# Social media trails, mapping and mashing memories at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. May 2016

Report and artist commentary on the Living Maps 'walkshop' on the former London 2012 Olympic Park. Richard White and Toby Butler facilitated the walk: one of three Living Maps walkshops in and around the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park on May 17 2015, part of East 20: Between Map and Territory. In the walkshop Richard demonstrated and discussed his collaborative practice working with mobile media, mapping, memory and myth. The paper offers an account of this creative practice and a commentary on this experiment using walking, socialmedia and smart device 'location services' to reveal and map cultural heritage on the site. The paper concludes with observations on the experience, lessons learned on the practice and closes with comments regarding enabling participation and the potential for developing a heritage activity from an ephemeral to more longer lasting presence.

**Richard White**
*r.white2@bathspa.ac.uk*

Richard White is a participatory media artist working with social media, walking and intangible cultural heritage. Recent work includes Lost Walks and Ghost Crossings as part of the 2015 River Crouch Festival, Essex and Forced Walks: Honouring Esther. He is a creative practice PhD student at Bath Spa University.

Early in 2015 Toby Butler and myself proposed a walk through the former Olympic Park as part of the Living Maps event East 20: Between Map and Territory. Our 'walkshop': *Mashing up Memories* invited 'walkers, delegates, shoppers, visitors online and offline to join us and contribute to an instant quasi-psychogeographical mapping of the site.' In retrospect given the broad scope of the term and the multiple tactics and strategies implied by the term psychogeography the quasi is unnecessary. Put simply this was neither to be an expert-led walk or simply a stroll in the repurposed park. We proposed to walk with all our critical and creative faculties on full alert, noting the enchantments offered, perhaps sampling them, perhaps proposing new ones. We proposed to conduct an 'emotional archaeology' on the site locating the stories, myths and rumours walkers would bring, discover or generate.

This is a story of that Living Maps walkshop through the Olympic Park in May 2015.

## Background

As an artist I work with the physical, affective and intellectual experience of walking; I am interested in layered knowledge of localities, memories, myths and their resonances accessed by walking. I am currently experimenting with social media as a tool to stimulate and document this through the production of social media trails. These experiments seek to extend the presence of the walk through engagement with networked users; they test the possibility of generating further resonances and momentary articulations of intangible cultural heritage.

My practice then involves work on 'cognitive mapping' [1] recognising that space does not simply exist, it is produced from nature and is the result of a range of human and non human activities [2]. My practice is influenced by psychogeographic approaches and tactics [3] and informed by a developing understanding of non-representational approaches [4]. As a participatory media arts practitioner I am committed to socially

engaged work. Embracing the participatory potential of social media, I took the step into walking, social networking and locative media. I share the view that, "a walk has a life of its own and does not need to be materialised into an artwork" [5]. Through live social media activity, however, my walking practice has a performative materialising element extending the presence of the walk and possibly extending the resonances of the process itself. The social media trail produced is a shared materialisation of the walk in a fluid, negotiable and ultimately ephemeral form, reflecting memory, space and interpretation.

**Site visit/recce:**

I was a complete newcomer to the site, I once saw the park under construction from the window of the John Lewis store in the vast shopping mall overlooking the Olympic site. I neither saw the opening ceremony, nor watched much of the Games on TV, but I did interview a carnival queen on the Isle of Wight who described her day at the opening of the Paralympics as the best day of her life [6]. I saw the stadium rise above the railway line embankment barricades and followed that long blue wall concealing it on many traffic jammed detours. So it was a revelation to get on the site on our recce day in January to walk in a space that had once been thronged with people and at the centre of attention for the sporting world. It was all a bit shabby, the stadium echoed to the shouts of builders and their machines 'repurposing' the site, the 'wild' flower meadows that had blossomed so photogenically in 2012 appeared threatened. The place was huge, empty, deserted, I felt like a trespasser, which in a way I was.

Passing the former athletes accommodation being refurbished for Stratford's new and wealthy arrivals we saw a neon sign which read "A Place Beyond Belief". This spectacular denial of enchantment was a provocation: I wondered what had gone before and what we would uncover and perhaps stir up in a brief drift through the site in a few months time.

**Technology and mapping**

Most smart devices carry the ability to locate themselves. Users are invited to *turn location services on* in order to find themselves on a map and discover nearby shops, restaurants and amusements. Apple, Google, Amazon et al, know where you are. This is powerful surveillance technology that can locate your device and, assuming you have it in handbag or pocket, you. They know where you are and a lot about what you are doing. Not a particularly big deal on the former Olympic site alleged to have been overseen by unprecedented levels of security and the UK itself where CCTV covers almost our every move [7]. But it is a technology we can play with and perhaps use to reveal something more than the facade of this *place beyond belief.*

Every photo, text, tweet and Facebook entry, every piece of media gathered on a smart device has the ability to identify the location where it was captured. Each is a digital selfie stating our presence and location. That existential statement, "I am here now", is I believe extraordinarily powerful. Whether it is a walker on a mountain showing us the view, now, or a citizen journalist showing us the actions of their government, *now,* it contains multiple possibilities for critical and creative engagement.

Such geolocated media can be tracked and recorded by the user. I am using two interlinked platforms to do this, Viewranger [8] and Social Hiking [9]. A Viewranger configured smart device uses the smart device location services to generate a regular beacon that enables it to be tracked, many social media platforms can be configured to link to a Viewranger trail. Social Hiking takes this data and can use an account on a single smart device to link to others. Thus if a group of people are walking and their devices are configured appropriately their social media postings can be aggregated. Other platforms use this strategy of a common hashtag to aggregate social media, cf Storify, but it is the GPS element that makes this of interest to walkers and cartographers. Both Viewranger and Social Hiking generate a trail, thus with the appropriate credentials, a networked user can follow an individual walker, and in the case of Social Hiking, a group of walkers not only

follow their progress as a line on a map but also follow their social media and interact with them. On completion of the walk both platforms produce a social media trail. On the Olympic park walk I was using Twitter, Facebook, Audioboom, Instagram and Flickr.

A number of platforms enable walkers to plan and follow a route. This facility includes digital way marking and the embedding of GPS triggered content at pre-ordained points. App making platforms such as AppFurnace [10] enable the development of these into polished locative media apps. Mobile locative media apps are at present relatively fixed/closed with take up hampered in the UK by slow internet speeds and poor wif-i/3G/4G distribution. My creative research interest is as much interested in the live interaction, or the potential for it, as in the possibility of seeding a walk with interesting and challenging GPS triggered experiences. Whether using an app or a more dynamic/ephemeral approach the technology requires an accurate GPS fix to be of use in this context. Our recce visit to the Olympic Park showed we were good to go.

**Background Research:**
The official story of the Olympic Park from the Stratford Stink to the latest repurposing has been fairly well worked over and I was far more interested to see what might come up on the day. I started tweeting about the forthcoming walk just to see what might surface and immediately engaged with a number of individuals and groups interested in the story of the site and surrounding areas. I did not have the time to grow these interactions. I did some deliberately superficial internet research just to see what had been in the news and what might still be hot, and also to find out what might have been buried. I wanted to generate something that might offer a few interactions with the official history and the unofficial history as we walked. The research was an unsystematic surfing from one thing to another following my interests in myths and layers, hidden history, the intangible cultural heritage in collective action. I located what I could on a Googlemap [11]. I do not intend here to further explore the many stories and local histories explored by colleagues at the Raphael Samuel History Centre and such organisations as Eastside Community Heritage [12] or the more critical responses by artists, academics and writers. Suffice to note that much has been written about the former Olympic site and what and who were there before. The issue that I was struck by, and the walk subsequently addressed, was how little of that work and life surfaced in the official story of the site as we discovered it in May 2015. 2012 appears to be year zero for the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

I discovered via a US archaeological association website [13] that a series of rescue digs had been conducted on the Olympic site by Wessex Archaeology prior to construction. Elsewhere [14] I was reminded of travellers, allotment holders and housing associations who, lured with promises, resisted and were ultimately bulldozed off the site. As part of my preparation for the day I attempted to locate some of this on a google map. A glossy summary of the Wessex Archaeology report [15] in our possession did offer some sense of location for the lay user, although published in 2012 it was not readily or freely available. The AIA website oversimplified the report for its readers as to be rendered almost unreadable for location purposes. Likewise my attempt to locate more recent social history had suffered from a kind of cartographic rendition, old roads had been built on or re-routed, street names, place names changed.

A site once heavily polluted from the paper trade and ink manufacture, rubble and wreckage from the Blitz, an early nuclear facility and all manner of industrial by products had been cleansed, the people and their stories seemed to have been cleansed along with it. Crucially from the point of view of this brief exercise, locating all this seemed to have been deliberately obfuscated. Here indeed in 2012 British athletes had won gold but also thousands of years ago people here had lived their lives and buried their dead with gold. Other riches, the story of petrol and dry-cleaning, the invention of transistors and struggles over homes, land and water all went similarly unacknowledged in the physical and metaphorical cleansing of the site.

**Onsite our walkshop 17 May 2017**

Making a few stabs and with no claims to accuracy I offered this map as a starting stimulus for our two hour walkshop [11]
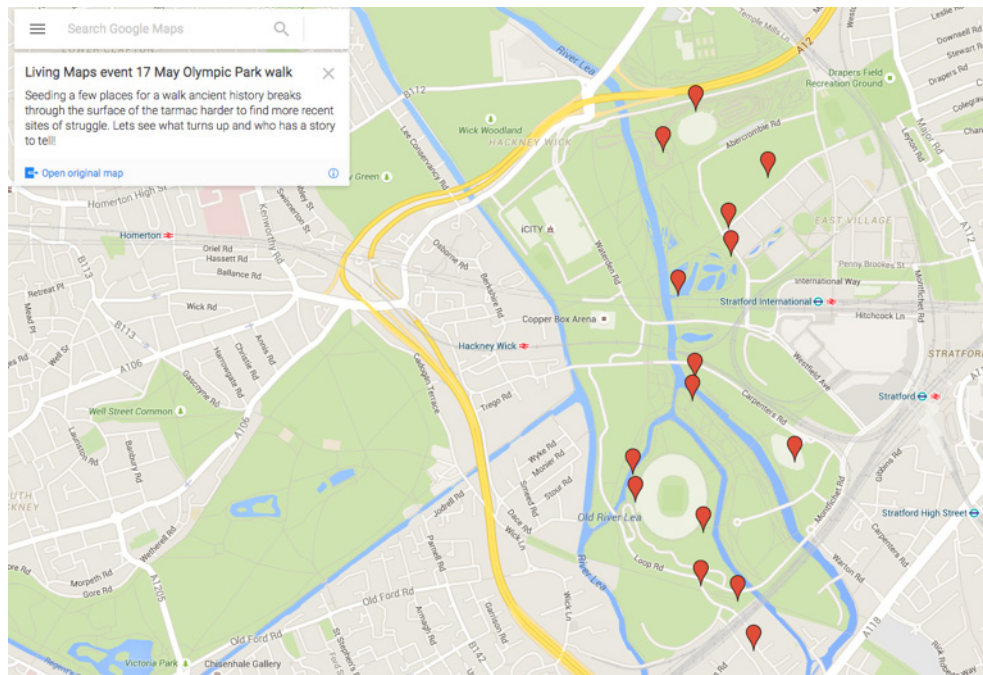


Walkers joined us at the start point and those with smart devices linked up to my Social Hiking account for the day. We drifted via the sites I had identified, and those on the publications that Toby Butler had provided, investigating those identified by the walkers who joined us and some few interacting with us remotely. Here is the Social Hiking aggregated social media trail [16]. Accessed online this includes 58 postings from all the walkers social media accounts that I was linked with:

Here more elegantly on Viewranger is our route again but accessed on line shows my social media postings only [17]
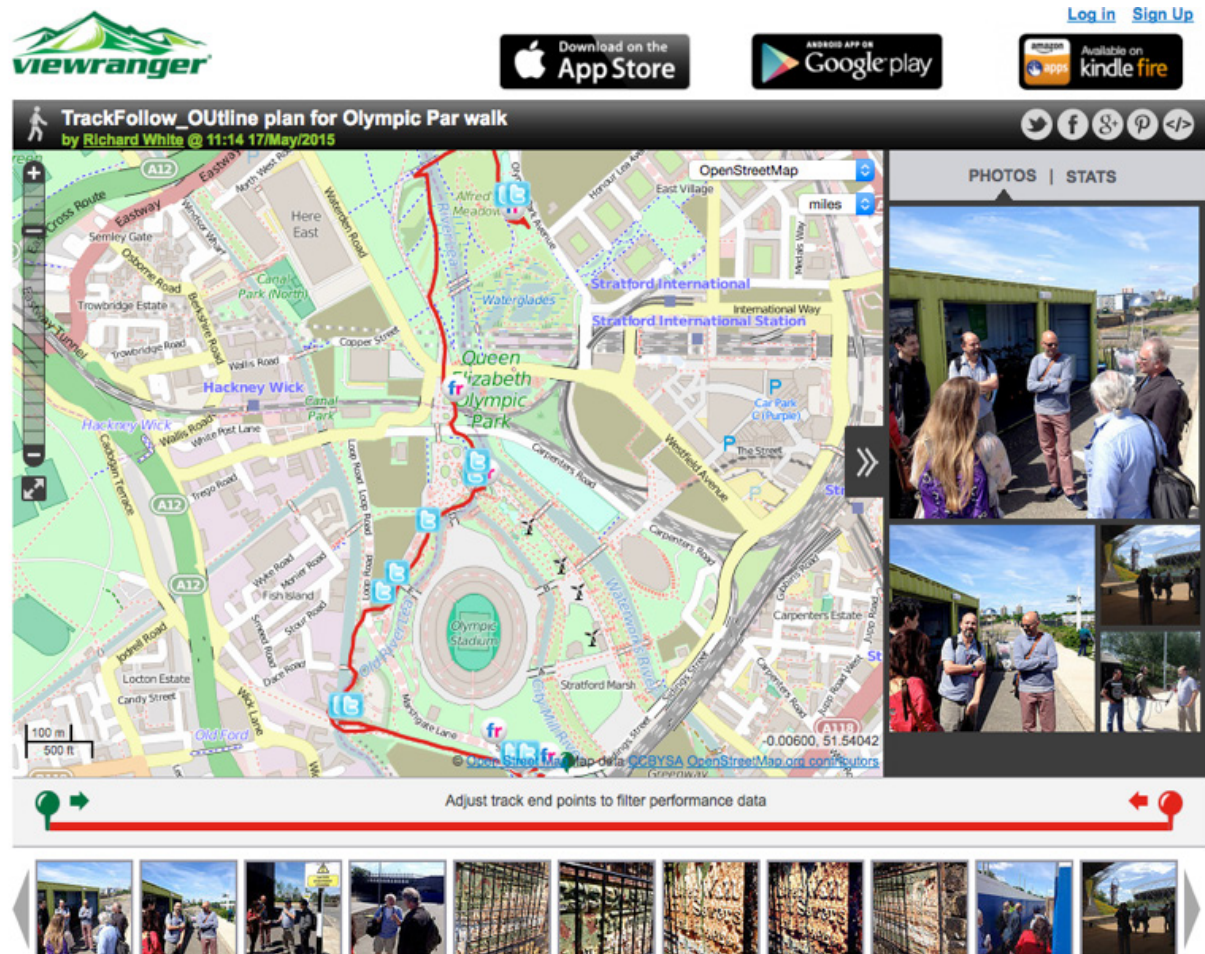


My blog entry [18], written on the train home records:

> Under the tarmac Neolithic rituals, Bronze Age burials and filled in waterways. Workplaces, homes and allotments.

> The Essex Sewer plaque seemed like the only acknowledged remnant of what had been there before. In that huge Victorian sewer London's stink flowed out in a great tubular causeway over the River Lea, now kindly renamed the Greenway. The whole site now a soviet boulevarded sterile landscape dug over by archaeologists and stripped clean of its memories. A policed heritage whose year zero was London 2012. No space even for Battle of Britain relics let alone speedway or travellers.

**Observations**

The site proved to be as rich as we had hoped in concealed layers, from the original Big Brother house (so we were told) to the old Speedway track buried underneath the Olympic swimming pool. Walkers familiar with the site pre-development tried with some difficulty to orient themselves. At the outset we walked down from the meet-point to try to locate the site of discovery of a Stone Age flint axe head; no sign of that, or the river inlet nearby, nothing to mark the place of the oldest find on site. In the subway I realized we were at the point I had heard a local voice describe where at high the subway flooded in ghostly memory of that inlet. We looked for the old school and London's first nuclear installation, found neither.

Forming the ironically named Greenway are the great sewers still carrying London's affluent effluent east. Here we saw the only plaque of the day memorializing anything pre-2012. Walkers shared stories of cycling the route unaware of the great poo pipes they were cycling on, others were able to share their knowledge of the significance of this great Victorian sewer system. Walking on under the Greenway and feeling ourselves deep in the bowels of the park we approached the Great Stadium. Our way was barred by repurposed sections of the old blue wall and site security.

Back on top and overlooking the canalized River Lee, Toby reoriented us showing a series of drawings of views prior to development. This opened up further conversations regarding the development and a series of tweets located us. Scrambling down to the river and under the great sewer we could see the warehouses and stilled workshops of a part of London resembling what had been cleared from the Olympic site. One of the walkers told us that a building we were walking past had been the first Big Brother house and in my memory's ear I heard that iconic signature tune as we peaked through the fence. Tweets commented on this ironic presence.

Walking under mirrored bridges and up on to another overlooking the site, we tried to sniff shared memories of Carpenters Road, 'the street of a thousand smells" [19] print works and dye factories. We heard the story of stoned Matchbox model makers and listened for the silenced roar of Hackney Speedway. Although we were able to share resistance stories of artists, travellers, allotment holders and social housing we could not locate them. Re-establishing that link between memory and place would enable a powerful re-connection with the place and its layered past. Walking those empty totalitarian boulevards our thoughts turned to the Da Vinci code and Temple Mills. Here, where once Knights Templar owned mills, now stands the Olympic velodrome, alongside it a series of wind up memory posts with nothing to say apart from advertising themselves. In front of this, the Archaeological Institute of America website told me, stood an anti-aircraft battery, the frontline in the Battle of Britain. Astonished that even such a consensual piece of heritage had been 'landscaped' away, leaving no trace, we walked on to our destination.

The silence of the wind-up memory posts, installed but not programmed, seemed indicative that 2012 was indeed Year Zero at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. To top it off and to prove that the Olympic surveillance systems were still functioning as we gathered at the destination café, site security turned up to stop the filming of interviews with the Living Maps team.

### Conclusions

As a brief mapping exercise this demonstrates how geolocated social media can be used to identify, explore and validate layers of cultural heritage, even those which have been deliberately obscured. There is inevitably a tension between recording and experiencing but this experiment demonstrated a relatively open and democratic method for stimulating, gathering and locating stories, thoughts and media, and a strategy for engaging with them and sustaining their resonances.

In the absence of official site recognition and given that the 'cleansing' of the site took place well within living memory a more permanent locative media trail may be of interest to casual visitors, provide some sense of deeper history for more recent arrivals and possibly offer validation and orientation for those with longer connections to the site. Although there is a danger that by turning this into a heritage product, users would feel that the contested elements of the site have been coopted, a transparent presentation, engaging with social networks, could offer a more disenchanted mode of experience.

As a brief social media experiment the exercise was successful in capturing something of the experience in the form of a social media trail. Users were not however familiar with how their postings would be represented, over such a short period of time and distance few social media resonances were generated. There have

been a number of subsequent viewings of the captured trail but no further user comments. All this would indicate that a more engaged high profile development period interacting with established key social media users could generate a larger 'following' at the outset for an event such as this. Once live, those walkers taking part making more effective use of @ and # tags could have generated more live interactions. Early and time limited research indicated that those networks exist and contributions would have been generated. On the basis of previous experiments elsewhere, however, this experimental practice is demonstrating that there is at the very least an engaging process here with potential for development.

--------------------------
[1] 'cognitive mapping' (Jameson 1991), in Massey, D. (1993) Politics and Space/Time in Keith, M & Pile, S (eds) (1993): *Place and the Politics of Idenity.* London. Routledge

[2] 'space does not simply exist' (Lefebre 1991). In O'Rourke, K. (2013) *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Car tographers.* Cambridge. MIT Press

[3] psychogeographic practices cf Wark, M. (2015) *The Beach Beneath The Street: The everyday life and glori ous times of the Situationist international* London. Verso

[4] non-representational approaches Thrift, N. (2008) *Non-Representational Theory. Space. Politics. Affect.* London. Routledge

[5] Hamish Fulton: website http://www.hamish-fulton.com/ (accessed 20/9/15)

[6] Isle of Wight Carnival Trail Companion (2014) http://www.thenewcarnivalcompany.com/projects/the-carnival-trail/ (accessed 20/9/15)

[7] the former Olympic site alleged to have been overseen by unprecedented security. Graham, S. (2012) http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2012/mar/12/london-olympics-security-lockdown-london (accessed 20/9/15)

[8] Viewranger http://www.viewranger.com/en-gb (accessed 20/9/15)

[9] Social Hiking http://www.shareyouradventure.com (accessed 20/9/15)

[10] AppFurnace http://appfurnace.com/ (accessed 20/9/15)

[11]  https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=zvUKzkh1HsIY.kL6C5sT8-tpE (accessed 20/9/15)

[12] Eastside Community Heritage http://www.hidden-histories.org.uk/wordpress/?page_id=1751 (accessed 20/9/15)

[13] Archaeological Institute of America: http://archive.archaeology.org/1207/features/london_2012_olympic_park.html (accessed 20/9/15)

[14] http://www.gamesmonitor.org.uk/node/2062 (accessed 20/9/15)

[15] Wessex Archaeology. Powell, A. (2012) *Renewing the Past: Unearthing the history of the Olympic Park site.* Oxford. Oxbow books

[16] Social Hiking aggregated social media trail http://www.shareyouradventure.com/map/57434/walknowlive/Living-Maps-Olympic-Park-walk

[17] Viewranger social media trail route again but accessed on line shows my social media postings only http://my.viewranger.com/track/details/MTY2MDgxMw== (accessed 20/9/15)

[18] http://www.walknowtracks.co.uk/blog (accessed 20/9/15)

[19] Carpenters Road, 'the street of a thousand smells" tweet on Social Hiking social media trail see endnote [16] above