



## An expedition down East Finchley's only river

Bugwoman is one of our favourite bloggers whose investigations into the flora and fauna of N2 and its surrounds make fascinating reading. Follow her at [bugwomanlondon.com](http://bugwomanlondon.com). Here, she takes a walk along the route of East Finchley's little-known river, the Mutton Brook.

**A few weeks ago it occurred to me that, at the grand old age of nearly 57, I have never walked along a river from its source to its end. I have always wanted to do this with one of the great rivers of the world: the Nile, say, or the Orinoco, or the Amazon. Well, not much chance of that at the moment so how about a much more local stream?**

The Mutton Brook is East Finchley's own river. It is said to 'arise in Cherry Tree Wood', though I was a little puzzled about that. Then it flows through Hampstead Garden Suburb and skirts the edge of Temple Fortune before meeting up with the Dollis Brook and becoming the River Brent, which empties into the Thames.

On a bright, cold day I decided to follow the river as far as the Dollis Brook, and just see what I could see. I left behind my pith helmet and took my camera and a copy of an old map of the Suburb

to help with navigation.

Well, the first challenge is finding where exactly the Mutton Brook arises. Cherry Tree Wood is notoriously prone to dampness and becomes a bog with little encouragement: the Summer Festival of a few years back had to be cancelled because of the quagmire, and watercress used to be grown in the stream.

The theory is that it was called the Mutton Brook because drovers taking their animals to slaughter at Smithfield would water their sheep here on the journey into town. But where is it within the wood? There is no obvious brook anywhere.

My guess is that the river starts somewhere behind the tennis courts. This area is always damp, and there are often flag irises growing, along with other bog plants.

You can follow a path of muddy puddles right along the edge of the wood itself, past the football fields. This morning,

some areas give an ominous creak when I stand on them, as if the ice will break and I will be plummeted into the mud below.

But the clear evidence of the stream is hidden away. I have missed it numerous times when I've been in the wood, and it was only the sound of running water that alerted me to it today. Beside the tube line, surrounded by undergrowth and a green metal

fence, a stream runs down a concrete culvert, and is directed sharp left under the embankment. It's the last time it will appear above ground for over a mile.

I have an old map of Hampstead Garden Suburb, which clearly shows that the Mutton Brook reappears on Vivian Way. I cut round behind the station, passing along Edmunds Walk and emerging into an area of Tudor-themed suburb houses. There are some magnificent weeping willows in the middle of the green here, and I wonder if they are tapping into hidden water.

When I get to Vivian Way, I can find no sign of the poor old Mutton Brook. The green, where it is supposed to run, comprises a lot of grass, three birch trees and a hungry blackbird.

There is, however, a huge manhole cover plonked down in the middle of the area, and it occurs to me that maybe the stream has been taken underground here, but can still be inspected via this access point. The manhole cover itself is a miniature garden, moss on one side, lichen on the other.

I cross the main road, and head up Norrice Lea. Just before I reach the synagogue and the Jewish school I notice the Mutton Brook has emerged from underground and is tumbling under my very feet.

To follow it, I have to head into Lyttelton Playing Fields, where a small Chinese man is doing his morning tai chi in spite of the cold. I find the stream behind the tennis courts (again). On the other bank there are some rather fine mansion blocks, but it's a sad little river here: confined between beaten up pieces of wood and crumbling concrete walls, and smelling slightly of sewage.

The banks are mainly bramble and cherry laurel, and rubbish is bobbing along. At one of the bridges (and at several other points along the brook) there is clear evidence that it occasionally floods, and that the banks subside. I'm very careful not to get too close to the edge along this part of the stream; in several places the soil has fallen in, and I don't want to follow.

Shortly, I come to Kingsley Way where the brook leaves the playing fields and flows on into a little ornamental park. There is a measuring device here which I find very puzzling. It looks as if it measures the depth in metres, but it has '63' in red letters at the top. This is about the same height as the bridge, which could well be 6.3 metres from the base. But how high does the river actually rise? I must pay attention and see how often, and how badly, the Mutton Brook misbehaves.

Once the brook emerges from under the road, it takes on a completely different character. The stream meanders through a narrow channel, burbling to



The brook is channeled under the tube line at East Finchley

itself as it goes. There are some fine specimen trees here, and a robin seems to be singing from every one.

My walk takes me into another little park, where the Mutton Brook still wanders along in a decidedly civil manner. I sense, however, that it is getting more ambitious.

Once past the tennis courts here it becomes wider and wilder. The river is nearly invisible behind the brambles now, and when I go to look for it, I find a fine patch of cyclamen leaves.

I can hear the water, but it's nearly drowned out by the roar of traffic from Falloden Way, a sound that will be my constant companion from now until pretty

much the end of the walk. I steel myself to cross the main road, and see where the stream goes next.

Read more of Bugwoman's walk at [bugwomanlondon.com](http://bugwomanlondon.com)



And this is how it looks between its embankments further north in Hampstead Garden Suburb



Is this the source of the Mutton Brook in Cherry Tree Wood?



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