

Wanstead Flats History Walks : No. 2 : Aldersbrook Flats

Introduction

This is the largest single area of Wanstead Flats, with grassland, copses, mown areas for sports, a pond and a lake. It was also the scene, on a number of occasions in the past two centuries, of struggles against attempts to change the nature of the Flats by enclosure and building. There are few signs now of the former uses of Wanstead Flats, but this walk takes in those that are left and recounts some of the tumultuous history of the Flats.

Time - the full walk takes about an hour and a half, but can be shortened.

Terrain – flat, and along grass or earth paths or across mown grass areas.

Facilities – refreshments are available at the cafe in the gatehouse of the City of London Cemetery and at the Golden Fleece pub. There is a shop with refreshments in the filling station in Aldersbrook Road near the start of the walk. Toilet facilities are available for patrons at the cemetery cafe and the pub. There are convenience shops on and near Aldersbrook Road.

Transport - there are bus stops at the start of the walk in Aldersbrook Road E11 (corner of Park Road) on two bus routes - 101 (Wanstead - Gallions Reach) and W19 (Walthamstow - Ilford). You can start and finish the walk at the car park by Alexandra Lake (see point 4 on page 3).

Maps - see the centrefold pages 6 and 7 for this walk, and the back cover for a map of the Flats showing all walks in this series.

- 1 Start at the corner of Aldersbrook Road and Park Road E12. St Gabriel's Parish Church stands on the corner. Walk onto the Flats through the wooden posts opposite the church. You can see the towers of Canary Wharf in the distance to the South. Walk across the mown area. On your left is a belt of trees – after about 75 metres look for the entrance to a path through a gap in the trees on your left.



- 2 You will see a graffiti-covered wall to the left of the path through the trees, with houses behind. Walk along the path, keeping the wall to your left.

Though much of the wall is modern, the far end (walk about 60 metres) is part of a much older construction. This dates from the 18th century and was probably the wall of Aldersbrook Farm, which stood on the Flats until the 1950s. (The farm buildings latterly became the original filling station on Aldersbrook Road). In the 1850s the farmer, Isaac Lake, was a tenant of Lord Wellesley, who ordered him to enclose 34 acres of land on the Flats. This provoked a local outcry, and another farmer drove his cattle onto the enclosed land, breaking down the fences, and was prosecuted. This was an early skirmish in the 19th century battle for Wanstead Flats.

- 3 Where the wall turns left, carry straight on to the (restricted access) car park ahead. To your left is a long white-painted wooden building, now dilapidated, used by the City of London as an equipment store, and a row of Keepers' cottages.

The wooden building and the brick building beyond it are among the last remains of the military installation on the Flats during the Second World War (see Walk 3). They probably formed part of the

living quarters for crews manning anti-aircraft guns, including a rocket battery, on the Flats. Part of the brick building was a gas decontamination unit. This was intended for civilian use. Upon entering one end of a decontamination building, gas victims would proceed through areas for undressing, eye baths, showering and dressing before leaving at the other end.

With the Keepers' cottages to your left continue across the (restricted access) car park and onto the mown area of the Flats. Walk parallel to Aldersbrook Road (on your left) towards the line of trees ahead, and a public car park.

To your left on the other side of the road is the edge of the Aldersbrook estate, built in the early 1900s on land transferred to Lord Cowley in exchange for what is now Wanstead Park. A huge cattle market was held on this area of the Flats every spring until the mid 19th century. Cattle would be driven from East Anglia and other parts of England to supply the growing London market for meat. The cattle were bought and sold in "The Rabbits" pub on Romford Road (at the corner of Rabbits Road – the building is now a pharmacy). In 1852 Lord Wellesley proposed building a permanent cattle market on the Flats. The plan failed, and the market was built in Caledonian Road, Islington, instead. Transportation by railway meant that the great cattle drives came to an end after the 1850s.

- 4 As you near the trees Alexandra Lake will come into view. On reaching the lake and car park have a look at the City of London sign board with information about history, fauna and flora, including a photo of the prefabricated houses built on the Flats towards the end of the Second World War.



Alexandra Lake (also known locally as Sandhills Lake) was dug out by the unemployed in 1907. It was named after Edward VII's wife Queen Alexandra.

The lake was one of a number of public work creation schemes in the area in the late 19th / early 20th century. At the other end of the Flats a model yacht pond (now renamed Jubilee Pond) was created at this time. Employment was erratic and insecure for the unskilled; the docks hired men by the day and periodic slumps threw many into destitution.

The lake was spring fed, but over the years construction work (including the North Circular Road) has cut off many underground streams feeding the water system of Wanstead Park & Wanstead Flats. During long hot summers the lake all but disappears. The two wooded islands in the lake are used by nesting birds.

When you reach the lake walk to the left round its edge. Walk through the trees keeping the lake to your right.

- 5 At the far end of the lake, you come very close to Aldersbrook Road with a parade of shops.

Stay on the Flats; follow the narrow path parallel with and quite close to the road. After about 75 metres look out for the stone gates of the City of London Cemetery on your left. Turn left along the



narrow path towards the cemetery gates. Cross the road and enter the cemetery.

London in the 19th Century was growing fast, and the old City churchyards were full – they were also eyed as prime building land. The City Corporation began to look for land outside the City for a new cemetery, and in 1853 bought Aldersbrook Farm. Over the next few years, under the City Surveyor William Haywood (who also built Holborn Viaduct), the cemetery was built. The entrance range and chapels are magnificent examples of mid-19th Century design. The cemetery opened in 1856. The purchase of the land was significant for another reason as the City of London thereby acquired commoners' rights in Epping Forest, enabling it to graze cattle on the Flats and in other parts of the forest. This was to have major implications as we shall see.

- 6 Walk down the avenue leading directly downhill from the cemetery gates. About 50 metres down on the left is the mausoleum designed for himself by William Haywood. At the other end of the avenue is the cemetery's Anglican chapel (the "North Chapel").



The cemetery repays a proper visit, and an excellent history is available at the gatehouse. Behind the gatehouse is a cafe – the "Gatehouse Pantry" – which serves meals and snacks, and is generally open during cemetery opening hours. There are toilets here for patrons. The cemetery is open from 9am to 5pm every day of the week throughout the year (Christmas Day & Boxing Day 9-3pm). In the summer opening hours are until 7pm.



---> long dashes where there is a path to follow

--- only short dashes where a path cannot be seen

Sp shop selling soft drinks, snacks etc

Cf cafe



return

to

5 Return to the Cemetery gates. From the cemetery cross the road again, and retrace your steps along the narrow path towards the lake.



7 As you reach the lake turn left, and keeping the lake to your right walk towards the area of closely mown grass with playing fields. You will see directly in front of you the “Golden Fleece” pub, a large late Victorian building put up when the houses were built along Capel Road in the 1880s.

As you walk onto the mown area, the long grass, bushes and trees to your left are the site of the prefabricated houses (“prefabs”) built by East Ham Corporation towards the end of the war to re-house families bombed out of the East End. Some of the trees you can see remain from prefab gardens. Beyond you can see the white tower of Capel Manor, an 18th Century estate and farm.

During the Second World War the Councils of East Ham and West Ham – amalgamated as the London Borough of Newham in 1965 – built temporary houses on the Flats for families whose homes had been destroyed by bombing. In 1945 West Ham Council decided to build a permanent housing estate for 7000 residents on the Flats. This aroused huge opposition locally, with sports clubs, wildlife organisations, faith groups and individuals banding together against the plans, and the campaign became a national news story. Led by local teacher Stanley Reed the campaigners forced a public inquiry and in 1947 the government ruled against West Ham Council’s proposal, saving the Flats from development.

The prefabs are remembered fondly by those who lived in them. For the first time they had indoor bathrooms, gas cookers and gardens. East Ham Council's prefabs were flat-roofed while West Ham's were made of semi-circular corrugated iron sheets.

- 8 As you reach Capel Road and the pub turn right and follow the path along the edge of the Flats. The distinctive outlines of the Fred Wigg and John Walsh Towers will now be visible on the horizon.



The area in front of you here was covered by West Ham Council's corrugated iron prefabs in 1945. This was also the area enclosed by fences by the local landlord Earl Cowley in the 1860s.

In the 1860s & 1870s popular opinion in East London was inflamed by the increasing number of enclosures of open land around the city by local landowners. Land which Londoners regarded as theirs for recreation was being built over at an alarming rate.

Wanstead Flats was enclosed by fences from Bushwood to Ridley Road by Earl Cowley's agents, but in July 1871 a protest meeting against the enclosure was called on Wanstead Flats and thousands turned up. Despite the pleas of the organising committee the crowd refused to disperse after the meeting and in the evening began to break down the fences near the corner of Capel Road.



Earl Cowley 1804-84

The police, who had left the Flats earlier, were recalled to find the fences at the western end of the Flats reduced to matchwood. The City of London began a legal action against Lord Cowley and other enclosers, which ended in 1874 with a decisive judgement against enclosure. In 1878 the Epping Forest Act declared the forest should be open to the people forever.

- 9 After about 500 metres you will reach a single storey building painted dark green, with a two-storey house on its left-hand end. These are football changing rooms. At these buildings turn right. With a wide track behind you walk straight ahead to the left-hand edge of a copse of trees.
- 10 When you reach the copse you will be on a wide track. Walk along this track towards another large group of trees. Notice the metal posts in the long grass to your left. These may have been tethering posts for barrage balloons during the Second World War. Look out for skylarks – the Flats provide one of London’s most successful breeding areas.

This path is one of the oldest on the Flats – marked on an 18th century map and leading towards Wanstead Park. During the late 19th / early 20th century there were allotments here – attempts were made to cultivate potatoes on the Flats which ended in failure.

- 11 After 100 metres and just before you reach a white post (a bridleway marker for horse-riders) the path divides. Go to the right of the white post and walk along the edge of the next copse of trees (trees on your left).
- 12 Ahead and slightly to your right you will see the keepers’ cottages (see 3 above) and just above the trees the top of a church spire.

- 13 Walk past the copse of trees to your left as you re-enter the mown area. These trees were part of a plantation for the Queen's coronation in 1953, paid for by a local appeal. A search among the shrubs may reveal the remains of a plaque to commemorate the planting.
- 14 At the end of the trees and bushes to your left keep following the white bridleway posts towards the trees ahead, with houses just visible behind. Go through the gap between large hawthorn bushes. Ahead look out for the red buildings with white walls and red roofs on Aldersbrook Road, once a children's home. As you walk further St Gabriel's Church comes into sight, bear right towards it, and you are back at the start of the walk.

St Gabriel's Church was built as part of the Aldersbrook estate development. The estate consisted of building plots sold by Lord Mornington (heir to the Wanstead Park estate) who received the land from the Corporation of London in exchange for Wanstead Park; it was built between 1900 and 1910.



The church was designed by Charles Sidney Spooner (1862-1938) who was strongly influenced by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. It was completed in 1914. Next to the church are the surviving buildings of a children's home built in 1910. The buildings now remaining are the old wards of the home now converted into flats.

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There are two other Wanstead Flats history walks in this series :

No. 1 The Bushwood Side

No. 3 The Flats at War

and an accompanying leaflet of historical background called
The Space Between

The booklets in this series were written and produced by Ron Allen, Andrew Cole, Mark Gorman and David Boote, from the Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society's Wanstead Flats Working Group.

The booklets are dedicated to two former members of the Working Group, Teresa Hedge (1949-2010) and David Salt (1954-2009), who loved the Flats, and without whose contribution these publications would not have been possible.