

Wanstead Flats History Walks : No. 3 : The Flats at War

Introduction

This walk includes many acres of common land, now used for recreation and sport.

During the Second World War (1939-1945) Wanstead Flats were extensively used for defensive purposes and looked quite different to what they are today. Anti-aircraft guns, rocket launchers, range finders and searchlights were deployed here, together with barrage balloons, which were used to deter enemy aircraft from low-level bombing. When the invasion of Europe (D-Day) was imminent, the Flats were used as an assembly point for Allied troops and vehicles, so they had a prominent part to play in the defence of London and in the offensive against Germany. As a result of the success of the Allied offensive in 1944-1945, German prisoners were brought into Britain in their thousands, and some were confined in a prisoner of war camp between Lake House Road and Centre Road.

Time - the walk takes about an hour and a half depending on the speed of the walker.

Terrain - firm and level, apart from a short steep slope near the beginning of the walk.

Facilities - refreshments are available at the Golden Fleece pub and at the cafe in the gatehouse of the City of London Cemetery. There is a shop with refreshments in the filling station in Aldersbrook Road near the start of the walk. Toilet facilities are available for patrons at the cemetery cafe and the pub. There are convenience shops on and near Aldersbrook Road.

Transport - near to the start of the walk there are bus stops for routes 101 (Wanstead - Gallions Reach) and W19 (Walthamstow - Ilford) that run along Aldersbrook Road, and for the 308 (Wanstead - Clapton Park) that serves Lake House Road. You can also start and finish the walk at the car park on Centre Road (see point 14 on page 10).

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 If starting from the car park on Centre Road go to point 14 on page 10 of this booklet. Otherwise find your way to the mini roundabout junction with Lake House Road (warning : the roads here are dangerous for pedestrians to cross). With the junction behind you walk down the left-hand side of Centre Road for about 200 metres.
- 2 Turn left beside a track that leads off the road through a gate.
- 3 In 100 metres the track goes down a steep slope to arrive at the side of football pitches.



Wanstead Flats became a major area for football at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries after the Flats were drained and levelled. In 1900 the London Playing Fields Committee approached the City of London to turn Wanstead Flats into football and cricket pitches for the benefit of the public. It was agreed an area could be used not exceeding 25 acres. This was then increased to 150 acres. There are now 60 full or mini-sized pitches. Wanstead Flats are one of only four public areas for football left in north London. The Flats are known as the 'Field of Dreams', and so it has turned out for several of the Premiership players of today who started their careers there, such as Jermain Defoe and John Terry.

The shape of the 'Dell' football pitches is due to clay being dug out for making bricks, many of which were used to build local houses. This activity is thought to have operated between 1830 and 1890 in an area roughly comparable with the football fields off Aldersbrook Road. Red brick dust can apparently still be seen on very hot, dry days. A 'Brickfield Pond' is still marked on some maps of this area, possibly created by a spring, and is thought to have been a bathing pond for a short while in the 1880s – 1890s.

- Carry straight on with Aldersbrook Road on your left, football pitches to your right. St Gabriel's Church is on the left but head towards trees with a green church spire behind (the former Aldersbrook Baptist Church). At the end of the pitches
- 4 turn right with hawthorn bushes your left. Continue the same direction across the grass right towards the right-hand end of a
- 5 high brick wall. Take a path with the wall on the left and a belt of trees on the right (a 'green tunnel' in summer).



Some of the wall dates from the 18th century and probably belonged to Aldersbrook Farm which stood on the Flats until the 1950s.

Some trees a short distance away are known as 'Long Wood' and contain the foundations of wartime buildings.



- 6 Follow the brick wall when it turns to the left.



Through the trees to the right is a white-painted wooden hut used by gun crews during the war, now a maintenance store for the City of London Open Spaces workers.

To the left beyond the hut is a brick-built gas decontamination centre to be used in the case of a gas attack by the enemy. Gas victims would have stripped, showered and been issued with new clothing by the Red Cross.



7 You can get another view of this wartime survival by reaching Aldersbrook Road and turning to the right and looking through the depot fence.

return

to Now retrace your steps to the wall corner and turn left onto a
6 (restricted access) car park, dusty in dry weather.



Near here (opposite Herongate Road) was an anti-aircraft gun site during the Second World War. 'Anti -aircraft', when transmitted by signallers, was known as 'Ack-Ack' in the army slang of the time. Women of the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) served on many Ack-Ack sites like this one, tracking enemy aircraft with radar

predictors, manning searchlights and fusing the shells. (They were not allowed to fire the guns). There were 335 ATS women killed during the war performing these important duties.



Cross the car park into the grass and continue parallel with Aldersbrook Road towards a green mound with trees behind.

- 8 Reach another car park (public) and turn right to go round the (man-made) Alexandra Lake, over the sand-hills created by the spoil taken from the lake when it was created.

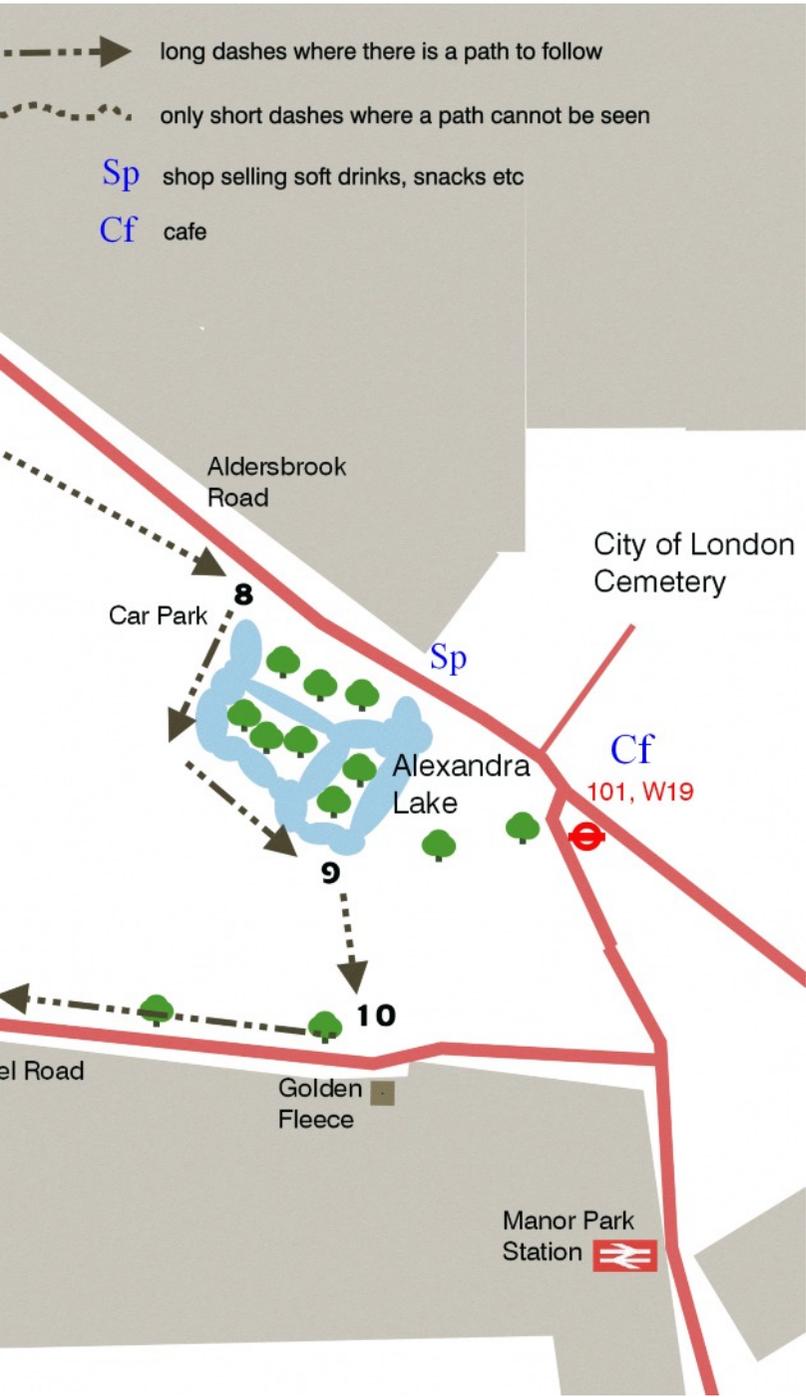
Turn left with the path and lake, heading towards a white building in the distance with a domed clock tower. (This is Capel Manor, an 18th century estate and farm.)



- 9 Before you come to the end of the lake turn right towards the 'Golden Fleece' pub over the football pitches. There you will be able to slake your thirst or attend the call of nature if you wish.
- 10 Facing the Golden Fleece pub turn right and follow the path marked with white bridlepath posts, with trees and road to the left, the Flats to the right.

Near here were prefabricated houses, known as 'Prefabs', erected by the Council to assist with the housing of people made homeless by the heavy bombing of east London. A campaign by locals was successful in opposing plans by West Ham Council to build permanent housing on the Flats.







Carry on down the bridlepath beside Capel Road, which is flanked by a wonderful line of trees, mainly oaks and beech and hawthorn bushes. In the distance to your right you can see the shapes of John Walsh and Fred Wigg Towers, built in the 1960s and named after local councillors. Further to your right, you will see a tall white building, Belgravia Heights, now luxury flats but once Police trainee accommodation. Later you will pass chestnut trees (shady in summer) and gorse bushes.



11 As you approach a sports changing rooms complex you will see side roads leading off Capel Road. Pass Ridley Road and pause opposite Tylney Road.

Catherine Tylney was once the richest woman in England (outside the great noble families). She inherited the estate of Wanstead, valued at £300,000 from her uncle John, 2nd Earl of Tylney, when he died aged just 11 in 1805. She later married William Wellesley, 4th Earl of Mornington, nephew of the Duke of Wellington. He frittered away her money, and they had to sell all the contents of the house at auction and the house was demolished to pay his debts. Catherine died in 1825 aged 36. Her

ghost is said to haunt Wanstead Park. Wellesley Road (now Michael Road) and Mornington Road, west of Bushwood, were named after her husband's family.

- 12 Pass the next turning, Lorne Road, and pause opposite the next, Latimer Road.

Look carefully at the ground as you follow the path and you will see a semi-circle of brick and stone blocks which raises the possibility that this may have been the site of a 'pillbox', giving the machine gunner a perfect arc of fire against any invading parachutists. (There were two such steel pillboxes, sunk into concrete, built near Bushwood during the Second World War).



Continuing the walk, the line of trees becomes an avenue.

Pause after about 100 metres opposite a 3-storey house to your left. A circle of trees marks the spot where there once stood a bandstand. A bandstand was here from late 19th / early 20th



century until 1957 when it was demolished. Open air concerts were never as popular after the war as they were before. It was also used during the war as a collection point for wood salvaged from damaged houses. This was available to local people for rebuilding work or firewood – and also provided a useful source of timber for children to build rafts to sail on Alexandra Lake or Jubilee Pond. The Bandstand Pond is one of three ponds on the

Flats that were built by unemployed labourers at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries. Bandstand Pond was excavated between 1893 and 1894, and was sometimes called Angel Pond after Lewis Angell, the borough engineer for East Ham. The trees around its site are thought to have been planted around 1903.

- 13 Continue past the 'Bandstand Pond' to a polished granite drinking fountain.

No longer in use this utility is dedicated to Joseph Fry (1809 – 1896) who was responsible for the erection of drinking fountains for both people and horses, and was a son of Elizabeth Fry the prison reformer.



- Turn right into another avenue of trees with the fountain behind you and the pond on your right. Follow this path beyond the
- 14 avenue, parallel to Centre Road on your left, to a car park.

Here is an interpretation board that tells some of the history of the Flats, identifies some of the wildlife that can be found there and describes other features including metal posts found in the long grass which could be barrage balloon tethers from the Second World War.



Barrage Balloons were huge, sausage-shaped devices with three fins, one each side and one below, made of silver fabric. They

were hoisted into the air on a cable and winch from the rear of an RAF lorry to a height of two thousand feet or so, to deter low-flying enemy aircraft. These lorries were often crewed by WAAFs (members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force).



Unless this is where you left your vehicle, carry on through the car park and along a gravel-surfaced strip beside Centre Road.

At the end of this strip and to the right is a well kept stretch of grassland where licensed model aircraft enthusiasts can sometimes be seen (and heard) flying their machines. By Centre Road, was an area where troops prepared for the D-Day invasion in June 1944. Also near Centre Road was a camp to confine prisoners of war. Many prisoners were used to clear bomb sites, and were also involved in constructing the nearby 'prefab' houses (at point 10 on this walk). The facts about the locations and occupants of the Prisoner of War camps remain unclear because local memories differ, and records have not been found.

return
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- 2 Continue walking beside the road past white posts until you reach the the gated track from the road into the Flats, which this time you ignore. Carry on to the mini roundabout junctions of
- 1 Centre Road with Lake House Road and then Aldersbrook Road.

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

No. 1 The Bushwood Side
No. 2 Aldersbrook Flats
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.