

THE CAMPAIGN TO SAVE WANSTEAD FLATS FROM DEVELOPMENT

Read by Wendy Mead

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The late 19th century battles to prevent the enclosure of our much prized open spaces at Epping Forest and Burnham Beeches are well documented and fairly well known. However, a more recent campaign was mounted in the mid 1940s when the pressure to find homes for bombed-out victims of the Second World War became intense and Wanstead Flats was, once again, targeted for development.

The Flats are the most southerly area of Epping Forest and provide much needed recreation for the densely populated parts of London to the west and south of the Forest, in Forest Gate and in West and East Ham.

Victorian expansion had always looked greedily at the Flats. Landowners in the 1850s and again in the early 1870s made attempts at development, despite vociferous local opposition including, in July 1871, a huge demonstration on the Flats which required police intervention and ended with the demolition of illegally erected fencing. This initiated the legal action against enclosing landlords by The City of London Corporation, leading to the Epping Forest Act of 1878.

Up to the start of the Second World War the Flats became popular with large numbers of East Enders for a wide variety of leisure activities including many sports pitches, a model yacht pond, a bandstand and holiday fun fairs, providing the open space lacking near their homes. By the 1930s over 100 football clubs were regularly using the Flats.

During the Second World War the Flats were requisitioned for military purposes with anti-aircraft batteries throughout, causing the Flats and surrounding areas to become prime targets for enemy action. The North-West side where the guns were concentrated became known as 'Hell Fire Corner'. In the summer of 1944 the Flats were used as an important transit point for the D-Day invasion and then, for a short time at the end of the war, as a prisoner of war camp.

By 1945 the Flats were in a poor state with remains of gun emplacements and buildings, rusting barbed wire, bomb and rocket craters. Much of the ground had been dug for trenches and allotments or churned up by military boots and vehicles. In addition, the local boroughs of East and West Ham had claimed sections of the eastern and southern Flats for temporary housing for

a ten year period.

Enemy action throughout the War had destroyed 14,000 houses in West Ham alone and those untouched required urgent repair, compounding the difficulties of overcrowding, poverty and the slums of the inter-war years. The British population had increased by over a million during the War followed by a baby boom and the need for housing was so immense that a West Ham County Borough Housing Committee meeting on 4th March 1946 declared the 'present housing situation...is such as to warrant drastic action'.

In the run up to the 1945 General Election housing was seen by many as the key issue and the Labour Party made extravagant claims for their building plans, Ernest Bevin promising 5 million homes in the shortest possible time but queues for housing grew longer still after their landslide victory.

In 1946, to ease their own very pressing housing shortage, West Ham Council proposed to acquire a large tract of the Flats by Compulsory Purchase Order. On the face of it they had a strong case given the destruction across the Borough but as those opposing the building plans pointed out, West Ham's housing problem was not entirely clear. From a pre-war peak in 1929 their population had been steadily falling. Younger generations moved further out of London as major employers such as the docks and railway works at Stratford began to decline and many residents had been evacuated during the war.

During the war the Corporation of London had allowed temporary housing as an emergency for bombed-out families and three respite camps were set up in Epping Forest to receive 7,000 evacuees but were never used. The Corporation offered no objections to the Flats being used for temporary homes on a strict two year time limit. However, the post-war plans of the two Councils were giving cause for increasing concern and a letter from three Verderers published in the Walthamstow Guardian in February 1946 stated "their growing conviction that once temporary houses are erected in the 23 acres requisitioned by East Ham Corporation... the land so occupied will be lost to the public forever." The letter goes on that once one authority was allowed to raid the Forest in this way others would follow. Their concerns were well founded: the Walthamstow Guardian had earlier reported that in view of East Ham's success, Walthamstow Council was considering re-applying for other Forest land. East Ham's claim was followed shortly after by a demand from West Ham Corporation for a compulsory purchase of 163 acres to house 7,400 people. Of the land claimed, only 17 acres lay in the boundaries of West Ham but their new plans would mean that much of the central area of the Flats would be covered in housing and shops.

As expected, West Ham Corporation received strong support from the new Labour Government, itself determined not to repeat the failure of successive

Governments to provide decent housing after the First World War and was even considering nationalisation of land to prevent the obstruction of development by private landlords. Aneurin Bevan, now in charge of the housing programme, declared that landlords' interests must be secondary to the needs of the nation and, referring particularly to the Flats, he said he regretted very much the need to do it but "...the Commoners of Epping Forest must surrender to the overwhelming needs of the people of East Ham".

In a typical political ploy responsibility for housing was handed over to local authorities who would become the driving force in the housing market claiming "if Councillors wanted votes, they would have to supply the housing".

Alarm grew rapidly as the plans became known through the local press and it became clear that the argument was far from over. Typical letters of the time express the view that the Flats were not being taken from a wealthy landowner but from the working man and his children, and many references were made to the dedication of Wanstead Flats to the people forever as part of Epping Forest and enshrined in the 1878 Act. Letters to local MPs made clear the incalculable recreational value to the people, particularly the youth, of the thickly populated areas of East London.

At a council meeting, the Mayor of Wanstead and Woodford produced the axe presented to his ancestor George Burney for his part in demolishing enclosures in 1882 and promised to lead another axe squad with it, should one be required.

A vociferous group of home-owning residents of Park Ward, made up of estates north of Wanstead Flats, became the focal point of the opposition. They had formed in 1945 as the War Damage Organisation, helping local people whose homes were bomb damaged. In its newsletter, attention had already been drawn to the danger to the Flats and led by a committed secretary, local school teacher Stanley Reed, a Defence Committee was formed.

The Committee played a key role in co-ordinating scattered local opposition particularly from East and West Ham, Reed fearing that the West Ham politicians who initiated the development plans would represent objections from Wanstead as the "snobbish fears among the Wanstead well-to-do of working class penetration of their preserves".

The Committee mounted a petition, held public meetings and declared itself to be "prepared to do all that lies in its power to harness the indignation that will undoubtedly be widespread when the implication of these schemes is fully realised". Naturally, as anger grew the debate became increasingly bitter with a public meeting in Leyton attracting 250, where Leah Manning

the first Labour MP to be elected for Epping told the meeting she had received letters from servicemen in the desert and the jungle begging her to preserve the land where they had spent their childhood. She went on to propose that, if all legal means failed, she was prepared to spend as many nights needed out on the Flats organising pickets to prevent the first step to build.

Her involvement in the protest campaign was significant for, not only as a Labour MP she may have favoured house building over open spaces, but later she worked equally hard for the development of Harlow New Town despite vociferous local opposition. In her autobiography she writes that the need for housing “was desperate and urgent”, and building in the New Town “should override the need to preserve the natural beauty of village country life”.

Councillor Burgess of Wanstead and Woodford raised an issue that became central to the protestors’ case when he said, at a public meeting, that powers were being claimed which infringed public rights, and if councils were allowed to build on one part of Epping Forest it would let loose development over the whole Forest. He went on to declare that the councils were approaching Hitler’s methods of using the law to carry out schemes and when the laws didn’t fit, changed the laws. In 1945, this accusation carried force but West Ham Council’s response, in a letter to the Stratford Express, urged the ‘Hands off the Flats party’ to look at the problems facing the thousands of homeless or face appearing indifferent to their needs. East Ham Council weighed in to accuse The City of London Corporation of badly neglecting the Flats which ‘had been a disgrace for years before the war’.

The general feeling locally was strongly opposed to the proposals and other local boroughs, even those with acute housing needs of their own, were highly critical. Suggestions such as building in the bombed docks were put forward and Leyton Town Clerk suggested that if West Ham need houses they should use a park of their own.

By the summer of 1946 published plans revealed West Ham Council’s true motives and the real reason for development, according to protestors, was to increase local population which would in turn decrease the cost per head of local services.

On top of this the published minutes of the Housing Committee included a report of officers meeting to discuss a proposal to extend the existing boundary, so that the whole of the development would be in West Ham, otherwise West Ham would be the landlord but the local authority would be Wanstead and Woodford and decrease in service costs could not be achieved.

This situation could only be resolved by a public inquiry to hear West Ham Council’s application for a compulsory purchase order but by December 1946

when the inquiry opened, the Council probably knew their proposals would fail. 379 formal objections had been received by the Council and a petition of 60,000 signatures was presented to Parliament by Leah Manning. Forceful groups opposing the proposals included The City of London Corporation, Wanstead and Woodford Borough Council, the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society, the National Playing Fields Association and Ilford Trades Council. Each was represented by Counsel.

Such was the interest in the case as a test for other development proposals for protected land, the inquiry, which received national press coverage, heard vehement opposition and, amid catcalls and shouts, West Ham's Town Clerk declared it to be a battle of the haves and have-nots and accused protestors of prejudices against people from West Ham coming to live amongst them, just as Stanley Reed predicted.

Citing the 16,000 people in urgent need of housing, the Town Clerk went on to declare that the Flats were only technically part of Epping Forest and described them as "flattish, bleakish and unattractive open space, where only a lunatic would travel from surrounding areas to play football." This view was endorsed by West Ham's Borough Engineer, who declared that most of the Flats consisted of "a gravel which did not retain moisture or manure and was incapable of supporting healthy vegetation and would not sustain grass strong enough for football pitches". Since these views were in direct contrast to the experience of pre-war users of the Flats they were met with derision and a reply from Sir Edward North Buxton, one of the Forest Verderers, and possibly with a little exaggeration, claimed that during the 1930s it was not unusual to see up to 5,000 playing and a further 2,000 watching football.

Objectors pointed out that the proposals were at odds with Government's own Greater London Plan which emphasised keeping as much open space as possible and even if building were allowed on the Flats it would not solve local housing problems. In support of all this evidence the tireless Stanley Reed presented the petition of 60,000. He had been granted unpaid leave by his employer, none other than West Ham Corporation, to attend the inquiry, a pretty fair minded gesture.

The opposition took differing but complementary approaches. The City of London Corporation concentrated on the legal aspect, leaving local campaigners to focus on the public protest. Despite the formidable legal arguments from both sides, the most effective testimony, according to Stanley, came from a bus driver who described his dismal progress through Hackney, Homerton and Leyton to the point where the houses ended and he and his bus emerged into the light and air of Wanstead Flats, with their trees, grass and grazing cattle.

The Minister for Town and Country Planning gave his verdict rejecting the Application to West Ham's Town Clerk in a letter dated April 1947, but made it clear that the Ministry did not accept the argument that the Flats, as part of Epping Forest under the Act of 1878, was necessarily protected from compulsory purchase for building land. The rationale for rejection was, that due to shortage of labour and materials, West Ham would be limited to building on land it already had. He went on to add "it is most undesirable to permit building on Wanstead Flats ... it is not necessary to contemplate sacrifice of some of this open space for housing". He described the Flats as "part of a well-established wedge of public open space extending into the densely built up area of London".

West Ham Council declared itself without means to appeal and would "loyally accept the decision" and immediately began lobbying the Minister to help them find alternative land and to encourage the City of London Corporation to fulfil its undertaking to develop the Flats as a public open space on modern lines.

The phase "on modern lines" veiled another potential threat to the Flats as a relatively undeveloped space. West Ham's Town Clerk wrote to Wanstead and Woodford and Leyton Councils proposing a committee be formed to meet with Epping Forest Conservators and draw up plans for the development of the Flats as a leisure amenity. Elaborate plans were drawn up, including a swimming pool, 9 hole golf course and an open air theatre. These plans came to nothing but the City Corporation perhaps stung by criticism at the public inquiry, embarked on a major restoration programme to which the Park Residents Association, successor to the Defence Committee, contributed to the planting of a grove of trees on the Aldersbrook side of the Flats.

Today, the Flats provide 47 football pitches suitable for different ages, plus designated areas suitable for sport. Walkers, with or without dogs, funfairs and circuses, joggers and picnickers all enjoy this well-loved green space on the edge of London.

Incidentally, local hero Stanley Reed did not lose his week's salary. He notes in his memoirs that an envelope with his exact wages dropped through his letter box one evening and other anonymous packages, containing minutes of various West Ham Council Committees dealing with the compulsory purchase application, had been similarly delivered during the campaign.

I am indebted to Mark Gorman and the Leyton and Leytonstone Historical Society for all their work and research into this remarkable story.