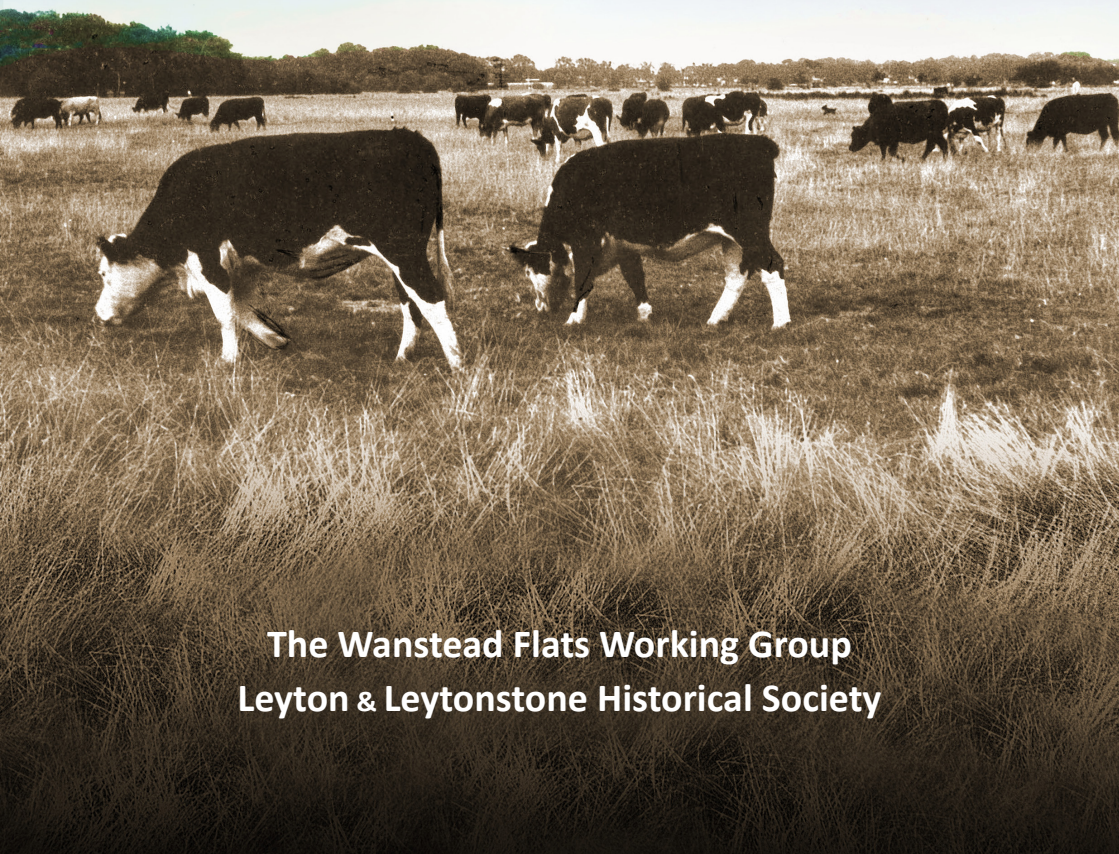


# **‘Unruly & Predatory Cattle’**

## **The Cows of Wanstead Flats**



**The Wanstead Flats Working Group  
Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society**



# The Wanstead Flats Working Group

## Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society

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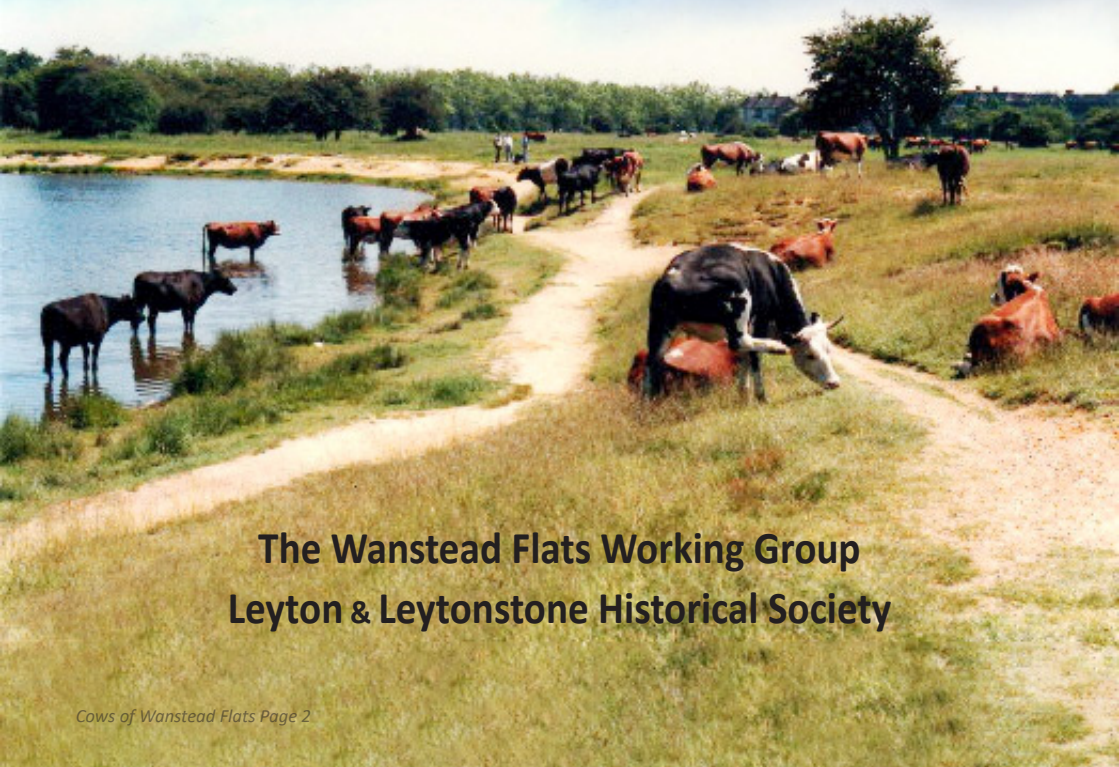
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# Introduction

Epping Forest owes its existence to cattle. From 'time immemorial' Epping Forest was a royal hunting ground and part of extensive woodland which covered most of the county of Essex. The forest was governed by royal laws, but local people also had rights which they shared in common. The most important of these were the right of lopping trees for firewood and the right to graze their animals in the forest. For centuries pigs, horses and most important of all cows, were 'turned out' in the forest by people living within the forest boundaries.

Because of cattle grazing much of the forest was not thickly wooded, but was open wood pasture, an area of grazing land studded with trees, which were cut from time to time for fuel and livestock fodder. The trees were maintained as pollards by cutting the tree's crown and upper branches, but allowing some branches to grow above the reach of animals to prevent the cattle browsing on this new growth.

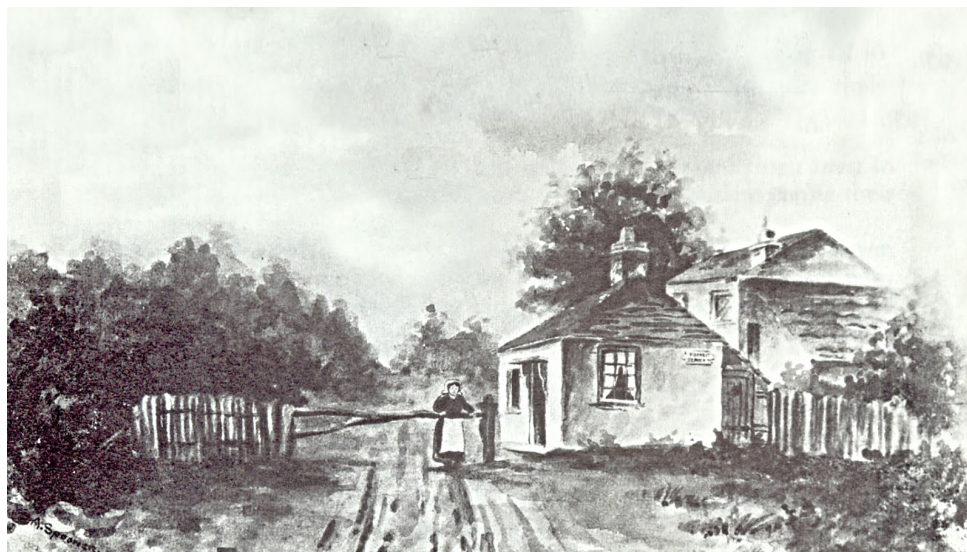


*The first Aldersbrook Farm, now the site of the City of London cemetery*

Although the extent of Epping Forest was unclear, with some documents claiming that it stretched to the Thames, for hundreds of years Wanstead Flats formed the southern boundary. As the heath-land which formed the Flats was not suitable for farming it became part of the so-called forest 'waste' where cattle were grazed extensively. This booklet tells the story of the cows of Wanstead Flats.

## Commoners' rights – cattle grazing on Wanstead Flats

Animal grazing was a feature of Wanstead Flats probably from the time of the Norman Conquest. The Abbey of Stratford Langthorne had a grange or farm (called Woodgrange) north of the main road from Stratford to Romford. Also, due to a privilege granted by King Richard I in 1189 the abbey had the right of pasture for nearly 1,000 sheep on the heath-land of Wanstead Flats between a hamlet called Hamfrith and Walthamstow. Modern-day Hamfrith Road in Forest Gate marks the approximate area of the farm and hamlet.



*On the corner of Forest Street and Woodgrange Road was a gate erected by the Lord of the Manor to keep cattle from straying from Wanstead Flats. Next to it was a tiny cottage for the gate-keeper*

This right of sheep pasture continued to be claimed by the Stratford monks throughout the Middle Ages and after Henry VIII abolished the monasteries, by their successors as lords of the manor of Woodgrange down to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Forest Gate gets its name from a gate erected in the 17th century, probably to stop cattle straying onto the Romford Road from Wanstead Flats; the gate is first mentioned - as 'the Woodgrange Gate' - in 1639.

The gate was still needed to keep cattle out of Forest Gate village well into the nineteenth century and in 1851 the Lord of Woodgrange Manor erected a new five-bar gate across Woodgrange Road. The gate, which stood near the former pub the Eagle & Child, remained until about 1883.

The Eagle & Child is now closed, but its facade is still visible as the frontage of the Woodgrange Pharmacy.

It was not only sheep that were grazed on Wanstead Flats from medieval times. Local people who lived within the forest boundaries (which in the Middle Ages stretched down as far as the Romford Road) and owned over half an acre of land within a forest parish, had the right of 'turning out' cows in the forest. A regulation of 1790 allowed 'the release onto the Forest of two cows or one horse for every £4 per annum rent paid'.

The open wood pasture and heath of Wanstead Flats was a popular place for grazing. The local Lords of the Manor generally agreed to this common grazing, but from time to time attempts were made to control it.

In 1550 the Lord of Wanstead Manor was Sir Richard Rich, who was also the Lord Chancellor of England (and villain of the piece who betrays Thomas More in Robert Bolt's play 'A Man for All Seasons'). Rich brought a case in the Manor Court against locals who were, he claimed, overgrazing Wanstead Flats with too many cattle. The defendants were said to come from as far afield as Plaistow and Stratford.

Further cases were brought in 1563 against incomers from West Ham and Ilford. It was declared that only the tenants of forest parishes had the right to graze their animals (though nobody had the right to pasture goats, which were considered too destructive).



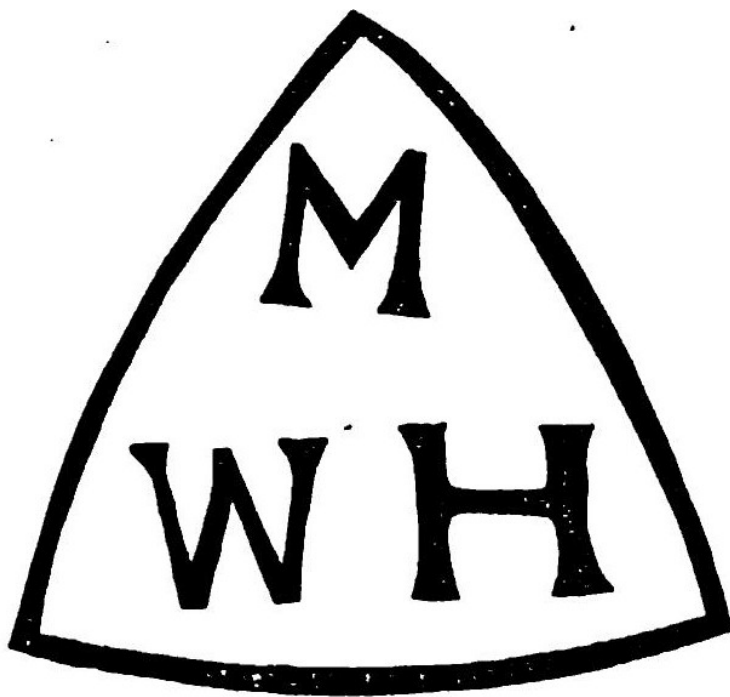
*Richard Rich Esq. Speaker 1537.  
From a drawing after Hans Holbien,  
in the possession of M<sup>r</sup>. Simco.*

*Ref of c 1600?  
BKA*

**Sir Richard Rich, Lord of Wanstead Manor 1550**



To distinguish which tenants had the right to graze in the forest the practice began of identifying cows with a mark signifying the parish in which the owner lived. The marking was done by a local official, the reeve, who was elected by the residents of each parish. In the southern part of the forest the marking was done at the Green Man pub in Leytonstone, where hundreds of animals would be driven up from Wanstead Flats to be branded. Poor people in the locality were allowed to graze their animals in the forest for free, even if they didn't have common rights.



*West Ham parish cattle mark*

There was one limitation on the right to graze cattle on forest lands. Once a year there was a period called 'Fence Month' when all animals had to be removed, to protect the king's deer which were then giving birth to fawns. If cattle were left out during Fence Month they could be impounded (rounded up into a fenced compound) by the reeve. On Wanstead Flats there was a cattle pound in the 1570s, on a site now occupied by the City

of London Cemetery's crematorium. To retrieve his/her cattle, the owner had to pay a fine of 4d (approximately £4 today) or 1d per foot for each animal. Another pound was erected just south of the earlier one, and though disused still appeared on maps until 1915.

As we have seen, over the centuries local people made full use of their grazing rights on Wanstead Flats. Many cow-keepers had sheds near the Flats, being paid to look after local residents' animals, while others combined other work, such as gardening or agricultural labour, with keeping cows. In the 1850s between 40 and 60 cows were being grazed on the Flats, owned by local people who were labourers, market gardeners and in one case a potato salesman. There were also several small dairies in the neighbourhood supplied from the Flats.

Cattle were also kept on the farms in the neighbourhood of the Flats, of which there were still several well into the nineteenth century. The most significant of these was Aldersbrook Farm, which originally occupied the site developed by the City of London Corporation for their cemetery in the 1850s. At this point a new Aldersbrook farmhouse was built on what is now Aldersbrook Road. The site is now occupied by the Aldersbrook filling station opposite Park Road.



*Aldersbrook Farm c. 1947 when it had become a garage (note petrol pump far right)*

By the 1900s Aldersbrook Farm had a herd of milk cows - between 30 and 40 animals - which by commoners' rights handed from one tenant to the next enabled them to graze on Wanstead Flats. The farm's former dairy still exists in Park Road (it is now a small branch library).

Another survival of the old farm is part of the wall built to surround it in 1854. After World War 1 car repairs and selling petrol began to prove more lucrative, and the farm sold off its herd in the 1920s and became a full-time garage.

## Wanstead Flats and the cattle drives

Local people were not the only ones grazing cows on Wanstead Flats. From Tudor times onwards London's population was growing, and after 1700 this expansion really took off. By 1800 there were over a million Londoners, and the appetite for meat both here and across the country was said to be greater than anywhere else in Europe. Live animals were driven in for sale at Smithfield market (the name of Cowcross Street next to Farringdon station is a reminder of these times).

By the 1700s cattle were being driven from all over the country to the London market. Cattle breeders on the uplands of Scotland and Wales could raise small, tough animals which were able to survive the long drives to the London market, while farmers in the south-east, and especially round London, had grazing straw and root crops to fatten cattle for sale. In Epping Forest, Wanstead Flats became a prime site for 'finishing' cattle before their final journey to Smithfield. From late winter into the spring Wanstead Flats was covered with 'lean beasts' being fattened on what was said to be the finest grazing in Epping Forest. Then in the spring agents would arrive to inspect the cattle and strike deals with the drovers. In contrast to the commoners' cattle that were a constant feature of the landscape and were kept for their milk as well as, eventually, their meat, the animals from further afield were just passing through before being moved on to slaughter in the city.

In 1796 Wanstead Flats was described by the traveller Daniel Lysons as

*'A great mart [market] for cattle, from Wales, Scotland, and the north of England...held annually, from the latter end of February till the beginning of May, on the flat part of...Epping Forest, within the parishes of Ilford, East ham, West ham, Leyton, and Wanstead'.*

This was big business. Drovers were entrusted with cattle worth thousands of pounds in today's money and they had to be both competent and trustworthy. The lead drover (the 'topsmen') had to be licensed, married and over the age of 30. Deals were struck at the Three Rabbits (later the Rabbits) pub on the corner of Rabbits Road and Romford Road.



*The Rabbits Inn - this building was replaced in Victorian times by the building which still stands (though no longer a pub) on the corner of Rabbits Road*

We know that in 1785 an Essex grazier named John Wigglesworth was at the Three Rabbits with £1,200 in cash and banker's drafts – that is about £90,000 today. This came to light because he was the victim of a sensational robbery in the pub.



*Frances Davis, from a chap-book (a cheap story book sold by pedlars)*

# Robbery at the Three Rabbits

The robbery took place in September of that year. Wigglesworth, who was both a grazier and an agent for Scottish and Lincolnshire cattle salesmen, arranged to visit Smithfield market to purchase cattle for fattening and sale. So when he stayed overnight at the Three Rabbits he was carrying a substantial sum both in cash and banker's drafts, enough to buy over 250 head of cattle. At the inn he was befriended by a young man who claimed to be a horse-dealer.

They spent the evening together, smoking and drinking, during which time the young man noted the contents of Wigglesworth's canvas bag. When Wigglesworth awoke the following morning, he found his bag had been removed, and the 'young man' (in fact a young woman, a servant named Frances Davis) had disappeared. Word was at once sent to law officers in London, and the hunt began.

It didn't take long to find Frances. The next day she spent some of the money in various London shops, then visited an acquaintance in Newgate prison with presents and boasted of her exploits. This woman informed a thief-taker and Davis was arrested with £900 and the 'young man's' clothes still on her. Taken to Bow Street lock-up, she was identified by Wigglesworth and a serving maid from the Three Rabbits. She was then removed to Chelmsford Gaol to await trial.

She was tried in March 1786, found guilty and sentenced to death, on the grounds that this was not her first offence; she had been 'the terror of this country [i.e. Essex] for some years back'. As was fairly common at the time, her sentence was quickly commuted to transportation for 14 years. She sailed to Australia in May 1787, arriving at Botany Bay in January 1788 as part of a convoy of 11 ships. This was the 'First Fleet', which brought over 1,000 convicts, marines and seamen to establish European settlement in Australia.

Frances makes further appearances in history; in 1803 the London '*Star*' carried a story about her, saying that she was 'the principal farmer in Botany Bay', who was still single despite her beauty and her celebrity as

one of the first female convicts landed in Australia. Over later years she was said to have returned to England at least three times. In 1823 Frances received a Certificate of Freedom, a legal document showing that she had served her sentence and could not be re-arrested as a convict. She died in 1828, aged 64.



*Cattle foraging on Wanstead Flats during a 1970s refuse worker strike*

## The end of the cattle drives

Although the cattle drives continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the arrival of the railways in the 1830s meant that farmers could send their cattle directly to market quickly and cheaply. By 1848 the Eastern Counties Railway was transporting 700 head of cattle a week to the London market from East Anglian farms. Winter fattening was no longer needed, and the Wanstead Flats cattle market disappeared.

This was not the end of the Flats' connection with the metropolitan cattle trade however. In the early 1850s, Lord Mornington, the profligate husband of the late Catherine Tylney-Long, made yet another attempt to recoup income from his Wanstead estate by proposing the building of a permanent cattle market on the Flats. He commissioned a report which not surprisingly endorsed the idea enthusiastically. Railway sidings could be built and the nearby river Roding could be utilised for transport too. Best of all said the report, the area was 'not a popular or fashionable district', so the local residents were unlikely to complain. But like so many of the estate's money-making ideas the scheme came to nothing, and a new metropolitan cattle market was opened in Copenhagen Fields, Islington in 1855.

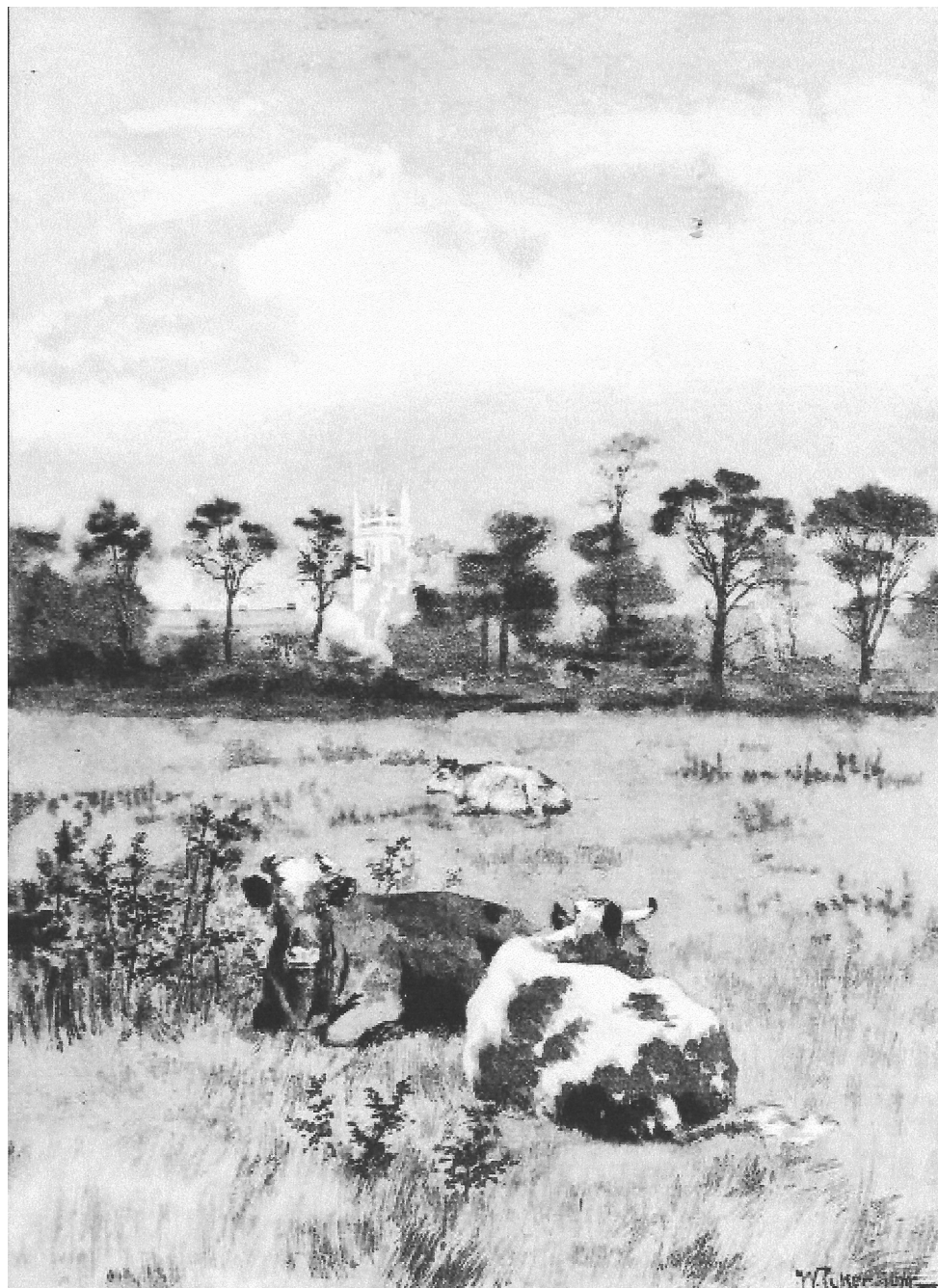


*City of London Cemetery gates from Wanstead Flats c. 1856 – note the cow with calf on the left and sheep on the right*

## Cows and the fencing of the Flats

During the 1800s other pressures began to build in Epping Forest. London's growth was creating demand not only for meat but for foodstuffs of all kinds, and agricultural land near the city was in demand. Forest Gate was a centre for market gardens, particularly potato production, and local landowners looked to carve out ever more farms from the southern forest.





*The western end of Wanstead Flats, St John's Leytonstone in the distance 1893*

In 1851 Hainault Forest (east of the river Roding) was abruptly cleared and laid out as farms, creating an outcry across London at this loss of open space. This did not deter the Mornington estate, which while drawing up their proposals for a cattle market and abattoir, also fenced off over 30 acres of the north side of the Flats - the present Aldersbrook estate. Local cattle farmers strongly objected to this loss of prime grazing land, and clubbed together a sum to pay the fine for one of them, Richard Plaxton, who broke the fences and drove his cows in. Plaxton lost the resulting case for trespass, but this was just the opening shot in a 30-year battle for the open spaces on Epping Forest.



*Cattle watering in Angell Pond, Wanstead Flats*

At the same time as Plaxton's action the Mornington estate, ever ready to extract value from their landholding, sold Aldersbrook Farm on the north-east side of Wanstead Flats to the City of London Corporation, which wanted the land to build a huge new cemetery. What the Mornington estate's solicitors failed to appreciate was that by buying this land the City of London also acquired commoners' rights in Epping Forest, particularly the right to graze cattle. This was a sale that the estate was bitterly to regret just a few years later.

London's unchecked growth continued and Epping Forest came under increasing pressure as local Lords of the Manor enclosed their land with fences. By 1870 the clamour for action to save the forest was intense, and the City of London stepped in. Invoking their grazing rights as Epping Forest commoners the Corporation claimed that fencing the forest was illegal, as it prevented cattle from grazing across the whole forest. In 1871 they sued the forest Lords of the Manor, demanding the removal of the fences. After a long legal battle they won their case, and began buying up forest land. In 1878 the Epping Forest Act declared that the forest should be opened to the public and kept unfenced forever.

## The City Corporation and the cattle on Wanstead Flats

When the City of London became custodians of Epping Forest in 1878 they had to manage age-old customs such as grazing rights, and decided to allow forest commoners to continue to graze their cattle in the forest. A commoner had to have a house and at least half an acre of land within the forest boundaries – enough to enable grazing during the Fence Month closure.

The Corporation's aim was to allow local people to keep animals at minimal cost, but the policy soon ran into problems. The half-acre qualification was regularly broken and the forest was being over-grazed again. Thousands of houses were being built in Forest Gate, Leytonstone and other areas near Wanstead Flats, and many householders were grazing cattle on the Flats. Even today the deeds of some of these houses include the right to turn out cattle in Epping Forest. The City Corporation's attempts to enforce the half-acre rule met with vocal (and sometimes physical) opposition.

Time and changing land use as the forest became increasingly surrounded by built-up areas meant that cattle ownership declined, and by the end of the First World War very few local people were grazing cattle on Wanstead Flats. Nevertheless, other challenges faced the City Corporation.



*Cow grazing on Wanstead Flats - Forest Drive in background*

## The Cows and crime

The cattle which grazed Wanstead Flats over the centuries were always a valuable commodity. In 1750 a cow could be worth £5 or two months' wages for a skilled tradesman. A century later £7-£10 (or up to £800 today) was not unusual. So the temptation of unattended cows grazing on the nearby common was too much for some locals.



*Eating hedges and flowers was a favourite pastime. Capel Road 1993*

One such was George Hollingshed, who in October 1853 stole six heifers from the Flats and paid a drover to drive them to Whitechapel where they were butchered and the hides were tanned. The owners of the cows however, all of whom were Forest Gate residents, were close behind. They found the drover, who told them where the cows had been taken, and they set off to the Whitechapel butcher, who had given Hollingshed an IOU for over £40 (over £2,000 today). When Hollingshed returned for his money he was arrested and received a four-year gaol sentence at the Old Bailey.

This experience did not deter others from stealing the valuable animals on the Flats. In 1896 Stratford magistrates heard that Henry Smith, a 22

year-old labourer, stole a heifer owned by a local dairyman. He reckoned without police detective William Eustace, helped by George Godden, known locally as 'the amateur detective'. These two apprehended Smith in Stratford and were marching him to the police station when Smith's father and friends appeared. A free-for-all ensued, with Eustace hitting Smith over the head with his truncheon and Godden thrown through the glass front of a mission hall. After the intervention of local shopkeepers and railway workers Smith was eventually put in custody.

When the case came to court the magistrates, taking a dim view of the activities of the self-appointed 'amateur detective', dismissed the charges of assault on him. They fined Smith's father £1, taking into consideration his natural protective feelings towards his son. The fate of the stolen heifer remains unknown.



*Banes' Dairy on the corner of Capel Road and Forest Side c.1911*

The cattle provided a source of milk for local dairies in the early years of Forest Gate's development from an Essex village into a London suburb. By the 1900s however, trains were bringing in fresh milk from Essex farms and the Wanstead Flats cattle provided milk only for the owners' families.

## ‘Unruly and predatory cattle’

As we have seen, ever greater urbanisation saw the decline of cattle grazing, and by the mid-twentieth century just a handful of farmers had animals in the forest. Between 1912 and 1970 cattle numbers fell from nearly 1,000 to just over 500. The graziers (there were just seven left by this time) were based on the borders of the northern forest, but the best grassland was to be found on Wanstead Flats and other southern areas.



*Cattle in Woodgrange Road Forest Gate near Wanstead Flats early 1990s*

At the same time complaints were growing that what *The Times* called ‘unruly and predatory cattle’ were wandering off the Flats, blocking roads and invading local gardens. The local councils bordering the Flats wanted action to curb the cattle, and solutions such as tethering cattle and restricting grazing to the summer months were proposed. In 1962 an attempt was made to amend the 1878 Act, but this was defeated by the protests of forest preservation groups.



*Above - cows in Alexandra Lake 1900s.*

*Below - Alexandra Lake today, showing scrub encroachment since grazing ended. The same view was almost impossible to obtain owing to scrub and sapling growth. Parts of the lake have also become silted - changing the overall layout and causing flooding on the adjacent road.*





In 1975 another attempt was made to amend the 1878 Act, by banning winter grazing. One MP suggested that cattle should be daubed with luminous paint to make them more visible on the roads, and indeed in the winter of 1977 a motorcyclist was killed after hitting a steer in thick fog. After this the City Corporation bought out the commoners' right to winter grazing, and cattle were allowed to graze only between April and November.



*Cattle wandering down Capel Road*

Known locally as 'cows', although most were bullocks, cattle being driven through Loughton and Woodford towards Wanstead Flats continued to be a familiar sight. Wanstead Flats was still the favourite grazing area and especially in dry summers cattle continued to invade local gardens. In 1986 the Manor Park Cemetery Company tried to get residents to write to the local newspaper if they had been troubled by cattle. The aim was to 'prevent distant farmers taking advantage of a very ancient law which causes inconvenience and harassment to our neighbourhood'. The response was three letters in favour of keeping the cattle and one against.

For many local people the cattle were a welcome presence on the Flats, a unique sight in urban east London. Their wanderings were legendary - a West Ham Park keeper recalled corralling cattle into the tennis courts to await the cowman's arrival and their return to the Flats, while cattle grids at the Green Man roundabout, built in the late 1990s, were a further testament to the cattle's spirit of adventure.

The cattle also provided entertainment on the Flats, where many football referees had the task of herding animals off the pitches so that matches could start. A local Scout leader devised a different sort of competition. Each patrol had to round up one of the steers and the first group to corral their animal in the ancient bus shelter opposite St. Gabriel's Church in Aldersbrook Road was the winner. More practical benefits were also enjoyed by local gardeners, though it was said that the quality of the dung from the cattle was not as good as that from the local milkman's horse.



*The last reminder of cattle on local roads – a cattle grid still visible at the Green Man roundabout Leytonstone*



*This cattle warning sign remained on Centre Road until recent times*

## The end of cattle grazing on the Flats – or is it?

By the early 1990s only four graziers, all in the Waltham Cross area, were releasing cattle, and the advent of BSE ('Mad Cow Disease') and Foot and Mouth in the mid-1990s meant that after 1996 the local graziers' cattle disappeared from Wanstead Flats and the rest of Epping Forest.

But this has not been the end of the story of cattle in the forest, as the City Corporation has long recognised the importance of grazing to the forest's

ecology. From the late 1990s experiments by grazier contractors with cattle in fenced areas gradually expanded, and in 2014 the Corporation took operations back in-house. New technology has also helped, and the use of GPS tracking collars enabled the reintroduction of animals into the southern forest when three Longhorn cows spent late summers in Wanstead Park.

The success of this initiative over two years has sparked local interest in a potential reintroduction of cattle on the Flats, re-establishing a 1,000 year-old historical link. Just as importantly, the value of their grazing habits to Wanstead Flats is shown by the loss of biodiversity in the past 25 years. There has been significant growth in tree-scrub whilst other lower-growing species have gone into steep decline.

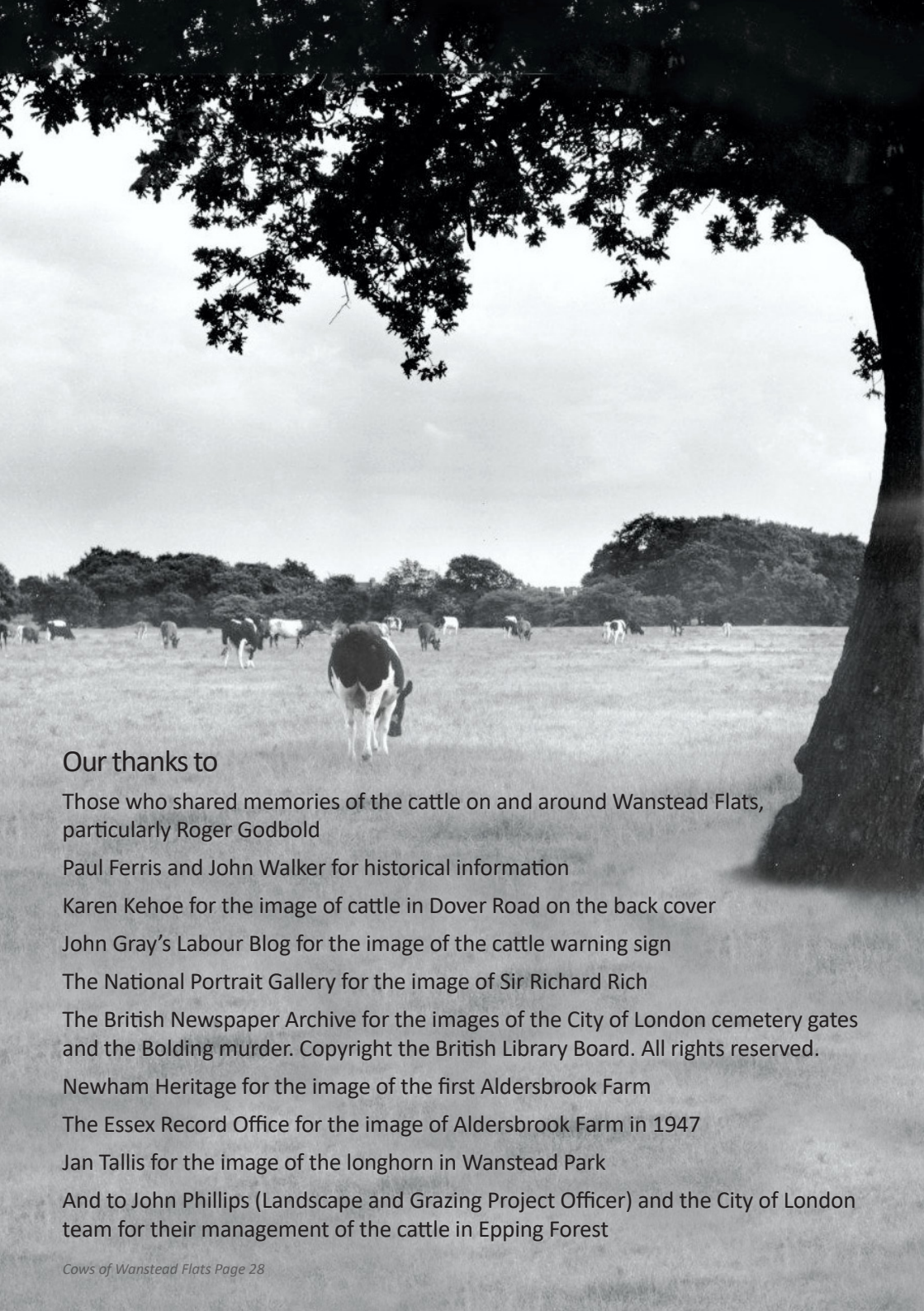


*Cows in Wanstead Park 2020*

Challenges remain – much has changed in the area of the Flats even in the past quarter-century since cattle last grazed there. Public awareness of cattle is much less than it was, and the kind of careful management that accompanied the re-introduction in Wanstead Park would be needed. The support of a large and dedicated group of cow-watchers to engage with the public was an important element of the Wanstead Park project and would require organisation on the Flats. Yet the rewards - in terms of both biodiversity gain and public enjoyment - make the effort seem worth a try.



*Following a pilot in 2020 three more 'Longhorns' were introduced to Wanstead Park again in 2021.*



## Our thanks to

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The National Portrait Gallery for the image of Sir Richard Rich

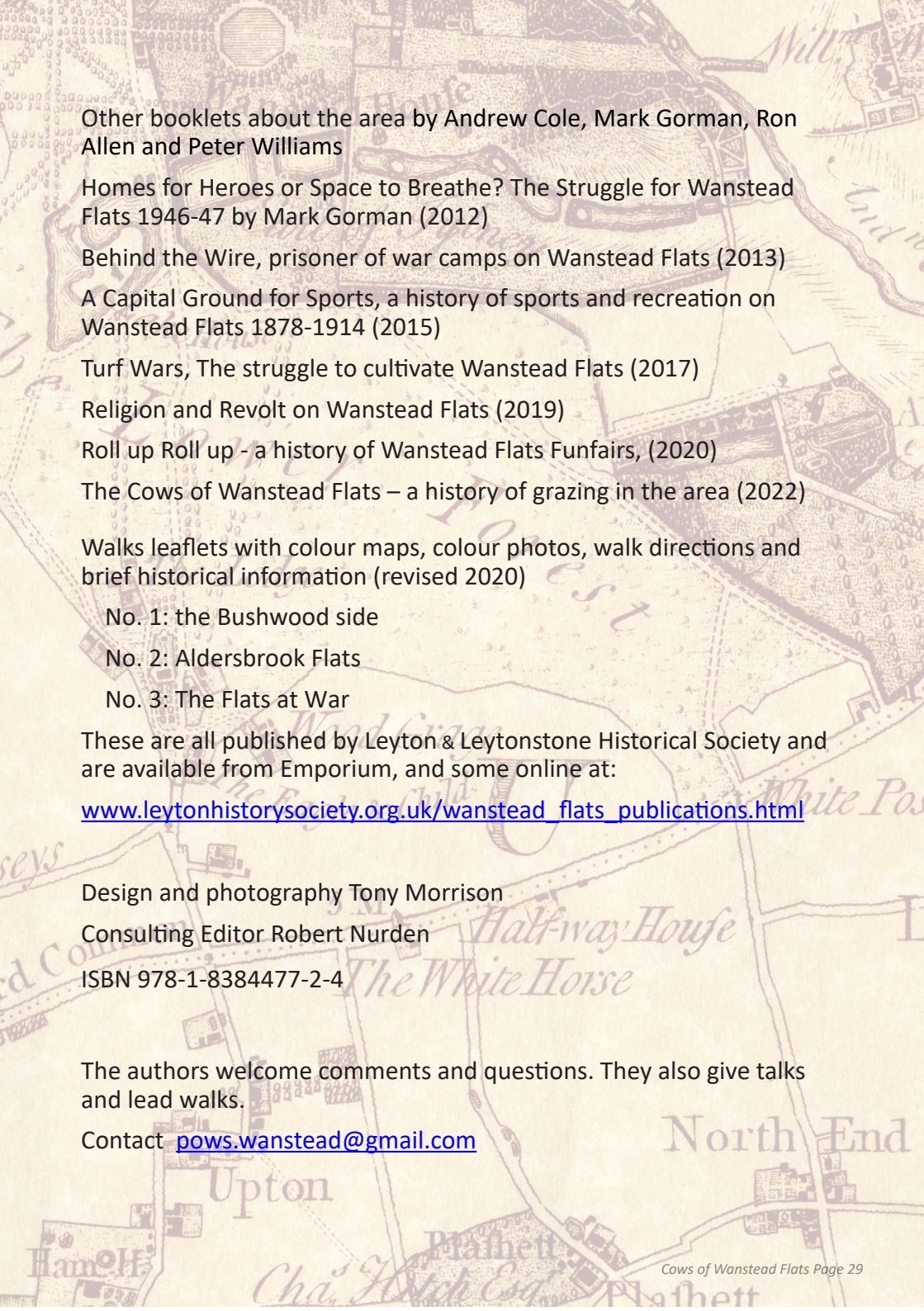
The British Newspaper Archive for the images of the City of London cemetery gates and the Bolding murder. Copyright the British Library Board. All rights reserved.

Newham Heritage for the image of the first Aldersbrook Farm

The Essex Record Office for the image of Aldersbrook Farm in 1947

Jan Tallis for the image of the longhorn in Wanstead Park

And to John Phillips (Landscape and Grazing Project Officer) and the City of London team for their management of the cattle in Epping Forest



Other booklets about the area by Andrew Cole, Mark Gorman, Ron Allen and Peter Williams

Homes for Heroes or Space to Breathe? The Struggle for Wanstead Flats 1946-47 by Mark Gorman (2012)

Behind the Wire, prisoner of war camps on Wanstead Flats (2013)

A Capital Ground for Sports, a history of sports and recreation on Wanstead Flats 1878-1914 (2015)

Turf Wars, The struggle to cultivate Wanstead Flats (2017)

Religion and Revolt on Wanstead Flats (2019)

Roll up Roll up - a history of Wanstead Flats Funfairs, (2020)

The Cows of Wanstead Flats – a history of grazing in the area (2022)

Walks leaflets with colour maps, colour photos, walk directions and brief historical information (revised 2020)

No. 1: the Bushwood side

No. 2: Aldersbrook Flats

No. 3: The Flats at War

These are all published by Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society and are available from Emporium, and some online at:

[www.leytonhistorysociety.org.uk/wanstead\\_flats\\_publications.html](http://www.leytonhistorysociety.org.uk/wanstead_flats_publications.html)

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