Visitor information

The Oak Room can be hired by tenants of the New River Head apartments. It can also be viewed by arrangement with the building concierge at New River Head, Rosebery Avenue, London EC1R 4TT.

There are also buildings of historic interest at New River Head. They include the medieval Devil's Conduit, the base of an 18th century windmill, and the larger 18th century engine house, which once accommodated steam pumping engines.

Parts of the wall of the reservoir in which the New River Head building now stands also survive.

By contrast, the site now incorporates a shaft of the 1994 Thames Water Ring Main. This 80km-long tunnel encircles London and is used to move water to all parts of the city from the treatment works to west of the city.

And the New River, though somewhat shorter now, is still in use as part of London's water supply system today.

There is public access to more than 16km of the New River path, heading south from Chadwell. Thames Water also publishes a booklet about the New River and its path, and the New River Action Group publishes a brief walkers' guide.

The Oak Room is just one of Thames Water's historic sites. To find out about the others, visit thameswater.co.uk/livewild

The Oak Room

New River Head

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New River Head takes its name from the reservoir at the mouth of the New River, the channel cut in 1604 –13 to supply London with water from springs in Hertfordshire. It is the site of the former Metropolitan Water Board offices and is now converted into flats.

The Oak Room contains magnificent oak carvings, believed to be the work of Grinling Gibbons.

New River Head was built in 1920, next to Sadler's Wells Theatre in Islington, North London. It houses the Oak Room, which the 1906 Architectural Review described as, "one of the most remarkable specimens of a late Renaissance room to be found in England".

And all around New River Head, the streets echo the history of London's water supply: Myddelton Square, Amwell Street, Chadwell Street, Myddelton Street and River Street.

The story begins

At the turn of the 17th century, the residents of London realised their existing supplies of water, drawn from local springs and the River Thames, were no longer enough. The springs were running dry, and the Thames was becoming polluted. Water was either distributed through primitive pipes or delivered by water carriers. But the population of London was growing and outstripping the capacity of these basic arrangements.

In response to this, the City of London Corporation devised a bold and imaginative solution. Its plan was to build a channel to bring water into the city from springs in Hertfordshire, 32 km to the north. The construction of the proposed aqueduct was assigned to Hugh Myddelton (1560-1631), a banker, MP and self-taught engineer. He'd also helped to fund the project through a partnership called the Society of Merchant Adventurers.

Work began in 1609, but two years later funds were already starting to run low. Since the Corporation would not invest in what was seen to be a risky project with little return, Myddelton asked King James I to invest in the project. The King agreed, with the condition that he was to receive half the profits.

A channel was cut, from springs at Chadwell and Amwell, near Ware, to Clerkenwell, just outside the City of London. It ended at a pond, which was enlarged into a reservoir later known as the Round Pond. Beside this, a cistern was built from which water was distributed to the City through pipes made of hollowed-out elm trunks.

The winding 64km route taken by the channel as it followed the contour of the land fell only five metres from its Hertfordshire sources to the Round Pond. The successful construction of such a slight gradient is testimony to the skill of Myddelton and his team.

The aqueduct, which became known as the New River, was opened with great ceremony in 1613. The operation of the system was managed by the New River Company, formed by Myddelton and his partners. In 1619 the company received a royal charter, and in 1622 Myddelton was made a baronet in recognition of his achievements.

The New River Company prospered, and an existing building at the head of the New River, alongside the Round Pond was extended to serve as the company's offices. The building was also a water control station and domestic accommodation for company staff. It was known as Cistern House and later as Water House.

In the late 17th century, the company added a boardroom to the Water House for meetings and dining. Known as the Court Room, it was built by John Grene, who had married Elizabeth Myddelton, a granddaughter of Sir Hugh Myddelton. He was the clerk to the company from 1667 to 1697.

The Metropolitan Water Board, which had assumed responsibility for London's water supplies in 1902, bought the Oak Room from the New River Company in 1904, for £2,000.

By 1992, Thames Water, which had been given control of London's waterways in 1974, no longer needed New River Head as an office building, so sold it for conversion into luxury apartments. But the Court Room, now known as the Oak Room, has been kept and preserved. And two giant trees inscribed with the dates 1920 and 1613, still guard the entrance to the building.

The Oak Room

The Oak Room consists of a main room flanked by two anterooms. On entering through the first, your eye is immediately drawn upwards to the painted and gilded ceiling of the main room. The centrepiece is an oil painting by Henry Cooke (1642–1700), a court painter. It features a portrait of King William III (who reigned from 1689 to 1702) in armour, enclosed in a frame embellished with a lion's head. The frame is supported by five figures floating in a clouded sky. Behind them, a cherub can be seen among the clouds. The painting is surrounded by two borders of decorative plasterwork, one oval and one rectangular, in the shape of fruit and flowers. Originally painted, these borders are now gilded.

Outside the gilded borders, the rest of the ceiling is made up of three intricately moulded plasterwork frames. The innermost shows village scenes with bridges over rivers and pictures of forts, as well as fantastic creatures and figures in chariots hauled by dogs and dolphins.

The main central border has a representation of Neptune and a mermaid-like figure at opposite ends . It then has dolphins and swans in alternate corners, and the whole border is decorated with birds and fruits.

The outermost border shows rural scenes of villages and forts. The villages with their bridges are probably intended to represent locations on the New River, while the forts may represent a line of fortifications thrown up to resist a threatened invasion. Two painted and gilded coats of arms break up the borders. Sir Hugh Myddelton's arms, with three wolves' heads under a coronet, can be seen on the side above the window. The wolves are a reference to a Welsh ancestor of Myddelton called Wolf. The hand in a smaller shield within the main shield is the red hand of Ulster, which baronets are entitled to bear on their arms. The hand above the shield is a reference to the glove trade of Denbigh, Myddelton's birthplace. John Grene's coat of arms, which has three gold stags on a blue background, can be seen below that of Sir Hugh.

The ceiling oil painting of King William III by court painter Henry Cooke

From the arms of John Grene, your gaze falls to the magnificently carved oak surround of the fireplace, flanked by two Corinthian columns. Immediately above it. You'll see the arms of King William's Dutch House of Nassau, carved with the motto of the Dutch Royal House, Je Maintiendray, (literally 'I will maintain', but meaning 'I stand steadfast'). Around these arms, carvings show the abundance of nature: there are fish, crayfish, crabs and lobsters, along with fishing equipment.

Waterbirds hang above them, with corn, grasses, flowers and fruits above the bookcases on either side of the fireplace. The carvings are believed to be the work of Grinling Gibbons (1648-1721), a Dutch-British sculptor and wood carver, or one of his pupils. Ahead of you, and over the doors of the further anteroom, are more magnificent carvings. And to the left, there is a pair of garlanded wings, with the garlanded heads of two winged cherubs to the right. You can also see carvings above the windows of the room: garlanded trumpets and wreaths of oak and laurel.

The room also contains some interesting furniture including a set of fine mahogany chairs in the Chippendale style. How many of these chairs are genuine or not is the subject of some controversy. No proof has been found to guarantee their authenticity, however, they are likely to have come from the workshops of George Seddon, who, it was recorded, was paid for furniture in 1772.

The carved wooden armchair was used by the chairman of the Metropolitan Water Board. It was made in 1923, from (an inscription on the back tells us) the original sheeting from the Round Pond.

The coats of arms of Sir Hugh Myddelton and John Cooke that form part of the ceiling decoration.

The Oak Room has twice been moved: once in 1915 so that it could be incorporated in the construction of the present New River Head building, and again in 1941, when it was removed to the Queen Mary Reservoir as a precaution against bomb damage.

A drawing of The Oak Room by John Crowther, published in October 1888 in 'the Builder', also shows that the room had to be turned from its original orientation to fit the new building.