

Wanstead Flats History Walks

The Space Between

A brief history of Wanstead Flats

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Wanstead Flats are a unique area in east London. Not a park, the Flats are open grassland forming the southern end of Epping Forest. The story of the Flats is bound up with much wider national history, from the birth of the environmental movement to the defence of Britain in the Second World War. This history, accompanied by three history walks, aims to tell the story of this unique space and its importance to the lives of generations of Londoners.

Wanstead Flats are on gravelly, shallow soil. The natural vegetation is heathland, comparable to Blackheath and Wimbledon Common, and the Flats are poor for growing crops*. Less fertile land formed a boundary between settlements and the landholdings centred on them. The Normans recorded these landholdings in the 'Domesday Book' and controlled them as feudal manors. The Church provided and regulated the Catholic Christian rituals of the Mass, baptism, marriage and burial in churches, each with its territorial area, the parish. Wanstead Flats were between the villages of Leyton, Wanstead, Ilford, Little Ilford, East Ham and West Ham. They were just a small part of the Forest of Waltham, within which conditions were made as favourable as possible for hunting by the King. The Flats were mainly used as grazing for sheep.

Of the manors around the Flats Wanstead came to be the most desirable. Henry VII and Henry VIII hunted there, and fenced off

* A Roman villa was built on what is now Wanstead Park, presumably supervising agriculture on more productive land in the surrounding area.

Aldersbrook Farm, on a site now occupied by the Aldersbrook Road filling station, had some arable fields.

In the mid-19th century much top-soil was removed from the Flats by the Wellesley estate and sold to nurseries in South London as potting-soil.

During both World Wars there were allotments on areas of the Flats, and after 1918 there was a long campaign to retain allotments.

the Park. Wanstead manor was purchased, with the adjoining Stonehall manor in Ilford, by Queen Elizabeth I's favoured courtier, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, in 1578. After he died the ownership passed through a number of prominent courtiers including Elizabeth's favourite Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, and James I's George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. The manor was purchased in 1667† by Josiah Child, the leading member of the East India Company. He planted long avenues of trees which are still a feature of the landscape. His descendants had huge pretensions, building a grand mansion, adopting the surnames of the Tylney and Long families whose land they acquired by marriage, and hosting extravagant entertainments.

The Crown owned a forest lodge on the Flats in line with the avenue leading to Lake House, and near the present Sidney Road*. The 'Royal Lodge' off Leytonstone High Road, a timber-framed building converted into a private school in the 18th century and later destroyed in a fire, faced an entrance to the Wanstead Flats forest land which has become Davies Lane.

During the 18th century Wanstead became a fashionable retreat from London. At one point a claim was made that a spring in Wanstead had the mineral qualities of spa water, and this seems to have been by Blake Hall Road, perhaps in Bush Wood.

In 1812 the heiress to Wanstead House and manor and much more, Catherine Tylney Long, married the nephew of the Duke of Wellington, William Wellesley-Pole. By 1823 William's debts exceeded his wife's riches. Wanstead House was completely dismantled and sold. The land of Wanstead manor could not be claimed by William's creditors, and stayed in the family's ownership.

† Wanstead Park, A Chronicle by Alan Cornish

* Victoria County History of Essex, section on Leyton

From the time of his financial problems William Pole-Tylney-Long-Wellesley tried to maximise the value of his property by blocking footpaths and taking possession of common land. The one part of Wanstead manor where he was resisted was the Flats, though he took 34 acres in a legal victory of 1851. The City of London became the champion of those wishing Epping Forest and adjacent areas to remain public open space. In 1854 the Corporation of London gained 'commoner' status when it bought up Aldersbrook Farm to create the City of London cemetery. This allowed the Corporation to fight enclosures on the Flats and elsewhere in Epping Forest. From the 1850s to the 1870s a campaign to save Epping Forest from enclosure united all classes in east London. The campaign culminated in 1871, when a mass demonstration ended with the destruction of enclosure fences on the Flats. In the same year the City of London Corporation started a legal case against lords of the manor who had enclosed areas of Epping Forest. The case ended in 1874 with a resounding victory for the Corporation. The Corporation then paid out money in 1876 to preserve the Flats within the manor of Cann Hall, and secured the rest of the Flats together with Bush Wood under the provisions of the Epping Forest Act of 1878.

During the 19th century the Flats were used for a variety of activities such as military training. In 1863 2,500 volunteers under the command of Charles Buxton came to the Flats by train from London and fought a mock battle for possession of Woodhouse, a mansion which had been vacated by Mr Money Wigram*. Another of these exercises took place at the same time as the 1871 enclosure demonstration. Money Wigram was also one of those aiming to make a profit from the Flats. In the 1860s he and a Mr Davis purchased the avenue of trees that cross the Flats from Bush Wood

* Journal of Ellen Buxton 1860-1864, edited by Ellen R C Creighton

and they were only narrowly prevented from chopping them down and selling them for timber_μ .

Nonconformists found the Flats a useful location for open air preaching. John Wesley visited Leytonstone and may have spoken on the Flats.

The Leytonstone side of the Flats was described around 1885 as “mostly covered with tall bracken, wild raspberry, blackberry, rose and other bushes”, and the Avenue by Bush Wood as sometimes offering horse and donkey rides, rope and board swings, stalls for cakes, nuts, toys and ginger-beer. At the Swiss Cottage was hot water, or teas with watercress for those who could afford it*.

Donations were given to install a grand drinking fountain at the western end of Capel Road. A bandstand was also erected there and this became a popular promenading area, known locally as the “monkeys parade”. A holiday funfair was allowed to use a site near a model yacht pond (now the Jubilee Pond). Other ponds were dug on the Flats to give work to East Enders during periods of economic slump. A large part of the Flats was drained, levelled and seeded as football pitches, work which was continued and completed after the Second World War.

The two World Wars left their mark on the Flats. On 17th August 1915 a German airship reached Wanstead Flats after dropping bombs on Leyton and Leytonstone[¶]. It dropped several bombs on the Flats which blew out windows of houses in Dames Road.

The Flats played a prominent role in the Second World War. There was an air raid shelter near Davies Lane, perhaps an early stop-gap

_μ Leytonstone and Its History by W G Hammock, re-published by Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society

* recollection of Mr J H Appleford of Wallwood Road, Leytonstone

¶ The Story of Leyton and Leytonstone by W H Weston BA

before more secure ones could be built. To disrupt raids by German bomber aircraft barrage balloons were tethered to vehicles and the ground. One location was in line with Lansdowne Road^μ. Mobile[‡] and fixed anti-aircraft guns were positioned on the Flats. Balloons were also used to provide practice at parachute jumping[¶].

A temporary enclosure on the Flats housed troops preparing for the D-Day invasion in June 1944. The Flats were also used to hold Prisoners of War. Many PoWs were used to clear bomb sites in the area, and were also used as labour in erecting prefabricated houses on the Flats. There are conflicting memories, and the truth about the prisoner of war camps on the Flats remains shrouded in mystery.

Short term prefabricated housing ("prefabs") for those made homeless by air raids was erected on parts of the Flats by local Councils. These homes, with bathrooms and indoor toilets, were much loved by those who lived in them. Other areas were made into vegetable allotments[‡], such as the area in front of St Gabriel's Church[≈] and about 100 yards beyond Ferndale Road[‡].

After the War the adjacent local authorities of East Ham and West Ham saw the Flats as an area on which they could build houses for affordable renting. West Ham in particular pursued a plan to build houses for over 7000 people. However, as in the nineteenth century, opposition in east London grew rapidly. The campaign attracted national attention, and after a public inquiry the plans were

^μ Eddie Terry online recollection Leytonstone Message Board: Knowhere Guide

[‡] interview of Alan Gough by Andrew Cole on 24th February 2008

[¶] more than one recollection on the Leytonstone Message Board: Knowhere Guide

[†] Ordnance Survey / Royal Air Force photograph taken in 1946 and allocated accession reference 5855 S June 1950 by Vestry House Museum

[≈] interview of Peter King by Mark Gorman on 26th January 2008

turned down. More formal sports pitches were created than had existed before the Second World War, and the Flats took on the aspect that they have today – a mixture of formal sports facilities, grassland and ponds. The Flats continue to attract wide and diverse use, and they remain a much-loved feature of East End life.

There are 3 Wanstead Flats history walks :

No. 1 The Bushwood Side

No. 2 Aldersbrook Flats

No. 3 The Flats at War

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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.

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