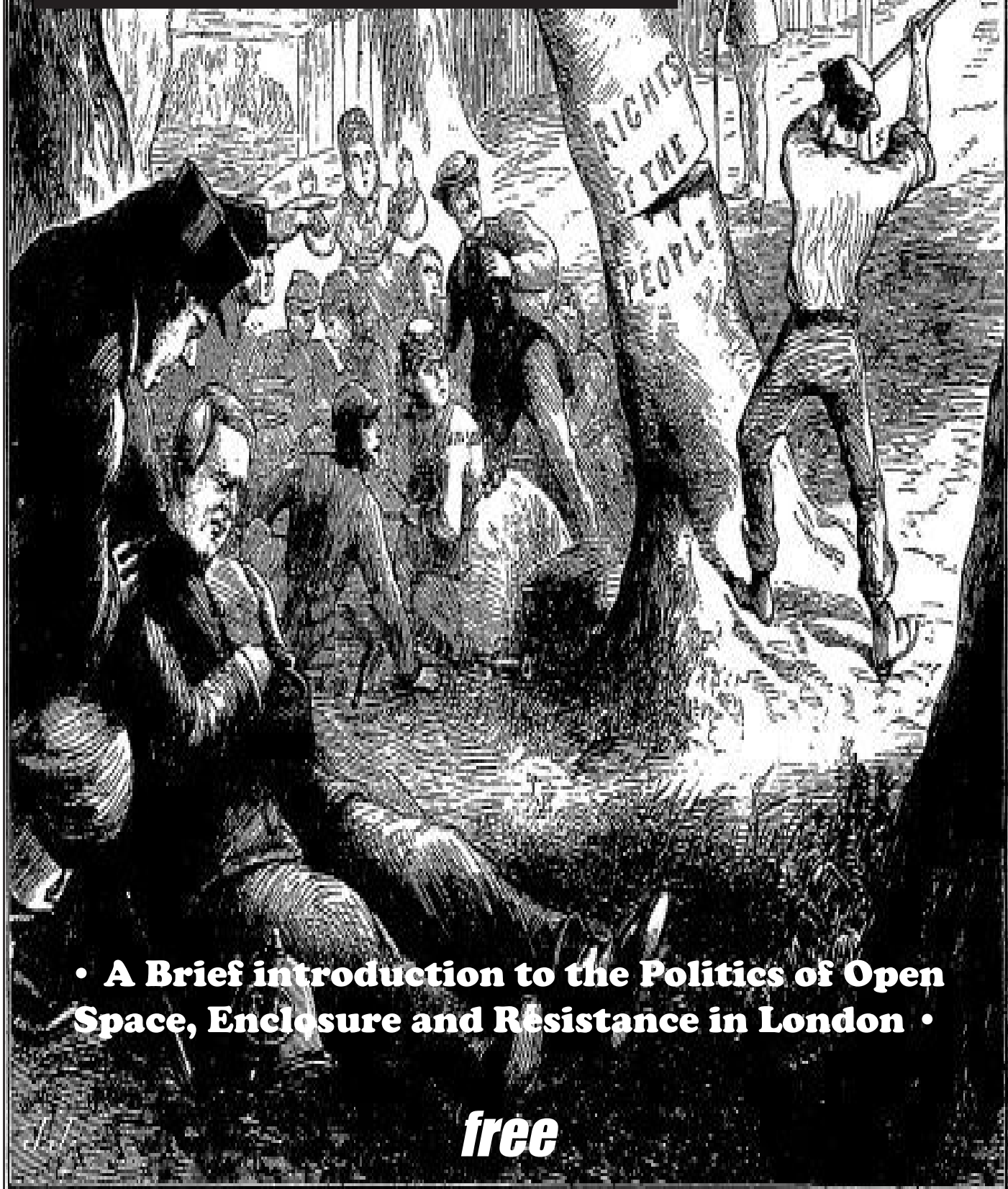


Stealing the Commons



• A Brief introduction to the Politics of Open Space, Enclosure and Resistance in London •

free

Open Space - or Closed Space?

It's easy to take open space for granted in the city...

Parks, commons, woods, from the heaths to the slivers of green at the edge of the canals... Green places in the heart of London, places of refuge, pleasure, places for picnics, games... They can be a lifesaver, when work and stress and all rises up and threatens to overwhelm you... *you can lie on your back while the wind dances in the trees. When you've got no garden, when your family drives you nuts, when you just love the grass. For the mad endless football matches, falling out of trees, hide and seek as the sun dapples the moss; for dancing round your phone in the summer evenings... trying not to giggle at the t'ai chi bloke, wiping the tear away as you daughter's bike wobbles round the lake for the first time, even for when you're masochistic enough to go running on rainy mornings...*

The benefits of having access to open green space are obvious, for exercise, mental health and wellbeing, teaching children about wildlife and nature, having somewhere green to just relax; quite apart from the playgrounds, sports facilities, water features, running tracks, that go with them.

But we shouldn't assume that the open green spaces that we know and love are just there, an entitlement. In most cases they exist because people fought hard in the past, for access, to save them from being built on or sold off, or walled off for the exclusive use of the rich. And because we have free access to them now doesn't mean it will always be like that... We have grown used to access to green space.

Centuries of hard fought battles saved many beloved places from disappearing, and laws currently protect parks, greens and commons. But times change... Pressures change. Space in London is profitable like never before. For housing mainly, but also there are sharks ever-present looking to exploit space for 'leisure'. And with the current onslaught on public spending in the name of balancing the books (ie cutting as much as possible in the interests of the wealthy), public money spent on public space is severely threatened.

Many are the pressures on open green spaces - the costs of upkeep, cleaning, maintenance, improvement, looking after facilities... Local councils, who mainly look after open space, are struggling. Some local authorities are proposing to make cuts of 50 or 60 % to budgets for parks. As a result, there are the beginnings of changes, developments that look few and far between now, but could be the thin end of the wedge.

So you have councils looking to renting green space to businesses, charities, selling off bits, shutting off parks or parts of them for festivals and corporate events six times a year... Large parts of Hyde Park and Finsbury Park are regularly fenced off for paying festivals already; this could increase. Small developments now, but maybe signs of things to come. Now is the time to be on guard, if we want to preserve our free access to the green places that matter to us.

Already space in the city is being handed to business - London's Canary Wharf, the Olympic Park and the Broadgate development in the City are public places governed by the rules of the corporations that own them.

An example of public space being created, that will operate under private control, is the proposed Garden Bridge across the river Thames. Despite the promise of £60m of public money if built under current proposals be plagued by corporate restrictions: cyclists would have to dismount to cross while social gatherings, playing musical instruments, making a speech, releasing balloons and many other pursuits would be banned. It could be closed to public access for private events.

And increasing privatisation of space in cities is often tied up with CCTV, surveillance, control of our behaviour. Private space is space where they can tell us what we can and can't do; space they can ban us from, keep us out of. Not that public bodies aren't doing their bit: the last government introduced Public Space Protection Order (PSPO), allowing councils to make illegal 'social problems' like sleeping rough in an attempt to drive homeless people from town or city. Councils are also dealing

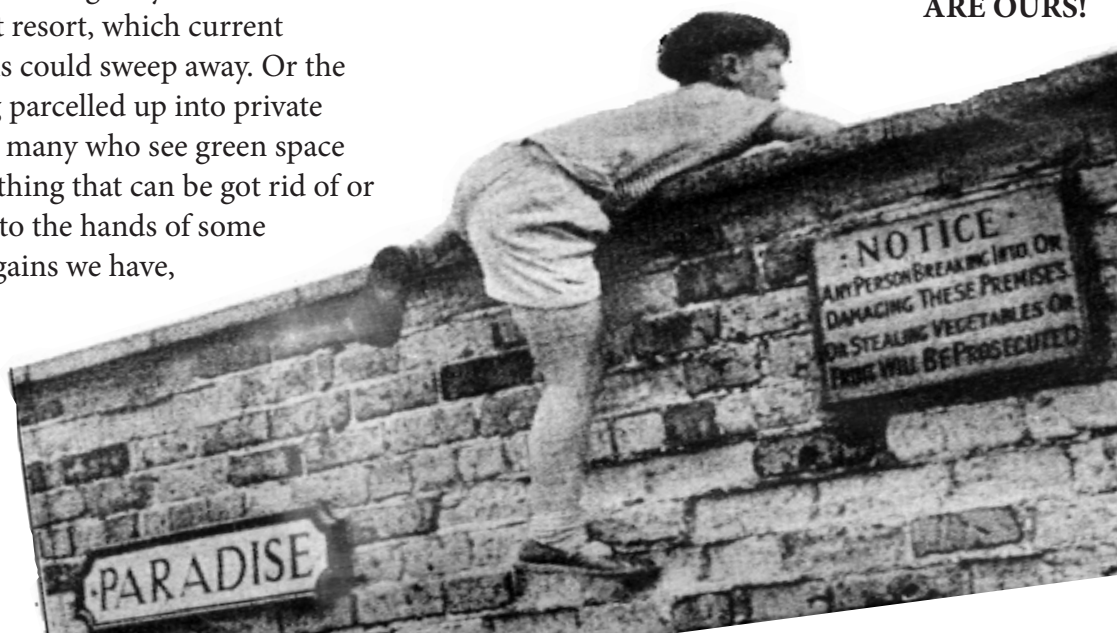
with developers that give them control over paths. Planning laws are being 'relaxed' nationally to allow developers a freer and quicker ride when they want to build. Everywhere slivers of green not protected by law are vanishing; or social housing with access and views over green space is being replaced with new developments for the rich (as at Woodberry Down, or West Hendon). The threat to open space is part and parcel of the massive changes underway in the city, attempts to permanently alter the capital in favour of the wealthy, driving those who can't afford it to the margins or out of the city entirely.

It may seem like parks, and other green spaces are givens; things that can't be taken away. But what seem like certainties can be lost before we realize. Look at way social housing have been dismantled over the past 30 years. In the 1960s council housing was taken for granted as a right by millions: it has been reduced to a last resort, which current government proposals could sweep away. Or the way the NHS is being parcelled up into private providers... there are many who see green space as a luxury and something that can be got rid of or at least shunted off into the hands of some quango... Whatever gains we have, whatever we win, whatever rights we enjoy, came from long generations of battling - the moment we stop, rest on our laurels, powerful forces start

pushing back against everything we have won.

However, it is worth remembering, that open space has always been contested space - in London as much as elsewhere. From resistance to its enclosure, to its role in hosting radical crowds and disorderly gatherings, as a venue for immoral and illicit pleasures, which the respectable wanted to put a stop to. If landowners, the rich, authority, have usually seen open space as a resource for their profit, or as a problem to be controlled, there has always been opposing views, and those willing to struggle to keep places open, and to use them for purposes at odds with the rich and powerful. From an invaluable source of fuel and food, to the playground for our pleasures; from refuge from the laws made by the rich, to the starting point of our social movements...

**THE COMMONS
ARE OURS!**



Some useful contacts

Open Spaces Society - Founded as the Commons Preservation Society in 1865; the CPS played a huge part in legal actions and campaigning to preserve green space nationally, and was instrumental in the passing of legislation to protect commons. The Society today remains committed to defending open space, foot-paths and rights of way. <http://www.oss.org.uk>

National Federation of Parks of Green Spaces - a UK network of area-wide Forums. We exist to promote, protect and improve the UK's parks and green spaces by linking together all the friends and users Forums/networks throughout the country. <http://www.natfedparks.org.uk/>

The Land Is Ours - campaigns peacefully for access to the land, its resources, and the decision-making processes affecting them, for everyone. <http://tl.io.org.uk/about-tlio/>

The Ramblers - 'Britain's walking charity, working to protect and expand the places people love to walk and promote walking for health and pleasure.' <http://www.ramblers.org.uk>

Enclosure and Resistance

Many if not most of the open spaces - commons, woods, greens - of any size that remain today in London (and nationally), exist because they were preserved from development by collective action. Many of the commons and parks that enrich life in the capital wouldn't be there if they hadn't been actively defended by legal actions and campaigns, or by rioting, tearing down fences & re-opening up enclosed land. Even much of the space eventually lost and built over, was defended for centuries.

For uncounted centuries, common lands, forests and wastes provided people with myriad ways of making a living; from collecting wood for fuel, gathering fruit, herbs, and other foodstuffs, to hunting for animals for food, and grazing of livestock. In Saxon times, most land was open to use by all. After the Norman Conquest all land was redistributed to a new ruling class, who introduced many laws to force peasants into serfdom to work for the wealthy, restricted the poor's access to land, and prevented them from hunting. Many serfs however managed to rent a small plot of land to feed themselves. Overwhelmingly villages consisted of a patchwork of open fields ploughed by different people, paying money or in kind to the landowner.

Over the years resistance opened up many ways for the poor to make a living. Although what we called common land was not 'held in common', was always owned by the Lord of the Manor, over the centuries customs and traditions grew up about what people were allowed to take, use and where from... What started at the discretion of the Lords came to be viewed as 'common rights'.

From the sixteenth century, pressure for profit from land rents began to see land being enclosed - fenced off, with smaller open fields being ploughed together into much larger farms. Already in the 1510s this was forcing people off the land and into destitution; over the next 300 years, enclosure would increase hugely, creating a mass exodus from the best farming land, pushing hundreds of thousands first into marginal lands, wastes and woods, and then into the growing cities. The impetus for enclosure came entirely from the search for greater profits for the landlord classes. Propagandists for the process made much of how it improved agricultural efficiency - historians still argue about whether this was even true. But enclosure ultimately made fortunes for the landowning aristocracy; and as much of this money was also later funnelled into industry, it was a huge driver for Britain's industrial revolution.

But none of this took place without resistance from those being excluded from the land. Already in 1549 there was a major revolt in Norfolk - Kett's Rebellion - in protest at hardships caused by enclosure; it needed an army to put it down. In 1607 enclosures sparked a widespread series of insurrections across the midlands. Riots, rebellion, direct action against their being denied common rights became commonplace. The huge changes in land use taking place in the early sixteenth century, the mass dislocation of peoples, formed a major motivation for the support for the parliamentary side in the English Civil War, and for the communal ideas of groups like the True Levellers (Diggers), who took over land to work it on common in 1649. Ironically, however, many of the leaders of the puritan side supported enclosure, and king James I and Charles I (though an enthusiastic land-grabber himself) had backed those fighting off enclosures.

The main big wave of enclosures took place in England, from 1750 to 1830. 5000 enclosure acts saw 21% of the country fenced off, totally changing the nature of agriculture, to the profit of the landowners and the dire loss for the poor; reducing farmworkers to waged labourers with little or no access to their own land or common rights.

In the nineteenth century as London expanded, new pressures on open spaces emerged... The city was rapidly increasing its size as housing was needed for thousands of new residents; from the 1840s hundreds railway lines were built, cutting through open space. Much if the farmland around London was built on; but the millions now crowded into tightly packed streets needed open space more than ever. Struggles over open space became more and more about a fight for leisure space, somewhere to hang out, a relief from the pressure of work and overcrowding. If anything, Londoners fought harder in the late 1800s to protect green space, as it became more of a precious commodity...

1263 – **City** crowds threw open lanes blocked up by justiciars... and followed it up in 1264 by destroying fences round the king's brother's park in **Isleworth**.

1292 - Eastenders defeated the Bishop of Stepney's attempt to enclose two woods in **Bethnal Green**, used by locals for chasing hares, rabbits etc...

1314, **Pinner Park** - residents illegally felled trees belonging to the Archbishop of Canterbury; 1323 - fences round the park broken down.

1515 or 1516 – **Moorfields**, archers destroyed fences put up by rich residents to prevent them using fields.

1592 - bailiff of Westminster and a crowd tore down fences, **Neat House Fields**, (round modern Victoria).

1593 - locals massed to tear up fences and pull up palings round **Osterley Park**.

Sydenham Common

– enclosure resistance 1605-15, resisted by locals who marched to petition the king, as well as fighting pitched battles to defend common. In 1754 fences were thrown down and reclaimed

rights to gather fuel in Cooper's Wood. But in 1792 Michael Bradley was murdered by landowner Samuel Atkinson, for exercising common rights in enclosed Colson's Coppice.

1614, **Barnes Common** – locals marched to petition king – enclosures reversed in court. In the 1890s, the Local Vestry's attempt to encroach on the Common to extend the cemetery was defeated.

1641: Royal grounds enclosed on **Hounslow Heath** were attacked and entered by irate peasants. In 1766/7 Stanwell locals defeated landowners

attempting enclosing of the Heath. In 1867 there were mass invasions on the Heath in defiance of landowner by locals to poach; in 1872 the caretaker was beaten up when he challenged 3 local men protesting the illegal

'encroachment' by the landowner.

Enfield Chase: enclosures here resisted by petition, 1575, riots in 1589, 1603, 1649, 1659, 1660... Legal and illegal resistance continued right up to 1777, when the Chase was finally enclosed.

1618, locals encroached on **Harrow Weald Common** and built cottages in defiance of the Lord of the Manor (Lord Northwick), nicking bits of his land for gardens; in response to him enclosing part of the Common in 1607.

1648, **Hanworth**, Lord Cottington's enclosures

attacked and fences thrown down.

1649: The local poor of Eltham & Lee tore down fences in **Horn Park**.

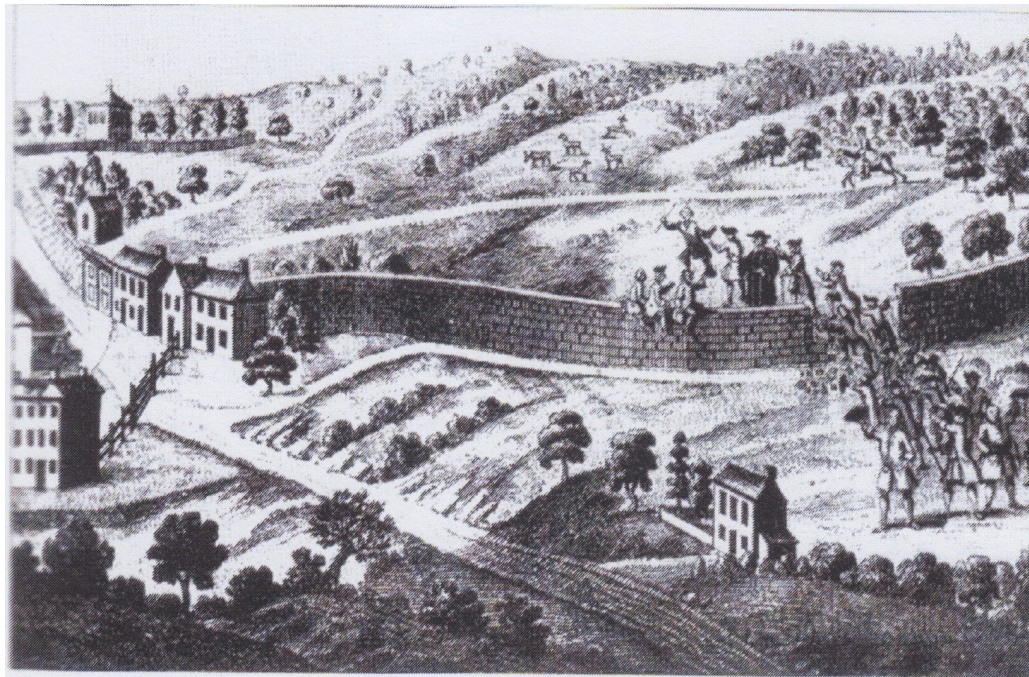
Richmond Park – enclosed by king Charles I; in 1751, locals

broke in to 'beat the bounds'. A legal case eventually opened up access to the park, 1750s.

Bushy Park – blocked rights of way opened up 1754 after radical shoemaker Tim Bennett challenged landowner.

Hampstead Heath, 1776: Actress Mrs Lessingham caused a riot by building herself a house on

Just some of the spaces in the greater London area which saw resistance to enclosure and development, over many centuries:



common land. (In 1906: Soap magnate William Lever, bought the same house, and tried but failed to block right of way on land here, due to local opposition.) Hampstead Heath was finally secured against enclosure and development in 1868 after forty years of campaigning.

1794, **Streatham Common** – locals burnt the furze (gorse bushes common right allowed them to collect for fuel) before landowner could collect it, and demolished his fences.

1797- 1802, **Harrow** - an Association for Opposing Harrow Inclosure Bill fought enclosures. Although in 1810 commoners were breaking fences in 1810 in a desperate attempt to stop the physical process of enclosures, the battle was lost.

1798, **Hanwell** – locks removed from gates and former common fields had cattle driven on to them in defiance of farmer. 1813 – newly enclosed land here invaded for unruly sports.

1801, **Bedfont** - a failed attempt to enclose the common.

1803 – **Roxeth Common** finally enclosed, after years of stout resistance.

1803, **Wormwood Scrubs** - court case in the King's Bench defeats fencing off of Scrubs.

1812-1885 Staines residents fought a long battle to prevent enclosure of **Staines Common**, first through petition and legal challenge, but as late as 1885 direct action was still being used to obstruct landowners.

1812, **Wimbledon Common** – there were failed attempts to enclose the Common in the late 17th century, and in 1723; both failed. In 1812 the lord of the manor obstructed locals common rights, cutting down all trees and selling timber. Protest followed... In 1864, Lord Spencer, ancestor of Princess Di, biggest landowner in South London, tried to sell much of the Common, and enclose more as a park. Protest led to a committee saving the Common through legal action. However, in 1902, Wimbledon Green (on edge of Common) was enclosed despite a number of riots and destruction of fences.

Protesting Ex-commoners turned their cattle onto the ex-commons and bye-roads of **Hillingdon** in 1817, (enclosed by act in 1812) and **Finchley**

between 1816 and 1823, (enclosed by act in 1811).

1820s, Loughton - 300 people rioted several times to prevent tree felling in **Epping Forest**; especially troublesome were 13 local women who *“beat Rigby's workmen and took from them their axes... and detained them.”*

1834, **Ickenham** labourers dug up and allotted themselves several parcels of land, in defiance of manor courts who spent twenty years unsuccessfully trying to evict these latter-day diggers... This was an area where the 1830 Swing Riots had spread.

1837, **Hackney Downs** – locals swarmed onto the lammas land and seize all crops from a tenant who'd overstayed short term lease beyond lammas day (common rights extended slightly here to, er, looting!) In December 1875, large crowds (up to 50,000 people at one point) destroyed fences erected as lord of the manor tries to sell part of the Downs to railways company.

Primrose Hill: 1842: popular pressure kept Hill open in defiance of developers.

1850s, **Stockwell Green** – the Green was enclosed by a fence, but locals accustomed to partying there broke it down. A 20 year struggle followed but the green was eventually built over.

1851, **Highbury Fields** - threatened with development for posh housing, which a popular agitation prevented.

1862, **Old Oak Common** - a dispute regarding common rights at Acton saw fences on Old Oak Common destroyed.

1864-76, **Banstead Commons** – local protest eventually blocked plans to enclose them.

Epsom Downs & Commons: There was opposition to enclosure of a part of the Downs by locals in 1865.

In 1868 a local committee formed to oppose recent enclosures on **Mitcham Common**. In 1890 protests against enclosures & gravel digging led to an Act to protect the Common.

1868 - 100 years of protests against encroachments on common land in **Peckham Rye Park** lead to its purchase in 1868 for a public park.

1868, **Tooting Common** – repeated destruction of fences (voted on in open meetings in the local Infant School), defeated WS Thompson's attempt to fence off the Common. The enclosures were ruled illegal; the Common was bought for the public in 1875.

1868 – 70, **Wandsworth Common**. Already decimated by three railways lines being run across it, and other encroachments, an 1860s attempt to develop the rest led to a mass local working class campaign, and ended in direct action. 2000 people pulled down fences in 1869, and 100s more did so at Plough Green in 1870. As a result landowner Lord Spencer (him again) gave the land to the Wandsworth Common Defence Committee, and it remained open to all.

1870 mass meetings on **Blackheath** in May, convened by the Advanced Liberal Association of Greenwich, against plans to enclose part of the heath.

1870, 2000 people met at Mill Pond Bridge, Rotherhithe, to oppose efforts by the Metropolitan Board of Works to build on part of **Southwark Park**.

1871, **Wanstead Flats** - 1000s of local working people pull down enclosure fences; protests save Flats. In 1946, the Flats were saved again from development by a local campaign. Locals also fought the building of a temporary police compound here during the 2012 Olympics.

Hilly Fields: Between 1875 and 1896, a long public agitation saved the Fields from development.

1876, **Plumstead Common**: “a series of wild and violent riots” in July defeated enclosures here (there had already been direct action in 1866, and 1870 over landowners encroaching on common land.)

1876, **Chiselhurst Common** – repeated destruction of fence around common land, and public meetings, defeated GH Baskomb's attempt to sell it off. In neighbouring **Camden Park**, the landowner, William Willett, tried to enclose the land here: locals defeated the idea and proved it was common land.

1878, **Epping Forest** thrown open to the public, after a long legal battle, begun when local agitator Tom Willingdale went to prison for asserting common rights. Half the forest had previously been enclosed 1851-71.

1878, **Eelbrook Common**, Fulham – protest meeting at plans by Ecclesiastical Commissioners to enclose it turns rowdy, fences destroyed.

1882, **West End Green**, West Hampstead – crowd tear down hoardings round green, scheduled for development, and burn them. Just down the road, **Fortune Green** was saved from being built on by local opposition in 1896.

1880s, **Alexandra Palace Park** - protests over plans to sell it for development end with proposals shelved.

1883, **Coulsdon Commons** – legal action ended fencing off and quarrying.

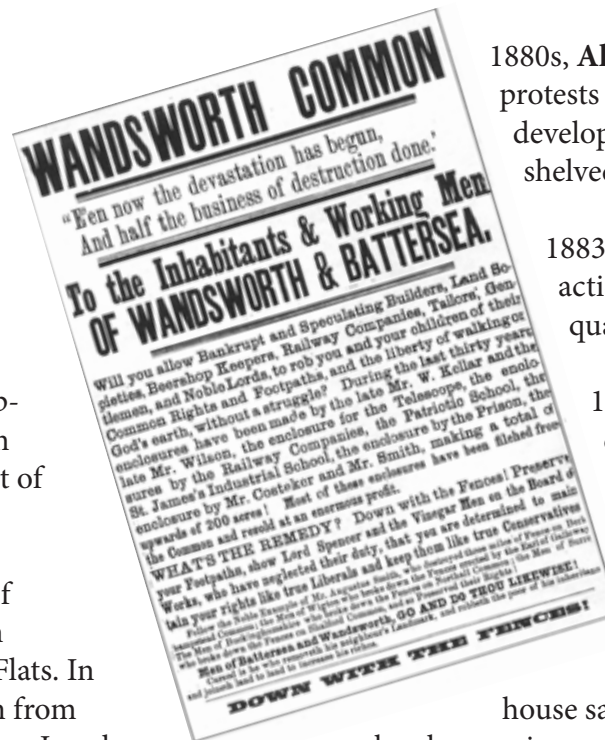
1886, **Highgate Wood** - local campaign stops the wood being sold off to speculators for development

Clissold Park, Stoke Newington: 1886-89: Grounds of the local big house saved from development by local campaign and opened as public park.

1880s, **Petersham Park** - locals in alliance with the Commons Preservation Society defeated a plan to appropriate part of the Park for a vicarage. In 1896, owner Lord Dysart, wanting to build on the land, closed footpaths & fenced off land. Local pressure led to the Bill's failure.

1888, **Town Mead**, Fulham – locals destroyed fences during long, ultimately unsuccessful resistance.

1890, **West Wickham Common** - Lord of the Manor Colonel John Lennard enclosed and sold 20 hectares for building, then put up a “strong unclimbable spiked iron fence”. Local opinion forced him to sell the land to the Corporation of London, who opened it up. **West Wickham & Hayes Commons** also saw a Ministry of Transport plan



in 1924 to build an arterial road through the woods defeated after local protests.

1891, **Ham Common** – Protests against landowners (the Dysart family) ban on removal of game, or gravel, and claim that common fields and footpaths were private property. Early one morning 4 notice boards were chopped down. Culprits were acquitted.

1892, **Leyton** – 3000 people pulled down railings protecting a railway that had been unpopularly run across common land & wreck the railway.

1897, **One Tree Hill**, Honor Oak – 1000s rioted over several weeks in protest against the enclosure of the open land here for a golf course. After long legal wrangling the Hill was bought for the public in 1905.

1898, **Croham Hirst**, Croydon: Owners Whitgift's Hospital tried to flog half of it off for development in 1898. Croydon residents successfully campaigned to get the local council to buy it for the public.

Parliament Hill, 1899: Saved from development by campaigning.

1900, **Eltham Common** – protests forced the War Office to back down on a plan to steal the Common to build army officers quarters. In 1908 though, part of nearby Woolwich Common was lost to the War Office for the officers quarters and a polo ground.

1912, **The Rookery**, Streatham, was preserved for public use by a local committee. In 1923, the same committee revived to save neighbouring **Norwood Grove** from development.

1920, **Petts Wood** – a campaign prevented sell off of the wood. In 1973, Petts Wood residents opposed plans to build 60 flats in **Covet Wood**. The Wood was bought by the Council instead and preserved as an open space.

1973-4, **Sparrow Wood, Roundabout Wood & Crofton Heath** - local opposition scuppered a plan to develop 139 acres of this woodland near Bromley

1970, **Heston Farm**: Green space saved from huge housing development by campaign.

1980s : A local campaign saved **Stoke Newington East reservoirs** from being developed. 1979-85,

Walthamstow Marshes: Save the Marshes Campaign prevents marshes being destroyed for development into a marina.

Parkland Walk, Haringey - old railway line closed in the 1960s and turned into a green walk. Saved from proposed development in 1990 for a 6 lane highway by mass campaign.

1985-93, **Oxleas Wood**, Eltham - Proposals to build an East London River Crossing, with a new motorway driven through this very beautiful 8000-year old wood, (as well as 100s of homes being demolished) were defeated by fierce campaigning from locals & environmentalists.

1999, **Crystal Palace Park** – During a campaign to oppose the building of a huge complex on part of the park, the site was squatted as a protest camp. Although the camp was evicted, the plan collapsed.

The struggles mentioned are just the tip of the iceberg. Many acts of resistance didn't get recorded, or were forgotten. Destruction of fences, fights with bailiffs and 'stealing' of resources people had been banned from using; trespass on lands barred to all – much of this went under the radar. Acts like poaching by their nature were mostly carried out in secret, for instance. The defence of open space is a history without heroes – it was carried out from below, by millions, and is still being written...



FIRST MEETING ON ONE TREE HILL

From Wild Wood to Pleasure Garden

Open Space as the haunts of rebels, outlaws and outcasts

For centuries the ring of forests and heaths around London provided refuge for outcasts, rebels, robbers, squatters, fugitives and later political radicals; making new communities as well as fighting for survival, and often resisting the landowners and authorities by force... The legends of Robin Hood arose from real people... This caused a sense of fear and encirclement among the rich - the respectable feared the conspiracies, plots and revolts they saw as brewing in the wild lands. *Forests had of course always been to some extent threatening to settled man, being full of wild beasts, wild folk, the unknown... The pressure to clear forests came not just from economics, the need for wood, farmland, etc, but also to tame the uncontrolled, threatening wilderness...*

Places like St Johns Wood, Epping Forest, Hounslow Heath, Enfield Chase, Putney Heath all well known haunts of rebels and robbers, poachers, highway-men, smugglers, political rebels, gypsies, squatters, ex-soldiers turned mauraunders, for centuries.

As enclosure drove people off more profitable land, communities grew up on wastes, marginal land, in the woods; often squatted - houses built in a day and a night were thought to carry some right to remain. Places like Epping Forest were home to 'Maroon Villages' - outcast camps of the dispossessed. Almost all the commons in the London area had squatter communities in the 17th and 18th centuries. The growth of pressures on poor rates from the dispossessed living in marginal conditions ironically served as a driver to further eviction and enclosure.

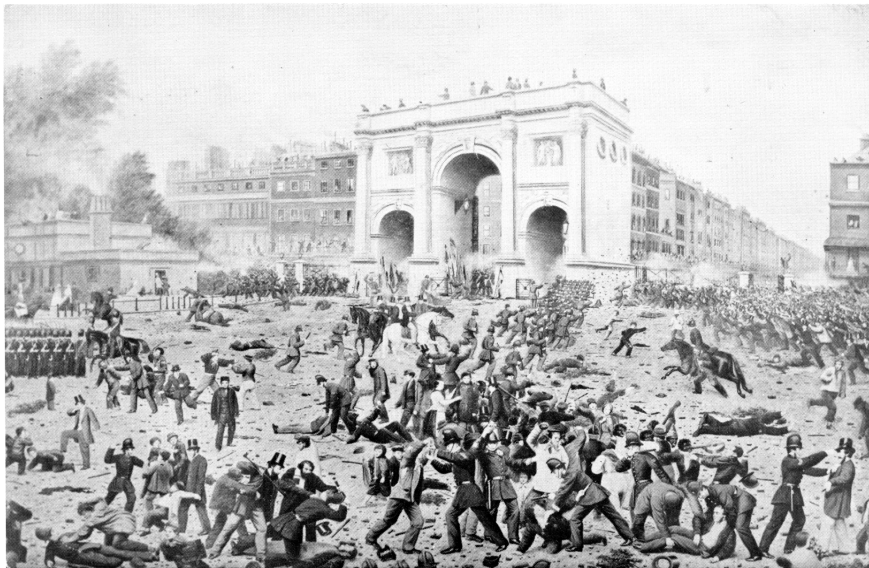
Travellers, gypsies, casual migrant labour, Irish refugees from the dire poverty created by the absentee landlord system in their country, also relied on access to open land for temporary refuge.

Gathering Places of Revolt

Open space also hosted rebellious armies, radical crowds and movements for social change. During the 1381 Peasants Revolt, the rebel army camped on Blackheath, (it was here that rebel priest John Ball preached the seminal sermon on the subject of equality for all - *When Adam Delved and eve Span, Who was then the Gentleman?*)... they parleyed with the king at Mile End Fields and Smithfield.

Jack Cade's 1450 Kentish rebels, the 1497 Cornish tax rebels, also occupied Blackheath; the radical crowds of the English civil war also rallied on open spaces - Mile End Fields, St George's Fields in Lambeth, Moorfields. The 1768 Wilkes Riots and 1780 Gordon Riots began on St George's Fields. In the 1790s the London Corresponding Society held mass rallies demanding political reform in the open spaces on the fringes of the metropolis - Marylebone Fields (now Regents Park), Camden's

Chalk Farm, Copenhagen Fields in Islington. Later radicals met on Spa Fields and Coldbath Fields in Clerkenwell; on White Conduit Fields in Islington, Chartists on Bonners Fields in Bethnal Green, and most famously, on Kennington



Common, in their last big rally in 1848.

Hyde Park became a noted battleground in the 1850s and 1860s, with radical crowds fighting for the right to gather there. Trade unions, suffragettes, socialists, people arguing against (or in favour of) religion: parks and commons became the venue for open air politics, mass meetings, debates and argument. The kind of speechifying now only really seen at

Speakers Corner used to be a common sight in all of London's open spaces.

And when bylaws were used to drive socialists, anarchists and radicals out of parks, street corners became meeting places. Until the police came to beat up speakers, nick them and jail them... an attack that they defeated, in the end, by force of numbers.

Fairs, Immorality and Pleasure

From time immemorial London's open space was also always a venue for pleasure. It's obvious, and hasn't changed much over the years, that in crowded cities, you desperately need access to freer places where you can relax, escape the jostling of your neighbours, evade (of only for a while) control by family, church and authority, play games, walk, chill, maybe have sex... And also meet, discuss banned ideas, gather and organise...

Right outside the old City wall, just to the north of the Moor Gate, one of London's oldest and most famous open spaces, Moorfields; well-known for rowdy games of football (a banned, and frowned upon pastime), for turbulent get-togethers of London's apprentices (always to the fore in riots, political troubles and protests), and for night-time rendezvous; most notably for gay men to meet each other, at a time when 'sodomy' was a hanging matter. (In more recent centuries, Russell Square, Hampstead Heath, and Clapham Common, have



taken on the mantle of venues for outdoor gay meeting places, while Hyde Park, was well-known for prostitution for centuries... as Tooting Common was more recently...)

But London's other ancient 'wastes' became similarly notorious. Lincolns Inn fields was a favourite place for walks and sports by the 14th century. But the Fields were also infamous as the haunt of 'brotherhoods of beggars' & thieves, as well as the venue for unlawful games, and the illegal exercising of horses. The homeless slept here for centuries: local lawyer Roger Leggett was killed during the peasants revolt, having made enemies by setting mantraps here to catch rough sleepers...

There were constant attempts by authority, often prompted by the wealthy who lived nearby open space, to 'clean up' the poor's playgrounds. Open space should be for nice and proper people, taking part in useful, orderly and polite leisure pursuits, not a *"vile rabble of idle and disorderly persons, who assemble there to play cricket, and such like pastimes, to the no small danger, and hurt, of harmless people, who either walk for air or business"*. Clerkenwell's Spa Fields was a mecca for prize-fighting, duck-hunting, and other bruising encounters. Victoria's Tothill fields, and Bloomsbury's Long Fields, also become infamous, for kite-flying, dog-fighting, and naked swimming and nearly naked running races. A major complaint was that 'roughs' would gather to play games on Sunday, the Lord's Day; when they should've been in church, obviously! That Sunday was most people's only day off was neither here nor there... However, attempts at repression could backfire: as in 1766, when the High Constable of Holborn and his officers entered the Fields, to find *"upwards of two hundred and fifty dog-fighters, bullies, chimney sweepers, and sharps..."* When they tried to put a stop to a dog-fight, the hooligans set their dogs on them.

Open spaces were also cherished because they hosted the annual fairs that livened up London's life. Once mainly economic, where yearly work contracts were negotiated, and farmers sold produce, in the growing urban sprawl, Fairs were losing their old rural economic functions, becoming more and more festivals of debauchery, and a public order headache for local authorities. Increasingly hated by the better off, for their immorality, disorder and policing expense, London's many Fairs became notorious and rowdy.

May Fair, the traditional May 1st shindig, held for centuries, off Piccadilly (that gave the area Mayfair its name), ended up as a rowdy gathering of the poor & a threat to public order. As the area was gradually taken over by the rich in the 18th century, pressure grew to ban it. The authorities first tried to suppress it in 1708; it was finally banned in 1769. *When the constables came to suppress the fair, a mob of about thirty soldiers and other persons, stood in defiance of the peace officers, at whom they threw brick bats: a constable died of stab wounds after the fight.*



The most famous was Bartholomew Fair, held at Smithfield, for centuries; a teeming, riotous, outpouring of popular culture, feared like no other by those in power... *"a dangerous sink for all the vices of London"*... a venue for subversive plays, puppetry, satire and attacks on the Lord Mayor & all established authorities. In 1697 William Philips was whipped for his anti-government satires at the fair. Rumours that radicals were planning to start an uprising there were enough to terrify the government in 1817.

London's fairs were mostly closed down, banned or toned down, between the 1760s and the 1850s, an important plank in the moral reformation of London's poor, and the attempt to impose hard work and religion on the working classes in place of drink, riot and pleasure.

Often part of the impetus to enclosing space came from pressure to eliminate the waste and common spaces where Fairs, rowdy games, outdoor sex took place. Notorious spaces like Moorfields and Smithfield were landscaped in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, laid out into formal walks, open waste' made 'proper', in an attempt to transform the behaviour that took place there. Later, sites associated with radical crowds had to also be transformed; almost as if the memory, the possibility of uprising, had to be exorcised. Kennington Common, where the last great Chartist rally took place in 1848 (scaring the crap out of the rich), was shortly afterwards surrounded by railings, turned

into formal gardens; folk considered 'unrespectable' were kept out.

But landscaping or fencing, creating ordered space, didn't always succeed. Formal parks and gardens, the fashionable spas or pleasure gardens, had the habit of starting out posh, but succumbing to a process of de-classing. The spas of Clerkenwell and Islington Hill (Sadlers Wells, London Spa, Bagnigge Wells) and Lewisham's Sydenham Wells began with respectable airs and a healing ethos, but within a few years the large numbers coming to drink the waters were mixing them with other liquids. Moral reformers fumed that 'the wrong sort' were being attracted... that they were encouraging class mixing (a very bad thing!), and thence to rowdiness, drunkenness, sex and debauchery.

Even landscaped pleasure gardens became contested. Emerging in the eighteenth century, as open spaces had been transformed into fashionable landscaped gardens, catering for the growing leisured classes, often they excluded the poor, servants, soldiers... In 1764, a crowd tore down railings at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens in protest at entry prices and its private ownership. In the 1790s Kensington Gardens were opened to the public, but soldiers, sailors & servants were banned, and a strict dress code was enforced. Complaints started to flood in about crowds of servants gathering outside the gates & insulting ladies & gentlemen entering...

Going Beyond Preservation

We need a new commons... based not in the past but in the future. The main thing to take from the numberless struggles to preserve open space is that people won because they considered the places they were defending to be theirs, to belong to them, even when that stood in opposition to the legal 'reality'... Although sometimes relying on those traditions and common rights as the basis for legal argument didn't work, often when it formed the backbone for direct action and a collective campaigning approach, this sense of the commons being 'ours' could overcome all the power of law, profit and parliament. This is a lesson worth taking when we think about how we view open space: although we can take many inspirations from our history, reliance on the past can not be a defence, we need to be re-forging a sense that the resources of the world are for all of us, for people's enjoyment, not for the profit of a few.

We need to be redefining what is ours, collectively, in opposition and defiance of the laws and fences built to exclude us; and not just when it comes to green or urban space, but for the whole world. In the midst of 21st century London, a whirlwind of global profit, backed by a government with a determined ruling class agenda, is uprooting communities, altering the landscape, destroying or severely hamstringing any right to social housing, welfare, health, education, for increasing numbers of us.

What are we going to do in response?

Read More

This freesheet is just a brief introduction to the history, politics, and significance of open space in the London area. More information on everything herein, available from us... We're currently working to put out a book covering the struggles and themes touched on here in greater detail. We don't yet know when this book will be published... Keep in touch with us for further info.

In the meantime, longer accounts of some of the events mentioned here can be found in some of our other publications:

- *Down With the Fences: Battles for the Commons in South London.*
- *The Battle for Hyde Park: Radicals, Ruffians and Ravers 1855-1994.*
- *Rights of Common: The Fight against the Theft of Sydenham Common and One Tree Hill*
- *William Covell and the Troubles at Enfield in 1659.*
- *Kennington Park: Birthplace of People's Democracy*
- *Symond Newell & Kett's Rebellion: Norfolk's Great Revolt against Enclosures, 1549.*
- *Burning Women: The European Witch Hunts, Enclosure & the Rise of Capitalism*

All of the above are available from our website:
<http://alphabetthreat.co.uk/pasttense/past-tense-publications.html>

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