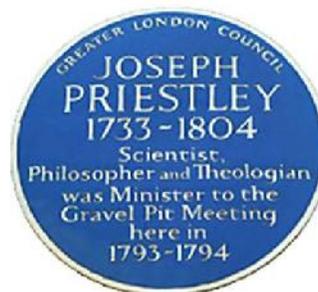
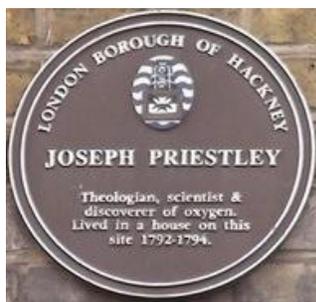


**London Borough of Hackney: Priestley's First Refuge**by  
David L. Wykes <sup>1</sup>**Plaques commemorating Priestley's time in Hackney <sup>2</sup>**

Joseph Priestley arrived at the London Borough of Hackney a refugee, dispossessed of almost everything he owned as a result of the riots at Birmingham in July 1791, when the contents of his house, his laboratory and his library were broken up or destroyed by the mob on the first evening of the disturbances. Priestley scarcely escaped before the mob arrived fleeing with wife Mary to the home of their daughter in Dudley, about 9 miles northwest of Birmingham. Five days later he arrived in London. The riots had transformed Priestley into a national figure of hate and that animosity followed him to Hackney.

In London Priestley found a temporary refuge with friends. In mid-September, almost exactly two months after the riots, he sought to take a house at Clapton, part of Hackney; though it was not without difficulties as it was feared the landlord would object to Priestley as a tenant. There were rumours that any house Priestley took would be burnt down. He took the house on a twenty-one year lease and made expensive repairs.

Hackney in addition to providing a refuge had a number of important advantages for Priestley as a place to live. The death of his friend Richard Price, minister of the Gravel Pit Meeting, in April 1791, offered him an opportunity to resume his ministerial career. The Gravel Pit Chapel was established in 1715–16 in Hackney for a Presbyterian congregation. It took its name from the gravel pit nearby. Priestley was an obvious choice as minister of the Gravel Pit Meeting in succession to Price; indeed he was already known to the congregation having preached Price's funeral sermon. But there was opposition in the congregation to his appointment from fear that his presence would attract the mob. A majority of the congregation were in favour of Priestley but a two-thirds majority was required. The election was held in November and he was elected, 51 votes to 19, a majority greater than the prescribed two-thirds. Priestley began his ministry on December 4, 1791, just under three months after the riots.

Although Priestley found a job quickly, it took him longer to re-establish his laboratory and begin scientific research again. Over two thousand volumes from his library were recovered after the riots, about two-thirds of the total including the handwritten manuscript copy of his unprinted Memoirs and a register of experiments. Following an appeal to fellow scientists he received gifts of chemicals, apparatus and money, especially from members of the Lunar Society, enabling him to re-establish his laboratory. Priestley wrote in June 1792 to the French scientist Antoine Lavoisier that he was about to commence his experiments again. He was an opponent of the new chemistry advanced by Lavoisier and others. His experiments in this period were largely concerned with defending his original theory of phlogiston. This

also proved to be a barren period in terms of contacts with the other leading scientists of the day. He found himself shunned by members of the Royal Society, and candidates he recommended as Fellows rejected on account of their politics.

Priestley's settlement at Hackney provided him with the opportunity to teach again. By early December 1791 he was offering to lecture *gratis* on history and natural philosophy at New College at Hackney, established in 1786 to educate both lay and ministerial students on liberal principles. Although Priestley's lectures on natural philosophy, principally chemistry, at the College provided a general overview of the subject, the evidence from the summary he published in 1794 reveals that they followed the old system of science rather than the new. Teaching was clearly an activity Priestley enjoyed and at which he excelled.

It proved less easy to find a settlement for his sons. His eldest son, Joseph junior, had been placed with a Manchester merchant with the intention of being made a partner, but after the Birmingham riots a separation was made. His second son, William, found a place with William Russell in France. As early as June 1792 Priestley concluded that "this country is not likely to be a desirable situation for any child of mine, and therefore it is natural for me to look for a settlement for them elsewhere".

But his settlement in Hackney continued to be happy despite the threats of violence against him. It was with some relief he had reported that 14 July 1792, the first anniversary of the Priestley Riots, had passed off quietly. During the winter of 1792 individual attacks on dissenters were overtaken by a comprehensive government-inspired onslaught against all radicals and reformers following the violent events in France. The formation of loyalist associations led to demonstrations and renewed violence. The activities and 'Church and King' clubs were reinforced by government sponsored intimidation and repression. A series of repressive acts, state trials, and the suspension of Habeas Corpus, severely restricted civil liberties and brought almost all attempts at reform to a halt. In early February 1793, Priestley was burnt in effigy with Thomas Paine at Shrewsbury, and subsequently at Dudley, where his daughter lived with her family.

He left the country ultimately because of his sons who by early 1793 had all determined to live in America. He wrote "I should willingly have awaited my fate in my native country, what ever it had been, if I had not had sons in America, and if I did not think that a field of public usefulness, which is evidently closing upon me here, might open to more advantage there".

The stay of two-and-a-half years at Hackney may have formed only a very brief period of Priestley's life, but these years were not irrelevant. His work as a scientist formed the weakest part of his life there despite rebuilding his laboratory. The quantity of Priestley's research had declined and he increasingly attempted to adapt his phlogiston theory to fit every new hypothesis. Priestley made it clear that had he 'foreseen what I am now witness to, I certainly should not have made any attempt to replace my library or apparatus'. Yet his stay in Hackney was largely a happy one and he left the congregation at the Gravel Pit with genuine regret. Priestley left Hackney for America in April 1794.

<sup>1</sup> **Dr. Wykes is Director of Dr Williams's Library, London. This article was condensed from a much longer piece, "We have lived very quietly and comfortably here": Joseph Priestley at Hackney, September 1791 – April 1794, and is used by permission of the author.**

<sup>2</sup> **Both plaques misrepresent Priestley's tenure in Hackney:  
Brown plaque - Priestley lived in Hackney from 1791 to 1794, not 1792-94;  
Blue plaque - Priestley served as minister to the Gravel Pit Meeting from 1791 to 1794, not 1793-94.**