

Wanstead Flats History Walks : No. 1 : the Bushwood side

Introduction

Although the Bushwood section of Wanstead Flats is now characterised by playing fields and woodland, it once formed a small but significant section of Wanstead House, the huge stately home and gardens that dominated this part of east London from the 16th to early 19th century. The most obvious reminder of those former glories is the lime tree avenue that stretches from the top of Blake Hall Road across to Ferndale Road at the far end of the Flats. This section of the Flats also contains some of the oldest trees in the borough – a number of ancient chestnut trees dating back to the late 17th century. It was also home to a colourful 19th century poet and, during the 2nd World War, was the site for a number of air raid shelters as well as largescale allotments.

Time - the walk takes between an hour and an hour and a half, depending how briskly you walk.

Terrain – firm and largely level apart from a short incline going up to the northern pond in Bush Wood. There are rudimentary earth or grass paths but none that are made up.

Facilities – none on this section of the Flats apart from a few logs to rest on. The nearest food, drink and toilets are probably to be found at the North Star pub on Browning Road, which is off Bushwood and just 200 metres from the north west tip of the Flats, or McDonald's on the High Road, another 100 metres beyond the North Star.

Transport - bus routes 58 and 308 stop near the Cann Hall Road and Dames Road end of Centre Road, routes 101, W19 and 308 stop near the Lake House Road and Aldersbrook Road end of Centre Road.

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

- 1 Start at car park on **Lake House Road** (see map. This is around 200 metres from the nearest bus stops on Cann Hall Road – 58 - and Dames Road - 58 and 308). The car park is next to the site of the **fairground**, which is itself just north of **Jubilee Pond** (for which there is an interpretation board by the car park).

An **Easter fair** has taken place on the Flats since at least the middle of the 19th century. It may have developed from the huge annual cattle market that was held on the Flats, near what is now the City of London Cemetery, in March or April each year during the 18th century.

One regular visitor in the early 1900s was local boy **Alfred Hitchcock**, and those experiences may well have been the inspiration for the famous fairground scene in 'Strangers on a Train'. These days the area near Jubilee Pond hosts well-attended fairs at Easter and May as well as a circus, usually in November.



Jubilee Pond – which was formerly known as Dames Road Pond and then the Model Yacht Pond - dates back to 1908. It was re-dug as a work relief scheme to try and improve drainage in the early 20th century. After a period of decline in the 1980s and 90s the Lakehouse Lake Project, made up of local residents, turned the pond into a wildlife lake, which was officially reopened in 2003.

- 2 Cross road towards the two tower blocks and almost immediately turn right on to a track that runs parallel with Lakehouse Road. Continue along this path, which stays close to the road, for the next 150 metres (almost to where the nearby road bends further away to the right) until you reach a Corporation of London post

to your left warning against unauthorised ballgames – and the edge of the playing fields.

- 3 Continue along a clear path with the playing fields to your left and a line of plane and poplar trees on your right. On the far side of the playing fields you will see the twin tower blocks that dominate this part of the Flats – the **John Walsh and Fred Wigg towers**, built in the 1960s and named after two local councillors.



- 4 Continue walking along the footpath. Behind the avenue of trees to your right is the **Lakehouse Estate**, much of which dates back to the early 20th century. There is also a log to rest on at this point.

- 5 Diagonally to your left you can see the tower of **St John's Church** in the heart of Leytonstone just showing above the rooftops.



St John's – or to give it its full name the Church of St John the Baptist – was built in 1833 but was later significantly enlarged as the population of what was at the time a small village expanded rapidly in the mid to late 19th century.

- 6 After a further 250 metres you reach the end of the playing fields. At this point you should also be able to glimpse, beyond the fields to your left and looming over the trees, the tower and weather vane of **Davies Lane Primary School**, a fine Victorian yellow and red brick building. The plane trees come to an end shortly after this but continue following the line of trees – now poplars, then planes again – until you reach a bridle path stake which marks the point where another path crosses yours diagonally.
- 7 At this point you can look back to see the towers of **Canary Wharf and Docklands**, with the smaller **tower blocks of Stratford** to their right. Facing forward again, continue straight ahead until you meet the main avenue of lime trees, where you turn right.

The Avenue, which you see stretching away to left and right, is one of the last reminders on the Flats of the grandeur of **Wanstead House** and its estate, which spanned many miles from its epicentre in **Wanstead Park**.



Commissioned by merchant banker **Sir Josiah Child**, who bought the estate in 1667, and said to have been created by **John Evelyn**, the Avenue stretched from close to the gates of the House (the pillars of which are still visible at the junction of Blake Hall and Bush Road) all the way to Ferndale Road. For obvious reasons this route used to be known as Evelyn's Avenue.

- 8 Continue along the **Avenue**, crossing a tarmac path – with a lamp-post immediately on your right. The start of this path, on

your left, is in Waltham Forest while the other end is in Redbridge! This also marks the site of a popular tea kiosk, known as **The Shanty**, that stood here till after the 2nd World War. Continue for another 200 metres along the Avenue, flanked by huge lime trees dotted with younger saplings planted in the early 1990s.

- 9 To the right you will see a huge white building with a funnel-like tower. This is now a luxury block of apartments called **Belgrave Heights**.



The apartments previously provided accommodation for police cadets attending the Hendon training centre.

Previously this was the site of the **Swiss Cottage**, a timber building which was built around 1850 and stood in a corner of the grounds of **Lake House**, itself an annexe of **Wanstead House**. After the present Lake House estate was built, the cottage remained at the edge of Bush Wood and was accessible by a bridge across a ditch or stream.



The well-known poet **Thomas Hood** (1799-1845) once lived in Lake House.

Take Browning Road for refreshments and toilets in the High Road (or stop at the North Star pub)





10 After a further 50 metres, after passing a white post, and just past the Belgrave Heights block of flats, you reach a 'crossroads' with the right turn taking you on to Blake Hall Road and Wanstead Park. Turn left and follow the path up a small incline, bearing right at a junction, towards Bush Wood pond. Go through a fragmented avenue of oak trees – including the so-called 'Hollow Tree' (burnt by lightning) which was a popular landmark for schoolchildren in the 2nd World War - and past a large cluster of holly on your left until you reach a very substantial Spanish chestnut tree. Just beyond is **Bush Wood pond** which has been on this site for more than a century and used to be sufficiently full of water that it was possible to sail boats on it (as well as collect newts and frogspawn in the spring). These days it is nearly always dry, defined only by a dip in the ground and the clumps of reeds growing in it. There are four large Spanish chestnut trees close to the pond – two more to the left and one, along with a number of smaller saplings, to the right. These are believed to have been planted in the late 17th century as part of the series of avenues radiating from Wanstead House.

Although this work was begun by **Sir Josiah Child**, the redesign of both house and gardens was completed by his son Richard. At its height in the middle of the 18th century Wanstead House and its magnificent estate was likened to an English Versailles. The house was finally demolished in the 1820s after the last heiress, **Catherine Tylney-Long**, married ruinously and was forced to auction the building's contents and the shell of the building itself to meet mounting debts.

11 Keeping the chestnut tree to your left, walk halfway around the pond in an anti-clockwise direction. At the far end turn left on to

a well-established path. After a further 10 metres you will see to your right part of the red brick garden wall of the Quaker Meeting House.

The **Quaker Meeting House** has been based here since 1870 although the original building was replaced by a modern polygonal structure in 1968. Within its grounds is a tombstone commemorating the famous local prison reformer **Elizabeth Fry**.



- 12 Turn sharp left at this point and make your way along the other side of the pond, passing between two large Spanish chestnut trees before you arrive once more at the first chestnut tree by the holly bush. There are a number of blasted trees surrounding the pond. Much of this damage was done by lightning strikes but there have also been a number of deliberate fires.
- 13 Turn right past the holly, go back down the gently sloping woodland track, bearing left, until you reach the broad Avenue again where you turn right and retrace your steps to the tarmac path.
- 14 Continue along the Avenue through a line of lime trees. Most of the Avenue is made up of lime trees that were probably planted at the turn of the 19th-20th century. They replaced the Spanish chestnut trees that used to line this route.
- 15 After about 300 metres the large lime trees are for a short time replaced by saplings and, through the gaps to your right, you can see a number of 1930s houses along the curve of the adjoining street, which is now called **Bushwood**. (Slightly confusingly, the street was itself called the Avenue until 1895-96.)

- 16 The limes come to an end and are replaced by hawthorn and wild rose bushes that were planted by the City of London in the 1990s to continue the sight line of the Avenue. When you get to the point where the playing fields start you will see a row of terraced houses along Bushwood. During the war a series of air raid shelters operated on the Flats opposite these houses. To your left you can see **Canary Wharf**, then the **Stratford tower blocks** and the **John Walsh and Fred Wigg Towers** on the edge of the flats. **Davies Lane Primary School** can be seen more clearly to the right of the Avenue at this point.



Davies Lane School was first opened in 1901 as a board school , responsible for educating children aged 5 to 13. It was reorganised in 1932 to cater for senior boys, juniors and mixed infants and again in 1948 when it became a junior and infants school. These merged into a single primary school in 2004. One of its most famous old boys is the TV chat show host **Jonathan Ross**.

- 17 The lime trees on the Avenue now give way to plane trees. There is a log to rest on to the right hand side – and another brief glimpse of **St John’s Church** behind. Another resting log is about 50 metres further along this stretch. Continue along the Avenue to the far end, then turn left onto the playing fields and immediately right towards the tower blocks.

- 18 Walk 25 metres and then bear left, continuing along the edge of the playing fields, with first three Victorian cottages and then the **Fred Wigg and John Walsh Towers** to your right (Fred Wigg is the first tower you encounter and John Walsh the second).
- 19 At the end of the playing field, and just as you reach John Walsh tower, turn left and continue in the same direction, with the metal-roofed **Harrow Road changing rooms** and an avenue of plane trees to your right.

During the later stages of the 2nd World War much of this area, from the edge of the playing fields down to Harrow Road, was given over to **allotments** as part of the government's 'Dig for victory' campaign. There was also an air raid shelter and barrage balloon close to the Fred Wigg and John Walsh Towers.



This whole area of the Flats, stretching all the way to Manor Park, also used to be the site for **grazing cattle** in the summer months. Local farmers took advantage of the ancient Epping Forest commoners' rights to pasture their cows here each summer but sadly the BSE outbreak ended this pastoral scene in 1996. The cattle grids on the Green Man roundabout and elsewhere are now the only testimonies to this period but it is hoped a small herd may return in the not too distant future.

- 20 After about 200 metres, as you near the road, you will see two small undulating paths to your right. Take the first one until you see an oak tree on your left. At this point you should be able to
- 21 see the small **Cats and Dogs pond** to your right. It is presumably so called because it only fills up when it rains cats and dogs! In fact there is usually more evidence of water here than in the Bush Wood pond.

Continue along the path until it reaches the track that runs parallel to Lakehouse Road. Turn left and walk about 25 metres before turning right. Cross over the road and you are back at your starting point.

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

No. 2 Aldersbrook Flats

No. 3 The Flats at War

and an accompanying leaflet of historical background called
The Space Between

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

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

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