

# Turf Wars

The struggle to cultivate  
Wanstead Flats

**The Wanstead Flats Working Group**

**Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society**



**Text: Andrew Cole, Mark Gorman**

**Additional research: Ron Allen and Peter Williams**

**Picture research: Peter Williams**

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**The authors are always interested in new material and any corrections. You can email them at [pows.wanstead@gmail.com](mailto:pows.wanstead@gmail.com)**

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Wanstead Flats and district before 1900

Wanstead Flats today shows no sign of a time when farms, fields and later allotments made the area an important centre for food production. The last vestige of that history disappeared as recently as 1996, when the BSE crisis finally ended a tradition going back hundreds of years, of cattle grazing on the Flats by farmers who held common rights in Epping Forest.

The allotments which border the Flats are now the only reminder of this not very distant past. As farms and fields gave way to housing around Wanstead Flats, allotments became increasingly important to local people to help support themselves. Wartime pressures only increased the significance of local food production and led for periods of both First and Second World Wars to allotments springing up on the Flats themselves.

Not surprisingly, at the end of each of those wars allotment-holders made determined efforts to keep their green spaces while the City of London Corporation, which has overall responsibility for the Flats, fought to return them to their former use for recreation and leisure. This is the story of that struggle.

Agriculture, market gardening and horticulture in the area round Wanstead Flats has a long history, with survivals still to be found after

the Second World War. In the early 1800s east of the river Lea was still part of rural Essex, an area of small villages and farms. Wanstead Flats was, like today, a large area of open land on the southern edge of Epping Forest, but then surrounded only by the villages of Leytonstone, Wanstead and Forest Gate, whose inhabitants used the Flats to graze their cattle and collect firewood.

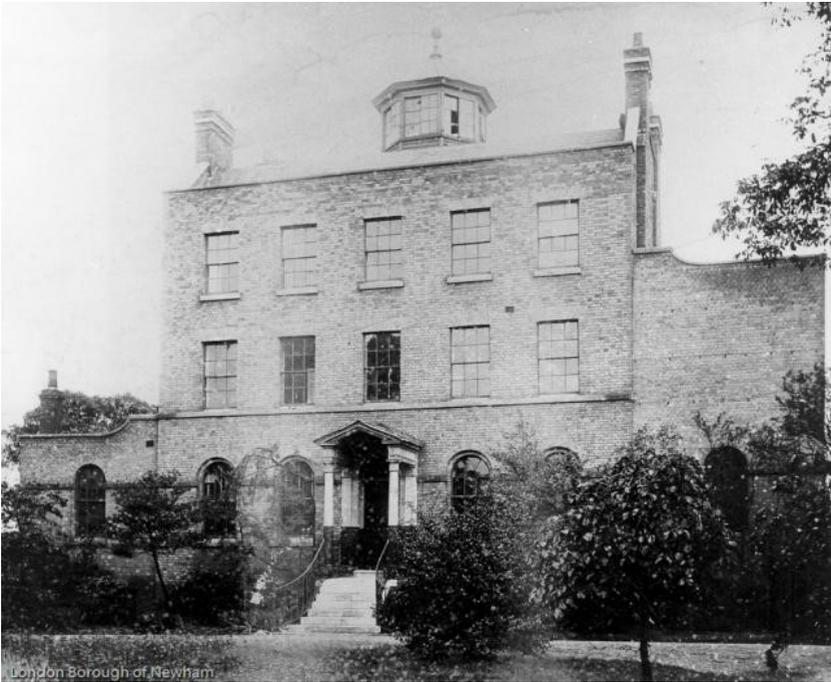
However, London was already making its presence felt. By the 1790s on the Leyton side of the Flats nurserymen and market gardeners were involved in extensive potato cultivation.<sup>1</sup> Potato harvesting attracted Irish migrants to settle in the area, and there were complaints about the 'vast number of petty depredators', as the district is inhabited mainly by Irish labourers, 'who are almost exclusively employed in cultivating the potatoe [sic] gardens...'<sup>2</sup>

A number of local farms grew large potato crops. Plashet Hall, pictured above in about 1890, was known locally as Potato Hall because of the large number of potatoes cultivated in the neighbourhood. Cabbages started to be grown when potato blight arrived in 1840s. The house, which stood on the corner of Katherine Road and Romford Road in Forest Gate, was the residence of one of the Greenhill family who farmed the 150 acres of the nearby Hamfrith farm.

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<sup>1</sup> Lysons, Daniel, *The Environs of London: volume 4: Counties of Herts, Essex & Kent* (1796), pp.150-187.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Papers; "Report from the Select Committee on the Police of the Metropolis" (1828).



*Plashet Hall*

In a comment on the growth of market gardens, Lysons wrote, 'In proportion as this great town [London] has increased in population and opulence, the demand for every species of garden luxury has increased also; and, from time to time, fields have in consequence been converted into garden-ground, till a considerable proportion of the land within a few miles of London became occupied for that purpose'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lysons, pp.573-6.

Wanstead Flats was also the end point of cattle drives from all parts of England and Scotland. A cattle market was held on the Flats every year during March and April, and much of the business relating to it was transacted at the Three Rabbits pub, which stood on the north side of the main road at Little Ilford.<sup>4</sup> So attractive was Wanstead Flats as a cattle market that when the City of London Corporation decided to move the metropolitan cattle market from Smithfield, the Lord of the Manor of Wanstead commissioned a study for building the market on the Flats.

The report stated that Wanstead Flats had room for a livestock market and slaughterhouses, while good railway connections meant that all stock could be brought by train. The Flats were surrounded by hundreds of acres of pasture land and the 'famed fattening Marshes stretching south to the river', and were 'unequaled for the quality of grass and abundance of good water'. Most importantly, the Flats were '...not surrounded by a populous or fashionable district'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Victorian pub has been converted into a pharmacy, and still stands on the corner of Rabbits Road and Romford Road.

<sup>5</sup> "Report of Thomas Rumball, Civil Engineer, to Messrs Coverdale, Lee and Purvis, Solicitors to Lord Wellesley, recommending Wanstead Flats as a fitting site for the Proposed Metropolitan Cattle Market" (February 1858).

## DIFFICULTY OF OBTAINING YELLOW LOAM IN LONDON.

**From the inclosure of waste and common lands, and from the prohibition of the Lords of the Manors of others not yet enclosed, as Old Oak Common, and Wimbledon, there is great difficulty in procuring pure native loam round London; I, as well as many other florists and nurserymen, have been lately under the necessity of sending for it as far as Waltham Flats, and Wanstead Common, at considerable expense; this loam is of a yellow cast, of too free and unsubstantial a texture for Carnations or Tulips; yet very suitable for Auriculas,**

*In the 1830s much of the topsoil of Wanstead Flats or Common was stripped off and sold for commercial nurserymen to use as loam.*<sup>6</sup>

Rabbits Road in Manor Park is a reminder that rabbits were also important in the local diet, and part of the Aldersbrook side of Wanstead Flats was used as a warren. In about 1580 one local landowner kept at least 1,000 couple of rabbits, and in 1660 a local farmer was convicted for extending his rabbit burrows onto the common land of the Flats.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hogg, Thomas, *A supplement to the practical treatise on the culture of florists' flowers*, (London, 1833).

<sup>7</sup> British History Online:

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/essex/vol6/pp163-174>.



*Rabbit netting in Epping Forest 1847*

There were three farms on or near Wanstead Flats in the 19th century whose names are remembered today - Aldersbrook, Cann Hall and Capel Manor. When the original Aldersbrook Farm was sold to the City of London in 1854 as the site for the City of London cemetery, it was growing turnips and clover, as well as rearing cattle.<sup>8</sup> Isaac Lake, the tenant, then moved to new premises (where the Aldersbrook Road filling station now stands). This was a “model” or experimental farm, and by the 1870s his successors were growing potatoes and onions

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<sup>8</sup> *Chelmsford Chronicle* 02/06/1854.

and hiring seasonal workers to harvest them.<sup>9</sup> Cattle were also kept there right up until the 1920s.<sup>10</sup>



*The original Aldersbrook Farm*

As London grew, the demand for food production increased, but so too did the demand for building land. The local historian Katherine Fry wrote of the areas south of Wanstead Flats towards Manor Park, ‘which not many years ago provided the London markets with all kinds

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<sup>9</sup> *Stratford Express* 05/03/1870.

<sup>10</sup> *Essex Newsman* 01/02/1890.

of roots and greens and other agricultural produce, are now covered with dwelling houses'.<sup>11</sup>



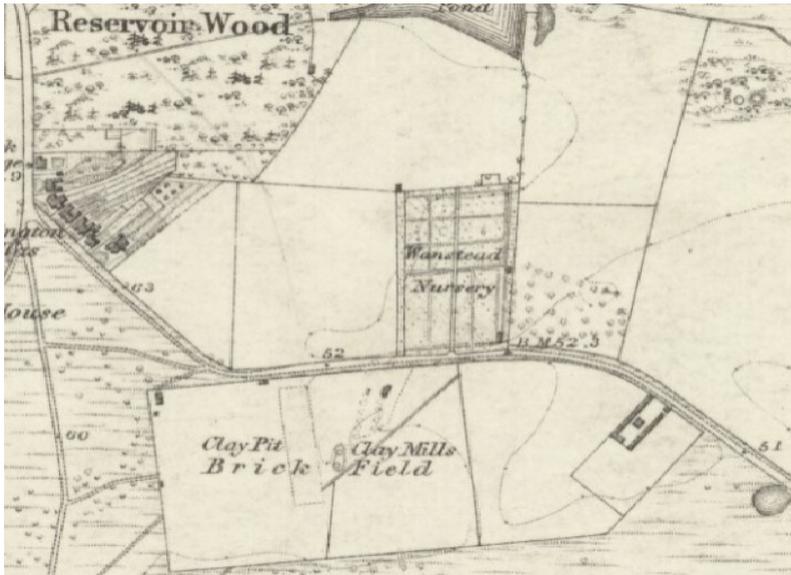
*Aldersbrook Farm c.1946. By this time it had become a garage and filling station.*

Other areas on the fringes of the Flats were disappearing too. In 1871 an advertisement for the sale of a freehold property described its orchard as 'well stocked with fruit trees' and meadow land on the north side of Chestnut Avenue on the corner with Woodgrange Road.<sup>12</sup> Over the next two decades this area too was built over.

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<sup>11</sup> Fry, Katherine, *History of the Parishes of East and West Ham* (Stratford, ed. Pagenstecher, G., 1908), p.158.

<sup>12</sup> *Stratford Express* 18/03/1871. West Ham Hall was demolished and Godwin Primary School now stands on the site.



*This 1860s Ordnance Survey map shows Aldersbrook Road on the north side of Wanstead Flats. Aldersbrook model farm is the rectangle towards the bottom right. Wanstead nursery is marked to the north of the road, and to the south is the clay pit or brick field, leased for 17 years from 1864 for brick making.*



*The same area as the map above a few years later, with houses built all round the northern edge of Wanstead Flats. The brickfield had by this time been landscaped as part of the Flats but the large depression in the ground left by extraction of clay is clear. There was even a small swimming pond in the old brickfield later.*

## Local Produce

Nevertheless, although the Wanstead Flats area kept its rural feel, development was underway. At Christmas 1852, the 'Essex Standard' was describing the fine seasonal displays of locally-reared meat in local butchers.<sup>1</sup> In 1900, J. Owen & Sons 'Cowkeepers and dairymen' in High Street North, East Ham, were advertising milk deliveries three times daily, and fresh eggs, butter & dairy twice a week, with 'Special cows kept for Infants and Invalids...The milk sold at this dairy is delivered as the cows give it'. At 58 Dames Road Forest Gate, Baileys sold eggs and a dairy called Twyfords survived at the same address well into the 1930s. The advertising postcard below shows a very rural scene in an area where houses were developed over the previous 20 years.



*58 Dames Road, Forest Gate c. 1906.*

## Work for the unemployed

By the end of the Victorian era Wanstead Flats was surrounded by housing, and some of the nearby areas were marked by poverty. In the early 1890s attempts were made to create work for some of the estimated 10,000 unemployed in West Ham. A charity committee set up by West Ham Council and local philanthropists funded the levelling of parts of Wanstead Flats and a potato-planting scheme.<sup>13</sup> It did not go well; the introduction of a piece-work was fiercely opposed by local trade unions, who demonstrated outside and inside West Ham's Council Chamber (in the latter case with a large red flag).

The potato diggers on the Flats wanted a better hourly rate, and it was alleged that, when out of sight of the foremen, they were sitting down and refusing to work.<sup>14</sup> An incident with a group of unemployed workers who shouted abuse at the Wanstead Flats diggers, calling them scabs for working at less than the union hourly rate, did not help matters. Although the scheme's promoters proclaimed it a success, at its peak less than 200 men were being employed, and it was quietly abandoned.

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<sup>13</sup> Parliamentary Papers, "First Report from the Select Committee on distress from want of employment; together with the proceedings of the committee, and minutes of evidence" (1895), p.155.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.157.

## WANSTEAD.

THE LOCAL BOARD AND BARBED WIRE.—The Local Board have resolved “That the clerk serve notice upon any occupiers of land on which barbed wire has been placed so as to be a nuisance, to remove such fencing within five weeks of the date of the notice.”

*Chelmsford Chronicle, 10/11/1893*

As part of this scheme for the unemployed a section of the Flats was fenced off, presumably to protect the vegetables from theft. However, the fence itself became a cause of controversy and there was lobbying to have it removed. An unfortunate man from East Ham was later even said to have died from blood poisoning, having pricked his hand on the wire.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> House of Commons Debates, 12/03/1897, vol. 47 c568.

## Market gardens

In the mid-19th century change was arriving in the locality. The first threshing machine in the area was introduced at Woodgrange Farm in Forest Gate during the 1840s.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the farm's 100 acres continued growing rhubarb, parsnips, peas, and other crops for the London market right up to the period when housing development started in the 1870s. As a local press report said:

'An effort of the imagination is required to realize the Forest Gate of twenty years ago. A stranger emerging at that time, into the Woodgrange Road, from the old wooden railway station would see market-gardens directly in front of him as far as the eye could reach, and on his way towards the Romford Road would have these same market gardens on his left hand and only a few private houses on the right.'<sup>17</sup>

It is apparent from Ordnance Survey maps that commercial market gardens survived long after the first housing development of the area between Forest Gate and Manor Park stations by the Manor Park Cemetery Company.

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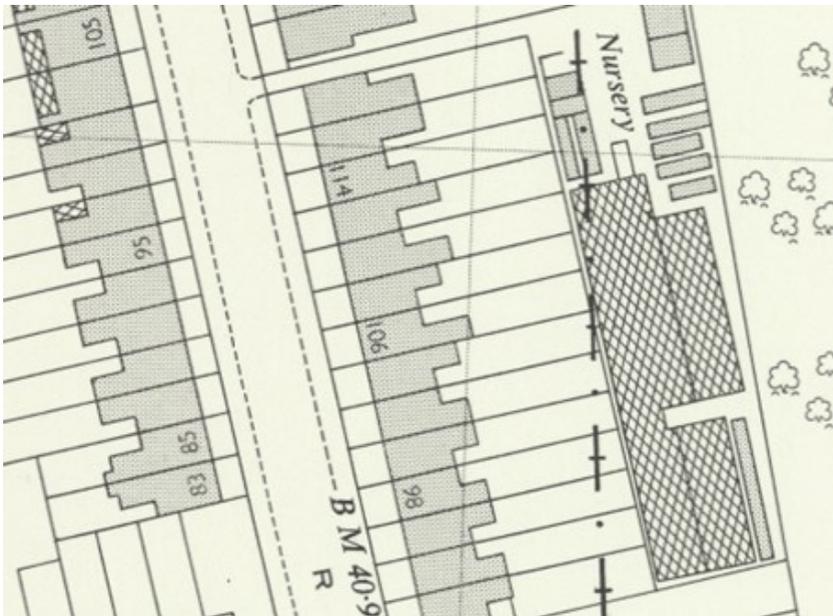
<sup>16</sup> Curwen, J., *Old Plaistow* (London, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1994), p.56.

<sup>17</sup> *The Forest Gate Weekly News* 09/07/1897.



 Glasshouse

*This 1895 map shows Lorne Road, Forest Gate: the cross hatch symbol indicates commercial glasshouses still there 10-15 years after the first terraces were built.*



*In the neighbouring Ridley Road, shown above in 1959, there was a nursery on a backland site in between the houses and the Manor Park cemetery that survived into living memory. It is now occupied by two architect designed modern houses, having been empty for a number of years.*



*Produce packing shed Sidney Road, Forest Gate, now converted into residential use.*

The area to the rear of the property pictured above, 61 Sidney Road E7, now occupied by a company called Lowden Roofing, was a market garden/nursery till the 1960s. The occupier recalls playing in his rear garden in the early 1970s amongst the derelict greenhouses.<sup>18</sup> The packing shed was later used as a sewing machine factory, a dentistry equipment workshop, and a ladies gym. Lowdens was a lorry yard before its current use by the roofing contractor.

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<sup>18</sup> Personal Communication, May 2017,

So despite rapid housing development in the late Victorian era, farms, nurseries and market gardens on and around Wanstead Flats survived well into the last century. After 1900 a new element was added, as allotments became an important – and contested – part of the local landscape.

## Chapter 2

### Allotments on Wanstead Flats in World War One

As we have seen, for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century local people were free to grow a range of produce on the Flats. The Epping Forest Act of 1878 put a stop to that – until the coming of the First World War.<sup>19</sup>

The war saw the introduction of emergency legislation to boost food production. As a result there was a massive expansion of small allotments around the country, including on Wanstead Flats – despite the foot dragging of its overseers, the Corporation of London.

Immediately after the war, and in the teeth of bitter opposition from plot-holders, the allotments all disappeared, to be returned to the playing fields that had existed prior to the war. But in 1939 history was repeated with the government's Dig for Victory campaign.

Again, large swathes of the Flats were given over to allotments and again there was a confrontation between allotmenters and the committee when the war ended and it was time for the allotments to be handed back. In the end the Corporation carried the day, but it was a long drawn out battle that was not fully resolved until the late 1950s.

Part of the reason for the ferocity of this battle was that the allotment movement had become a major force by the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Epping Forest Act 1878, 40 & 41 Vict, c 121.

century. Allotments have existed for hundreds of years but the system we recognise today has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when land was made available, in part to enable the labouring poor to grow food. These plots were initially confined largely to rural areas. But in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, fuelled by rising unemployment and high food prices, they started to become more of an urban phenomenon.<sup>20</sup>

A series of Allotment Acts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries placed new obligations on councils to provide sufficient allotments to meet demand. Partly as a result the number of allotments across the country expanded enormously. In 1873 there were 243,000 allotments; by 1895 this had risen to around 500,000 and on the eve of the war it was estimated to be around 600,000.<sup>21</sup> This trend was reflected in the Waltham Forest area – indeed Leytonstone Allotment Holders Association (LAHA), which still exists today, can trace its roots back to the late 1800s.

LAHA is one of the oldest Allotment Societies in London. It originated in the late 1800's in Leytonstone. At the turn of the century the allotment site was moved to Forest Gate, opposite Vansittart Road.

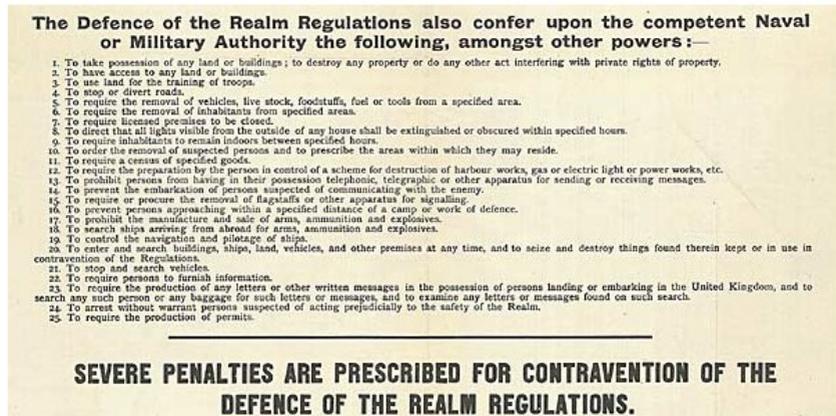
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<sup>20</sup> Acton, L., *The Allotment Movement in North-East Greater London 1900-2010: a case study of the supply, demand and culture of urban allotments, volume 1*, unpublished PhD thesis, UCL London pp.39-40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

During the Second World War the Vansittart Road site was needed for barrage balloons and anti-aircraft gun emplacements.<sup>22</sup>

The typical size of an urban plot at this time was around 20 poles – or 500 square metres, twice the size of modern allotments – though some could be as small as 5 poles. The most popular produce to be grown on these allotments was potatoes but other home-grown foodstuffs included wheat, peas, beans, carrots and onions.<sup>23</sup>



*The 1914 Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) saw the British government massively increase its regulatory powers on the home front.*

So when in 1916 the government passed the Defence of the Realm (Acquisition of Land) Act, giving it emergency powers to take over public land for cultivation for a period not exceeding two years after

<sup>22</sup> Leytonstone Allotment Holders' Association, <http://www.laha.org.uk>.

<sup>23</sup> *A brief history of allotments in England*, <http://bkthis&that.org.uk>.

the end of the war – and then followed it up with the Cultivation of Land order – it was operating in already fertile soil.<sup>24</sup>

Within months the Corporation had received applications from both West Ham Council and Leyton UDC for portions of Wanstead Flats to be made available for allotments and this was rapidly followed by a similar request by East Ham Council.<sup>25</sup>

However, because this was common land the Corporation had to sanction this change of use and initially it did not, citing commoners' grazing rights as well as claiming the land was unsuitable for cultivation. Only after the intervention of the Board of Agriculture, and then only reluctantly, did they agree to hand over a portion of the Flats to allotments on a temporary basis.

West Ham and Leyton were given permission to cultivate some 40 acres of the Flats near the Lakehouse estate (an area that was extended in the following year) while East Ham took up 20 acres on the eastern side of the Flats. Further small extensions followed so that by the end of the war over 2,000 allotments were in operation producing a range of fruit and vegetables for the plot-holders' families – and for the wider population.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Epping Forest (EF) annual reports 1915-49, 1916, 1917.*

<sup>25</sup> *EF annual reports 1915-49, 1917.*

<sup>26</sup> *Stratford Express, 18/10/1919. See also Epping Forest Committee minutes, 1916-19.*

Although it is difficult to know precisely what was grown on the Flats during this time, potatoes were, as ever, one of the staples. In the spring of 1917, for example, there were severe storms over East London. The press reported that ‘serious damage was caused on Wanstead Flats where a large number of allotment plots have been cultivated. The patient work of weeks was ruined, rows of potatoes being washed out of the ground’.<sup>27</sup>

An outbreak of Black Scab potato disease in 1918 in allotments and gardens in the area was therefore potentially disastrous, wiping out much of the first year’s harvest, and helping to explain why plot-holders were so keen to make up for this lost harvest by hanging on to their plots after the war came to an end in November 1918.<sup>28</sup>

However, the Corporation was just as keen to return this land to its earlier use. Within months of the Armistice the Corporation had served notice to all councils requiring them to give up their allotments by January 1920, pointing out that it would take another year to restore the land to a state where it could be used as playing fields.<sup>29</sup>

The request met with immediate and bitter resistance. Allotment holders asked for a two-year stay of execution, emphasising their contribution to the local area’s food production. They had produced food for 13,000 people a year, it was claimed at a West Ham council

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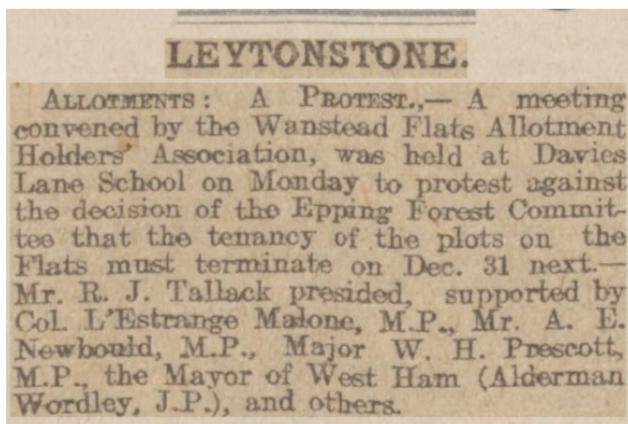
<sup>27</sup> *Hull Daily Mail*, 30/05/1917.

<sup>28</sup> *Leyton District Council minutes*, September 1918.

<sup>29</sup> *EF annual reports 1915-49*, 1919.

meeting, but had not yet realised the investment they had initially made. 'If they could keep them for another two years they would have value for their money.'<sup>30</sup>

As the Corporation dug in their heels the allotmenters were building a growing body of support, including local councils, the newly formed National Union of Allotment Holders and even the Board of Agriculture, which had originally sided with the Corporation. Both sides appealed to patriotism and claimed they were representing the true interests of the war heroes – the allotmenters preserving plots for returning veterans, the Corporation retaining playing fields for ex-soldiers' leisure and recreation.<sup>31</sup>



*Chelmsford Chronicle 30<sup>th</sup> May 1919.*

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<sup>30</sup> *Stratford Express*, 01/11/1919.

<sup>31</sup> *Stratford Express*, 01/11/1919, 07/02/1920.

Some local councillors maintained this was nothing less than a battle between sustenance and leisure. West Ham's mayor Alderman Edward Wordley – himself an allotment holder – claimed at a protest meeting in October 1919 that:

'It was absolutely ridiculous to say that the allotments were required for football and cricket. It seemed to him that the official attitude was similar to that taken by the government to the soldiers. The government had got all they wanted and now they were turning them adrift [hear, hear]. There would undoubtedly be a great shortage of potatoes and other vegetables for some years to come. The Epping Forest committee seemed anxious to cause all the unrest and shortage they possibly could. It was not much use for a man going out to play football or cricket if there was nothing for him to eat when he got home'.<sup>32</sup>

There were pointed references to the wealth and privilege of the Corporation – as well as the loose morals to which they had turned a blind eye. Speaking at a meeting of the Leytonstone Allotment Holders Association in 1919 one member claimed the administration of the Flats had been a 'public disgrace for a long time. No man could take his wife for a walk across the Flats on a summer Sunday

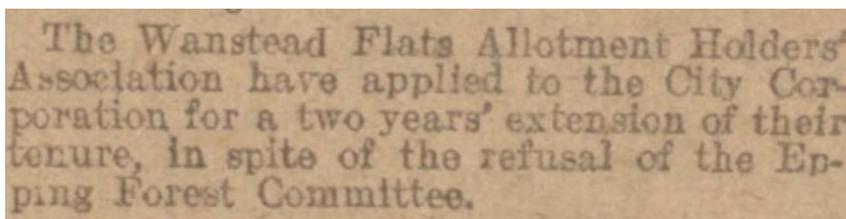
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<sup>32</sup> *Stratford Express*, 25/10/1919.

evening; in fact it was not fit to take a “respectable woman from the West End”.<sup>33</sup>

At another meeting West Ham councillor Mr Ward denounced the Epping Forest committee as a ‘body of gentlemen who never had to consider the price of potatoes or cabbages’.<sup>34</sup>

Protest meetings were held, petitions raised and deputations made their case to the Epping Forest committee urging a stay of execution. There were even calls for a strike by councils, in which they would refuse to serve the eviction notices on plot holders. The deputy mayor was a strong supporter, according to the Stratford Express: ‘The cry from the Government was “Hop it” but his advice to the allotment holders was “Stick it”. They had right on their side, he added, ‘so therefore let them hold to everything that was good and let no man take away their crown’.<sup>35</sup>



The Wanstead Flats Allotment Holders' Association have applied to the City Corporation for a two years' extension of their tenure, in spite of the refusal of the Epping Forest Committee.

*Essex Newsman 29 Nov 1919*

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<sup>33</sup> *Stratford Express*, 01/11/1919.

<sup>34</sup> *Stratford Express*, 25/10/1919.

<sup>35</sup> *Stratford Express*, 01/11/1919.

In late 1919 a meeting of the Leytonstone Allotment Holders Association decided to send a letter to the King, the Prime Minister, the leader of the opposition and the President of the Board of Agriculture attacking the 'unreasonable, unjust and unpatriotic attitude of the Epping Forest Committee', which was using 'autocratic power to obstruct patriotic and earnest citizens from putting into operation their desire to help the country by economically increasing production, which the much harassed people are being continually urged to do'.<sup>36</sup>

In December 1919 a deputation of the Parliamentary Allotments Committee presented the allotmenters' case to the Epping Forest Committee, calling for a two-year extension, but with no success. On the same day – coincidentally or otherwise - the committee received another deputation supporting a petition signed by local residents and school teachers representing 'many thousands' of school children, protesting at the proposed extension of allotment tenure on the Flats. The same meeting also received letters from a range of sporting bodies, including the London Playing Fields Society, asking the committee to provide more playing fields for young people and enclosing a list of clubs that were currently unable to play on the Flats.<sup>37</sup>

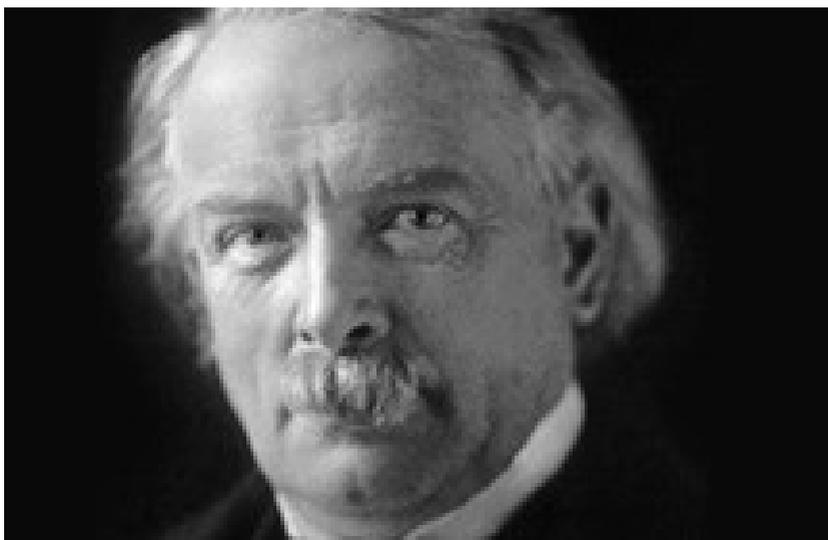
With the eviction date still set for the following month and most avenues now exhausted, the local councils went for a last throw of the

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<sup>36</sup> *Stratford Express*, 01/11/1919.

<sup>37</sup> *Epping Forest committee (EFC) minutes*, 1919.

dice - they appealed directly to the Prime Minister Lloyd George to intervene and to frame an Order in Council to give further tenure of two years in the case of common land. One member of the council's deputation, Sir Ernest Wild, suggested that unless something was done there would be bloodshed.<sup>38</sup> Rather remarkably, Lloyd George agreed to make a further appeal to the Epping Forest committee.



*Prime Minister David Lloyd George made a direct appeal to the Epping Forest committee*

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<sup>38</sup> *Stratford Express*, 20/12/1919.

In early January 1920 Lloyd George's letter to the chairman was received, urging the committee to reconsider their decision and asking them to grant plot-holders a further extension of tenure.<sup>39</sup>

But the committee remained adamant. In a formal response to the Prime Minister's request they rejected the claims that it was perfectly possible for allotments and playing fields to co-exist. In fact they had been compelled to refuse 'numerous applications' from sports clubs to make use of the Flats, they maintained.

They had allowed parts of the Flats to be used as allotments 'on the distinct understanding that the allotments were to be vacated and the ground restored to its original condition at the close of the war, occupied space which, if not used for allotments, would be taken up by 34 football grounds'.<sup>40</sup>

Prior to the allotments there could be as many as 1,500 men playing on one day, 'to say nothing of the many thousands of spectators to whom enjoyment is afforded by watching the games so played. This Committee are also assured that hundreds of demobilised soldiers in the habit prior to the war of using the allotment ground for purposes of recreation are now entirely deprived of any place for recreation'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *EFC minutes*, 1920.

<sup>40</sup> *Stratford Express*, 07/0/2/1920.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

One of the committee's members, Gerald Buxton, underscored the reasons for the committee's intransigence in a later letter to the chairman. He had, he said, visited Wanstead Flats earlier that month and had counted just 12 people on the allotments. In contrast he had seen at least 1500 spectators at one football match 'and many other football matches with large crowds around them'.<sup>42</sup>



*Food shortages remained severe immediately after the war. Pictured: queues for food in 1918 (painting by CRW Nevinson)*

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<sup>42</sup> *EFC minutes*, 1920.

The committee did offer one small concession – they wouldn't evict allotment holders until the end of February 'to enable allotment holders to get the benefit of their winter produce and thus avoid waste of loss of food'.<sup>43</sup>

Surprisingly, this concession seemed to be enough for Lloyd George. He replied on 24<sup>th</sup> January expressing 'his agreement with the reasons advanced by the Conservators in support of their action and his thanks for the extension that had been granted'.<sup>44</sup> He seemed more open to the committee's arguments than most of the allotmenters themselves.

But although their anger remained high, allotment holders faced what turned out to be an insurmountable obstacle. The lease of the Flats was not technically governed by the Defence of the Realm Act but – because Wanstead Flats was common land - was granted as an act of grace. As West Ham's mayor explained at the annual meeting of the Wanstead Flats Allotment Holders' Association, the land 'had been loaned to us and the unfortunate position is that there are no written conditions'. And if the Corporation wasn't for turning, there was, ultimately, little anyone else could do about it.<sup>45</sup>

And so, having failed to change the Corporation's mind through deputations and appeals at a national level, the councils had to admit

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<sup>43</sup> *EFC minutes*, 1920.

<sup>44</sup> *EFC minutes*, 1920.

<sup>45</sup> *Stratford Express*, 07/02/1920.

defeat. Early in 1920 West Ham and East Ham Councils started issuing eviction notices to all their allotment holders and by the spring the plots were back in the Corporation's hands.<sup>46</sup>

But one council, Leyton UDC, refused to budge. The annual meeting of the Wanstead Flats (Leytonstone) Allotment Holders Association commended Leyton for their stance and contrasted that council with East Ham 'who despite their very brave attitude at first, as soon as they saw Mr McKenzie, Superintendent of the Forest, cried "Comarad [sic], we surrender"'.<sup>47</sup>

Leyton's rebellion was short-lived, however. The Corporation responded by threatening to take them to the High Court to compel them to return the land. The UDC suggested a compromise whereby the land would be handed over by the end of November but although there were some concessions, the rebellion effectively ended in defeat. Leyton were told to restore the lands to their condition prior to taking possession, and the land was finally handed over on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1920. Within a year all signs of the allotments had been erased and the Flats were once more east Londoners' 'principal playground'.<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, there were two further attempts to turn back the tide. In April 1920 a private member's bill was introduced in Parliament with

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<sup>46</sup> *EFC minutes, 1920 & East Ham Council minutes, January 1920.*

<sup>47</sup> *Stratford Express, 06/03/1920.*

<sup>48</sup> *EF annual reports 1915-49, 1920.*

the aim of making allotments a permanent feature of the Flats.<sup>49</sup> And in October of the following year the Metropolitan Boroughs put forward a similar scheme. The proposal was rejected out of hand by the Epping Forest committee which warned that any such attempt 'will meet with strenuous opposition on the part of the Conservators'.<sup>50</sup> The idea was quickly dropped – although, as we will see, it was revived briefly after the Second World War.

The demise of allotments on the Flats to some extent reflected the national picture. The number of allotments declined in the inter-war years, partly as a result of the massive house building programme that began in the wake of the war (as well as the fact that normal food production resumed). By 1929 the number had fallen below 1 million (from a 1.5 million peak during the war) and by the eve of the Second World War it is estimated there were only 740,000.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *EFC minutes*, 1920.

<sup>50</sup> *EFC minutes*, 1921.

<sup>51</sup> Acton, L., *The Allotment Movement in North-East Greater London 1900-2010*, p.40.

## Chapter 3

### Allotments on Wanstead Flats in World War Two



Once again, though, the situation was transformed by the demands of a country on a war footing. The government's Dig for Victory campaign encouraged councils and individuals to use any available open land to grow fruit and vegetables for the war effort. Open spaces everywhere, from domestic gardens to public parks, were transformed into allotments.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Brief history of allotments in England*, <http://bkthisandthat.org.uk>.

Local councils wasted no time in applying to the Corporation of London to open up Wanstead Flats once again for allotments. This time, perhaps mindful of the bad blood created by their intransigence in the last war, the Epping Forest committee acceded to the requests more rapidly and with better grace.



*RAF aerial photograph taken 7<sup>th</sup> August 1944, Wanstead Flats. Capel Road angles from top left to bottom right. Alexandra or Sandhill ponds on right hand edge. Hundreds of allotments are clearly shown as rectangular shapes along the Capel Road edge before the East Ham prefab estate was built over some of them in 1945.*

A series of applications from West Ham, East Ham and Leyton councils for space for allotments were 'readily granted' between 1940

and 1945 'on the understanding that the Forest land will be suitably restored at the conclusion of such uses'.<sup>53</sup> Exact figures are hard to come by but a rough calculation suggests between 50-100 acres were under the hoe by the end of the war – which would probably put the number of individual allotments at anything from 1,000 to 2,000.

When the war ended, just as in 1919, councils immediately applied for extensions to their tenure. In November 1945, for instance, Leyton Council asked for an extension to December 1947 'in view of the continuance of the emergency' – and this was backed up by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, stressing the need for a continuation of land cultivation for allotment purposes.<sup>54</sup>

The Epping Forest committee responded by saying they could not agree to an extension beyond October 1946.<sup>55</sup> But this time they had reckoned without the ministry which, prompted by Leyton Council, now pointed out to the committee that no requisitioned land could be released from cultivation without the ministry's consent. And their requisition powers remained in force till 1950.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *EF annual reports 1915-49, 1940-45.*

<sup>54</sup> *Leyton Council (LC) minutes*, November 1945.

<sup>55</sup> *LC minutes*, January 1946.

<sup>56</sup> *LC minutes*, April 1946.



*A combination of allotments and anti-aircraft guns – not Wanstead Flats but ‘somewhere in Britain’*

As a result the committee was effectively compelled to give permission for the continuation of allotments on the Flats on an annual basis until the early 1950s. Both ministry and local councils backed up their requests with references to the world food shortage now prevailing<sup>57</sup>.

Yet not all allotmenters were so fortunate. In January 1946 a number of plot holders on land next to Capel Road were given three months’ notice to quit to enable temporary housing to be built in the area. Residents protested, claiming compensation for the loss of crops. And

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<sup>57</sup> *LC minutes*, November 1946.

in March the local MP Percy Daines presented a petition to East Ham Council protesting at the move and suggesting the houses be built instead on an uncultivated portion of the Flats. However, the protest fell on stony ground, the council informing plot-holders they had no powers to alter the location.<sup>58</sup>

Needless to say, tensions remained between footballers and allotmenters. There were, for instance, a number of complaints from plot-holders that their crops were being damaged 'by footballers trampling on the produce when retrieving the ball'. Leyton's borough engineer and surveyor were asked to report further on the issue.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *East Ham Council minutes*, 1946.

<sup>59</sup> *LC minutes*, February 1948.



*This 1951 aerial view shows the junction of Harrow Road E11 and Montague Road at the north-west corner of Wanstead Flats. A large area of allotments is visible at the top of the picture, as well as a row of prefabs at the top left hand corner of the photograph, on the site now occupied by the John Walsh and Fred Wigg council tower blocks. The former H. W. Nevill Ltd bakery is in the foreground at the centre, alongside the Barking-Gospel Oak railway line.*

At the same time fresh moves were made to turn some of the allotments on the Flats into a permanent feature. The first attempt came from Leyton Council's Allotments Committee in January 1947 but was quickly quashed by the full council.<sup>60</sup> But in July 1951 it

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<sup>60</sup> LC minutes, January 1947

returned to the fray, putting its weight behind a demand by the Bushwood Allotments Society for permanent allotments to be included as part of Epping Forest's new plans for the development of the Flats. (Bushwood Allotments Society had taken over management of the Wanstead Flats allotments from Leyton and Leytonstone Allotment Holders Society in June 1944).

The proposal was supported by the council's open spaces committee but was again over-turned by the full council.<sup>61</sup> A similar proposal, from West Ham Council's horticultural committee, for 200 'permanent allotment gardens' on Wanstead Flats, was also eventually rejected by the full council.<sup>62</sup>

The following year the Epping Forest committee informed the council that they now needed the allotment land for playing fields as part of the new development plan drawn up with the National Playing Fields Association and asking for all allotments to be vacated by September 1952.<sup>63</sup> When Leyton Council dug in its heels, the Conservators relented but only until the following year. This time the council – despite continuing opposition from the allotments committee – bowed to the demands and in July 1953 agreed to give notice to all allotment holders on the Flats to leave by the end of the year.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *LC minutes, July 1951.*

<sup>62</sup> *West Ham Council minutes, April 1950.*

<sup>63</sup> *LC minutes, February 1952*

<sup>64</sup> *LC minutes, July 1953*

In July 1954 the last storage shed used by the Bushwood Allotments Society was dismantled and removed and later that year the society's members moved to a new set of allotments in Browning Road, Leytonstone – an allotment that continues to this day.<sup>65</sup>

But even this wasn't the last act in the history of allotments on Wanstead Flats. East Ham allotmenters were given a further year's stay of execution, only finally leaving in December 1955. West Ham Council's remaining plot holders didn't leave until 1957. And it wasn't until February 1958 that Epping Forest committee began reinstating the final 14 acres of allotment land on the Flats.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *LC minutes*, July 1954, March 1955.

<sup>66</sup> *EF annual reports* 1950-59, 1957, 1958.

## Chapter 4 - Conclusion

The dramatic expansion of allotments during the two wars was the high point of horticultural activity on the Flats in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but their disappearance was by no means the end of the story.

The Epping Forest Act of 1878 prohibited the growing of produce and the removal of 'any substance' from Wanstead Flats and the rest of the forest, with the exception of firewood.<sup>67</sup> The commoners did however, continue to be allowed to graze animals, and this tradition continued right through to the 1990s. Large herds of calves and cows belonging to farmers who held common rights in Epping Forest remained a familiar sight every summer not only on the Flats themselves but also on the adjoining roads and in local gardens. Other traces of the past also continued – there was a piggery until well into the 1950s in Forest View Road, next to the Manor Park end of the Flats.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The Epping Forest byelaws permit *'the collection in any one day of no more than 12 kg of loose, dead or driftwood, of which no piece shall exceed 5 cm in diameter and 91 cm in length'*.

<sup>68</sup> Personal reminiscence of a Manor Park resident, 2016.



*As late as the 1990s cattle belonging to Epping Forest commoners were free to wander off the Flats into the surrounding area, including Woodgrange Road (above)*

Today, where once there were farms, fields and allotments, Wanstead Flats has grassland and copses, sports pitches and ponds. Nevertheless, faint echoes of its past history remain. In season blackberries, apples, wild rocket and mushrooms still grow, and are sometimes picked by foragers who ignore the Epping Forest bye-laws prohibiting their removal. And that's not to mention the many herbs to

be found in the woods. The Flats still remain surprisingly fertile soil for those in the know - just another reminder that Wanstead Flats today is in large part a result of its varied rural, agricultural and horticultural history.

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