

**Homes for Heroes or Space to
Breathe? The Struggle for
Wanstead Flats 1946-47**

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The Struggle for Wanstead Flats 1946-47

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for Stanley Reed and the Wanstead Flats Defence Committee

“...once done this cannot be undone; if the Flats go, they go for ever, and future generations will condemn the folly of those who permitted it to happen”. (Leaflet: ‘Hands off the Flats’ 1946)

Introduction – Wanstead Flats and Epping Forest

The story of the campaign to prevent large-scale house-building on Wanstead Flats at the end of the Second World War is one with a familiar ring. For centuries the economic power of London has drawn in growing numbers of people, fuelling the expansion of the city and swallowing up large areas of the surrounding countryside for housing, public and commercial developments and roads. Isolated areas of green space, parks and commons, are all that remain of the fields and villages which could once be found just a few miles from the city centre.

One exceptional area preserved as an open space for public use on the north-east side of London is Epping Forest, a crescent-shaped ribbon of nearly 2400 hectares (6000 acres) of woods, heaths and grasslands, stretching 19 km (12 miles) from Epping in the north to Forest Gate in the south. Today Epping Forest remains the largest public open space in the London area, and its survival as unenclosed open land is remarkable. For centuries Epping Forest had been used first as royal hunting land and later as a resource for grazing of animals and the cutting of timber. During the nineteenth century the growth of London, the arrival of new industries in Essex and the urbanisation of hitherto remote rural communities increased pressures on the forest. This land was seen by local landowners as an opportunity to enclose and build houses for the growing numbers who wanted to work in London but live in the country. “In a utilitarian age it was regarded as intolerable that these thousands of acres of good land should not be brought into use”¹.

¹ Addison, W.: “Portrait of Epping Forest”. London, Robert Hale, 1977 p.27

However there were forces of opposition, both from among those “of a new social class who possessed wealth but not land” and from the increasing numbers of ordinary Londoners who made use of the forest for leisure and recreation. These very different interests shared a resentment of the anachronistic claims of local landowners². The interests of these groups was reflected in the Corporation of the City of London, on whose Court of Common Council many of the newly wealthy City merchants were represented. In the face of the threat of enclosure and building on the whole of the ancient forest the City of London fought and won a legal action which in 1874 comprehensively condemned enclosures. Four years later the City Corporation, having purchased substantial forest lands, became by Act of Parliament the Conservators of Epping Forest, with responsibility for its management, in the words of the 1878 Act, “unenclosed and unbuilt on as an open space for the recreation and enjoyment of the public”³.

Wanstead Flats is the southernmost area of Epping Forest. In common with the rest of the forest, from the mid 19th Century the Flats were under increasing pressure as London expanded eastwards along the lines of the newly built railways and large-scale house building began in Forest Gate, West Ham and East Ham, particularly from the 1870s⁴. Attempts by local landowners to enclose large areas of the Flats, in the teeth of local opposition in the 1850s and again in the early 1870s had provided much of the impetus for the City of London’s action in preserving the forest. Indeed in July 1871 police had to break up a huge demonstration on the Flats which ended with the demolition of illegally erected fencing⁵, and subsequent to this the City Corporation began their legal action against

² Ibid p.43

³ Corporation of London: “The Official Guide to Epping Forest”. London, 1993 pp. 12-13

⁴ For an account of the impact of railway expansion on Epping Forest and surrounding areas, see Simpson, A.: “How the railway came to Leytonstone”. Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society Occasional Publication 1, 2006.

⁵ Stratford Express 15th July 1871

enclosing landlords⁶.

After 1878 the Flats, along with the rest of Epping Forest, came under the management of the City of London. As an open, relatively treeless space, the Flats became popular for a wide variety of leisure activities, including from the end of the 19th century, organised sports, in addition to the longstanding holiday fairs. At the beginning of the last century a model yacht pond was constructed, and a bandstand on the corner of Capel Road near Angell Pond attracted large crowds on summer Sundays. Up to the Second World War the Flats continued to draw large numbers of East Enders, providing the open space that they lacked near their own homes. By the 1930s over 100 football clubs were using the Flats.

During the war the Flats were pressed into use for a wide variety of military purposes. Anti-aircraft batteries were sited there, and in the summer of 1944 the Flats became a significant transit point for the D-Day invasion. For a short time towards the end of the war a prisoner of war camp was also located on the Flats. Because of this concentration of military activity the Flats and surrounding area were a particular target for bombing, and the north-west side of the Flats, where the anti-aircraft guns were concentrated, became known as "Hell Fire Corner"⁷. The following is an account of a night raid in March 1941 -

"The wail of the siren opposite the Post [an Air Raid Precaution - "A.R.P." - post located at Aldersbrook Tennis Club] announced at 8.15 p.m. the arrival of the raiders. The Post personnel saw a startling sight. The Flats were a sea of flame. Thousands of incendiaries were burning on the open space. The guns roared. It was obvious that the enemy was making a concerted and determined attack. Bomb flashes stabbed the black-out. Planes droned overhead. The batteries on the Flats joined those further away in putting up a terrific barrage"⁸.

⁶ Sharp, R.M.: "Waging the Holy War: the People's Fight to save Epping Forest". Essex Journal, Spring 2007 pp16-22.

⁷ Tiquet, S.: "It happened here: The story of Civil Defence in Wanstead and Woodford 1939-1945". Redbridge Reprints 2. Redbridge Libraries 1994 pp.38-39.

Large numbers of houses in the area were damaged or destroyed, with substantial loss of life. By 1945 Wanstead Flats were in a poor state – large areas were covered by rusting barbed wire, bomb and rocket craters, the remains of gun emplacements and buildings. Much of the Flats had been dug up for trenches and allotments, or churned up by vehicles and military boots. In addition the local boroughs of East Ham and West Ham had claimed sections of the southern and eastern Flats for temporary (“ten-year”) housing.

“The present housing situation...is such as to warrant drastic action”⁹

As in the area surrounding Wanstead Flats, across East London the story of large-scale destruction was the same. The Docks and the surrounding industrial areas had also been primary targets for German air-raids, and in the borough of West Ham alone 14,000 houses had been destroyed by bombing. This had only exacerbated an already difficult housing situation. During the interwar period poverty in East London had been accompanied by chronic overcrowding in poor quality housing. To compound these problems enemy action had destroyed over 100,000 houses in the London area; nearly one and a half million homes were in need of repair, while building and renovation had been almost at a standstill throughout the war. In addition many old and worn-out slums remained from before the war.

Meanwhile the British population had increased by over one million during the war, and this was followed by the post-war baby boom. This growing population was thus crowded into 700,000 fewer households than in 1939. The need for housing was immense; in January 1945 the wartime Coalition government had estimated the immediate requirement for new houses at 1,250,000, with 3-4 million needed by the mid-1950s,

⁸ Ibid p.38.

⁹ County Borough of West Ham Housing Committee meeting 4th March 1946. Committee Reports LXI

though some thought this was a significant underestimate¹⁰.

Housing had been seen by many as the key issue of the July 1945 General Election, yet housing policy had been neglected towards the end of the war. The wartime Coalition Government had produced no White Paper on housing, whereas it had done so for health and education, and many saw the government's housing policy as completely inadequate. The Minister for Reconstruction, Lord Woolton, told the House of Lords in February 1945 of the Government's target of 300,000 permanent and 200,000 temporary houses within two years of Germany's defeat. In response the Archbishop of York said he "could not imagine anything ...more likely to cause bitterness among the men in the Services than to find when they came back that there was no possibility of the home to which they had looked forward so keenly"¹¹. In the run-up to the General Election the Labour party made extravagant claims for their building plans – Ernest Bevin promised 5 million houses in the shortest possible time, but after Labour's election landslide the queues for homes seemed only to be getting longer by the end of the year.

This was the background against which in 1946 the County Borough of West Ham proposed to acquire a large tract of Wanstead Flats by Compulsory Purchase Order, to rehouse local residents made homeless by wartime bombing. On the face of it, West Ham had a strong case for seeking to build housing on a prime site adjacent to the borough, given the destruction across the borough during the war. However, as those opposing the building plans were to point out, the exact nature of West Ham's housing problem was not entirely clear. From a pre-war peak in 1929 West Ham's population had been steadily falling as younger generations had moved away to the outer suburbs, and major employers, such as the docks and the railway works at Stratford, began to decline.

¹⁰ Campbell, J: "Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism". London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1987 p.154.

¹¹ Waller, Maureen: London 1945: Life in the Debris of War; London, John Murray 2004 p.151

Though in 1939 a quarter of a million people had crowded into 50,000 dwellings in West Ham, during the war years many residents had been evacuated to escape the bombing.

It was expected that as these evacuees returned, together with demobbed servicemen and women, housing pressures would begin to reappear. West Ham's Council declared itself determined to provide adequate housing for the post-war population, and the open land of Epping Forest next door to boroughs which claimed serious housing shortages was an obvious target for development. During the war the Corporation of London had allowed temporary housing to be built as accommodation as an emergency measure for evacuees and bombed-out families. Three "respite camps" had also been set up in the forest to receive up to 7000 evacuees, though they were never used¹².

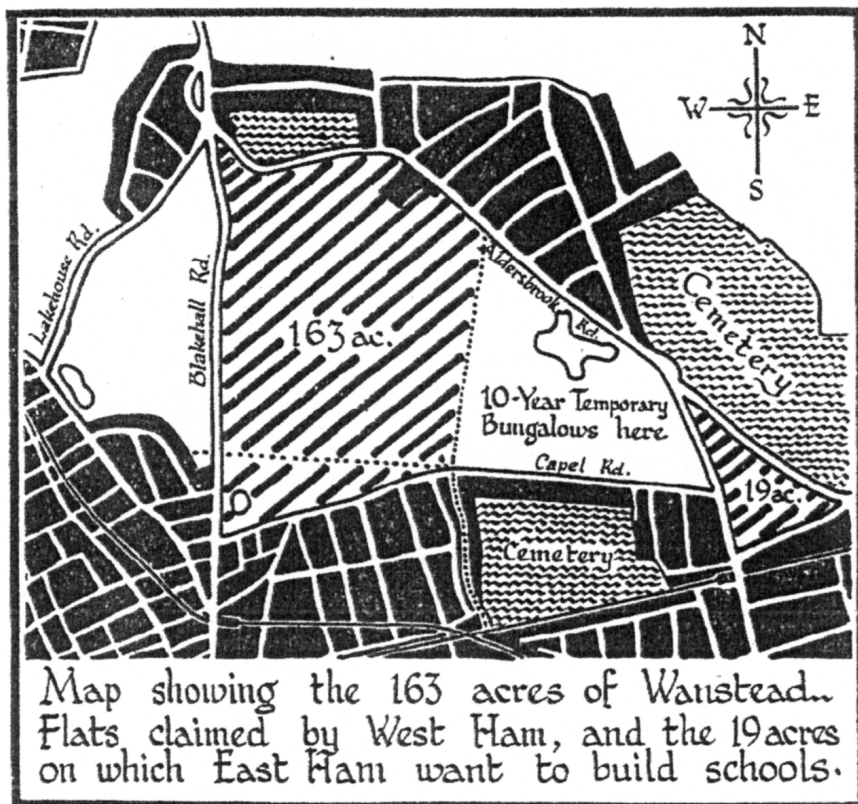
By the end of the war both East Ham and West Ham Councils had already negotiated with the City Corporation to build temporary "hutments" on Forest land. The City Corporation offered no objections to the use of land to put up temporary dwellings. The only condition was that there would be a strict two-year time limit on their occupation, and these dwellings, some made of curved asbestos ("uni-secco") sheeting, covered much of the east and southern part of Wanstead Flats. Despite the first warning voices raised against the potential damage to the green belt if councils started requisitioning land for housing, an editorial in the Stratford Express declared Epping Forest to be safe in the hands of the Forest Commissioners. Furthermore "...as for 'borrowing' part for temporary houses pending the construction of permanent dwellings, there is far more to be said for than against the plan". Bombed out residents "deserve all the consideration that can be shown them"¹³.

However the post-war plans of the two councils were viewed with increasing concern one year later, in the early months of 1946. Under the front page headline "Calamity for Forest" the Walthamstow Guardian

¹² Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian 11th January 1946

¹³ Stratford Express 9th March 1945.

published in full a letter from three Epping Forest Verderers¹⁴ stating their “growing conviction that once temporary houses are erected in the 23 acres of Wanstead Flats requisitioned as a site by East Ham Corporation, the land so occupied will be lost to the public forever”. This land was meant to be for “10-year temporary housing”, but as the letter makes clear, once one authority was allowed to “raid” the forest in this way,



Map published by the Wanstead Flats Defence Committee

¹⁴ The Epping Forest Verderers' ancient duties were to review and hear all offences committed in the forest, and to attend forest courts. After the 1878 Epping Forest Act the Forest Verderers adopted a role representative of local interests in the Forest area. See Morris, R.: "The Verderers and Courts of Waltham Forest in the County of Essex 1250-2000". Loughton and District Historical Society 2004.

others would follow suit¹⁵. They had good reason for this concern; the Walthamstow Guardian had earlier reported that “in view of East Ham’s success” Walthamstow Council was considering re-applying for other forest land¹⁶.

Longer term plans for development of the Flats also began to emerge. In addition to the temporary housing on the Flats East Ham Council introduced a proposal to build two “modern” (senior) schools and a technical college on the triangle of land at the eastern end of Wanstead Flats. The Borough Education Officer described this area as only “technically” part of Wanstead Flats, but, echoing the Walthamstow Guardian, an editorial in the Stratford Express – reversing their sanguine view of a year earlier - pointed out that this could lead to other councils which were hard-pressed for land making further demands of the Flats¹⁷.

This proved prescient, as shortly after this East Ham’s claim was followed by the demand from West Ham Corporation. Claiming that “the present housing situation in West Ham is such as to warrant drastic action” and that “Government proposals for Satellite Towns fail to recognise the urgency of the immediate need for houses”, in April 1946 the Council decided to make an urgent application to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning for an order for the compulsory purchase of 163 acres of the Flats to house up to 7,400 people¹⁸. Of the land claimed only 17 acres lay in the boundaries of West Ham borough, and on this land as we have seen 102 “emergency hutments” had been erected¹⁹. The new plans however would mean that much of the central area of the Flats would be covered with housing and shops.

As expected West Ham Corporation received strong support from the

¹⁵ Walthamstow Guardian 15th February 1946

¹⁶ Ibid 1st February 1946

¹⁷ Park Ward War Damage Organisation: ‘Bulletin’ May 1946

¹⁸ County Borough of West Ham Housing Committee: 4th March 1946. Committee Reports November 1945-October 1946 vol. LX p258.

¹⁹ Ibid

newly-elected Labour Government, which was itself determined not to repeat the failure of successive governments to provide decent housing after the end of the First World War. The Government was even considering nationalisation of land to prevent the obstruction of industrial and housing development by private landlords. There was a demand from both the press and public for government action, and the Minister in charge of the new housing programme, Aneurin Bevan, was under particularly heavy pressure. Moving the second reading of a parliamentary bill to speed up compulsory purchase of land for housing Bevan declared that landowners' interests must be secondary to "the housing needs of the nation". By the Spring of 1946 he said, houses "must be going up everywhere". Referring to the specific case of Wanstead Flats Bevan declared "I regret very much that we have had to do it, but the people of East Ham must have shelter...The Commoners of Epping Forest must surrender to the overwhelming needs of the people of East Ham".

Bevan's own sympathies were made even clearer when he added the "property owner, like the vulture, cannot desert the carrion...and insists on hanging on to the land"²⁰. In a radical policy departure, the government therefore proposed to give responsibility for housing to local authorities, who would become the driving force in the housing market. "If councillors wanted the votes, they would have to supply the housing"²¹. Ironically a further incentive to accelerate building came from the Conservative opposition in parliament, who criticised the government's slowness. In a censure debate of December 1945 Winston Churchill commented caustically that Bevan had "already allowed four months of excellent building weather to slip away"²². There was thus strong incentive for the building of houses on Wanstead Flats to go ahead.

²⁰ Daily Telegraph 1/2/1946

²¹ Waller, M. op. cit. p. 153

²² Waller, op. cit. p.154

“Hands off the Forest – Save Wanstead Flats from the Builder”²³

However the argument was far from over as far as local people in the area surrounding the Flats were concerned. As the plans became known through the local press alarm grew rapidly; a letter from Charles Bush to the Stratford Express expressed a characteristic viewpoint in declaring that Wanstead Flats was not being taken from a wealthy landowner “but from the working man and his children”²⁴. This was echoed in a letter to Winston Churchill in his capacity as a local MP, from Wanstead and Woodford Rotary Club, which described Wanstead Flats as “a recreation ground of incalculable value to the people, particularly the youth of thickly populated districts of East London”²⁵. Numerous references were to be made throughout the campaign to the dedication of Wanstead Flats, as part of Epping Forest, to the people forever, and the spirit of the 19th Century protest campaigns was invoked. At one meeting F.G. Burney, Mayor of Wanstead and Woodford, produced the axe presented to his ancestor George Burney, for his part in demolishing enclosures in 1882 and declared “if another axe squad is needed I want to lead it”²⁶.

A group of residents of Park Ward, comprising the Lakehouse and Aldersbrook Estates north of Wanstead Flats, became the core of the opposition. An organisation already existed on the estate, the Park Residents’ Society, which had begun life in 1945 as the War Damage Organisation, to help local people whose homes had been damaged by bombing²⁷. As we have seen, Wanstead Flats and the surrounding area had been heavily bombed due to the high concentration of anti-aircraft guns there. The War Damage Organisation was formed by owner-

²³ Campaign leaflet published by the Wanstead Flats Defence Committee. Newham Reference Library

²⁴ Stratford Express 14th June 1946.

²⁵ Churchill Archive, Churchill College Cambridge CHUR3/29-B

²⁶ Stratford Express 5th July 1946

²⁷ Park Residents’ Society “Bulletin” no.5 September 1946

occupiers of houses on the Lakehouse and Aldersbrook estates in protest at the shoddy repair work to their homes, being undertaken by private contractors working for Wanstead District Council, “as solidly Tory as West Ham was socialist”²⁸.

The War Damage Organisation had already drawn attention to “the threat to the Flats”, in its newsletter, which publicised the plans “now being pressed forward by the East and West Ham Councils for the acquisition of this magnificent, though neglected, open space for permanent building”²⁹. Led by a hardworking secretary in Stanley Reed, a local schoolteacher, a Defence Committee was formed, which launched a petition and held public meetings. The Committee played a key role in the coordination of otherwise scattered local resistance, urging opposition in particular from the residents of both East and West Ham, since Stanley Reed correctly foresaw that “objections from Wanstead were certain to be represented by the West Ham politicians who initiated the scheme as arising from snobbish fears among the Wanstead well-to-do of working class penetration into their preserves”³⁰. However the Committee stated that even failing this “your committee is prepared to do all that lies within its power to canalise the indignation that will undoubtedly be widespread when the implication of these schemes are fully realised”³¹.

A leaflet published by the Defence Committee paints a good picture of the poor state of the Flats at the end of the war. “Some of you” it says “particularly those who have children...have been looking forward to the day when the Army would clear away its rusty wire, dig out the gun emplacements and fill in the trenches. You would have liked to see the children’s row-boats on the pond once more. You may even have had optimistic visions of bare patches resurfaced and new trees planted”³². The neglect of the Flats before and during the war was, as we shall see,

²⁸ Reed, Stanley: “The Next Chapters”: unpublished memoirs, no date.

²⁹ War Damage Organisation “Bulletin” May 1946

³⁰ Reed, S.: op.cit. p.32

³¹ Ibid

³² Leaflet “Hands off Wanstead Flats”, no date. Churchill Archive, CHUR3/29-B

later used as an argument by West Ham Council against the City Corporation's stewardship of the area.

As the furore grew the debate became increasingly bitter. A public meeting convened in Leyton by the Defence Committee drew 250 people in July 1946. Leah Manning, MP for Epping, told the meeting that she had received letters from servicemen in "the desert [and] the jungle, who had played there in their childhood, begging her to preserve the land". She went on to propose that, if all legal means failed, "we have pickets and bands of people to take up positions on the Flats and prevent the first step to build. I am prepared to spend as many nights as you like on the Flats"³³. Leah Manning's involvement in the protest campaign was particularly significant; as a Labour MP, the first to be elected in Epping, she might have been expected to be in favour of the building proposal. Indeed, in the following year she was to work equally hard for the development of Harlow New Town in face of a local protest campaign. Her justification for housing in Harlow makes her support for the Wanstead Flats campaign the more remarkable. In her autobiography she wrote "...at that time, the need for housing accommodation was desperate and urgent. The bombed-out in London were living in conditions of unparalleled squalor and over-crowding ...", and this she felt should override the need to preserve "the natural beauty of village country life."³⁴

At another protest meeting held by Capel Road residents Councillor A.G. Burgess of Wanstead and Woodford raised an issue that was to be central to the protestors' case when he said that powers were being claimed by the Councils which infringed on public rights. If they were able to build on one part of Epping Forest it would be the beginning of the end for the whole forest. "Therefore", he said "they were approaching the methods which Hitler adopted when he used the law to carry out his

³³ Walthamstow Guardian 12th July 1946

³⁴ Manning, L.: "A life for Education". London, Gollancz, 1970 p. 173



Invasion, 1946

Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society and the author Mark Gorman thank Waltham Forest Guardian for permission to reproduce the cartoon above which appeared in the Walthamstow Guardian of 8th February 1946.

schemes, and when the law did not fit he made it fit”³⁵.

In the context of the times this was a strong accusation; however West Ham Council’s response to the criticisms was equally robust. The Chairman of West Ham’s Housing Committee, Councillor V. Ayres, wrote an open letter to the Stratford Express to ask the signatories to a letter of protest of May 1946 to “look at the problem from the point of view of the thousands of homeless or badly housed men, women and children” for whom the scheme offered the “only practical prospect” of housing in the next two-three years. To these people, she said, “the ‘Hands off the Flats party’ might appear as indifferent to their needs”³⁶. The City Corporation

³⁵ Stratford Express: 21st June 1946

were accused by East Ham Councillors of having badly neglected the Flats before the war. At an East Ham Council meeting Alderman Jackson said that the Flats had been a disgrace for years before the war, and that it was the Councils themselves which had provided facilities such as toilets on the Flats³⁷.

Nor was the general public unanimously opposed to the scheme. A writer to the Stratford Express said that the Flats were “an eyesore”. Servicemen who had fought through the war deserved homes of their own, “not... to live with relatives”. Another correspondent replying to a demand by the Walthamstow Guardian that “the amenities of the forest must be preserved” wrote “blocks of luxury flats, trolley bus routes, public lavatories, riding school tracks, all add to the ‘amenities’, but... dwellings for the labouring class of East Ham or West Ham apparently cannot be allowed even under the sacredness of socialism”³⁸.

However the general feeling locally was strongly in opposition to the proposals. Even other local boroughs, whose support for a major housing scheme might have been expected, were highly critical of their neighbours’ action. The Leyton Town Clerk commented sarcastically “if West Ham want to build houses they might consider using a park of their own”³⁹. Other suggestions included building in the bombed docks, and developing satellite towns in Essex. Many people likened the action of the Council and of the Government to stealing from the people. A correspondent to Winston Churchill, whose constituency of Wanstead and Woodford was close to the Flats, wrote of the proposal “to steal large portions of Wanstead Flats... Little did we think that ... Socialist Councils would be responsible for schemes to deprive us of our precious heritage, a possession shared by all the districts of London, but particularly the

³⁶ Ibid: 7th June 1946

³⁷ Stratford Express 21st June 1946

³⁸ G. Stewart in the Walthamstow, Leytonstone and Chingford Guardian, 19th July 1946.

³⁹ Leytonstone Express 8th June 1946

overcrowded east-End ones”⁴⁰.

By the Summer of 1946 the controversy was at its height. The published plans revealed West Ham Council’s true motives, according to opponents, who hinted that the real reason for development was to increase West Ham’s population with newcomers who would thereby decrease the costs per head of local services. In what Stanley Reed in a letter to the Stratford Express on 28th June called a “remarkably frank document” the published minutes of the Housing Committee included a report on a meeting between officers of West Ham Corporation to discuss a proposal to seek an extension of the Borough boundary, so that the new estate would be entirely within an extended West Ham. Otherwise, the officers pointed out, although West Ham Corporation would be the landlord, the Local Authority for almost the whole estate would be Wanstead and Woodford. However, if the estate were to be in West Ham “there would be a larger head of population to bear the expense of the central administration and those services of the Borough originally provided for a larger population, and the cost per head of providing these essential services would be decreased”⁴¹.

The Stratford Express reported the “singular reticence” of both the Councils over their plans, and there was a strong suspicion that an attempt was being made to rebuild population numbers, which as we have seen had been falling in the East End even before the war⁴². The story made the national press, becoming a test case for the preservation of open spaces against housing needs, the “Scotsman” among others reporting support for the protest campaign from all over the country⁴³. As the Stratford Express put it – “There can be no compromise...the question is simple; is the ...need for more housing so acute that such an irrevocable step has to be taken?”

⁴⁰ Mrs E. Pugh, letter to Winston Churchill 25th June 1946. Churchill Archive 3/29-A.

⁴¹ County Borough of West Ham Legal and General Committee 7th June 1946, Appendix A. Committee Reports November 1945-October 1946 vol. LX p. 465.

⁴² Stratford Express 28th June 1946.

⁴³ The “Scotsman” 24th July 1946

“An enquiry is promised”⁴⁴

It was clear that the issue would only be resolved by a public inquiry, which was ordered by the Minister for Town and Country Planning, to hear West Ham Council’s application for a compulsory purchase order. By the time the inquiry opened at Stratford Town Hall in December 1946 under the chairmanship of the Ministry’s Inspector, A.R. Dent, West Ham Council probably knew that the prospect of their getting agreement for the building plans was remote. Apart from the petition with 60,000 signatures presented by the Epping MP Leah Manning to parliament, the Council had received 379 formal objections to their proposal⁴⁵. A formidable array of groups assembled to oppose the application, not only the City Corporation but also including Wanstead and Woodford Borough Council, the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society, the National Playing Fields Association, and Ilford Trades Council, each represented by Counsel.

At the inquiry, which received national press coverage, such was the interest in the case as a test for other building proposals on protected land, opposition to the plans was vehement. Amidst catcalls and shouts the inquiry heard E.E. King, West Ham’s Town Clerk, declaring this to be a battle of “the haves and the have-nots”; he bitterly accused the protestors of prejudices against having people from West Ham coming to live near them⁴⁶. West Ham Council knew that the scheme would be opposed, he said, “because the land was an open space and they knew the type of English mind which said that because a thing had been used

⁴⁴ Defence Committee poster August 1946.

⁴⁵ Borough of West Ham Housing Committee: 13th September 1946. Committee Reports vol. LX p. 768

⁴⁶ Leytonstone Express 7th December 1946

for years for a certain purpose it was wrong to change it”⁴⁷.

The Corporation’s argument, set out in a circular to other local authorities in August 1946, acknowledged its falling population but declared as an aim the stabilisation of numbers living in West Ham at 170,000. The Council claimed that the loss of 14,000 houses out of a total stock of 50,000 in 1939 meant that 80,000 people needed re-housing, and that 16,000 had already applied for homes. The Council were also considering the acquisition of “exchange open space” for the land lost on Wanstead Flats⁴⁸. Citing the 16000 people in urgent need of housing the Town Clerk went on to declare that Wanstead Flats was only technically part of Epping Forest. In fact it was a large “flattish, bleakish and unattractive open space”. This statement brought more shouts of protest from the audience, which only grew when he went on that “only a lunatic” would travel from the surrounding areas to play football on the Flats.⁴⁹

During the 4-day inquiry both sides supported their cases with evidence ranging from witnesses who testified to their cramped living conditions after being bombed out of their homes in West Ham, to West Ham’s Borough Engineer, who declared that most of the Flats consisted of “a gravel which did not retain moisture or manure and was incapable of supporting healthy vegetation; it would not sustain grass strong enough for football pitches”. In reply it was pointed out by Sir Edward North Buxton, one of the Forest Verderers (possibly with some exaggeration) that during the 1930s it was not unusual to see up to 5000 playing and a further 2000 watching football. Other objectors pointed out that West Ham’s plans were at odds with the government’s own Greater London Plan, which emphasised keeping as much open space as possible. Even building on the Flats would not solve West Ham’s housing shortage. In support of all this evidence the tireless Stanley Reed, who had been given unpaid leave of absence by his employers – none other than West Ham Corporation - to attend the inquiry, presented the petition of 60,000

⁴⁷ Leytonstone express 7th December 1946

⁴⁸ Walthamstow Guardian 26th July 1946.

⁴⁹ Leytonstone Express 7th December 1946

names⁵⁰.

The opponents to West Ham Council took differing but effectively complementary approaches. The City Corporation concentrated on the legal aspect, while the local campaigners focussed on the public protest. Indeed, a meeting between representatives of the City of London and Stanley Reed had established that joint action was neither necessary nor desirable. Despite the array of legal talent on both sides the most effective testimony was, according to Stanley Reed, from a bus driver “with a gift for the theatrical...he told a graphic tale of his dismal progress through Hackney, Homerton and Leyton to the point at which the houses ended and he and his bus emerged into the light and air of Wanstead Flats, with their trees, grass and grazing cattle: Sam Weller himself could not have done better”⁵¹.

“This Space will Stay Open”⁵²

The Inspector duly reported back to the Minister for Town and Country Planning, whose verdict was given in a letter of April 1947 to West Ham’s Town Clerk, rejecting the application for housing. However, the letter makes it clear that the Ministry did not accept the argument that Wanstead Flats, as part of Epping Forest, was necessarily protected from compulsory purchase for building land. Acknowledging West Ham’s “very urgent housing problem” the Ministry stated that the Epping Forest Act of 1878 “does not operate to exempt this land from compulsory purchase”; the rationale for rejection was that shortage of labour and materials meant that West Ham would be limited to building on the land it already had. He went on, “it is most undesirable to permit building on the Wanstead Flats...it is not necessary to contemplate sacrifice of some

⁵⁰ Stanley Reed did not lose his week’s salary; he notes in his memoirs that an envelope containing his exact wages dropped through his letterbox one evening; other anonymous packages, containing minutes of various West Ham Council committees dealing with the compulsory purchase application, had been similarly delivered during the campaign. Reed S: The Next Chapters p.33

⁵¹ Reed, op. cit.p.33

⁵² Daily Mirror 24th April 1947

of this open space for housing...”⁵³

He proposed to make land available to West Ham in the outer country ring or beyond, where new towns were being proposed as part of the “Greater London Plan” which had been under development since 1943, and was published in 1945. This plan, commissioned by the London County Council, was the work of Sir Patrick Abercrombie, Professor of Town Planning at University College London. It provided a blueprint for a comprehensive redevelopment programme of the whole Greater London area⁵⁴. Indeed the Minister borrowed a key concept of the Abercrombie Plan in his judgment, talking of the Flats as “part of a well-established wedge of public open space extending into the densely built-up area of London”⁵⁵. The Council declared itself without the means to appeal, saying it would “loyally accept the decision”, and at once set about pressing the Minister to help them find alternative building land and to encourage the City of London Corporation to fulfil its undertaking to develop Wanstead Flats “as a public open space on modern lines”⁵⁶.

The phrase “on modern lines” contained another potential threat to the integrity of the Flats as a relatively undeveloped open space. West Ham’s Town Clerk wrote to Wanstead and Woodford and Leyton Councils proposing the establishment of a committee to meet with the Epping Forest Conservators and draw up plans for the development of the Flats as a leisure amenity. This reflected the early versions of the Abercrombie Plan which proposed “a series of recreation centres, with sports stadiums, gymnasiums, etc., serving the various districts of London. The location of these would be “a matter for joint consideration with the regional authorities”. Sites were “tentatively” suggested throughout the London area, including Richmond Park, Hampstead Heath, and Hackney Marshes or Wanstead Flats. “These centres would answer a long-felt

⁵³ West Ham Housing Committee: 5th May 1947 Appendix. Committee Reports vol. LXI p. 662

⁵⁴ www.londonlandscape.gre.ac.uk: The 1943 ‘Abercrombie Plan’ for the County of London. Chapter 3

⁵⁵ Daily Mirror 24th April 1947

⁵⁶ West Ham Housing Committee: 5th May 1947. Committee Reports vol. LXI p. 661

need for running tracks and physical training”.

Elaborate plans were drawn up for the development of the Flats “on modern lines”, including a swimming pool, a nine-hole golf course and an open-air theatre. These plans came to nothing, but the City Corporation perhaps (as Stanley Reed suggested) stung by the criticism at the public inquiry that they had neglected the Flats, embarked on a major restoration programme, after clearing the wartime debris, including renewal of soil and leveling of large areas. To this rehabilitation programme the Park Residents Society, successor to the Defence Committee, contributed to the plantation of a grove of trees on the Aldersbrook side of the Flats⁵⁷.

Conclusion: homes for heroes or space to breathe?

The controversy over housing on Wanstead Flats illustrates an enduring and highly contemporary theme. The competing demands of housing supply and green space remain a live issue for London and the south-east of England, and Epping Forest continues to be under pressure from development. Clearly in 1945 there were merits in the argument on both sides. There is no doubt that a large proportion of the population of the people of East London were in dire need of rehousing in decent accommodation, and that this was recognised as a priority need both by the Government and wider public. However, as we have seen, it was equally clear that the Flats were for many people in East London and beyond precious and irreplaceable open land, the more important for those for whom it was their only access to green space. Despite West Ham Council’s accusation that the campaign against housing was one of the well-to-do, well housed middle classes against the encroachment of a working class population into their area, the protesters were clearly very diverse, as in the 19th Century movement to prevent the loss of Epping Forest. It was also realised by many that the outcome of the controversy over the Flats would have far wider implications, for if housing needs were seen to take priority over open space in this case, other open land in or near areas of scarce housing would be vulnerable.

⁵⁷ Reed, S.: “The next chapters” P.34

In the event the Flats were saved by the mobilisation of a huge and effective campaign, linking diverse groups and individuals who saw how precious was this “well-established wedge of public open space”. Indeed the successful campaign was a reflection of people’s recognition of the truth in the opening words of the Abercrombie Plan: “Adequate open space for both recreation and rest is a vital factor in maintaining and improving the health of the people”⁵⁸. This remains as true today as it was in 1947.

⁵⁸ Abercrombie, P. & Forshaw, J.H.: “County of London Plan prepared for the London County Council”. London, MacMillan 1943

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