of whether he ever answered to this charge.

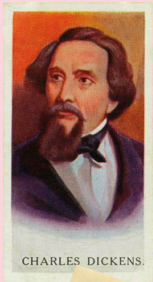
The final years of Marlowe's life are traced through a series of violent encounters with the law, yet between 1588 and his death in 1593, Marlowe wrote *Edward II*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Massacre at Paris* – which means we may conclude that all or at least part of these plays were written while he was a resident of Norton Folgate.



Excavations at The Theatre, Shoreditch 2010

# Charles Dickens in Norton Folgate

The City of London Theatre, Norton Folgate, opened on March 27th 1837 with a production of *The Pickwick Club or The Age We Live In*. It was the very first stage version of Charles Dickens' work, produced even before all the installments of the novel had been published, which required Edward Stirling, the playwright, to expend some imagination in resolving his hastily-composed drama.



Designed by Samuel Beazley, architect of Drury Lane, and managed by Christopher Cockerton, The City of London Theatre was described as “the handsomest house in London” in 1837. Accommodating an audience of more than a thousand, it displayed an imposing facade onto Bishopsgate, dignified with tall Corinthian columns.

Their production of *The Pickwick Club* was only the first of many pirated stage versions of Dickens' novels to be presented throughout his long writing career yet – despite their author's displeasure – audiences flocked to see these popular dramas and, by December 1838, The City of London Theatre was presenting *Oliver Twist or The Life of a Workhouse Boy*. Scenes advertised included 'Fagin's Den in Field Lane', 'A Beer Shop in Clerkenwell' and 'Garret of Bill Sykes, the Flash Burglar.'

In 1851, Dickens wrote a personal account of a visit to Spitalfields which he published in *Household Words*, opening with a description of his arrival in Spital Square in Norton Folgate, directly across the road from The City of London Theatre.

“Turning eastward out of the most bustling part of Bishopsgate, we suddenly lose the noise that has been resounding in our ears, and fade into the great churchyard of the Priory of St Mary, Spital, in the parish of St Botolph. Its modern

name is Spital Square. Cells and cloisters were, at an early date, replaced by substantial burgher houses, which, since the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, in 1685, have been the chief depositories of silk manufacture introduced into London, by the French Huguenots, who flew from the perfidy of Louis the Fourteenth. But much of the old quiet cloistered air still lingers in the place."

In common with many who have followed in his footsteps, Dickens appreciated the identity of Norton Folgate as the outcome of its history – as the location of the former Priory of St Mary Spital and the destination of seventeenth century Huguenot refugees.





# The East London Aquarium, Menagerie & Wax Work Exhibition

You might walk past the Savoy Cafe in Norton Folgate and not give it a second thought. Yet this building is a salient example of how an extraordinary history may be present without any indication. For here, in 1875, opened the East London Aquarium, Menagerie & Wax Works Exhibition.



“The Aquarium was a popular pleasure resort on Bishopsgate and contained, amongst other exhibits, a number of zoological specimens including bears, lions, jackals, birds and monkeys,” explained *The Police News*, “The building extended from High St Shoreditch to Blossom St.”

Yet in spite of the celebrity wax figures, the water tanks with seals, the cave with illuminated views, the rifle gallery with bird shows and arena offering shows by tamed lions three times daily, what was most remarkable about the Menagerie & Wax Work Exhibition was the bizarre manner of its demise.

Early on 8th June 1884, a fire broke out in the wax exhibition which quickly grew beyond control and gutted the building, destroying the animals. “It does seem somewhat odd that in an Aquarium there should not be water enough to put out a fire,” queried one correspondent vainly.

“The animals made their appearance at an iron-barred window looking out upon the thoroughfare running at the rear of the menagerie,” reported *The Standard*, referring to Blossom St. “Watchers saw a black muzzle appear at the window and soon the form of a huge bear came into view. The spectators were horrified by seeing the animal extend its paws and convey to its mouth the large jagged fragments of glass that were scattered before it, but an adventurous bystander clambered up the wall and threw down the broken pieces from the window sill.”

Walk down Blossom St today and you will find the warehouses built upon the site of the aquarium – two years later in 1886 – still stand. You can imagine the horrified crowd watching the poor black bear clawing at glass and you wonder if the caves with illuminated views still exist in the vaults below your feet.



# Neville Turner of Elder Street

This is Neville sitting on the step in Elder St, just as he did when he grew in this house in the nineteen forties. In those days, the building was dilapidated but Neville enjoyed a happy family life in the midst of the close-knit community in Elder St during the war and afterwards. It was only when an artist appeared, sketching the weavers' houses, that he became aware that he was growing up in an historic dwelling.



“My parents moved from Lambeth to 7 Elder St in 1931 and lived there until they were rehoused in 1974. I was born in 1939 and my mother called me after Neville Chamberlain. I got a lot of stick for that at school.

In the house, there were six rooms plus a basement and an outside basement, and we lived in four rooms on the ground floor and on the first floor, and there was a dockers and his wife who lived up on the top floor.

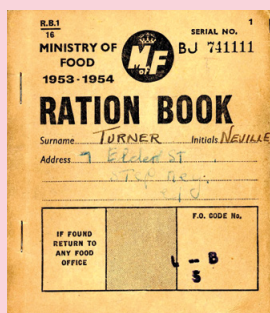
My earliest memory is of the basements being reinforced as air raid shelters. Even people passing in the street took shelter there. Pedlars and knife-grinders would bang on the door and come on down. That was normal, we were all part and parcel of the same lot.

War seemed quite mad to me and, when it ended, I remember the party with bonfires at each end of the street and everybody overjoyed, but I couldn't understand why. None of the houses in Elder St were damaged.

All the houses had a door onto the roof and people walked along the roof to visit each other. There'd be a knock on the window from above and it was your neighbours coming down the stairs.

In 1964, I left for good when I got married. I met my wife Margaret at work, she was the machinist and I was the cutter.

The rateable value of the houses in Elder St was low because of the sitting tenants and low rents, and nobody ever moved. We thought it was good, it was a kind of security. The money people had they spent on decorating, and it was always warm and brightly decorated. We were offered to buy 5 & 7 Elder St for eighteen hundred quid but my father refused because we didn't want them both.”



*Neville sits next to his father at Christmas dinner, Elder St 1968*