



Religion and Revolt on Wanstead Flats



The Wanstead Flats Working Group
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Introduction

Political and religious groups have long seen Wanstead Flats as a natural meeting place, as 'public property' for the use of the people. However, since the passing of the Epping Forest Act in 1878, the City of London as 'conservators' responsible for managing the Flats as part of the wider forest, have tried to control and restrict such uses. This is the story of the struggle between these two differing views of Wanstead Flats.

Up to the mid-20th century the main means of communicating political or religious messages was through mass meetings and processions with bands and banners. Often unable to afford (or banned from) meeting rooms and halls, radical political and religious groups sought out large open spaces for their gatherings. Wanstead Flats, located within easy reach of the London of earlier times, and since the late Victorian era surrounded by housing, was seen as an ideal meeting place.

Radical politics in Victorian times were dominated by one great issue – the vote. Even after reform of parliament in 1832, working people still had no say in running the country, and the vote was a key demand from the time of the Chartists through to the end of the century and beyond. At the same time, many people were seeking alternatives to the mainstream Anglican Church in an era of great religious fervour. Religion and politics were often interwoven, and open-air meetings were a prime means of passing on radical political and religious messages. The unfenced 'public spaces' of Wanstead Flats were an obvious venue for both.

At the same time, Wanstead Flats had for many years prior to 1878 been a temporary home to travelling communities, above all to gipsies, who, despite local disapproval (and sometimes harassment) were a familiar part of the local scene. We shall see how some members of this community were to become involved with the wave of religious enthusiasm of the Victorian era.

The rise of religion

From the start the Epping Forest Committee, which was set up to administer all activities on Forest lands, received a large number of applications to hold religious services on the Flats and elsewhere. This was clearly continuing an existing trend, part of an upsurge in religious interest and expansion of different Christian denominations in the late 19th century.

This upsurge was a widespread phenomenon in late Victorian society. The industrial revolution saw a great fracturing in society, with mass migration of population to urban centres. The former certainties of a stable rural economy, the country parish church and the squire were gone, and people felt uprooted and disoriented. Religious societies provided an important new focus, and gave a fresh sense of belonging to the urban working class. The rise of Methodism in the late 18th century

(itself a splinter movement from the Church of England) was famously said by the historian EP Thompson to have saved Britain from a French-style revolution.¹

Many Methodist societies locally had a very radical focus on, for example, the education of working people through Sunday Schools, which were far more than religious classes, and more akin to what we term adult education. Politics were freely discussed, as well as the position of working people in society at large, and their place in democracy. The radical education of working people and growing affluence promoted social mobility, with ordinary folk rising to positions of pre-eminence.

The evangelical wing of a number of Christian denominations was also on the rise with an emphasis on personal holiness, changed behaviour (most especially temperance, abstaining from alcohol, but also sexual continence and not swearing), the primacy of the Bible as a guide to life decisions, and the desire to preach to the non-Christian and seek their conversion to what was seen as the true faith. This approach would include preaching in the open air to non-believers in places like Wanstead Flats where people might gather away from the eyes of established religion and conventional authority.

It also reflected the fact that many of the nascent groupings might have had no permanent home – and even if they did, this might have held only a few dozen worshippers. Open air services offered not only the chance to expand congregations and reach out to new recruits, but might well have been seen by many as more authentic and closer in spirit to early Christian practices.



A Christian mission outreach to Romanies and gipsies.

¹ E.P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (London, 1963).

Gipsies and Christianity on Wanstead Flats

As early as the 1870s there are references to gipsies on Wanstead Flats who were also travelling evangelists. They held meetings adjacent to the Princess Louise Home, Woodhouse Road.² There is also an intriguing connection with the origins of the Salvation Army, founded by William Booth and his wife Catherine. They were brought up in the Methodist Church but became dissatisfied with this mainstream church. They developed a different model of what was to become the uniformed 'militant' style accompanied by bands. In 1871 Booth preached in Whitechapel and there were gipsies in the audience.

In 1880 there is a reference to Booth 'preaching at large upon Wanstead Flats.'³ By this time local nonconformist religion was increasingly active. In 1874, for example, Isaac Lake, the tenant of Aldersbrook Farm on Wanstead Flats, opened up his barn at Cann Hall farm for religious meetings, which the local gipsy community attended.⁴ By the 1890s there was a well developed group of gipsy evangelists associated with Wanstead Flats, who preached both to gipsies and the local populace.⁵ One of the most famous was Gipsy Rodney Smith, who was born in a gipsy van in Epping Forest at a location now marked by a memorial stone, located a few hundred metres north west of the Waterworks roundabout on the A406, North Circular Road, in Woodford.



The three gipsy evangelist brothers Cornelius, Bartholomew and Woodlock Smith.

² Letter of John Shaw to 'Word and Work' (1876).

³ The Salvation Army name was adopted in 1878.

⁴ The site of Aldersbrook Farm is now the petrol filling station on Aldersbrook Road, on the north side of Wanstead Flats. Cann Hall Farm was located in Cann or Cannon Hall Lane (now Road).

⁵ D. Mayall, *Gypsy Travellers in Nineteenth Century Society* (Cambridge, 1988).

Rodney's father Cornelius was one of three brothers who were all gipsy evangelists. Rodney preached for over 70 years in total and travelled the world doing his religious work. He died in 1947 on the trans-Atlantic liner 'Queen Mary' on his way to America and is buried in New York.

He had a cousin, 'Gipsy' Simon Smith, who was also a famous evangelist and was born in a vardo or gipsy van on the edge of Wanstead Flats in 1875. His father Bartholomew together with Cornelius and another brother Woodlock Smith had started mission work between 1873-5 around East London. Their basic technique was simple. In the open air one of them would strike up a tune on the violin. They would seek to gather a crowd, and once there was a reasonable number they would start speaking and preaching. It was reported there was a great Christian spiritual revival round Forest Gate between 1875 and 1880, no doubt partly because of open air preaching on Wanstead Flats. In his autobiography Rodney refers to 'preaching in the open air to a great crowd in Leytonstone.....'



Simon Smith and his mother Sarah Lee photographed living in one of the Cobbold Road houses in the 1920s.

Public meetings

Wanstead Flats was a popular venue for open air gatherings of all descriptions in the 18th and 19th centuries, if not before. But things changed with the passing of the Epping Forest Act in 1878 which placed the Corporation of London in charge of its administration as conservators. The 1880 bye-laws banned public speaking and

preaching, unless written permission had been obtained from the Conservators, who could specify where and when public meetings should take place.⁶

In practice this meant that nearly all political meetings were prohibited from the start (though, as we shall see, this did not prevent a number of political events taking place). However, there was still room for many religious services and other activities, notably army drills (which had taken place on the Flats since the early 1800s), 'so long as they did not endanger any person or property' or were deemed 'a nuisance, obstruction or annoyance to the public, or hinder or annoy them in the exercise of their rights of recreation in the Forest.'⁷

Licensing

By 1886 the Epping Forest Committee were receiving so many applications for religious and other gatherings they decided to call a halt to any further approvals 'as it was deemed advisable to limit the number of persons using the Forest for that purpose.'

In November 1891 they announced that nine designated spots would be reserved within Epping Forest for public speaking and that the Committee would determine who would be granted these licences. Successful applicants would have to undertake to comply 'with all the regulations laid down by the Conservators for the maintenance of decorum and order.'⁸

Another factor in the Committee's attempt to regularise open air meetings may have been that some disturbances were ending up in court. In October 1891 it had noted the conviction of a local preacher named William Oddy 'and others' for holding religious services on the Forest without permission, and of Richard Jane and Frederick Goulding for delivering political speeches on the Forest without permission. We shall meet all of these characters again.

From this time on approved applicants were granted annual licences to hold services or other events at one of the nine stipulated locations throughout Epping Forest – though this allowed for many more than nine licences or permissions since few if any of the applicants would have operated more than once a week. The Committee minutes show, for instance, that many organisations were given a one-off permission to hold a single event or even a time-limited series of events.

At the other end of the spectrum it seems that once a licence was issued it would be renewed fairly automatically and could even be passed from father to son. In 1916 the Committee agreed to a request by EW Ellis to transfer the licence to hold religious services from his now deceased father to him.

⁶ The byelaw (40) prohibits 'Delivering any public address of any kind, except with the written permission of the Conservators first obtained and then only upon such portions of the Forest and under such restrictions and regulations as may be specified in such written permission.'

⁷ Epping Forest bye laws, 1881

⁸ Epping Forest Committee (EFC), 1891



A typical tented mission like many that appeared on the Flats.⁹

Local churches and the Flats

Most of the successful applicants to hold services on the Forest were local branches of religious denominations such as the Leytonstone Primitive Methodist Church, Cann Hall Road Wesleyan Mission, London Missionary Society, Welsh Missionaries (whose services were held in Welsh, there being a large Welsh population in London at the time), the Bermondsey Ragged School Mission, Woodgrange Baptist Church and Emerson Ethical Brotherhood.¹⁰

At least as many were rejected, though, presumably on the grounds that they did not represent mainstream religious organisations. These included the SW Essex Christian Endeavour Union, the East Ham Corps of the Salvation Army, the Band of Christadelphians, the Unitarian Farm Mission, the Union of London Spiritualists, the Plymouth Brethren, the Christian Israelite Church and the Union of Floating Christian Endeavour. One of these groups, the Christian Israelites, ignored their rejection, and, with the help of a legacy from a convert at a meeting on the Flats, established a permanent church in Forest Gate, still active after the Second World War.¹¹



The former Christian Israelite church, Dames Road awaiting redevelopment

⁹ For more on gypsies on the Flats see Appendix 1.

¹⁰ In 2018 a Welsh nonconformist chapel is still in operation at the Green Man roundabout, Leytonstone, E11.

¹¹ <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/essex/vol6/pp123-141>

Many individuals were also granted licences. In 1899, for instance, Messrs Ellis, Boardman, Brown, Shine and Cooper all had their licences renewed to hold religious services and this pattern of both individual and group applications continued until the First World War at least.

Not all were successful though. As we have seen, one preacher, William Oddy of the Leytonstone Gospel Temperance Mission, frequently ran into trouble. In 1891 he was summonsed for preaching after his licence to do so, first issued 10 years earlier, was revoked on the grounds that the increasing number of preachers in Bushwood had led to numerous complaints.¹²

Oddy claimed he had been preaching in the area since the mid-1870s, and declared that he had 'obeyed the law of God' in preaching the Gospel. The magistrate responded that he must 'render unto Caesar that which was Caesar's' and bound him over.¹³ A few years later In March 1896, the Committee agreed to allow Oddy to hold religious services in the Forest in conjunction with Thomas Elliott. But in June, after receiving a letter from a resident complaining about the service held on the Forest near the Green Man, Leytonstone, the Committee asked the Superintendent to discuss with Oddy finding a more suitable place.

It would seem that Oddy didn't co-operate because in July the Corporation's solicitor was instructed to withdraw his licence, though no reason seems to have given. By 1899 Oddy was once more among those applying for the 'renewal' of their licence to hold religious services – but, unlike all his fellow applicants, he was turned down. Again no reason was given, although his past record must have been taken into account. A couple of months later he applied to hold meetings on the Forest but the Committee decided his letter 'should lie on the table.' That is the last time his name crops up in the Committee minutes.¹⁴



St Saviour's parish church 2018

¹² Oddy was born in 1836 In Epping. He had been a linen draper in Spital Square. He died in 1908.

¹³ *Morning Post*, 31/08/1891.

¹⁴ EFC, 1891

As Forest Gate grew into a busy London suburb, local churches' concern for the spiritual well-being of local residents was reflected in their efforts at local outreach. The Flats, which attracted large crowds on weekends and Bank Holidays, was an ideal location for evangelising. St Saviour's, one of Forest Gate's five Anglican churches, was particularly active. There were regular open-air meetings 'around the parish', and in the summer a weekly evening meeting on the corner of Wanstead Flats (either at Bignold or Brownlow and Woodford Roads). Volunteers were sought to speak. The Pioneer Helpers' League conducted these open-air missions. Hints for open-air workers were given: form a solid circle, do not block footpaths, and 'put plain things in a plain way.' The importance of a 'good circle of workers and Christian friends' to attract passers-by was emphasised.

The church was also a great social centre before 1914. It had clubs for cycling, rambling, football, cricket and swimming, and a gymnasium. The cycling club aimed at 'uniting our church members more closely together', and was open to both men and women. Clubs such as these would have been regular users of the Flats and Epping Forest.

The open spaces of the Flats took on a new role during the First World War, as families and friends began to meet to pray for the safety of soldiers at the Front. On Whit Sunday 1916 one such 'Intercession Service' was held 'for the Empire' followed by another in June, just prior to the battle of the Somme. The Vicar noted that 'over 2,000 people gathered on a wet afternoon to pray, one cannot help feeling it to be the best possible sign both of the people's need and the way in which the minds of men are moving.' It was, he said, 'a great encouragement to us all.'¹⁵

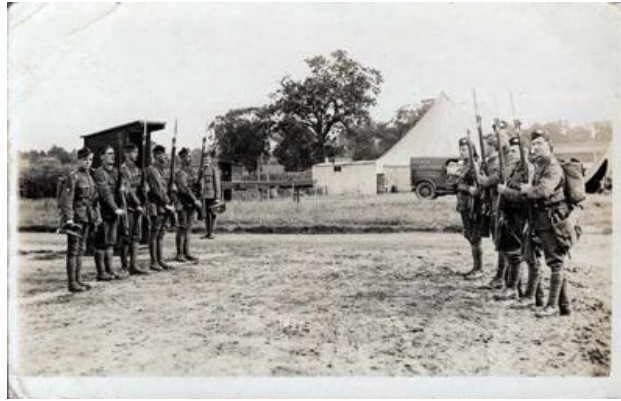
The popularity of these services is demonstrated by another gathering at the Bandstand on 9th July 1916, when the Bishop of Chelmsford was one of the speakers. This meeting was attended by 5,000, while a third Intercession Service in September (with music provided by the 'Boys Home Brass Band') attracted 2,300. These Intercession Services continued into the following year. Other open-air services also attracted large crowds, and the Parish Magazine noted '...the quiet attention of the people.'¹⁶

During the First World War the church was also involved in welfare work for the soldiers stationed on Wanstead Flats. In St Saviour's Jubilee booklet, published in 1934, the Rev C. Spencer called the welfare of soldiers and their families the church's chief war work. A 7am service was held every Monday, regularly attended by 200, to pray for soldiers at the Front.¹⁷

¹⁵ All these quotations are from St Saviour's Parish Magazines between July 1904 and June 1916.

¹⁶ St Saviour's Parish Magazine, July 1916.

¹⁷ Anonymous, 'St Saviour's Parish Church Forest Gate E7 1884-1934 – a short account of its history', p.23.



Soldiers from a Scottish regiment, possibly on Wanstead Flats

The church also provided practical help. ‘... A hut was erected on Wanstead Flats for the R.A.F. men, where recreation was provided as well as Gospel Services. A Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Club was opened in Woodford Road, all involving much money and labour.’ The hut was opened in July 1918, paid for by donations from parishioners.¹⁸

Fund-raising

All this activity required money, and there were complex (seemingly unwritten) rules surrounding fundraising at religious and other meetings. In 1894 the secretary of a local temperance group was writing of the success of their refreshment tent, dispensing tea, cake and mineral water on the Flats (while distributing temperance tracts and obtaining pledges) during the August Bank Holiday.¹⁹ In June 1915 the Leytonstone District Ladies Committee of the St John Ambulance Association were given permission to hold collections on Wanstead Flats on two specified dates – as was the Rev Manthorp to make a collection at one of his evening services in aid of the Metropolitan Hospital Sunday Fund.

But collections on behalf of the ‘artistes’ during concerts at the West Ham bandstand were strictly forbidden. (The Committee did accept that an entrance fee ‘no higher than 8d’ could be charged).²⁰ Routine collections at religious services also seem to have been banned.

Politics on the Flats: Conservators v the people

The Corporation may have looked reasonably favourably on religious and musical events on the Flats but they took a very different stance on political gatherings. Although the bye-laws did not explicitly forbid them, nearly all political applications during this period were rejected – presumably on the basis that they would be likely to breach the bye-laws’ requirement that events should not create ‘a nuisance, obstruction or annoyance to the public.’ Committee members would no doubt also have been aware of the long history of violent protests on the Flats such as in 1871

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Woman’s Signal*, 16/08/1894.

²⁰ EFC, 1920.

when a large crowd broke fences on the south side of the Flats erected by the Lord of the Manor for enclosures prior to development.



The 1871 campaign leaflet

This blanket prohibition of political meetings was a bone of contention from the very early days of the Corporation's management of the Forest. In 1884 a national debate over a further extension of the franchise was raging. Gladstone's Liberal government was under heavy pressure to extend to all working men the right to vote, held up to then only by wealthier propertied men and working class electors in the towns.

In August 1884 the Franchise Bill passed the Commons but was rejected in the House of Lords. There was a national outcry and public demonstrations culminated in a mass meeting in Hyde Park. Many political groups also wanted to hold local meetings, especially in the area surrounding Wanstead Flats, which at that time was part of the South Essex constituency, where working men did not have the vote.

In late August an application for a public meeting on the Flats was rejected by the Conservators. This provoked a mass protest of local radical organisations. The protesters, some 6,000 strong, marched from Stratford headed by the Great Eastern Railway Co. band, and banners, along Romford Road, through Forest Gate and across the Flats, before gathering in Cann Hall Road, on the edge of Corporation land. There they heard speeches attacking the 'corrupt and shameful corporation' for refusing the use of part of Epping Forest, which was the property of the people.

A resolution was passed condemning the House of Lords for their flagrant disdain of the wishes of the people, and supporting Gladstone's government in taking any necessary steps to pass the Bill and deny the Lords their power to block legislation.²¹ Some may possibly have gone further – one local group, the Cromwell Club of Plaistow, had a year earlier unanimously supported a resolution to give the vote to women.²² Voices from the crowd also suggested that what the Lords needed was not protest but dynamite.²³

²¹ *Tenbury Wells Advertiser*, 02/09/1884.

²² *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 26/10/1883.

²³ *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 29/08/1884.



Bushwood postcard early 1900s, the site of many controversial meetings.

This did not mark the end of attempts to hold political meetings on Wanstead Flats, but the Conservators remained adamantly opposed. In the summer of 1891, while William Oddy was preaching near the Green Man, local anarchists were holding meetings in Bushwood. Both the religious and political meetings strongly condemned the bye-law restrictions on their activities. The Conservators were equally resolved to crack down on what the Forest Superintendent called the 'intolerable nuisance' of both religious and political meetings, and at the end of August brought a 24-year-old bill poster, Richard Jane, described by one report as an 'Anykist (sic) Communist', before the magistrates.²⁴ Fined for one offence, Jane was back three weeks later, convening a meeting firstly on the Leyspring estate to the west of Bushwood, before marching into the forbidden area followed by a large number of 'red flag vagabonds...blood red banner and all.'²⁵



Chelmsford Chronicle 25th September 1891. The term anarchist was clearly unfamiliar to local journalists.

Clearly expecting trouble, the Conservators were there in force, with three Forest keepers supported by no fewer than 13 police officers, both mounted and on foot, and including six in plain clothes. Jane was arrested, and taken off to Wanstead

²⁴ *Morning Post*, 22/09/1891.

²⁵ The 1901 census does have one Richard Jane, born in Dalston in 1869, living in Old Ford Road. He is a labourer with Poplar council. However it is not clear that this is the same Richard Jane as the date of birth differs by 2 years. There is no Richard Jane in the 1891 census.

police station, with ‘the greater portion of the mob following, howling and yelling.’²⁶ He and a fellow socialist, Frederick Goulding of Leytonstone, appeared at Stratford magistrates’ court, where Jane defended himself by saying he refused to obey a bye-law which he had had no hand in making. Both he and Goulding were sentenced to prison terms by the unsympathetic magistrates.²⁷

Despite these experiences, political groups continued to try to use the Flats for meetings. In 1893 applications from West Ham Labour Council to hold a Labour demonstration and by the Walthamstow Social Democratic Federation to hold a meeting were both summarily rejected.²⁸

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
1	Frederick Goulding - anarchist	Head	69	Married	15	5	2	Blacksmith	190	Manor Park	London	090	English		
2	Carole Goulding	Son	14	Single				Blacksmith	190	Manor Park	London	090	English		
3	Christina Goulding	Daughter	19	Single				Blacksmith	190	Manor Park	London	090	English		
4	May Goulding	Wife	59	Married	15	7	5	2	domestic	010	Manor Park	London	090	English	

1911 census entry for Frederick Goulding – self described as anarchist – and a blacksmith living in Manor Park. He was born about 1864, active in the Socialist League and was secretary of the Leytonstone Anarchist Communist Group set up in 1891.²⁹

In March 1902 the Superintendent reported that despite having their application rejected, the East Ham and District Socialist and Trades Union Election Council had gone ahead and held open air meetings on the Flats near the City of London cemetery, even after being cautioned by one of the keepers. The Corporation’s solicitor was instructed to proceed against the offenders for infringing the bye-laws.³⁰

Three members of the Election Council were prosecuted, and appeared before Stratford magistrates, where they pleaded guilty ‘with justification.’ They admitted holding meetings about the forthcoming urban district elections, gatherings attended by several hundred people on three occasions. They also spoke against the City of London’s denial of their right to free speech on the Flats. They declared that East Ham Council was in favour of meetings on the Flats, and that they themselves represented ‘the whole of the organised workers in East Ham.’ The magistrates were unimpressed, bound them over in the sum of £5 and ordered them to pay costs.³¹

East Ham Council then took up the matter. In April the Council’s clerk wrote to the Committee asking them to receive a deputation to press their case to hold meetings on the Flats – a request that was turned down. The Corporation reiterated its line that all political meetings were banned. The Council replied that they were only seeking permission for public meetings, not political meetings, on the Flats. But the

²⁶ *Essex County Chronicle*, 25/09/1891.

²⁷ *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 04/10/1891. And see <https://libcom.org/history/anarchists-free-speech-fight-wanstead-flats>. Further details of Goulding are contained in the references at the end.

²⁸ EFC, 1893

²⁹ For more on Goulding see Appendix 2

³⁰ EFC, 1902

³¹ *Ilford Recorder*, 28/03/1902.

Corporation's response was the same - they 'could not see their way' to comply with the request. East Ham expressed their regret at the decision but do not seem to have taken the matter any further.³²

Later that year West Ham Council backed a proposal from Walter Scott, representing the North West Ham Socialist Council, that the Corporation should change their bye-laws. Scott said that they should allow public meetings 'provided such meetings were of sufficient importance to be advertised.' The Epping Forest Committee responded in November, summarily rejecting any change in the bye-laws about public meetings on the Flats.

In May 1908 the Committee rejected applications from Manor Park Liberal Club and Woodford Branch of the Independent Labour Party to hold meetings on the Forest. The town clerk was to be 'informed that all similar applications for political meetings on the Forest will not be allowed.'³³ Nevertheless, meetings continued, mainly involving groups that had not sought permission. For instance, Miss Hopkins, a suffragette speaker, announced a series of evening meetings to be held on 3rd March 1913 in a number of locations across West Ham, culminating (at 10 pm, so presumably in the pitch dark) on the Flats.³⁴

Ethical movements

Interestingly, this ban did not extend to peace or 'ethical' movements. The Emerson Ethical Church, for example, a humanist organisation with a congregation in Forest Gate, obtained a licence to hold services on Wanstead Flats in the 1890s. They even had a 'hymn book' to be sung in Epping Forest. Their church, they said, 'will have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters.'³⁵ In the 1920s the Committee allowed applications from the Leytonstone Branch of the League of Nations Union, the Ethical Movement and Wanstead Friends Peace Committee to hold 'services' on the Forest. In the summer of 1921 the League of Nations Union was given permission to hold an evening meeting on the Flats, as part of a series of activities centring on a 'peace pilgrimage' from the Essex coast to London.³⁶

But the Committee drew the line at an application in 1928 from the Leytonstone Branch of The National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement to meet on Sunday mornings and evenings near the Green Man ponds and take a collection. This was despite the Corporation's close involvement over the years in a number of work schemes for the unemployed.

Even peace and temperance movements faced opposition on occasions, it seems. In June 1927 the League of Nations Union (Leytonstone Branch), the National British Women's Temperance Association, St Catherine's Branch of the Mothers Union and

³² EFC, 1902

³³ EFC, 1908

³⁴ *The Suffragette*, 28/02/1913.

³⁵ Bishopsgate Institute, Brierley Collection 3/1.

³⁶ *The Church League for Women's Suffrage*, 07/ 1921.

the London Congregation Union Women's League all wrote to the Committee asking for 'proper and efficient' protection of women and children to be provided in Leyton and Wanstead's open spaces. The letters were referred to the Corporation's solicitor, who claimed that 'efficient protection is afforded.'³⁷

The battle between left and right

The Flats continued to be an attractive destination for political groups, however, and in April 1928 a small group of Communists, formed from the Labour League of ex-Servicemen, dressed in khaki with red sashes and berets, and complete with a band and red banners, marched from Aldgate to Wanstead Flats. According to one report, their aim was to disrupt a Conservative party political meeting, but their numbers proved to be rather small.³⁸ Describing themselves as the 'British Red Army', the 150-strong procession heard speeches on the Flats, and defied a jeering crowd before marching off again to Whipps Cross.³⁹

In the politically volatile recession years of the 1930s spaces for political meetings were in continual demand, and applications to the Committee continued. In 1936 the Committee rejected an application from the Socialist Party of Great Britain to hold meetings near Whipps Cross from April to September 1936. But the Peace Pledge Union was given permission to hold meetings throughout the 1930s – as was the Leytonstone Branch of the League of Nations.



The 'Red Army' on its way to Wanstead Flats in April 1928.

A more serious threat was provided by Oswald Mosley's British Fascist Party, which was strong in East London in the 1930s, and had a local HQ in Forest Gate.⁴⁰ In June

³⁷ EFC, 1927.

³⁸ *The Sphere*, 05/05/1928.

³⁹ *The Scotsman*, 30/04/1928.

⁴⁰ See <http://www.e7-nowandthen.org/2014/04/fascists-in-1930s-forest-gate.html>

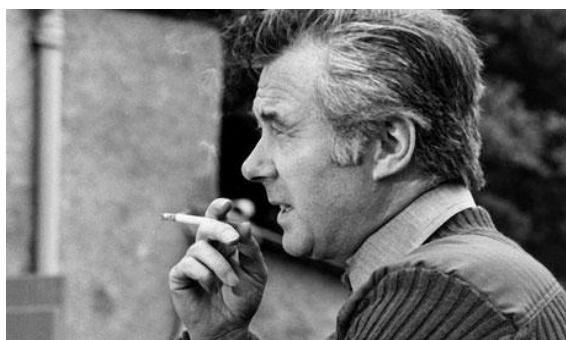
1935 the party applied to 'take a van with amplifying equipment on to Wanstead Flats for the purpose of holding public meetings during June and July.' The application was rejected. Despite this, Fascist meetings seem to have been regularly held on the Flats, the corner of Capel Road being a popular location. The actor and director Bryan Forbes, who was born in Forest Gate in 1926 and knew the Flats well, recalls Mosley speaking there in his autobiography:

'Mosley came to Wanstead Flats some Sunday evenings. He came in a sealed truck with a wire cage set into the roof. Surrounded by a black garland of close-cropped, scrubbed and wax-like body guards, he stood within in his cage and screeched his British upper-class impersonation of Streicher to an audience that mostly consisted of children, derelicts and policemen.

I remember listening without comprehension. It was merely a strange, but not unwelcome diversion from the sameness of everyday life. I can remember seeing bottles breaking on the white cage close to the thin drawn face of Mosley and hearing his lunatic-amplified voice bouncing back from the houses behind him.

*Mounted police waited in the shadows beside the empty bandstand, edging their restless horses forward as the bully boys started on the really important business of the evening. Mosley looked like a Mighty Mouse in his mobile cage and departed the scene as battle commenced to spread his gospel to another corner of a foreign field.'*⁴¹

The Fascists were not unchallenged locally, and there is also evidence that they were not always taken entirely seriously. A local resident, interviewed in 2017, recalled the 'Blackshirts' meeting on the Flats at the corner of Capel Road and Forest Road, and marching through Forest Gate with local children pretending to march behind them, imitating their Nazi salutes.⁴²



Bryan Forbes, Forest Gate born film actor and chronicler of Mosley.

In the summer of 1938 East London's political left decided on a more serious confrontation with the Fascists. One Sunday in July both the Labour and Communist Parties organised meetings in the Stratford area to coincide with a planned march by

⁴¹ <http://www.e7-nowandthen.org/2017/07/forest-gate-born-bryan-forbes-recalls.html>

⁴² Reminiscence of a Forest Gate resident, interviewed March 2017.

Mosley to Wanstead Flats. Thousands turned out to line the streets as the Fascists marched, and large numbers of police reinforcements were needed to clear a way through the increasingly hostile crowd. Mosley made it to the Flats, delivered a speech in the style recalled by Bryan Forbes above, then disappeared and was not seen again on the Flats.⁴³



Mosley at the July 1938 meeting on the Flats, at the corner of Capel Road. © The British Newspaper Archive.

Other uses for the Flats

Other groups, particularly army cadets and other military organisations, tended to get an easier ride. In 1903 the Committee were noting that battalion drills and other 'military evolutions' had been held on Forest land by a wide range of military volunteers over the course of the year.

In fact it is difficult to find a single rejection of an application to conduct military manoeuvres on the Flats or elsewhere on the Forest between 1878 and the Second World War. Of course it continued a long tradition of military drills on the Flats that stretched back to the early 19th century.

The only restrictions were that if discharging guns they should only fire blanks, and should not fire in the vicinity of the cricket pitches or the roads. In addition in March 1913 it was stipulated that no firing be allowed on Good Friday. Religion trumped war games in some situations at least.

A number of other groups were also given permission to hold meetings on Forest land during this period. These included German clubs (before the First World War), the East Ham Torchlight Association and Carnival, the Indigent Blind Visiting Society, Bushwood Men's Adult School, the British Women's Temperance Association, surveying classes from City and Guilds of London Institute, Hackney Technical Institute and West Ham Municipal Technical Institute and Fillebrook Total Abstinence Society.

⁴³ *Western Morning News*, 25/07/1938.

However, an application by the West Ham Branch of the National Secular Society in 1907 was rejected as was North West Ham Citizens' Committee request to hold a meeting on the Flats in support of the Licensing Bill the following year. In a reversal of their earlier policy regarding temperance organisations, in 1916 the Committee also rejected an application by the British Women's Temperance Association, only to learn that the meeting had gone ahead anyway.⁴⁴

As in so many things the Committee always had to balance competing interests when deciding which events should be allowed to take place on the Flats and elsewhere in the Forest. They were particularly mindful of their duty under the bye-laws to ensure activities did not avoid activities that endangered or annoyed the public and to protect their rights of recreation.

Local residents were quick to remind them of this if they fell short. In October 1910 Mr SJ Savage complained about an open air service that had taken place near Bushwood. The preacher, Mr Ellis, was asked to move as far from any houses as possible and, it was reported, he 'had complied with [the] request.'⁴⁵



'Invasion 1946' - campaign cartoon against West Ham Council building on Wanstead Flats

The Second World War and after – the decline of political and religious events

1939-45 marked a watershed in the history of open-air meetings on Wanstead Flats. After 1945, political activity died away. Protest meetings tended to be held over perceived dangers to the Flats, such as the plan by West Ham Council in 1946 to build a housing estate, or the campaign, which took place during the summer of 2011, against the police briefing centre for the 2012 Olympic Games. Other political protest in London moved indoors, or onto the city streets. The days of open-air politics on the Flats were over.

⁴⁴ EFC, 1916.

⁴⁵ EFC, 1910.

WANSTEAD FLATS

is protected by a 132-year-old Act of Parliament that prevents enclosure and preserves it as an open space for the recreation and enjoyment of local people.

Now the Metropolitan Police wants to enclose part of the Flats for an Olympic operations base in 2012

The Metropolitan police has applied to the City of London Corporation to build a temporary Olympics headquarters on Wanstead Flats. This will remain for three months in 2012 on the west side of Centre Road, in the area currently used by travelling fairs and circuses (for no more than a week at a time).

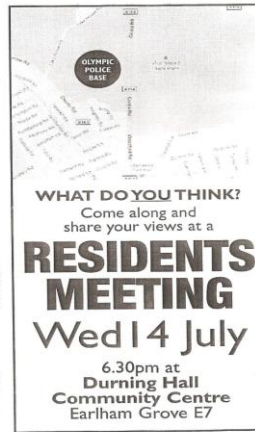
To make this possible, the police are seeking to amend the Epping Forest Act of 1878, which stipulated that the Corporation "shall at all times keep Epping Forest unenclosed and unbuilt on as an open space for the recreation and enjoyment of the people". The police say they have undertaken an assessment of open land in east London and that Wanstead Flats is the "only viable site" for their Olympic operational base.

But why is it the only viable site?

What is wrong with the Olympic stadium site itself? Setting up a deployment base on Wanstead Flats means the main route for police vehicles to Stratford is via the already congested Woodgrange Road and Forest Lane.

Access to the Flats for local people will inevitably be affected by a sensitive high-security operational centre.

Changing a law protecting Wanstead Flats sets a dangerous precedent, making future building and enclosure much easier. It also treats land that belongs to us as nothing more than 'empty space' - which can be easily closed off whenever it is deemed 'convenient'.



2011 protest poster against the proposed police muster station for the Olympics

This was not so true for religious meetings. A range of religious groups, from Jehovah's Witnesses and the Salvation Army to the Leyton to Ongar Christian Endeavour Union and the Gospel Song Team, continued to hold services and gatherings through the war years and into the 1950s. At the end of the Second World War the vicar of St Saviour's Forest Gate arranged a service of thanksgiving on Wanstead Flats at the request of the Capel Road Allotment Holders, who had occupied the Flats since the early stages of the war.⁴⁶ 'A full robed Choir was in attendance and among the goodly number present were the Churchwardens and Mr Wardley, the Chairman of the Open-Spaces Committee, to whom our best thanks are due for the kind permission to hold the service. The Service was quite a happy one and the Vicar spoke for a brief space.'⁴⁷

In 1970 an organisation called Deliverance International even held a baptism service 'involving immersion' at Alexandra Lake. The Conservators had approved the application 'subject to any necessary safeguards indemnifying the Corporation against all risks.' Thankfully, they weren't required to make good on these safeguards!⁴⁸

The Flats continued to be a popular gathering place and in the late 1970s a tented mission attracted large numbers. The mission arrived with a new tent 'like a circus tent.' Permission was only given for it to be put up provided there was someone there all the time. A volunteer from the time recalls that 'we took turns to sleep at

⁴⁶ See *Turf Wars: The struggle to cultivate Wanstead Flats* (Leyton and Leytonstone Historical Society, 2017).

⁴⁷ St Saviour's Parish Magazine, June 1945.

⁴⁸ Epping Forest and Open Spaces Committee, 1970

the back of the tent.’ The only disturbance was a visit from a hedgehog but the meetings were well attended.⁴⁹

In fact these large-scale ‘tent missions’, often lasting days if not weeks, became something of a feature in the 1970s, sometimes put on by big international bodies with few if any connections to the locality. The World Vision for Christ organised two such gatherings (on what one visiting journalist described as ‘a Godforsaken piece of land’) and the Hindu sect Shri Vallabh Nidhi was responsible for another.⁵⁰

But in 1981 the Corporation concluded that these events were ‘outside the spirit of the Epping Forest Act’ and decreed that no further large-scale religious festivals should be allowed on Forest land. It was agreed that in future only simple open air services would be allowed.⁵¹

Not all meetings went to plan however. In 1995 the Bishop of Barking aimed for ‘a massive celebration’ to take place in June, hoping to attract 5,000 for a picnic and worship as ‘a celebration of London Life for all Faiths and none.’ Sadly, summer weather intervened and the event was called off because of rain. Nevertheless, the Flats have remained in use in recent times, with local churches holding open-air family days, keeping alive a tradition that goes back 150 years.

Conclusion

This has been the story of people gathering to protest, to worship and often no doubt just to meet up and pass on the news of the day. It is in the nature of this sort of history – and indeed of the history of Wanstead Flats - that there are few, if any, physical mementos of what took place in those years. Instead we have to rely on newspaper reports, committee minutes, oral histories – and the occasional photo.

What these make clear is that in the last years of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century Wanstead Flats witnessed turbulent times, often reflective of even more momentous events taking place elsewhere in the country, or even abroad.

This was the result of a particular confluence of events that included the expansion of the franchise in the 1880s, the rise of religious fervour and radical groups and the opening up of Wanstead Flats itself to the wider populace following the Epping Forest Act in 1878. This in turn coincided with greater leisure and spending power among London’s working classes and hugely improved transport links, all helping to bring the Flats within the orbit of people living many miles away.

So this was fertile ground for the battles for democracy and religious freedom that dominated many people’s lives during this period. And as we have seen, religious and political objectives often overlapped – even though religious and political groups

⁴⁹ CJ Aston personal reminiscence October 2018.

⁵⁰ <http://wvfc.co.uk/outreaches/child-gospel-mission/>.

⁵¹ Epping Forest and Open Spaces Committee, 1981.

tended to be treated rather differently by the Corporation of London, the body ultimately responsible for overseeing what took place on the Flats.

The growing demand of local people to make their voice heard was a particular challenge for the Epping Forest Committee – and reflects a tension that has always been at the heart of their remit. Political and religious meetings that might end in riot or disorder were seen to be at odds with their duty to avoid anything that might create ‘a nuisance, obstruction or annoyance to the public’ or prevent them enjoying the Forest for their leisure and recreation. So applications to hold such meetings were regularly rejected.

But, as our account makes plain, this seems to have done little to prevent these events taking place. In some cases people defied the banning order. In many others they simply circumvented the Committee altogether and went ahead with their meetings regardless. In this battle between control from above and the popular will from below, there was, appropriately, only one winner.

Appendix 1 Gipsies and Wanstead Flats.

Gipsies had been part of the local scene probably for generations. In the second half of the nineteenth century they made their living locally in a variety of ways. They often went door to door selling their wares which they had made – wooden pegs; brushes; rush matting; baskets; using rushes to mend chair seats; they also sold and repaired tin ware; women were sometimes herbalists or fortune tellers, said to be especially popular amongst female domestic servants in the area. There were also the usual negative stereotypes in the press involving allegations of gipsies begging, cutting down trees for firewood, their role in deception, fraud, and even child kidnapping or stealing.⁵² Such stories are more likely to represent the prejudices of local residents than reality.

They were also great horse dealers, and that may be partly what brought them to Wanstead. It is possible that the fairs on the Flats had their origins in horse fairs and horse trading going back generations. Easter had marked a major gathering of gipsies on Wanstead Flats, the so called Easter fair.

In the 1870s there was a frenzy of building in Forest Gate, Cann Hall and Leytonstone and no doubt their itinerant lifestyle came under pressure and led to further conflict.

In 1871 parliament passed the Bank Holiday Act, creating the first formal public holidays. The Wanstead Flats fair was transformed from a gipsy cultural phenomenon to something more like the modern funfair. In 1891, for example, the Easter fair was a gathering place for travelling showmen and van proprietors with 700 separate attractions. The Flats became a resort for the masses packed into East End tenements and terraced houses, and by the end of the century tens of thousands of people were turning up on Bank Holidays. In 1883 there is an intriguing reference to gipsies owning 'a show of varieties'.⁵³

The 1881 census is also revealing about the changes going on in the gipsy community. By this time the Smith family had a group of 'vans' or caravans in Cobbold Road, at the eastern end of Cann Hall Road. Barty Smith and his extended family occupied four vans and another family called Gaskin occupied another. By 1888 the Smith family built two 'neat little wooden houses' at this location.⁵⁴

Later censuses show gipsies remained a significant presence, for example in East Ham, well into the 20th century. And indeed they were still common in Beckton until the 1980s, when the London Dockland Development Corporation (LDDC) comprehensively redeveloped the area. Green Street in Newham was known as Gipsy Lane until the area was developed in about 1880, presumably because gipsy encampments were common on the Plaistow Marsh that occupied the whole of the south of the current London Borough of Newham till the mid nineteenth century.^{55 56}

⁵² A long report of an alleged case of child kidnap on Wanstead Flats appears in the *Flintshire Observer and Mining Journal* 20/01/1887.

⁵³ *Welsh Methodist Magazine* 1883 sixth series vol. VII p.834.

⁵⁴ Mayall 1988.

⁵⁵ Victoria County History

⁵⁶ *Brecon County Times* 18/08/1868 refers to Hungarian gipsies at Whipps Cross. Gipsies camped in many marginal places on the edge of London, including Banstead in Surrey, Loughton etc.

Appendix 2

For more on Richard Jane and Fred Goulding in 1891/2 see <https://libcom.org/history/anarchists-free-speech-fight-wanstead-flats>

Fred Goulding - Born around 1864 Fred Goulding was active in the Socialist League in East London and belonged to its anarchist wing. According to an obituary in *Freedom** in 1923 Fred played 'a strenuous part' in the early days of the workers' movement and 'opposed Authority in every shape and form.' He was listed as secretary of the Leytonstone Anarchist Communist Group in 1891 in *Commonweal*, the Socialist League paper. His address was given as 2 St George's Villas, Montague Road, Leytonstone. He served a month in prison that year for speaking on Wanstead Flats. Another anarchist using the same address, Richard Jane, 24, described as a fly bill-poster, received two months for the same offence.

He fought against compulsory vaccination of his children, and on another occasion according to information in the last issue of *Commonweal* refused to send his son to Board School because 'he knows what education he wants his children to have.' As a result his son was sent to truant school for three months. He was actively involved in all the free speech fights and the no-rent agitations in the East End in the 1890s. 'In Anarchist outdoor propaganda he always did his share of the work, both as a speaker and in selling literature.' In 1907 he joined the Industrial Union of Direct Actionists, set up by Guy Aldred. He remained an anarchist to the end, two weeks before his death sending a letter and a donation to *Freedom*. He died in Manor Park on October 9th 1923 at the age of 87. He was buried at Manor Park Cemetery on October 15th, with a National Secular Society service read by his son-in-law W. Young.

**Freedom was an anarchist publication*

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Archives consulted

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British Library for newspaper material and references.

Essex Record Office.

London Metropolitan Archives for Epping Forest committee minutes.

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Page 3 <http://www.revival-library.org/index.php/catalogues-menu/1882/gypsy-smith-his-life-and-work>

Page 4 Gipsy Simon Smith from Richard Arnopp's ehive collection

<https://ehive.com/collections/6965/objects/786110/postcard-gipsy-simon-smith-and-mother-leytonstone-london>

Page 6 A gipsy tented mission – from Travellers' Times, permissions

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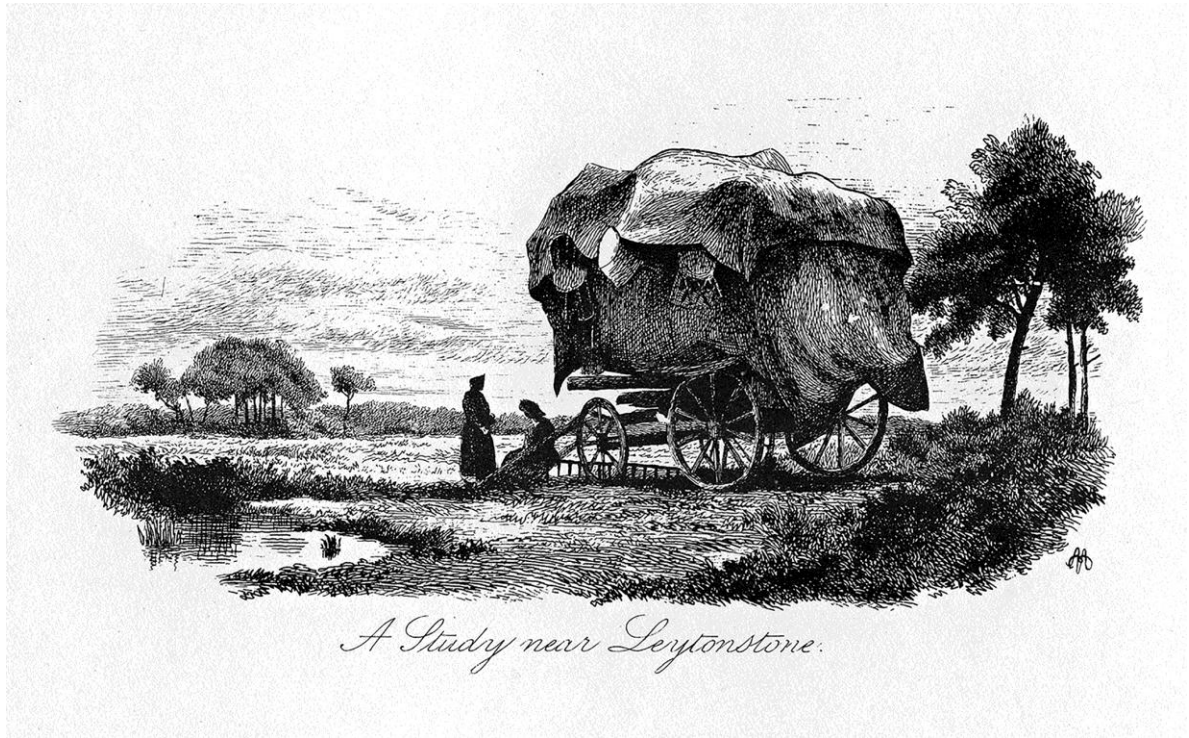
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