

EastBeginners

Sightseeing



To millions of TV viewers worldwide, Albert Square is a quintessential slice of East End community life. The Queen Vic, the launderette, the street market, the Fowlers' house at No.45: all are real to devotees of *EastEnders*. Of course, Albert Square is but a televisual illusion, built (surprisingly flimsily) on a set at the BBC studios in Elstree, Hertfordshire, miles from the East End. But if it were not, where would it be?

Walthamstow is closest to Albert Square in postal code: E17 compared to Walford's fictional E20. Certainly the street market (pictured), London's longest, is packed with cheeky barrow boys and Mo Slater types flogging fruit and veg and dodgy gear. But further south, the area around **Mile End** and **Bow** has Roman Road Market, packed with cafts, chippies, launderettes and pubs. Nearby Tredegar Square is a classic East End square, albeit a little too posh for Walford. Its pub, the Morgan Arms (43 Morgan Street), comes close to emulating the Queen Vic on a Sunday, as Peggy Mitchell types in glitzy blouses down gins to a soundtrack of bellowed karaoke.

And then there's the square that's reputed to be the real-life inspiration for Albert Square. Fassett Square in **Dalston** (ironically, itself two miles from the real East End of London) was

stumbled upon by a BBC location scout in 1983; several photographs and plaster casts later, it had been recreated in Elstree.

It certainly looks the part. Victorian yellow-brick terraced houses, built in the 1860s, surround a communal garden; their earliest occupants were clerks, merchants and master craftsmen, who could typically afford to keep a servant. Today, the houses are *EastEnders*-scruffy, with the requisite net curtains. And a train rumbling over a bridge in the background sounds just like the one on TV.

But it's by no means perfect. For one, there's a boxy block of flats on one side of the square. And for two, not only is the communal garden smaller than the one on TV, but fans can't get in to look for Arthur's bench as it's locked. Locked! Since when has Sharon stormed out of the Queen Vic for a good cry in the garden, only to stop and fumble with her keys? On the afternoon we visited, the only sign of life was a couple of boys playing cricket on the road, more reminiscent of the opening credits of *Neighbours* than a day in the life of Walford.

The soap's fictional neighbourhood, by the way, is reputed to have got its name from Walford Road in nearby **Stoke Newington**, an area far too gentrified for the Fowlers. Sometimes the truth hurts.