

# **“A CAPITAL GROUND FOR SPORTS”**

**A history of sports and recreation  
on Wanstead Flats 1879-1914**

Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society

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**A history of sports and recreation on Wanstead Flats 1878-1914**

**by the Wanstead Flats Working Group of Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society**

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## WANSTEAD FLATS PLAYING FIELDS 1878-1914

### *Introduction*

The 1878 Epping Forest Act marks a watershed moment for the forest in general and for Wanstead Flats in particular. The Act, the result of many decades of fierce tussles between landlords seeking to enclose common land and those resisting its spread, ensured the forest lands would remain open and accessible to the public and placed responsibility for overseeing this with the Corporation of London. This new pact was sealed four years later when Queen Victoria visited Epping Forest and declared the area should be for the 'use and enjoyment of my people for all time'.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century Epping Forest was frequently referred to as 'the playground for the people'<sup>2</sup> and the 450 acres of Wanstead Flats, at the southern end of the Forest, were especially heavily used.



'The playground of the people.' Donkeys on the Flats, Whitsun fair 1900.

The proximity of Wanstead Flats to East London meant that it was a well-known venue for sports, both legal and illicit. In 1816 a prize fight drew a huge crowd, many of whom had been misinformed of the secret location and had to cross from Blackheath by the Woolwich ferry, whose operators 'outrivalled the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Graphic*, 13/05/1883.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Morning Chronicle*, 14/11/1859, letter from 'An Ancient Forester' on encroachments in Epping Forest.

collectors on Hampton Court bridge in making money out of the customers'.<sup>3</sup> Foot races between professional 'pedestrians' were also very popular, with large prizes at stake.<sup>4</sup> Military reviews were held on the open spaces of the Flats throughout the century, and again these drew large crowds of spectators.

However, the new legislation was the first step in turning the area into one of the capital's largest expanses of playing fields for organised sport. Over the next thirty-six years, Wanstead Flats changed out of all recognition. By 1914 the Flats was home to over a hundred football and cricket pitches providing exercise and competition to thousands of enthusiasts.

The Flats in 1878 would have had a very different look to the area we are familiar with today. In fact it fitted more accurately its earlier description as Wanstead Heath than the later designation of Flats. The area was characterised by bogs, hillocks and just a few clumps of trees. An early annual report from the Epping Forest Committee said it had a 'very bare and desolate appearance. In many places the surface had not only been denuded of top soil but was very uneven and there were scarcely any trees [and] much coarse vegetation'.<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 06/12/1816.

<sup>4</sup> *The Era*, 04/10/1857.

<sup>5</sup> Epping Forest Report (EFR) 1882-98. Annual Report 1886.

'A bare and desolate appearance.' Wanstead Flats looking south near Centre Road in about 1900.

Other descriptions of Wanstead Flats soon after its acquisition by the City of London testify both to its potential as a venue for sports and to its poor state. One London guide book described it as 'a capital ground for cricket and other sports, indulged in the thousands, who frequent the space in fine weather', with a fine avenue of lime trees 'well known to the east-Enders' at its northern end.<sup>6</sup> However, another described the Flats as 'rather monotonous and uninviting. They consist of a wide expanse of open country, with scarce a tree to enliven the scene, naught but rank herbage, rushes, brakes and furze, meet our vision on every side'.<sup>7</sup>



'Naught but rank herbage, rushes, brakes and furze, meet our vision on every side.' A Victorian postcard depicting Woodford Road, Forest Gate in 1900.

In the early 1880s the Corporation was forced to fill up a number of ponds which had become 'foul and offensive and were becoming a nuisance to the large population that had sprung up' in this area. One of the main problems, said the 1885 annual report, was that 'various persons in spite of the vigilance of the keepers have made a practice of throwing dead animals, stale fish and other offensive substances in these ponds during the night'.<sup>8</sup>

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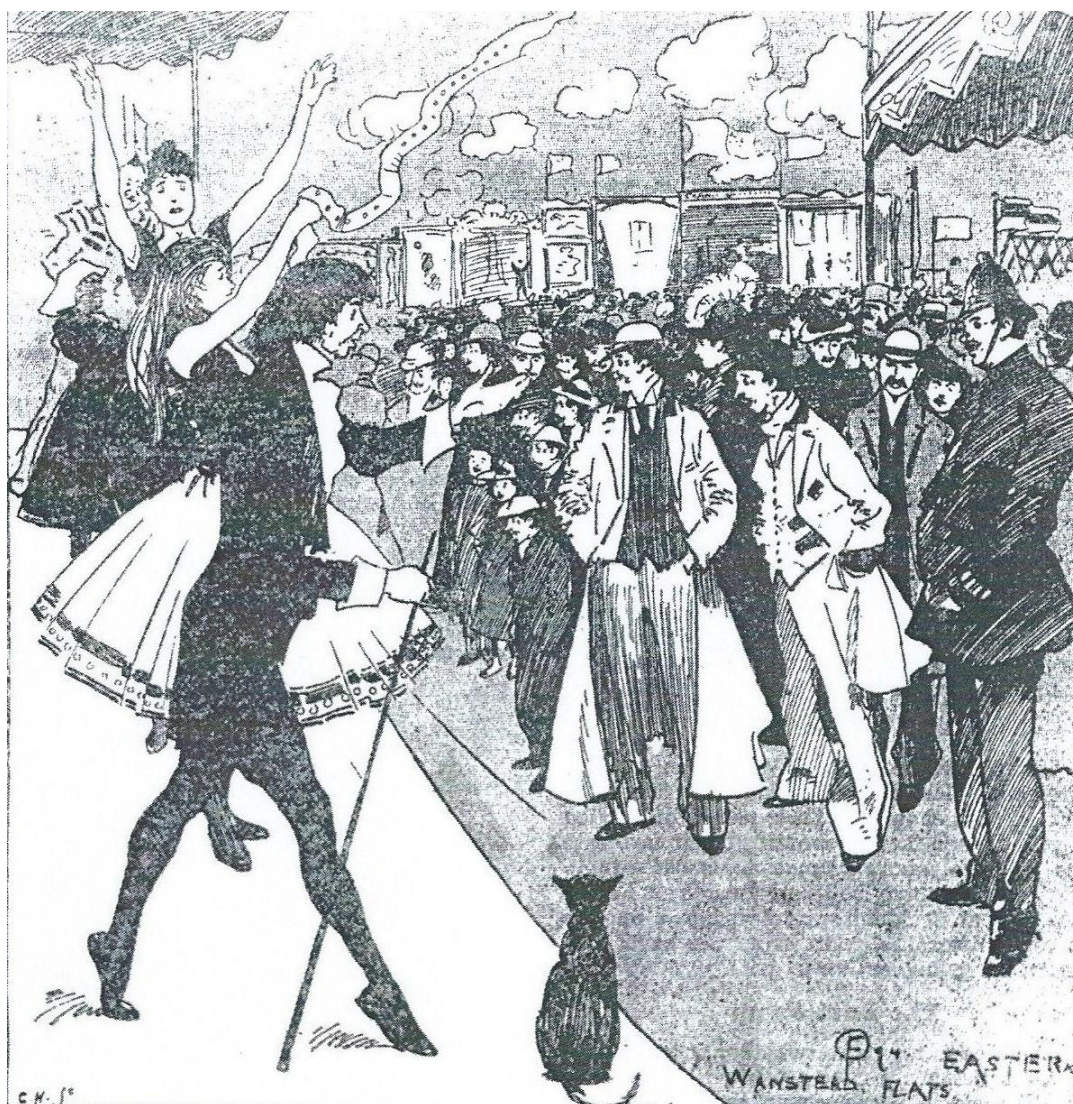
<sup>6</sup> F. Johnson, *Weldon's Guide to Epping Forest*, (London, Third edition, no date, probably c. 1880), p.6.

<sup>7</sup> E. Langley, *Wanstead Park Past and Present: a Complete Guide to the Various Places of Attraction*.

Reprinted from *Forest Gate News*, (Forest Gate, 1883), p.7.

<sup>8</sup> EFR 1882-98. Annual report 1885.

It also had an unsavoury reputation – not entirely dispelled during this period - as a meeting place for ‘roughs’ and prostitutes. One later account talked of the Flats as a ‘place of abominations by day and night’. These characteristics were only heightened, it seems, when large public events such as the annual fair arrived.<sup>9</sup>



All the fun of the fair on Wanstead Flats, sketched by Pip in 1894 - though others thought it ‘a place of abominations by day and night’.

### ***The coming of organised sport***

<sup>9</sup> Fifth annual report of the West Ham Distress Committee, 30/06/1910 .

The Epping Forest and Open Spaces Committee was set up in the immediate aftermath of the Epping Forest Act and was determined from the start to soften the old image through a major programme of landscaping as well as new attempts to curb some of the excesses. One of its first acts was to publish a set of bye-laws governing activities and behaviour within Epping Forest.<sup>10</sup>

There was little reference in these bye-laws to organised sport, mainly because it still had such a low profile – though the Committee did stipulate that no sport could be played within Epping Forest without the written consent of the Conservators.

In a later modification it was also expressly forbidden ‘to play at any game which may be a nuisance or annoyance to the public or hinder or annoy them in their rights of recreation in, and enjoyment of, the Forest’. Recreation was different from sport – and, it seemed, would always have priority when the two were weighed in the balance.



‘Might be laid out as a cricket ground.’ A match at the nearby Spotted Dog cricket ground during the Victorian era.

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<sup>10</sup> Epping Forest bye-laws 1881.

Indeed a report in 1876 to the Epping Forest Commissioners seems to underline this point. Surveyor Arthur Butler proposed the Flats could be an 'open park laid out with flower beds etc' with the only mention of sport being a suggestion that '5-6 acres at the south west corner of the Flats near Forest Gate might be laid out as a cricket ground'.<sup>11</sup>

When it was established two years later, the Committee did not adopt Mr. Butler's proposal but references to the Flats in those early years relate almost entirely to planting trees, draining the swamps, filling the potholes and making the area generally more appealing to those who wished to visit for recreation.

Yet within a few years the Committee began to receive a trickle of applications from newly-formed clubs in the area to turn some of the open land into use for cricket, and later football pitches. The first application for Wanstead Flats came in October 1881 with a request from the West Ham Board (the predecessor of West Ham Council before 1886) for land for a cricket ground (and bathing place).<sup>12</sup> In April 1883 Leyton Church Choir Cricket Club asked for a piece of land to be made available for cricket near the Green Man pond. The application was approved.<sup>13</sup> And in December of the same year Forest Gate Football Club became the first football club to seek permission to first level and then play football on the Flats - on a patch of ground near Chestnut Avenue.<sup>14</sup>

In the following year the Committee received a petition from a number of local cricket clubs asking for a space on the Flats to be levelled for the use of cricket.<sup>15</sup>

And as momentum grew the Committee started to receive applications not just from individual clubs but from organisations on behalf of a number of clubs. The first body to take on this role was the London Playing Fields Committee (LPFC). It was soon followed by West Ham Council in 1886 and then East Ham Council.

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<sup>11</sup> Mr. Butler's General Report and Draft Scheme to the Epping Forest Commissioners, 08/07/1896.

<sup>12</sup> Epping Forest Committee (EFC) minutes 1881.

<sup>13</sup> EFC minutes 1883. Leyton Choir CC.

<sup>14</sup> EFC minutes 1883. Forest Gate FC.

<sup>15</sup> EFC minutes 1884. Petition from local cricket clubs.



By 1895 the LPFC was administering 13 pitches on Wanstead Flats which were used by 21 clubs with more than 500 members who paid an average five shillings a season for the privilege.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile West Ham Council had responsibility for nine pitches on which a total of thirteen clubs played.<sup>17</sup>

By 1899 the pitches the LPFC was responsible for had risen to 20, used by 31 clubs, and by 1903 there were 24 pitches used by 40 different clubs.<sup>18</sup>

The Committee was also called upon to adjudicate in disputes between clubs and even between different individuals in the same club. And there was a massive programme of levelling and grassing of large swathes of the Flats to try and meet the ever-increasing demand.

The acceleration in demand in the years following the Epping Forest Act was dramatic. 1881, for instance, saw the first three clubs ask permission to use open spaces in the Forest to play cricket. In 1886 applications from cricket clubs had risen to twenty and there were also seven from football clubs. By 1893 those numbers had doubled and for the first time football applications outnumbered those of cricket.

By the turn of the century the Committee was receiving over 120 applications a year with twice as many (83) for football as cricket and by 1911 – the peak year – applications had soared to 240, two thirds of which (159) were for football.<sup>19</sup> In the space of twenty-five years applications to play football or cricket on the open spaces of Epping Forest – principally Wanstead Flats – had risen by nearly 1,000%!

The Committee also received a small but regular number of applications for other sports such as tennis, golf, hurling and cross country running. Indeed a newspaper report in 1905 describes how ‘some Irishmen playing a national

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<sup>16</sup> EFR 1882-98. Annual report 1895.

<sup>17</sup> EFR 1882-98. Annual report 1895.

<sup>18</sup> EFR 1899-14. Annual reports 1899, 1903.

<sup>19</sup> EFR 1899-14/ EFC minutes 1911-14.

game resembling hockey' on the Flats managed to hit some bystanders, which led to a brawl with the players being driven from the ground.<sup>20</sup> But all these were clearly minority pursuits and were dwarfed by the demand for cricket and football.



*Chelmsford Chronicle* 1913 – Wanstead Flats has been used for a wide variety of pastimes: it hosts one of the oldest model aero clubs in the country, which is still there though under a different name.

## **Social changes**

So what was fuelling this remarkable expansion? Of course the Epping Forest Act was a prerequisite for what followed. But there is little evidence that the Open Spaces Committee was taking any active steps to encourage this expansion apart from granting the permits to play and – usually in response to demand – helping to level areas of the Flats to create new pitches.

The major factors were undoubtedly the dramatic social and economic changes that took place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as working class people at last began to enjoy the leisure, combined with the money, needed for organised recreation.

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<sup>20</sup> *Essex Newsman*, 25/03/1905.

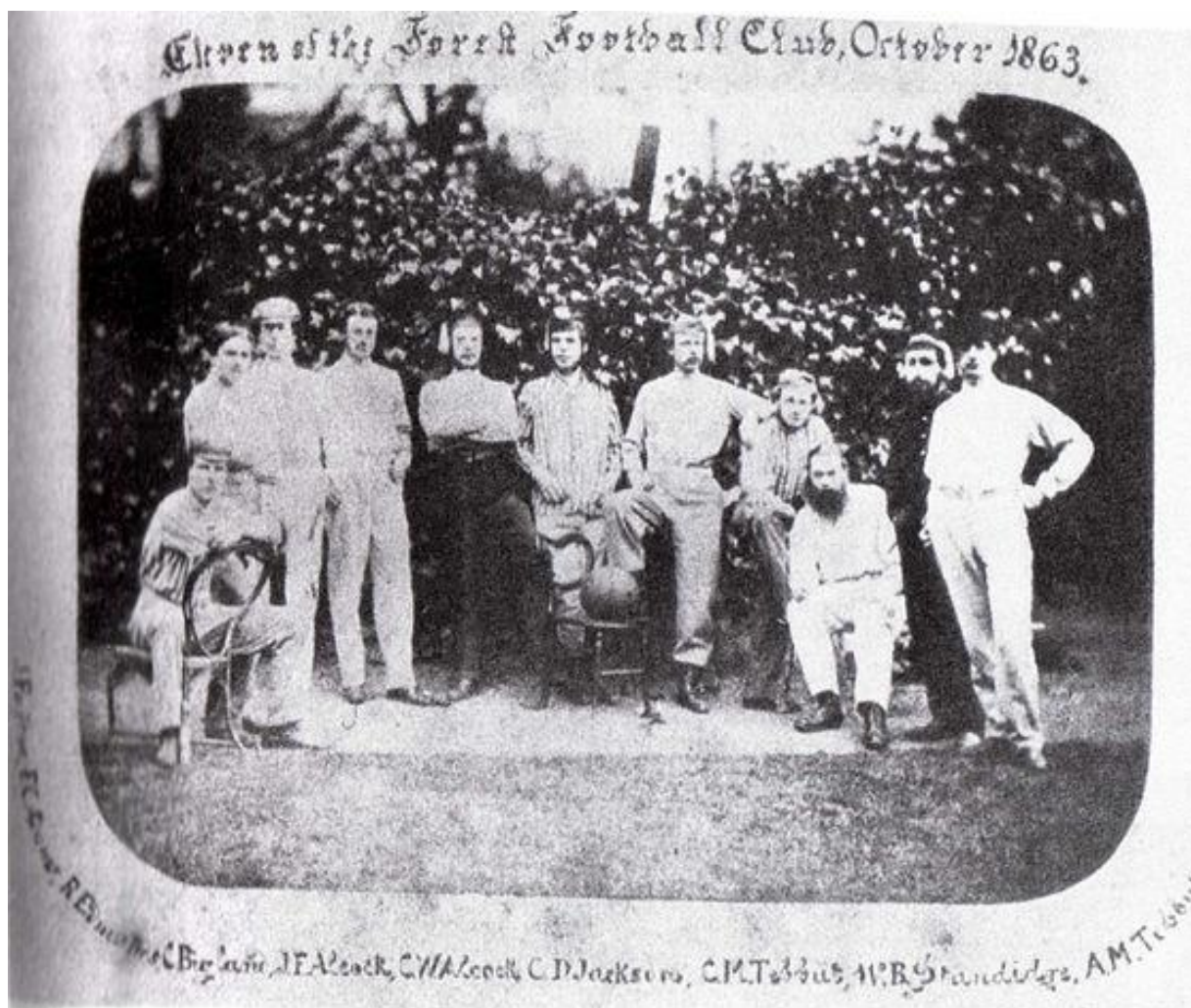
In those twenty-five years real wages rose dramatically,<sup>21</sup> and at the same time, and for a variety of reasons, there was a new emphasis on fitness, health and exercise. In addition the working week was for many reduced from six to five and a half days with Saturday becoming a half day. By the 1860s many East London businesses were closing on Saturday afternoons, and outings were increasingly common.<sup>22</sup> In 1863 the Select Committee on Royal Forests was taking evidence on the increasing use of Wanstead Flats and the rest of Epping Forest, not only on weekends but throughout the week in the summer. Wanstead Flats, according to one witness, 'immediately adjoins a large resident population, by whom it is continually used; and I may say that daily ... people assemble there ...'.<sup>23</sup> The Bank Holiday Act 1871 created further opportunities for time off, although a vigorous half-day closing campaign for shops produced no result until the Shops Act of 1894.

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<sup>21</sup> Saul, S.B., *The Myth of the Great Depression 1873-1896* (London, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> For example the major East End brewers, Truman Hanbury Buxton, were closing on Saturday afternoons from the 1850s.

<sup>23</sup> Parliamentary papers, 'Select Committee on Royal Forests (Essex)' 1863, evidence of George Burney, 1212.



Forest (later The Wanderers) football club 1863, founded in Epping Forest a few years before, probably on forest land in nearby Snaresbrook.

Until the 1870s football had been a relatively minor recreational pastime largely confined to a narrow and elite stratum of Victorian society. Indeed, one of these early clubs played in Epping Forest. In 1859 Forest Football Club was formed by a number of former public school pupils, and for the first two years of the club's existence, the players organised matches among themselves at Snaresbrook, possibly on land owned by the Earl of Mornington.<sup>24</sup>

But over the next twenty to thirty years football was transformed into the country's dominant sport. In 1863 a code of rules was introduced, and in 1889 a professional football league was established. Stadia were built and the game began to attract large numbers of paying spectators. The rise of football as a spectator sport saw a parallel – and in some ways interconnected – rise in the

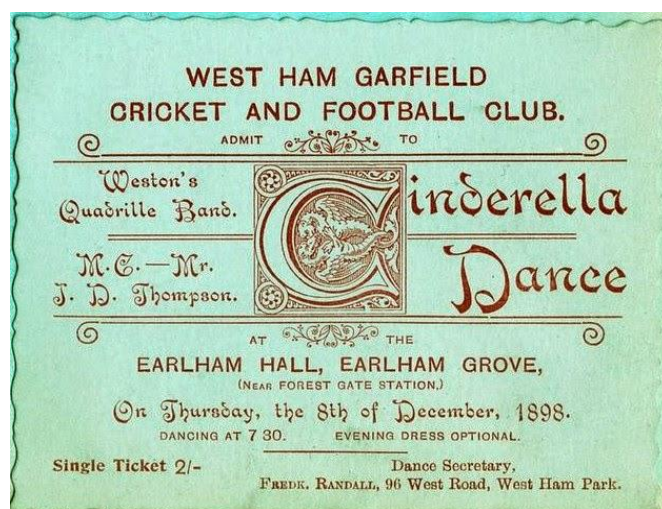
<sup>24</sup> Booth, K., *The Father of Modern Sport: The Life and Times of Charles W. Alcock*, (Manchester, 2002).

number of amateur enthusiasts looking to team up with others to play the sport simply for enjoyment.

There was a clear whiff of snobbery in the sometimes contrasting attitudes to football and cricket on the Flats. Local resident James Payne wrote to the local paper in August 1897 comparing the likely effect on the two sports of funeral processions going across a corner of the Flats: 'To put it at its lowest, this would hardly give an air of cheerfulness to the scene during the cricketing season, though it might have a slightly moderating influence when the football is on'.<sup>25</sup>

The clubs that were now playing on the Flats came from a large swathe of the east of London. Churches, factories and many other industries were often happy enough to encourage their members and workers to set up clubs under their auspices and this is evident in the names of the wide variety of clubs applying to the Epping Forest Committee for permits.

Clubs applying in the 1880s and 90s included Woodgrange Wesleyan CC, Cann Hall Baptist FC, Forest Gate Congregation CC, St Mark's Mission, Grove Wesleyan, St Andrew's, Woodford Bible Class and Leytonstone Mission CC. There were also applications from Great Eastern Railway FC, Bow Tank Works, Forest Gate YMCA and Forest Gate Police, Waterlow and Sons, Stratford Co-operative, Leytonstone College, Leytonstone Postmen and Bentall Swifts.



<sup>25</sup> *Forest Gate Weekly News*, 27/08/1897.

West Ham Garfield often played on the Flats though their home ground was West Ham Park. They played at quite a senior level, including cup games against Thames Ironworks (later West Ham United) in the 1890s.

### ***Work relief***

Another significant factor in the transformation of the Flats was unemployment. There were several periods of high unemployment during Victorian times, one in the 1880s soon after the Flats passed into the care of the City of London. Large numbers of working men, especially in the east of London, were out of work at this time, which led to the formation of a number of local 'distress committees' to try to find them temporary work. All this coincided with the need to re-landscape the Flats in response to the rising tide of applications for playing fields. The match-up was an obvious one.

In March 1886 the Open Spaces Committee agreed that a 'great public benefit would arise from portions of Wanstead Flats being levelled and drained with a view to meeting the daily increasing demand for cricket and other recreation grounds and this would be suitable relief to be undertaken by the court [of the Corporation of London]'.<sup>26</sup>

Two years later it was suggesting in a letter to the Lord Mayor that employment should be found for unskilled labourers in levelling and planting portions of the Flats. The Committee itself didn't have the funds for this work, it added, suggesting that it might instead be funded by public subscription.<sup>27</sup>

By the 1890s both local boroughs, West Ham and East Ham, had set up formal distress relief committees to meet the growing problem of joblessness.

In 1892 West Ham council was suggesting a programme of laying out and draining Wanstead Flats 'with a view to finding work for some of the unemployed'.<sup>28</sup> In December of the same year the Committee agreed to spend

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<sup>26</sup> EFC minutes 1886.

<sup>27</sup> EFC minutes 1888.

<sup>28</sup> EFC minutes 1892.

£400 in draining and improving the Flats 'with the object of finding work for the unemployed residents in the Forest parishes'.<sup>29</sup> In January 1893 West Ham Council had agreed to put up £1,500 towards relief works on the Flats and by the end of the year it was expressing its willingness to undertake the laying out of a portion of the Flats for football and cricket 'as a means of providing work for some of the unemployed'.<sup>30</sup> This work was celebrated in March 1894 with the official opening by the Lord Mayor of six extra cricket pitches.<sup>31</sup>

**THE LORD MAYOR AT WANSTEAD FLATS.**

The Lord Mayor, accompanied by the Lady Mayoress, on Saturday drove from London to Wanstead Flats, and there formally declared open 16 cricket pitches which have been recently laid out for the use of East London clubs. Ten of these pitches, 100ft. square, were laid down by the committee of the West Ham Relief Fund, the chairman of which is Alderman J. H. Bethell, Mayor of West Ham. This fund was started last November, and began the Wanstead Flats section of its work on Dec. 20th. A pond was enlarged to drain the Flats, then 12 acres of rough ground was dug over and levelled for football grounds, and in the same way 10 cricket pitches were laid, another six being undertaken by the Epping Forest Committee. By this work it is estimated that during three months, 2,162 men were assisted at an expenditure of £1,603 16s. 6d. by the West Ham Relief Fund, and as to the quality of the work it may be stated that the Epping Forest Committee have expressed their great satisfaction.

*Chelmsford Chronicle* 18<sup>th</sup> May 1894

By the following year a new relief work project was being proposed to drain and level 16 acres of the Flats for football and cricket – again as a 'means of providing work for the unemployed'.<sup>32</sup>

All this was given further impetus by the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905 which authorised grants to pay for those out of work to join relief projects. Following on from this a number of additional schemes were proposed and agreed to provide work for the unemployed. Some of these projects involved further levelling and seeding of areas to extend the playing areas of the Flats. Others were related to drainage and the creation of new ponds or lakes on the

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<sup>29</sup> EFC minutes 1892.

<sup>30</sup> EFC minutes 1893.

<sup>31</sup> EFC minutes 1894.

<sup>32</sup> EFC minutes 1895.

Flats such as the Bandstand Pond (aka Angell Pond), Jubilee Pond and Alexandra Lake.

And sometimes, almost inevitably, these different projects came into conflict with each other. In January 1907, for instance, the London Playing Fields Committee complained that one of the pitches on the Flats had been 'rendered useless' by the extension of Alexandra Lake then being carried out by the unemployed.<sup>33</sup> The Corporation's Superintendent FW Mackenzie, whose view of the handiwork of unemployed labourers was generally less than complimentary, was quick to point out that he had warned of just such an outcome!

### ***Landscaping***

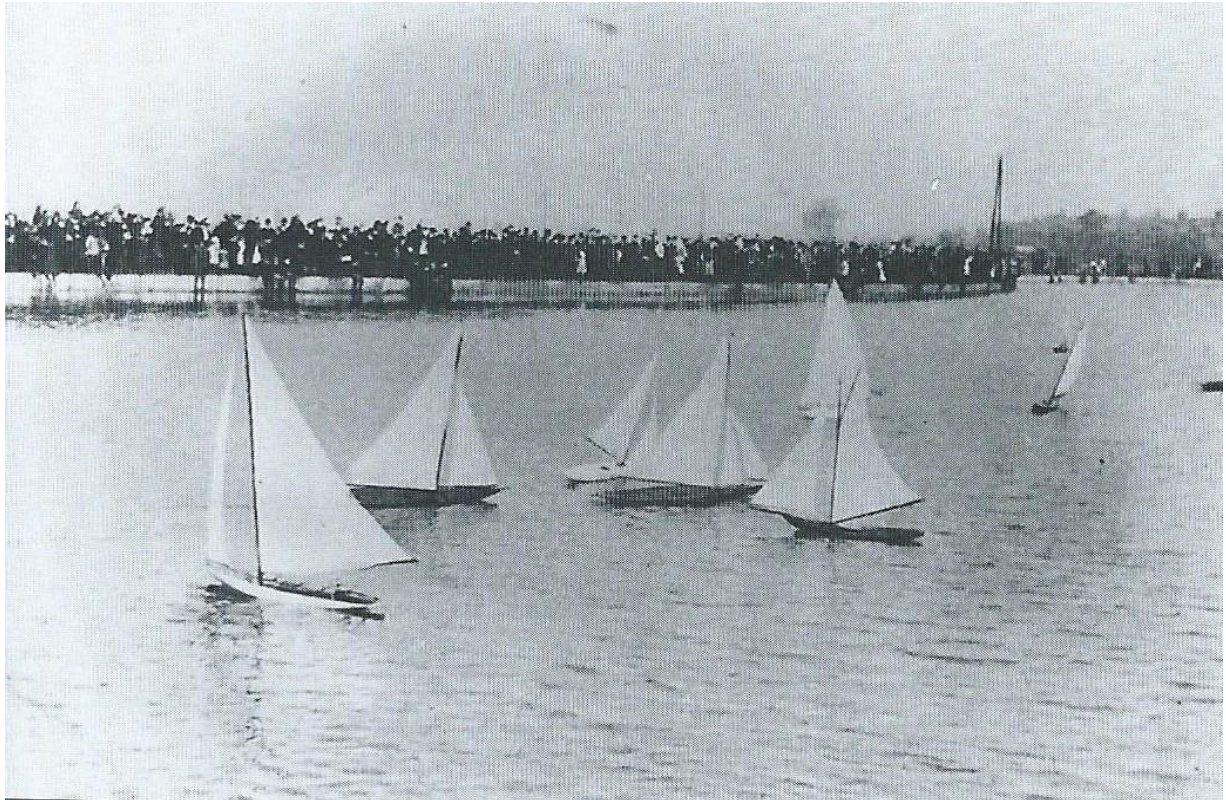
Landscaping of Wanstead Flats had several purposes: to create work, to improve drainage and to make attractive features to draw visitors to the Flats. There is an early reference to creating a bathing pool in the Brickfields site in 1881 but the main programme started around 1886 with about 100 men (400-500 were turned away) burning rushy grass and digging trenches to drain and level the ground.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> EFC minutes/papers 1907.

<sup>34</sup> *London Standard*, 08/01/1887.





Huge crowds watching racing on the model yacht pond, Dames Road in 1908.

In the early 1900s improvement works were begun to the Angell Pond, at the corner of Capel Road and Woodford Road. An extension was also built to the model yacht pond on Dames Road. At the same time there were major improvements to the lake system in Wanstead Park, also to help the unemployed.

The largest single project during this period was the creation of Alexandra Lake opposite the entrance to the City of London cemetery, work that was carried out in a number of stages over several years right up to 1911. Gravel was freely available just under the surface of the soil to reshape the landscape and create small hills and features. There were similar works in Leytonstone with the creation of the Hollow Ponds boating lake.

On 13 April 1906 the *Chelmsford Chronicle* reported that the 'lake has made the Flats more attractive, and, in addition, will have the effect of draining what in the

rainy season is a very marshy tract land'.<sup>35</sup> On 5 November 1906 'enormous crowds' were drawn to the Flats for fireworks night.<sup>36</sup>

In 1907 West Ham Distress Committee proposed 'extending in a northerly direction the model yacht pond at the corner of Capel Road and Woodford Road; construction of foot paths and avenues of trees across Wanstead Flats; and the formation of an open-air swimming bath in brick fields hollow adjacent to Aldersbrook Road'.<sup>37</sup> A trial pit was to be dug to explore the swimming bath idea. Gravel for paths on the Flats was extracted from the Brickfields area. The ordnance pathway across the Flats from Capel Road at the junction of Tylney Road to Aldersbrook Road, for instance, was 15 foot wide and had drains underneath it. Remains of this are visible today.

As the years went on there were further proposals to extend Alexandra Lake and improve drainage on the Flats. The model yacht pond was finalised in 1908, covering a total of three acres.

By 1909 there were complaints that 'the public were being annoyed by the sight of naked adolescent boys rushing about' at Alexandra Lake.<sup>38</sup> East Ham council built a bandstand nearby on what is now Forest View Road. In fact, work continued right up to the start of the First World War in the summer of 1914.

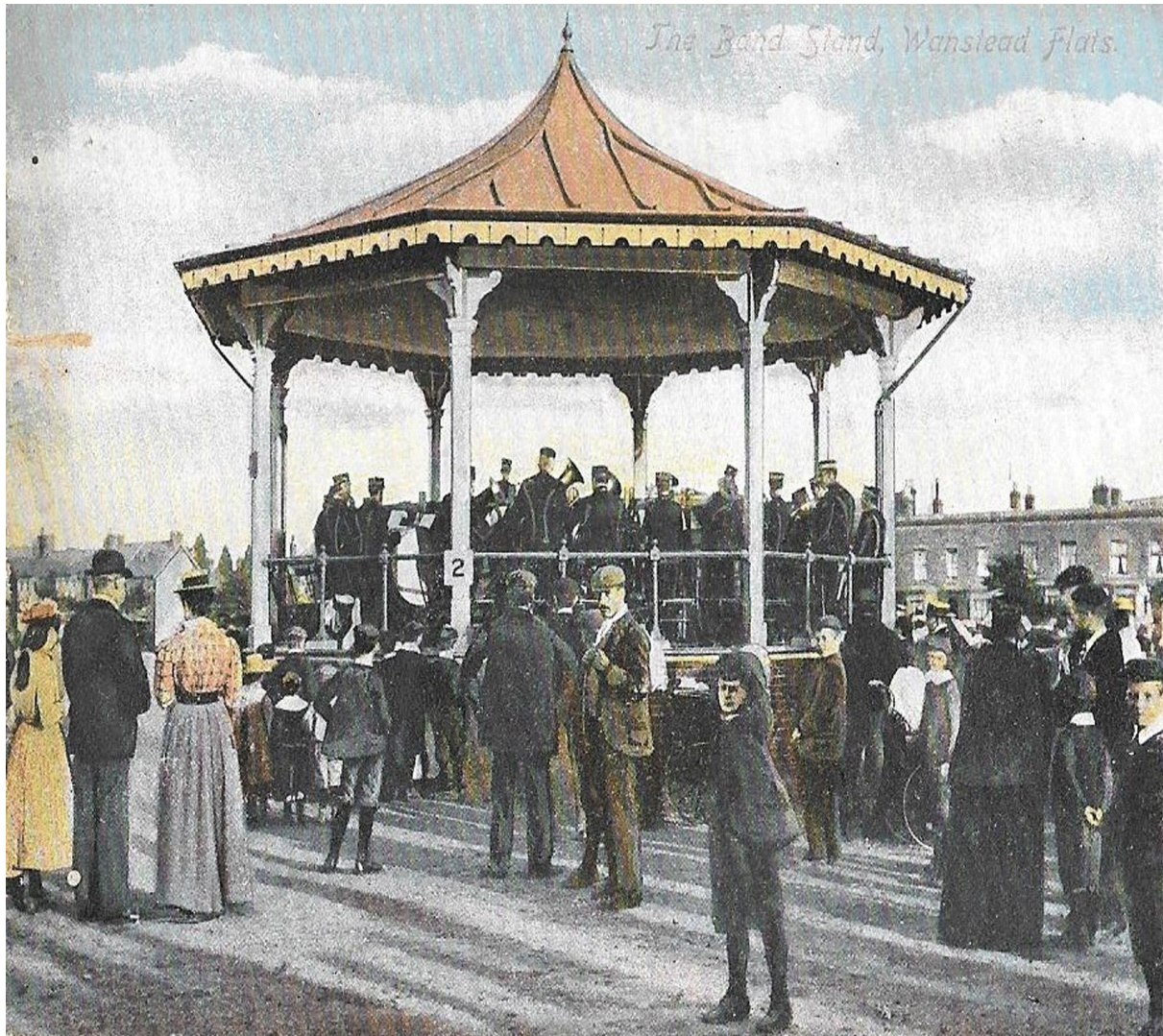
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<sup>35</sup> *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 13/04/1906.

<sup>36</sup> *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 05/11/1906.

<sup>37</sup> West Ham Distress Committee 1907.

<sup>38</sup> *Forest Gate Weekly News*, 07/07/1896.



Although Manor Park residents had their own bandstand on Wanstead Flats, it couldn't rival the one in Forest Gate for superior structure or quality of bands. This postcard shows the Forest Gate bandstand in action in the early 1900s.

### ***Levelling the Flats***

Although most levelling and drainage schemes were based on an overview of the area's recreational needs and were largely carried out at council or committee level, individual clubs were also closely involved in the creation of many of the early pitches. The Committee had little money to fund these schemes so would often give clubs permission to play in certain areas, as long as they took responsibility for the levelling, drainage and seeding required.

In the early days applications to use part of the forest as a pitch for either football or cricket were dealt with on an *ad hoc* basis. But very soon the sheer scale of the demand necessitated a more structured approach.

By the mid-1880s it was being stipulated that applications had to be made in writing on an annual basis and would be considered *en bloc*, with cricket applications heard between January and May and football between June and October. The cricket season itself lasted from 1 May to 30 September and the football season from 1 October to the end of March (the football season was later brought forward to start in mid-September with the cricket season contracting accordingly).

There is no evidence that clubs had to pay for their licence to play at this time – although those belonging to larger organisations such as the LPFC and the councils certainly did. West Ham Council's clubs, for instance, were expected to pay an annual registration fee of £5. In 1895, however, the Open Spaces Committee did introduce a £1 deposit payable in advance and to be forfeited if the pitch was damaged in any way.<sup>39</sup>

That clearly presented difficulties for some clubs. In February 1896 the secretary of St Margaret's, Leytonstone CC, for instance, expressed his surprise at the imposition of the deposit – 'as the members are of the working class this unexpected call on our slender resources has left us in a difficulty'.<sup>40</sup> There were also inevitable complaints when on occasion the Committee decided to dock money from that deposit.

Meanwhile the number of pitches in use on the Flats – and the number of players involved every weekend – continued to expand. The Committee was reporting in 1895 that across Epping Forest it had set aside 40 pitches for cricket and 66 for football – the substantial majority of which would have been on Wanstead Flats. By 1913 this had risen to 49 cricket pitches and no less

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<sup>39</sup> EFC minutes 1895.

<sup>40</sup> EFC papers, February 1896.

than 164 football pitches – which were being used by more than 300 different clubs and enabling around 4,000 young men to play sport at any one time!<sup>41</sup>

### ***Pitch battles***

Almost inevitably, disputes broke out at regular intervals over the use of these prized portions of common land. Often these occurred between football and cricket clubs, since the same areas were frequently being used by one club in the winter and another in the summer. In 1896, for instance, West Ham Council asked the Committee not to allot to football clubs that part of the ground on which their cricket pitches were laid. The matter was referred to the Superintendent.<sup>42</sup>

There were also frequent disputes between football clubs over their rights to certain pitches. It seems to have been not uncommon for clubs to arrive to find another club playing on ‘their’ pitch or even that the pitch had effectively disappeared.

P Lewis, the honorary secretary of Whittington Football Club in Whitechapel, complained for instance in 1894 that part of their ground had been taken over for a cricket pitch. Having received permission from the forest keeper to extend the pitch in a different direction they arrived on the Saturday to find another club, Darby FC, using it.

The following week they turned up to find a different club, Avenue FC, in occupation having turfed off Darby in the meantime! But to make matters worse they had extended ‘their’ pitch in such a way that the adjoining pitch, which Whittington was hoping to use, was now too small. ‘If Avenue FC would have kept to where they have been playing for the last four years there would be plenty of space for two clubs’, Mr Lewis pointed out. ‘Now there’s only space for one’. And from the plaintive nature of Mr Lewis’s letter it seemed Whittington were the club to miss out.<sup>43</sup>

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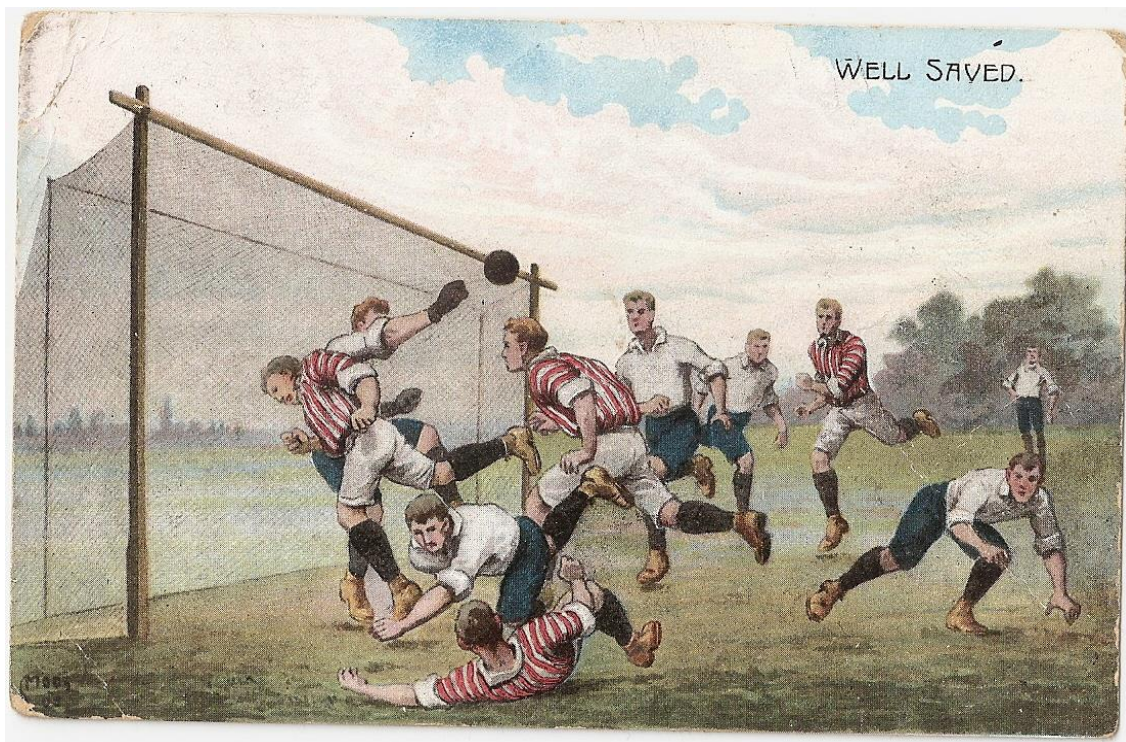
<sup>41</sup> EFR, 1882-98, 1899-14. Annual reports, 1895, 1903 1913.

<sup>42</sup> EFC minutes 1896.

<sup>43</sup> Superintendent’s correspondence November-December 1894. .

A year later, H Harbott Stevens, the secretary of St Thomas's FC, from West Ham, wrote to the Committee complaining that after putting in a great deal of effort and 'laying out every available penny' to maintain and improve their pitch over the last three seasons, they had arrived on the previous Saturday to discover to their dismay that 'about a third of the field was one mass of upturned clay soil, our goal boxes torn from the ground and nowhere to be seen'.

Mr Stevens felt his club should have been notified if the ground was going to be 'taken from us and at least some provision made for us in finding us another suitable piece to finish our list of matches'. The whole experience had put St Thomas's and their opponents to 'great inconvenience'. And the fact they had hired a dressing room nearby for the season meant 'another burden to our club if we are to be treated (apparently) in such an unseemly manner'.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately it is not known if Mr Stevens and his team were ever able to complete their fixtures.



'Honest pluck and bodily strength.' Park football represented on a postcard dated 1908.

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<sup>44</sup> EFC papers February 1895.

## ***Keeping the pitches secure***

Another related cause of complaint was vandalism. At regular intervals, it seemed, teams would arrive for their matches to find the pitches unplayable. West Ham Council, for instance, complained in March 1895 that its cricket pitches were ‘being seriously damaged by persons playing football and otherwise using them during the winter season’. It wanted to put up notices ‘cautioning the public against so using them or damaging them’. The Council also suggested it should have a man on duty on Saturday afternoons to help protect the area.<sup>45</sup>

In the face of these continuing concerns the Committee eventually – and clearly reluctantly - agreed in 1899 that East Ham could appoint two unpaid ‘keepers’ to protect the pitches within their district.<sup>46</sup> And a month later it also agreed, in response to a proposal from the LPFC, to appoint a special keeper on the Flats ‘to safeguard the grounds from damage and secure the property of the clubs from theft and see that the Committee rules are carried out’.<sup>47</sup> This was, it stressed, only an experiment and was to last for the forthcoming cricket season and no longer. By the following year, however, it had resolved to engage a retired policeman to act as a forest keeper on Saturday afternoons.<sup>48</sup>

It is not entirely clear how successful this was. Even in 1911 the LPFC was reporting that turf had been cut from three of their pitches and also of ‘persons galloping across the pitches in the early morning’.<sup>49</sup>

## ***Residents’ reaction***

At the same time local residents were not always delighted as the expansion of organised sport came ever closer to their own homes. In March 1894 a ‘memorial’ from residents at Woodford Road, Forest Gate requested that cricket pitches be removed further from their houses – something the Committee

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<sup>45</sup> EFC minutes 1895.

<sup>46</sup> EFC minutes 1899.

<sup>47</sup> EFC minutes 1899.

<sup>48</sup> EFC minutes 1900.

<sup>49</sup> EFC minutes 1911.

promised to do something about.<sup>50</sup> But similar complaints continued to come to the Committee's attention at intervals over this period.

One self-styled 'old resident', for instance, wrote to the *Forest Gate Weekly News* in 1897 complaining that the advent of the football season would bring 'hundreds of men and boys trampling down every blade of grass on our Flats, which will soon become a barren waste. Why should the residents of Forest Gate put up with this incursion of football payers, the majority of whom do not live in this locality and do not care how much damage they do? If one takes a walk up the Woodford Road, one can count dozens of young trees that have been broken down by these roughs. Every season it gets worse and worse. Surely if some of the residents combined, something could be done to remedy this evil and save the Flats from being utterly wrecked'.<sup>51</sup>



'Something could be done to remedy this evil.' - Forest Gate station about the turn of the century. Some residents expressed concern that large groups were coming into the area by train and tram to play sport on the Flats.

<sup>50</sup> Superintendent's correspondence. March 1894.

<sup>51</sup> *Forest Gate Weekly News*, 27/08/1897.



But this was far from one-way traffic. In 1894, for instance, a ‘large and enthusiastic’ public meeting of local ratepayers from Cann Hall, Harrow Green, Leyton and Leytonstone ratified a petition calling for a portion of the Flats to be levelled and drained to create more playing fields and so revive ‘this long-neglected and unsanitary portion of the Flats’.<sup>52</sup>

Five years later a petition signed by 1,100 residents from Wanstead, Forest Gate and Leytonstone was delivered asking for additional pitches to be laid out and levelled on the Flats. The petition was supported by Leyton Urban District Council, Leyton and District Football League and the South Essex League. The Committee rejected the application though promised that ‘every facility will be given to the respective clubs to improve grounds set apart at their own expense’!<sup>53</sup>

### ***State of the pitches***

Given the original state of the Flats when the Corporation took over responsibility, it is hardly surprising that even after the levelling and drainage work, many of the playing fields still left much to be desired.

Claremont FC was complaining early on about the ‘lumpy and hollow ground’ they had to play on which meant players ‘are impeded and often stumble’.<sup>54</sup> Grove Wesleyan noted their pitch was still very rough despite some levelling and this could ‘lead to sprained ankles’.<sup>55</sup> Forest Gate Avenue were concerned that the pitch on which they were due to play an important cup tie still had puddles and wondered if they could use an adjoining ground instead – when the other team wasn’t using it.<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile Cambridge Park FC spent two seasons stoically playing on a pitch adjoining the Friends Meeting House at the top end of Bush Wood which had two small oaks and one May tree growing in the middle of the pitch! The

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<sup>52</sup> EFC minutes/ EFC papers 1895.

<sup>53</sup> EFC minutes 1899.

<sup>54</sup> Superintendent’s correspondence August 1894.

<sup>55</sup> Superintendent’s correspondence. August 1894.

<sup>56</sup> Superintendent’s correspondence. November 1894.

Secretary wrote to the Superintendent asking for permission to remove the trees 'as they hinder the play in the matches'! They would be willing to pay for this removal process, he added.<sup>57</sup>

### ***'Honest pluck and bodily strength' - football on the Flats in the 1890s***

As football in London grew in popularity, youngsters in the East End began to form teams and look for matches. This was encouraged by local missions, such as the Oxford Settlement and Toynbee Hall, where university and public school boys did good works among London's poor. An article by 'A Connoisseur' in St James's Gazette in 1891 described the football played on Wanstead Flats.

Connoisseur noted that, although football was not yet as common in London as it was in Scotland and the north, 'a fair number of teams have been extracted from Whitechapel to engage weak clubs located in the Eastern suburbs of but slightly higher caste than themselves but vastly superior in physique and in knowledge of football'. On Saturday afternoons 'the pallid, pimply, stunted population' could be seen at Liverpool Street station, buying single tickets (as they couldn't afford returns) to Forest Gate. On the Great Eastern, said Connoisseur, 'most are shabby and very few genteel', and the trains were overcrowded with third class passengers.

Wanstead Flats was a favourite destination, being less used for football than Victoria Park, and free, so fair-sized pitches could be marked out, complete with corner flags, 'without the probability of these being stolen'. The surface, though, consisted of tufts of sedge, covered with large puddles after rain and the many holes made by horses' hooves were an added hazard.

The kit that poor East End boys could afford was basic. Rugby shirts, probably donated by the missions, went with thin shorts (or 'knickers') made from cut-down cricket flannels (also probably hand-me-downs). Socks were optional. Changing rooms were stables and outhouses on the edge of the Flats. As some players nearly always arrived late and half-time was usually drawn-out, since the players put their coats on while sucking their lemons, matches often finished in semi-darkness. If it was raining or very cold, most decided to play in their coats.

For Connoisseur all this was fairly unimportant, since the skills on display were so low. 'An immense amount of instruction' by the public school team members (of whom two or three were always included to 'illustrate the science of the game') was necessary to counteract the 'dribbling tendency'. The matches often produced very few goals 'owing to the feebleness of the shooting'.

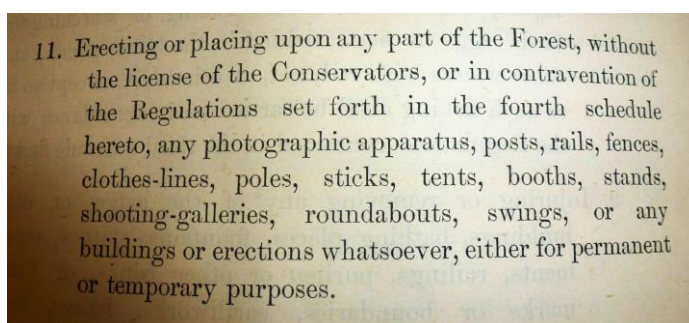
Nevertheless, Wanstead Flats proved to be enduringly popular, with pitches booked for the whole season. And, as Connoisseur remarked, 'there can surely be only one verdict as to the desirability, on Saturday afternoons, of enticing the East-end lout...away from the spending of his wages in a pot-house, and of infusing into him...that honest pluck and bodily strength which once was the pride of every Englishman'.

## **Facilities**

But perhaps the most time-consuming issue to come before the Committee related to the facilities available to the thousands of players using the Flats each week.

The Epping Forest Act and the new role of protection given to the Corporation of London's Conservators had emerged from the bitter eighteenth and nineteenth century battle over enclosures, and the Corporation was acutely sensitive to any threat of a permanent structure that might be deemed to be 'enclosing' public land.

The 1880 bye-laws, for instance, explicitly prohibited any 'enclosing or building or otherwise encroaching upon any part of the Forest'. More specifically it prohibited the erection of any 'posts, rails, fences, clothes lines, poles, sticks, tents, booths, stands, shooting galleries, roundabouts, swings or any wheeling vehicle or any building or erection whatsoever either for permanent or temporary purposes' – without the express permission of the Conservators. No tent or shelter could be erected either without their permission – and then only on condition they were removed 'no later than one hour after sunset'.<sup>58</sup>



Epping Forest bye-law prohibiting any enclosures on Forest land.

They took these restrictions fairly literally when it came to placing any structure on or near the pitch. So goalposts had to be removed after each game and

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<sup>58</sup> Epping Forest bye-laws, 1880 and 1895.

permanent fencing off of any parts of the football or cricket pitch was not allowed.

This also created difficulties for players needing to change into their playing kits and meant that many had to change in pubs and other buildings on the edges of the Flats. In March 1891 the Committee did accede to a request from the LPFC for their cricket clubs to erect small tents for dressing purposes on Saturday afternoons during the cricket season. Of course the tents had to be taken down after the game.<sup>59</sup>

It also approved a request by Buckhurst Cricket Club in 1881 to erect a 'galvanised iron building on wheels', presumably for changing purposes. But this doesn't seem to have set a precedent. In April 1895 South Essex Cricket Club applied for permission to erect a portable pavilion on wheels on Wanstead Flats which would be removed every winter. The main reason was that the team were now playing some very good clubs 'who have private grounds and every accommodation for dressing purposes and as there is not enough room in a tent, we thought that a pavilion would be much better'. Their request was, however, rejected.<sup>60</sup> Maybe a new century encouraged new thinking because in 1900 the committee did accede to pleas from Buckhurst Ladies Cricket Club to erect a small pavilion – on condition that it was removed again at the end of the cricket season<sup>61</sup>.

The Committee was also suspicious of requests to put up notice-boards of any description, to fence in any part of the pitches on anything but a temporary basis and even to install temporary sight screens to help batsmen see the ball.

One of the fiercest and longest-running disputes took place over the issue of public conveniences on the Forest land. In July 1892 the LPFC suggested the need for a urinal in 'convenient reach' of the pitches at Wanstead Flats and this request was referred to the Superintendent.<sup>62</sup> But this does not seem to have been agreed because seven years later West Ham's town clerk was making a

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<sup>59</sup> EFC minutes 1891.

<sup>60</sup> EFR 1882-98. Annual report 1895. EFC 1895.

<sup>61</sup> EFC minutes 1900.

<sup>62</sup> EFC minutes 1892.

similar request for 'some sanitary convenience' and suggesting that one of the plantations would be a suitable site. This request was rejected.<sup>63</sup>

In April 1902 another application, for a refreshment booth and 'sanitary conveniences' on Wanstead Flats, was rejected.<sup>64</sup> A final bid by East Ham and West Ham Councils in 1905 for temporary conveniences on the Flats 'owing to the large number of people arriving at Forest Gate by electric tram' seemed to be gaining impetus when the Committee asked the Superintendent to report on the matter and negotiations began with West Ham Corporation about establishing conveniences at the south end of Woodford Road.



'Large numbers arriving by electric tram.' The tram terminus just north of the junction of Capel Road and Woodford Road – the houses survive little altered.

However, by October the Committee was reporting that it didn't 'see its way to find a site on the forest' and in December the matter was laid to rest when West Ham reported it was 'unable to further entertain the question of provision of

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<sup>63</sup> EFC minutes 1899.

<sup>64</sup> EFC minutes 1902.

sanitary conveniences as suggested by the Committee'.<sup>65</sup> One might surmise that agreeing cost and location had proven insurmountable stumbling blocks in the end. Presumably the Flats' footballers and cricketers had to continue queuing up at the local inns and hotels.

### ***A transformed landscape***

Football and cricket on the Flats didn't come to a juddering halt in August 1914 when war was declared. In fact applications from local clubs to play on the Flats continued to be approved throughout the war years – though the numbers declined significantly, from nearly 300 in 1914 to 129 in 1915, 84 in 1916 and 93 by 1918.<sup>66</sup>

Presumably the majority of those making up the teams during the war were significantly younger or older than previously (or working in exempted industries) since most men between 18 and 41 were now fighting on the front. There was also growing competition for the use of the playing fields from other parts of the war effort, from military drills and anti-aircraft defences to allotments.

From early 1917 the Government granted local councils the right to turn over common land to cultivation in order to grow extra food for the war effort. Wanstead Flats was an obvious location but the Conservators resisted the attempts every step of the way on the basis that this land would not be suitable for crops. They only relented when they were effectively forced to.

As soon as the war ended they stipulated that all commandeered allotments should be returned to their original function by January 1920. One of their main reasons for this determination was a growing demand from clubs to play sport – especially football – a desire that was being thwarted because of the allotments.

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<sup>65</sup> EFC minutes 1905.

<sup>66</sup> EFR 1915-49. Annual reports 1915,16,17,18.



Prime Minister David Lloyd George took the side of Flats allotment holders.

Meanwhile local councils pushed strenuously for an extension of the deadline on behalf of allotment holders. The confrontation became something of a national issue, with even the Prime Minister, Lloyd George stepping in to lobby the Corporation on behalf of allotment holders. But the Conservators stood firm – strongly supported by local sports clubs and schools - and by February 1920 the allotments were being dug up and the land restored to playing fields. By 1921 normal service was resumed and applications to play football and cricket on the Flats were back to pre-war levels.

The fact that sport and the needs of the local population were put forward as the chief justification for returning the Flats to its pre-1914 state highlights the way the Corporation's strategy had changed between 1878 and 1914. In 1878 their plans, such as they were, concentrated on making the area fit for public recreation. By 1914 organised sport had become a central rationale.

Wanstead Flats has always had a very different character to the rest of Epping Forest – in some ways it was (and maybe still is?) viewed as the poor relation. But it was precisely this separateness – and lack of an established policy for the

area – that allowed the Conservators to respond so rapidly to the burgeoning demand for organised sport facilities. The result, it could be argued, was the birth of the modern Wanstead Flats.

By 1914 Wanstead Flats was virtually unrecognisable from the heath land the Epping Forest Conservators had inherited in 1878. Vast tracts of the land had now been levelled, resurfaced and made fit for football or cricket. In 1878 there was not a single football or cricket pitch on all of its 440 acres – by 1914 the bulk of the Flats was given over to playing fields and each weekend several thousand young men would travel from all over East London to play there.

Within a couple of years of the end of the war those playing fields would once again be echoing to the noise of organised sport. It is, though, poignant and shocking to realise that a significant proportion of those who played on Wanstead Flats prior to 1914 would never return, having been mown down or maimed on the killing fields of France and Belgium.



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