



Not on the high street

Eccentrics, artists and a faux gin palace - Walthamstow's indoor market offers shopping with a soul. Words by Sophie Yeo

Photographs by Carmel King



Wood Street Market is designed not for shopping, but for treasure hunting. With each corner you turn, there is a new perspective on the general disarray. The stallholders embrace the chaos, allowing their stock to sometimes encroach out of the shop units and into the covered paths. Each pile of clutter promises discovery.

Wood Street Market is a local treasure in itself, albeit a hidden one. Tucked away behind Walthamstow's busy main road, it is a place that seems to be stumbled upon, rather than sought out. The building itself began life in 1912 as the Crown Cinema, operated by the Penny Picture Theatre Company. The space has now been used as a market for over 30 years, although its fortune and reputation have fluctuated wildly in this time.

The market thrived in the 1980s, but then suffered a period of poverty and degradation. Helen Greenwood, who grew up in Walthamstow, recalls that she and her friends used to run past it as children, afraid of its tatty alleyways. Recently returned from studying, she rediscovered the market quite by accident: 'I thought I'd

come and explore the local area. It was so off the beaten track, I never even knew it was here, but it was just off Wood Street. It was like a little gem.' She now works in one of the many vintage shops housed by the market.

Wood Street Market is going through this transition thanks to a regeneration project launched last year. Although a smattering of the original stallholders remain, funding from the Mayor's Outer London Fund has attracted an influx of new talent, and allowed the building to be restored to some of its former glory.

A new facade for the market was designed by architects Gort Scott, and the interior was also refurbished. In an attempt to boost business and restore the vibrancy that characterised the market 30 years ago, the architects together with the council ran a competition for three months free rent in their empty units. Julie Davis, who runs the market, recalls, 'We got about a hundred applicants, lots of different people, everything from artists, flowers, cakes, creative people, and t-shirt printing. We had a selection process and we chose about 20 people.'



With such a pick and mix of different stalls, there is no easy way to navigate through, and absolutely no telling what you will chance upon as you browse. It is probably best to approach this market with no specific expectations other than that of unearthing something you completely would not expect to find. These surprise discoveries are not limited to novelty purchases. The stories and the people are what really carve out something special in this rickety building.

For me, the discovery of the day was not for sale (although it had an estimated value of £150,000). It is an automata clock, the life's work of Walthamstow local John Rowe (left), who has worked at Wood Street Market since its beginning. The components of this clockwork masterpiece are laid out behind a glass window cabinet, but unlike with your typical impersonal window display, the artist behind the contents hovers around the area, ready to leap into an explanation of his work to anyone who is interested.

John patiently takes me through each of the fifteen automated functions that, when the clock is finished,

will bring the fairy grotto scene to life every hour on the hour. It is a work that has been eight years in the making, and it will be another eight before it is completed. He notes, however, that he took a seven year break during the process to mourn the loss of his dog, Lucy. Work has only recently recommenced thanks to persuasion from the other stallholders.

Why all the hard work? He explains: 'I've just done it because I love children, and I love the subject. It's just a nice subject, like Christmas is a nice subject. And just knowing how the children's faces will be, because I've seen them with it like this.' He gestures towards the various components in the cabinet.

If you prefer the sort of treasure that you can take home in a little bag, there is no shortage of weird and wonderful offerings. As can be expected, the place is a veritable treasure trove for the lover of vintage clothes and jewellery, but it also caters for those with a penchant for reupholstered furniture, rare records and antique maps.

One of the more whimsical stalls is Mother's Ruin.



Becky Griffiths set up the shop three months ago, and she makes her gin entirely from scratch. She grows the fruit, picks it, makes the liqueurs and designs the overall look of the product. On top of that, she is employed part time as a social worker, and morris dances as a hobby.

She has found that the market provides the perfect location for the style and size of her business. Becky says that her tiny unit has allowed her to 'go crazy with the quality', enabling her to recreate the atmosphere of one of historic London's notorious gin palaces on a miniature scale. From the richly patterned wallpaper to the 18th century replica dresser, walking into her shop is like entering into a sort of gothic underworld.

She emphasises, however, that despite her attention to detail, the overall effect is meant to be humorous. She points out the cartoon framed on her wall – it is Hogarth's famous print, 'Gin Palace'. She says that her design was 'a nod towards all of that Hogarth stuff about Mother's Ruin, which is the whole thing around women drinking too much gin. In the 18th century gin was very cheap and lots of people made it. It was all about looking

at that historical context of gin in London. But it's also a little bit tongue-in-cheek because it is just me selling my gin with my homemade labels.'

Wood Street Market currently hangs in the balance between the contemporary vision of the new generation of stallholders, and the time-honoured traditions of those who have been here since the start. The community that has grown up around it is having to adapt to the presence of the new arrivals. As I walk and talk my way through the market, I certainly feel the influence of the old market hanging over its shiny new reinvention.

It is a time of change, and whenever great changes take place, you can be certain that there will be a philosopher not too far away to reflect on the process. At Wood Street Market, this role is filled by Guido Ratti, an Italian who moved to London for his love of punk music. He now runs the record shop Hypstrz.

'We have to live under the same roof, so it's better to get along,' he muses. 'It works in exactly the same way for the whole world. We all have to live in the same world, so therefore we have to support each other and be cool.'