

# **Roll up! Roll up!**

## **A History of the Wanstead Flats Funfair**

**The Wanstead Flats Working Group  
Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society**

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## Introduction

*'There is no other fair like Whit Monday's on Wanstead Flats. Here is a square mile and more of open land where you may howl at large; here is no danger of losing yourself, as in Epping Forest; the public houses are always with you; shows, shies, swings, merry-go-rounds, fried fish stalls, donkeys, are packed closer than on Hampstead Heath; the ladies' tormentors [hand-held pumps] are larger, and their contents smell worse, than at any other fair. Also, you may be drunk and disorderly without being locked up,—for the stations won't hold everybody,—and when all else has palled, you may set fire to the turf.'*<sup>1</sup>

This vivid description comes from Arthur Morrison's late 19<sup>th</sup> century novel 'Tales of Mean Streets' and not surprisingly the evening ends in a brawl! The work may be fiction but the description rings true and is echoed in an 1896 local newspaper report describing 'the garish glare...the deafening din, the sickening smell, and the crushing crowd' at the August fair.



*Costermongers' donkeys at the fair. During normal working days they would have pulled barrows round the East End, but on bank holidays they gave rides on the Flats c.1900.*

From their earliest days fairs have had a reputation for drunkenness, lewdness and riotous behaviour – as well, of course, for fun and pleasure. The Wanstead Flats fair, which dates back to at least the 1860s, was no exception.

<sup>1</sup> A. Morrison, *Tales of Mean Streets* (Boston, 1895), p.32.

## Origins of the fair

Although the origins of the fairs are unclear, they may lie in gatherings of gypsies on the Flats, which pre-date 1878 when the City of London (the Corporation) took over ownership and management of the Flats and the fairs. Gypsies had a winter camp on the Flats and descendants of a local Romany family still in the area have a written lease from the Mornington estate (Earl Cowley at Wanstead House) granting them permission to park a van or vans on the Flats.<sup>2</sup> Indeed the fair was known as the 'gypsy fair' and may have started with a horse fair or hiring fair for casual labour with booths on the fringes of the Flats.<sup>3</sup> Gypsies were well known for fortune telling and dispensing herbal cures, and it is a short step to stalls for food and drink, and then coconut shies and other basic forms of entertainment.



*Wanstead Flats had long been the haunt of gypsies.*

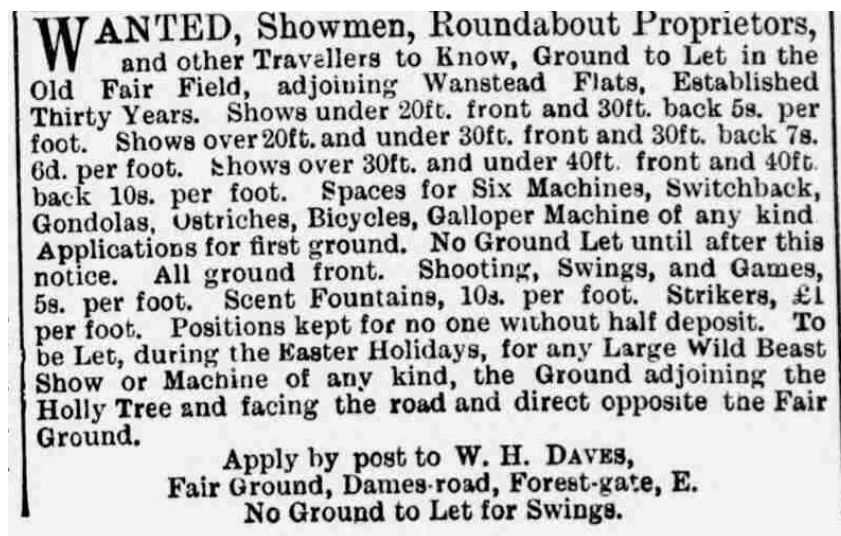
East Londoners' holidays were often arranged around organised entertainments, both close at hand and further afield. At the beginning of the 19th century, it was possible for Londoners to enjoy a range of fairs. For east Londoners Shoreditch, Stepney and Bow fairs were regular attractions. And in Epping Forest there were already two hugely popular public holiday events for east Londoners, the Epping Hunt on Easter Monday, and the Fairlop Fair in June.

The hostility of respectable local residents led to the closure of many of the urban fairs from the 1820s on. As east London suburbs grew, fairs were pushed out further east, to Wanstead Flats and other open spaces on London's fringes.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication Billy Waters, Sidney Rd, E7.

<sup>3</sup> D. Mayall, 'Itinerant Minorities in England and Wales in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries: a Study of gypsies, tinkers, Hawkers and other Travellers', PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield, 1991.

The first organised pleasure fairs were probably held on the Flats in the 1860s, growing out of regular outings by east Londoners taking advantage of cheap excursion tickets. In 1863 a Forest Gate resident described 'hundreds of people...going in the direction of Wanstead Flats', for fair-style entertainments every Sunday, including rides, horse and donkey racing, food stalls and fortune-telling.<sup>4</sup> These weekly entertainments evolved into three annual fairs – at Easter, Whitsun and the August bank holidays – taking place on the site they still occupy at the western end of the Flats. A newspaper advertisement of 1899 offering storage for fairground equipment on the "Fair Field", opposite the Holly Tree pub, noted that the site had been established for 30 years.<sup>5</sup>



**WANTED, Showmen, Roundabout Proprietors,**  
and other Travellers to Know, Ground to Let in the  
Old Fair Field, adjoining Wanstead Flats, Established  
Thirty Years. Shows under 20ft. front and 30ft. back 5s. per  
foot. Shows over 20ft. and under 30ft. front and 30ft. back 7s.  
6d. per foot. Shows over 30ft. and under 40ft. front and 40ft.  
back 10s. per foot. Spaces for Six Machines, Switchback,  
Gondolas, Ostriches, Bicycles, Galloper Machine of any kind.  
Applications for first ground. No Ground Let until after this  
notice. All ground front. Shooting, Swings, and Games,  
5s. per foot. Scent Fountains, 10s. per foot. Strikers, £1  
per foot. Positions kept for no one without half deposit. To  
be Let, during the Easter Holidays, for any Large Wild Beast  
Show or Machine of any kind, the Ground adjoining the  
Holly Tree and facing the road and direct opposite the Fair  
Ground.  
Apply by post to **W. H. DAVES,**  
Fair Ground, Dames-road, Forest-gate, E.  
No Ground to Let for Swings.

*The Era 14<sup>th</sup> January 1899. The fair had been in existence at the western end of the Flats for at least 30 years as this advertisement makes clear.*

## **Petitions and protests**

Although the fairs predated the 1878 Epping Forest Act, that year signalled a change in the way things were managed, with the City of London becoming responsible for issuing licences to all fairground operators and for ensuring a balance between visitors' rights to entertainment and residents' rights to privacy.

In its early years the new Epping Forest administration received a plethora of 'memorials' (that is, petitions) from local residents complaining about the fair's location, its inconvenience and noise and – a common theme that runs through this whole period – the loutish behaviour and loose morals that were on show.

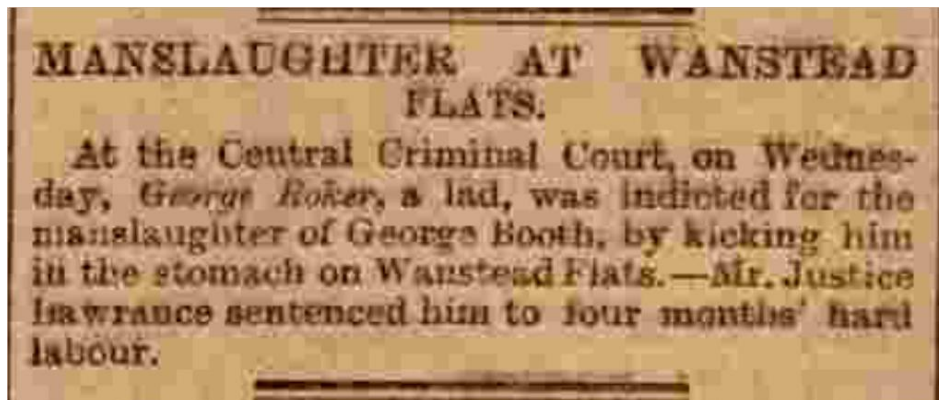
In April 1890 a petition to the Epping Forest committee from the Forest Gate Ratepayers' Association highlighted the 'growing inconvenience and nuisance from a sanitary point of view' and called for the fairground to be moved further away.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Essex Standard*, 08/04/1863.

<sup>5</sup> *The Era*, 14/01/1899.

<sup>6</sup> Epping Forest Committee (EFC) minutes, EFC papers, 1890.

A year later the committee received a letter from JH Harmer at the offices of the *Courier and East London Advertiser* calling for a ban on the fair because of the adverse impact it was having on residents in Forest Gate. The fair was causing 'great injury' to the neighbourhood, it was claimed, because 'it brings into the district thousands of a very doubtful character and that the scenes during the time speak very lightly for the moral character of those brought together.' In addition it had a 'tendency to the undervaluing of property'.<sup>7</sup>



*Essex Newsman* 25<sup>th</sup> July 1896. A 14-year old boy was charged with manslaughter after kicking another boy to death in argument over a coconut. George Roker was also a military deserter in 1899.<sup>8</sup>

It would seem these protests had little effect because in June 1892 the committee received a huge petition signed by many hundreds of local residents from Manor Park and Forest Gate objecting strongly to the continued operation of the fairs and calling for them to be halted or at least severely restricted.<sup>9</sup>

The petitioners called the committee's attention to the 'grossly indecent scenes which this so-called "Fair" brings in its train, making it unsafe and most objectionable for respectable persons (especially females) to walk about on the occasions of the "Fair" being held'.

They also pointed out that the fair's activities were harming both the neighbourhood and the City of London's property – but they were even more opposed to the suggestion that it should be moved further east and closer to a 'highly respectable neighbourhood' which would result 'without doubt' in a decline in property value and the loss of tenants.

In conclusion they urged the Corporation to 'put an effectual stop to the annoyance complained of' by refusing to grant any more licences to fairground operators 'or by otherwise greatly restricting its field of operation'.

<sup>7</sup> EFC minutes, EFC papers, 1891

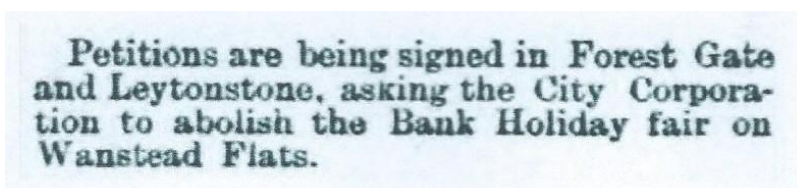
<sup>8</sup> Ancestry.co.uk and see Old Bailey case online <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>

<sup>9</sup> EFC minutes, EFC papers, 1892

The memorial was signed by a large number of residents in nearby roads such as Capel Road, Manor Park Road, Albany, Clarence and Carlyle Roads as well as Forest Drive and First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Avenues.

The committee met a deputation of the petitioners to discuss the matter a month later and as a result it was decided that in future licences would be restricted to just 50 and these would only be granted on application in writing to the Superintendent one month before the event began. In addition the conservators agreed that from the next bank holiday the site would be moved 'to a spot as great a distance from dwelling houses as practicable'.<sup>10</sup> It is not clear if this happened.

Even these developments failed to satisfy local residents, and in 1907 'a movement, originating from Leyton', was demanding that the fair, which they declared 'had degenerated into a general nuisance', should be closed down.<sup>11</sup> Yet the very numbers of fairgoers that local residents were complaining about probably helped to ensure the survival of the fairs in the face of local opposition. And the numbers could be huge – 45,000 were estimated to have attended the Easter fair in 1913.<sup>12</sup>



Petitions are being signed in Forest Gate and Leytonstone, asking the City Corporation to abolish the Bank Holiday fair on Wanstead Flats.

*Chelmsford Chronicle 5 April 1907.*

Hostility from 'respectable' local residents towards travelling showmen was rarely far below the surface. In the 1880s a specific threat emerged when an evangelical preacher, George Smith, took it upon himself to reform the 'offensive lifestyles' of the showmen. In 1888 he promoted his 'Movable Dwellings Bill' in parliament. It was generally regarded as too sweeping and got little support. He tried again in 1889, and in response leading showmen formed the United Kingdom Showmen and Van Dwellers' Protection Association. Wanstead Flats fairs were big occasions, drawing showmen from all over southern England, who met annually during the Easter fair to plan their campaign. After five years struggle, Smith's Bill was finally rejected by Parliament in 1893.<sup>13</sup>

In the following years the Van Dwellers' Association responded successfully to other threats to the livelihoods of its members. These were usually from local councils trying to introduce their own regulations on caravans, but in 1902 the Association's vice-president, W.H. Davies (proprietor of the 'Fair Field' in Dames Road), was forced to issue a statement denying a rumour that the showmen on Wanstead Flats were spreading

<sup>10</sup> EFC minutes, 1892.

<sup>11</sup> *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 29/03/1907.

<sup>12</sup> *Essex Newsman*, 29/03/1913.

<sup>13</sup> Adapted from the excellent *National Fairground and Circus Archive's* website

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca/researchandarticles/historyshowmensguild>. Date accessed 11 12 2019.

smallpox locally. He had inspected all the vans on the Flats, he stated, and found them in good sanitary condition.<sup>14</sup>



*The Van Dwellers' Association became the Showmen's Guild.*

## **The fun of the fair**

Fairs probably reached their pinnacle of popularity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the fairs at Wanstead Flats were no different, continuing to do good business in the inter-war years.

The entertainment that was on offer to the fairground visitors has obviously changed over the years. Before the First World War, for instance, you could see 'freak shows, including Siamese twins and bearded ladies, go for donkey rides, or even visit the 'cinematograph theatre'. Peep shows for 'eager and excited boys' included rows of tiny glass windows featuring 'No.1, The gallows; No.2, The Guillotine; No.3 The Torture Chamber &c., &c.' There were also the 'shameless booths' of the 'Paris by Night' and 'Gay Life in London' tents, with graphic pictures outside and 'Artists' Models' inside. 'Inside you may show whatever you please so long as you can get it out of the way before the police come.'<sup>15</sup>

Dance shows were also popular, mimicking the style of music halls. Dancing to a barrel organ or mouth organ, dancers 'were fond of song-accompaniment which mentioned such delicate matters as 'lastic garters...and the dance gave ocular demonstration of the fact that the dancers possessed them...'<sup>16</sup> Live theatre (or 'mumming') booths, sometimes called 'fit-ups', also appeared at the fairs; one of these evolved into the Theatre Royal Stratford when the actor-manager Charles Dillon, who appeared regularly in shows on the Flats, decided to establish a permanent local theatre in 1886.

<sup>14</sup> *London Daily News*, 03/04/1902.

<sup>15</sup> *Forest Gate Weekly News* 07/08/1896.

<sup>16</sup> *Bucks Examiner* 05/10/1923.





*One of many cowboy shows on Wanstead Flats early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

Although circuses in their modern form were not seen on the Flats until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, travelling menageries were commonly included on fairgrounds at this time, despite opposition even in the early days on the grounds of cruelty. 'Wild beast shows' could also be dangerous (see box at the end of this publication 'Circuses on the Flats'). However, menageries were often to be found on the Flats.

The development of steam power earlier in the 20th century meant that the fairs were able to feature steam-driven roundabouts, with automated 'brass bands' also powered by steam.<sup>17</sup> Steam power was also useful to drive the generators that, by the early 1900s, were providing lighting for cinematograph booths. In the early 1900s these forerunners of permanent cinemas became ever more elaborate, with 'magnificent decoration', lit by thousands of lights. The booths had stages for performances to entice patrons into the cinema behind. The heyday of the cinema booths came to an end by 1914, as purpose-built permanent cinemas replaced them.



*The first cinemas were at fairs: one of the biggest was Taylor's bioscope, pictured here on Wanstead Flats at Easter 1903. Note the forest keeper in bowler and breeches next to a police constable.*

<sup>17</sup> *East London Observer*, 31/03/1883.

One regular visitor to the Wanstead Flats fair in the early 1900s was local boy Alfred Hitchcock, and those experiences may have been the inspiration for the famous fight scene between Guy and Bruno on the carousel in *Strangers on a Train*. The film and the fairground are set in the States but some have suggested the scene drew on Hitch's early childhood memories. We will of course never know for sure!



*Alfred Hitchcock – a frequent visitor to Wanstead Flats fair.*

Improved technology led to a range of innovations over the following years, many of which are still common features of Wanstead Flats fairs, such as dodgems and the big dipper. But many other activities have been standard features throughout such as the merry-go-round, skittles, hooplas, coconut shies and rifle and darts stalls – as well, of course, as all the food and drink stalls, selling whelks, sausages and bread, and fair rock, that are such an integral part of the fairground scene. Enterprising local householders provided hot water for picnic parties. Nearby pubs always did a roaring trade on fair days, with the Holly Tree (still in Dames Road today) a special favourite, where on August bank holiday 1896 ‘...the beer engines were going with a steady and sustained swing which told of cellars excellently well stocked’.<sup>18</sup>

### **The fairs after the First World War**

After 1918 the fairs seem to have become rather less rowdy. Dorothy Neal, who was born in Forest Gate in 1912, remembered the fairs in the 1920s.

‘On Bank Holidays the new Centre Road, which was then Woodford Road, was a blaze of lights with the arrival of the Fair. The number 5 trams would reach their destination just past Forest Road, packed with people from the Dockland area...out

<sup>18</sup> *The Forest Gate Weekly News*, 0/ 08/1896.

to enjoy themselves. Some of the roundabouts were magnificent. I remember the Dragons and the Gondolas, with their beautiful ornate carriages, and the red plush upholstery, all powered by steam engines. A small children's roundabout stood on the forecourt of the Holly Tree pub, along with the jellied eel stall and the ice cream van.<sup>19</sup>

With only a few interruptions, the fairs continued through the Second World War, though in a more limited way. In early 1940, for instance, the military authorities and police indicated they had no objections to fairs being held - as long as they closed at 7pm. But as the committee noted, fairs made most of their money between 6.30 and 11pm so these restrictions would strike at the heart of the business. As a result the Superintendent was authorised to reduce charges 'to such an extent as he may deem expedient'.<sup>20</sup>

Although the August 1940 fair was cancelled 'because of the present national situation' fairs continued thereafter until April 1944 when much of the Flats, including the fairground, was requisitioned for the war effort. An Italian prisoner of war camp was built on the site.<sup>21</sup> The conservators made a last-minute effort to hold the Easter fair elsewhere but reckoned they had lost at least £300 from the mass withdrawal of licensees from this one event.<sup>22</sup>

The problems continued into early 1945 when the Corporation's £500 compensation claim to the war department for loss of rent in 1944 and 1945 was accepted in full. That money was put to good use in the post-war years in expanding and levelling out a 45-acre area between Blake Hall Road and Lakehouse Road.<sup>23</sup>

One additional fair was held in 1945 – a Victory Fair on two days in October to celebrate the peace. The two-day event raised nearly £600 in fees but when the Superintendent suggested the committee might like to make a donation from these unexpected proceeds to a forces charity, it decided after 'careful consideration' to decline!<sup>24</sup>

After 1945 people starved of entertainment in the war years flocked to the fairs. Charlie Mayne, whose family have been involved with the fairs at Wanstead Flats since the 1960s (continuing a family tradition of working on fairs in east London going back to the 1840s), recalls those fairs of the 1960s stretching from the boating pond nearly all the way across to Centre Road. 'There were 40 adults' rides, 20 on each side, and then there were supporting kiddie rides and hooplas and a range of sideshows such as coconut shies, skittles, darts stalls and a ghost train,' he says.

<sup>19</sup> D. Neal, *Newhammer's Diary* (Newham North West Conservative Association) 10:2, pp 9 and 19, Spring 1981. With thanks to Richard Arnopp for this reference.

<sup>20</sup> EFC minutes, 1940

<sup>21</sup> A. Cole et al, *Behind the Wire - Prisoner of War camps on Wanstead Flats* (LLHS Booklet 2013).

<sup>22</sup> EFC minutes, 1944.

<sup>23</sup> EFC minutes, 1954.

<sup>24</sup> EFC minutes, 1945.



*The extent of the fair in 1960s – Model yacht pond to left on Dames Road.*

He also has memories of an earlier time, and other fairs:

‘In the 50s we had parading shows and dancing girls. Then you had a boxing booth. At Epsom Freddie Mills was on the boxing booths, that’s where he started. You got £2 if you went two rounds with one of those fighters. Also there was a man who used to come and do donkey rides and ponies.’<sup>25</sup>

### **Ups and downs**

By the 1980s fairs across the country were struggling to maintain their audience in the face of ever-growing competition from other forms of entertainment, whether that was TV, cinema or a wealth of alternative live events. And although the fair still attracts a healthy turn-out in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is a far cry from the days when it was one of the major events in the local calendar.

For Charlie Mayne ‘the times changed and there was more entertainment for the general public. If you go far back enough we didn’t have televisions or mobile phones. There are now so many points for entertainment. Things were different then.’<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, while much has changed since he first started coming to the Flats, many familiar features remain the same. The Easter fair has always been the biggest occasion of the year. ‘You get about 20 rides for Easter, more like five or six at [the spring bank holiday] and maybe five or six at the August one. On this funfair there are about five families that are regulars on all bank holidays; have probably been coming there for a long time. Most are from a long line of showmen.’

The type of people coming to the fair has changed over the years. ‘In the 50s and 60s we got all age groups. We used to have the families come in the morning then at night time we used to get the young people, courting couples. We’d be open up to midnight. Later residents objected to the noise, especially of generators being run all night. So now we

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Charles Mayne, May 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Charles Mayne, May 2019.

shut down by 10 and all generators are completely off by 12. Also the general public don't like to be out in the dark so we more or less close with the darkness now.

'Things have moved on. We still get family people but we don't get so many teenagers as 10 years ago. [But] basically the rides are the same. The dodgems are the most popular ride – always have been. This Easter [2019] we had five sets of dodgem cars – at Whitsun it's just two. They're the most popular. And we have about eight adult rides in total. [But] the bottom line is that if the rides are not popular they won't travel.'<sup>27</sup>



2019 advertising for Mayne's fair on Wanstead Flats.

## Licensing

In 1963 the committee began a major reorganisation of its licensing system. Up until then the Superintendent had complete responsibility for managing the fair, dealing with all applications for individual licences, determining which showmen should or should not be approved and then checking on the days of the fair that everything was in order.

This involved a huge amount of work and in November 1963 the committee agreed to the Superintendent's proposal to appoint a supervisor or overseer who would now be responsible for the issuing of all licences, though still answerable to the Superintendent. The overseers would themselves be aided by City of London office staff who would work on site when needed.<sup>28</sup>

The scheme took some time to bring into effect but by 1966 overseers for the different fairs on the Forest had been appointed, fees had been agreed and uniforms issued. A complex paper trail of dockets and colour-coded documentation was also instituted to track the licensing process. Huts were set up on site for the overseer and office staff.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Charles Mayne, May 2019

<sup>28</sup> EFC minutes, 1963

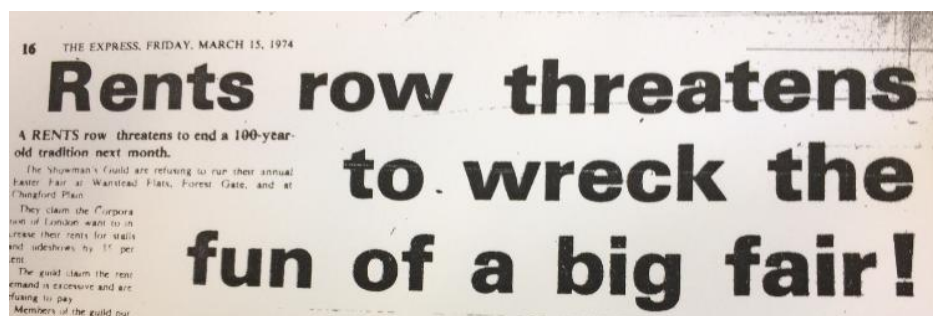
<sup>29</sup> EFC minutes, 1966, 1968

The new system appears to have worked well though clearly it relied heavily on the competence and probity of the overseer and there are indications that they were sometimes leaned on by licensees seeking preferential treatment. In 1970, for instance, the committee agreed to increase the overseer's fees 'in view of the possible pressure which might be placed upon staff and from which they should be protected as far as possible'.<sup>30</sup>

### Showmen's strike 1974

Inevitably over the course of the years bad weather has impacted on the fairs from time to time and on a number of occasions they were delayed or granted extensions because of 'unfavourable weather'.

But the only occasion in peacetime when the Wanstead Flats fair failed to operate for a full calendar year was in 1974 following a strike by the showmen in protest at a rent increase. This was in the wake of a prices and incomes freeze that meant the Corporation had been unable to increase rents for three years – at a time when annual inflation was 16%.



*Stratford Express 15<sup>th</sup> March 1974.*

The original plan had been to hike up rents by 42.5% but in the spirit of accommodation this was reduced to 35%. A spokesman for the Corporation pointed out that even then they would only be breaking even. 'We can't believe that the guild haven't increased their charges to the public in the past four years so we don't think it unfair to ask them for more money,' he told the *Stratford Express*.<sup>31</sup>

But the Showmen's Guild, which represented all the fairground operatives, rejected this proposal. They suggested instead a rise of 20% which would stay in force for the next three years. 'The present time is one of stress and uncertainty,' noted the showmen's representative, 'and I ask that you appreciate this when considering the position.'<sup>32</sup>

The Corporation held to its line, however, pointing out that this was a period of stress and uncertainty for them as well, and the showmen went out on strike. No fairs took place at Wanstead Flats for the whole of that year.

<sup>30</sup> EFC minutes, 1970.

<sup>31</sup> Stratford Express, 15/03/1974.

<sup>32</sup> EFC minutes, 1974; Superintendent's report, Feb 1974.

According to the Superintendent's report on the situation in May, a major reason for the impasse was the guild's fear that the 35% rent increase would be seen as a precedent and could 'weaken their position in respect of other fairgrounds'.

Despite this, he claimed, a 'considerable number' of showmen did not object to the increased charges and expressed their understanding of the circumstances that had dictated the increase. He urged the committee to stand firm not only because of the increased costs of managing the fairs but also because this work was 'disruptive to your general programme and is becoming increasingly unpopular with your staff'.<sup>33</sup>

Eventually, in November 1974, the two sides reached accommodation, agreeing a 25% increase on the 1970 charges on the condition that the showmen themselves took on responsibility for clearing the site of all litter in the aftermath of each fair. The Corporation would provide the bins for this exercise but since this would save them having to employ a 'large gang' of staff for 10 days after each fair, this probably seemed quite an attractive bargain.<sup>34</sup>

### Riot closes fair

One of the few other occasions when the fair was cancelled came in the spring of 1981. In the wake of the riots in Brixton in April of that year, a large group of teenagers at the Easter fair began fighting and damaging stalls. This then spread to Forest Gate where a number of shop windows were broken; 15 arrests were made.<sup>35</sup> This was a time of widespread racial tension in many cities around the UK and the Superintendent, in his report to the committee, had no doubt this was what had sparked the outbreak.



*Newham Recorder 23rd April 1981.*

<sup>33</sup> Superintendent's report, May 1974.

<sup>34</sup> EFC committee, 1974; Superintendent's report, November 1974 (confidential).

<sup>35</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 21/04/1981.

Because of this many showmen had already decided not to attend the spring bank holiday fair, he reported. Meanwhile the police had put in a 'strong request' to cancel the fair. As a result it was agreed not to hold the spring fair that year.<sup>36</sup>

Following on from this a meeting was held between the Superintendent, the police and other interested parties to enable fairs 'to continue to be held successfully on Wanstead Flats in a peaceful atmosphere'.

In future, it was agreed, the fair would be closed for the day at the first sign of disturbance - usually when youths began to congregate after 8pm. In addition all fairground music 'which could be considered provocative and an enticement to riot' should be turned off after 8pm while at the end of the day the lights should be turned off gradually to avoid the show ground being 'suddenly pitched into darkness'.

It seems that none of these measures ever had to be employed, however. The August bank holiday fair took place without any incidents and in April 1982 the Superintendent was able to report there had been no trouble at that year's Easter fair either. Although roughly 1,500 'coloured youths' (sic) were at the fair, he added, 'a strong police presence had deterred trouble-makers'.<sup>37</sup>

## **Making it pay**

Looking at the gross revenue the Corporation received from the two Epping Forest fairs – that is, Wanstead Flats and Chingford – between 1963 and 1973, it would seem that the peak was reached in the early 1970s. By 1972 the overall takings were £8,469 compared to £5,131 in 1963 but it seems they began to decline soon afterwards.<sup>38</sup> By December 1982 the Superintendent was noting that the fee negotiated with the Showmen's Guild for 1983-4 'reflected the unhappy performance of the fairs in recent years'.<sup>39</sup>

One thing remains constant throughout this period though – the takings from the Easter fair were always substantially greater than the Whitsun and August fairs, often amounting to more than the other two put together.

One snapshot of the individual costs that showmen were expected to pay is provided by the 1966 scale of charges which shows that the most expensive pitch for the Easter fair would have been £50 for a large dodgem or speedway rink ( 80 foot or over) followed by a smaller dodgem or speedway rinks at £42. The autodrome, moon rocket, Noah's Ark and Octopus all cost £21, the waltzer £35 and the wall of death £28. Sideshows such as coconut shies, darts and fortune telling were 3 shillings<sup>40</sup> and 6 pence per foot, swings

<sup>36</sup> EFC minutes, 1981.

<sup>37</sup> EFC minutes, 1982.

<sup>38</sup> Superintendent's report, Feb 1974.

<sup>39</sup> EFC minutes, 1982.

<sup>40</sup> A shilling was equivalent to the modern 5 pence.



were £8, guess your weight £2 and 10 shillings and food stalls 6 shillings. Stalls cost anything from £24 to £7 depending on their size.<sup>41</sup>

Although the committee were often looking for ways to maximise the revenue they could make from the fairs and other activities on the Flats, they rejected what must have seemed a very tempting proposition in 1974 – an application to hold a Sunday market on the fairground over all the bank holidays. The company proposed that the Corporation would receive a share of the gross profits – amounting to a staggering £40,000 a year (nearly five times the total takings from all the Forest fairs that year). It seems quite likely this was a gross over-estimate but it would certainly have been a money-spinner. The reasons given for the rejection were that it might conflict with the stipulations of the Epping Forest Act and could also lead to the local authority increasing its business rates for the whole site.<sup>42</sup>



*'Fair play here' - A stallholder and her friend about 1980.*

Nevertheless the committee did finally agree in 1977 to allow the fair to open on a Sunday – something it had long resisted. The fair would only be allowed to remain open between 2 and 8pm and music would not be permitted. But even so the Superintendent calculated that Sunday opening would increase overall revenues by 10% - something that must have been a factor in the committee's calculations.<sup>43</sup>

There was still resistance. The Lord's Day Observance Society registered their objections later that year as did the residents of the adjoining Sidney Road - but the committee stood firm and Sundays soon became an accepted part of the fairground calendar.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> EFC minutes, 1966.

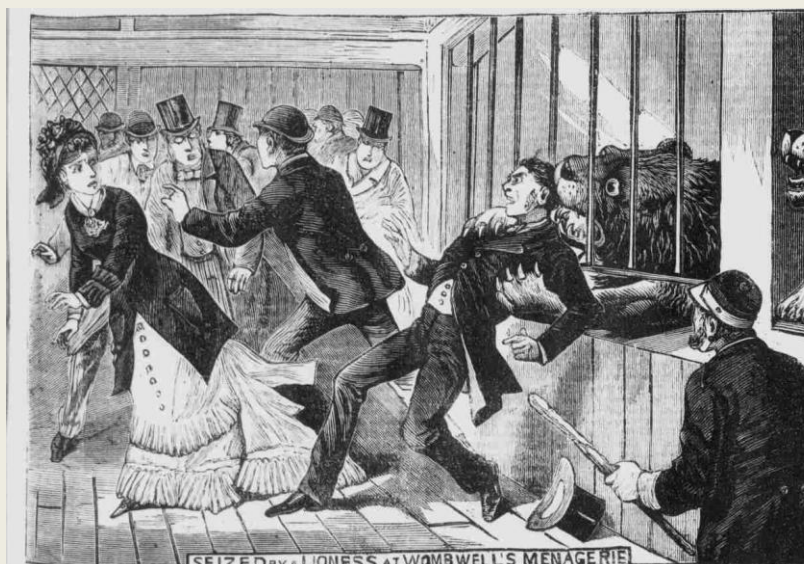
<sup>42</sup> EFC minutes, 1974.

<sup>43</sup> EFC minutes, 1977.

<sup>44</sup> EFC minutes, 1977.

## Circuses on the Flats

While 'menageries' with wild animals were a regular feature of the early fairs, the circus in the modern sense didn't come to the Flats until the 1970s, though the first application had been back in July 1888. We do not know why this was rejected, but in 1892 an incident occurred which may help explain the reluctance of the Epping Forest committee to license circuses involving animals. In March the mauling to death of a lion tamer at Wombwell and Bailey's travelling menagerie made national news, and the committee decided not to allow them to bring their show to the Flats at Easter. However the late decision caused confusion, as Wombwell and Bailey already had a space allotted. On arrival the showmen discovered that they did not have permission to bring wild animals onto the Flats. They protested, but the Conservators prosecuted them for being on the Flats without a licence. The magistrates were sympathetic, but were forced by the committee's refusal to compromise to impose a £5 fine.<sup>45</sup>



*Illustrated Police News 29/06/1878. There were several incidents of mauling by animals at Wombwell and Bailey's menagerie shows in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

Applications were made over the next 80 years, but rejected by the Superintendent before reaching the committee. In July 1960 he put forward an application for 'special consideration', from Billy Smart's Circus for use of the fairground site. The Superintendent reported that previously he had rejected circus applications because they had come 'from the lesser known kind'. But Billy Smart's was worth consideration. However, the committee's response was no more favourable: 'this committee are of the opinion that it would be contrary to the interests of the Forest and to the policy...of refraining from using it for commercial benefits if the request for circus licences were permitted and that the Superintendent accordingly be instructed to refuse the request and others of a similar nature.'<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *The Era*, 07/05/1892.

<sup>46</sup> EFC minutes, 1960.



*Camels grazing on Wanstead Flats in the 1980s.*

Something clearly changed for in 1971 an application from Robert Fossett's Circus was agreed 'on the usual conditions re rent and any necessary reinstatement of Forest 'land...for this occasion only'.<sup>47</sup> But two years later an application from Circus Hoffman was again agreed and in June 1973, came a change of policy. The Superintendent reported that 'despite a few protests' the Circus Hoffman event had passed off without problems, and asked the committee whether they were prepared to issue licences in future. The committee agreed to license Circus Hoffman for £1,200.<sup>48</sup> It appears to have become an annual event, featuring high wire artists, 'clowns a-plenty', and 40 animals, 'a brave show in the light of the recession which is restricting so much in entertainment'.<sup>49</sup>

Even in the 1890s opposition had grown against the 'revolting exhibitions' by menageries, one newspaper listing the numerous attacks by animals on keepers.<sup>50</sup> A century later, individuals and organisations, including the London Borough of Newham and the local RSPCA branch, opposed the holding of circuses on the basis of animal cruelty. But the committee held firm – possibly mindful of the significant income the circus provided when fairground revenues were tailing off. In 1981, for instance, the net annual income was £3-4,000.<sup>51</sup>

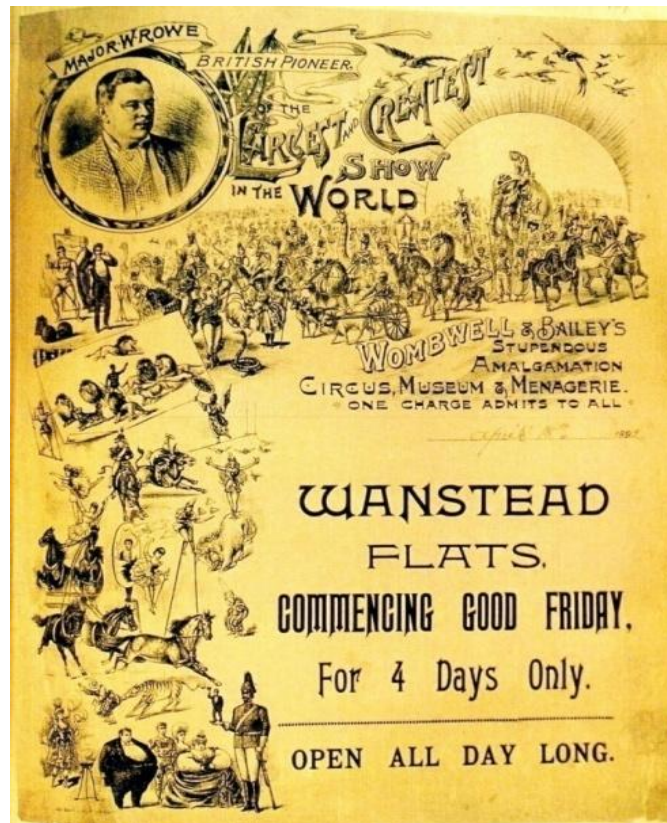
<sup>47</sup> EFC minutes, 1971.

<sup>48</sup> EFC minutes, 1973.

<sup>49</sup> *The Stage*, 24/10/1982.

<sup>50</sup> *Torquay Times, and South Devon Advertiser*, 18/03/1892.

<sup>51</sup> EFC minutes, 1981.



## Conclusion

You could be forgiven for seeing Wanstead Flats fair as something of an anachronism these days. A product of the boom in entertainment and leisure in the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has survived where many other entertainments of the time, such as music hall and vaudeville, have disappeared almost without trace.

It has done this despite strong opposition at various times and in the face of growing competition from an increasingly sophisticated leisure industry. The fair has, of course, adapted and modernised in response to this changing world. But it may be that part of the secret of its success is that in some important respects it hasn't. One of the more remarkable aspects of the fair in 2020 is just how many of the rides and stalls that you see today would be familiar to the Victorian visitor to the fair more than 150 years ago.

Having said that, the future of the fair is rather more uncertain than its past. Fairs are still held three times a year on the Flats but they are much reduced in size and scope compared to their heyday. And as Charlie Mayne has noted, they can only continue if they pull in enough punters to make it financially worthwhile. Meanwhile a new generation is emerging who appear to consume most of their entertainment via a laptop or smart phone.

So will the fair still be running in another 20 years' time? One has to hope so because Wanstead Flats fair is a colourful and vibrant (if noisy) part of our local area. Just as importantly, it is an integral, and often overlooked, element of the history of the Flats. We would all be the poorer without it!

## Picture credits

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### *Front cover*

Taylor's bioscope at the Easter fair c.1903 (no copyright found)

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Page 1 Costermongers (Newham archive)

Page 2 Wanstead Flats had long been the haunt of gypsies (London Borough of Waltham Forest)

Page 7 One of many cowboy shows on Wanstead Flats early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Vimeo)

Page 8 Alfred Hitchcock – a frequent visitor to Wanstead Flats fair. (Wiki commons)

Page 10 The extent of the fair in 1960s (Newham archive)

Page 11 2019 advertising for Mayne's fair on Wanstead Flats. (Photo Peter Williams)

Page 12 Stratford Express – photo from microfilm held Newham archive (Photo Peter Williams)

Page 13 Newham Recorder - photo from microfilm held Newham archive (Photo Peter Williams)

Page 15 Fair play here' - A stallholder and her friend about 1980 (Photo Tony Morrison)

Page 17 Camels grazing (Photo Paula Duggan)

### *Back cover*

The fair in early 1980s (Photo Tony Morrison)

Easter Fair 1940 (Photo via Tony Morrison)

