

Histories of Hackney Marsh

(source of some sections unknown)

1893: On Saturday, the final step in the acquisition of Hackney Marsh as an Open Space will be taken when Sir John Hutton, the Chairman of the London County Council, will publicly dedicate the Marshes as an Open space, to be forever the property of the people of London. The acquisition of this great boon to East London, has been a work of time, and many thanks are due to those gentlemen, whose strenuous exertions, have ended in the final and satisfactory settlement of the question. The following history of the acquisition of the Marsh is taken from the pamphlet prepared by Mr John Sexby, the chief officer of the Parks Committee of the LCC:- "Hackney Marsh is a large area of flat meadow-land, lying on the eastern boundary of London, and intersected and skirted by the river Lee, and its tributaries. It is 387 acres in extent, and 3 1/2 miles from the Royal Exchange. The land was formerly subject to Lammas rights, and so long as these Lammas rights were maintained the land could not have been built upon, but at any time an arrangement could have been made between the Lords of the manor and the severalty owners, and the owners of the Lammas rights, to convert the Marsh into freehold building land. Forming as the Marsh did a splendid air space between the portions of Hackney which were built upon, and the rapidly increasing outlying districts between Stratford and Leyton, it became evident that the marsh must be secured for the health and recreation of the people of London, and the Hackney District Board, by resolution in May 1889, asked the Council to purchase or rent the marsh. The Council asked what contribution the District Board would be prepared to make. Meanwhile in November 1889, the Rev. E K Douglas, of the Eton Mission, Hackney Wick, brought to the notice of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association the fact that the lads of a football club connected with the Mission had been ordered off the Marshes by the 'Drivers' who had proceeded to carry off their goalposts. Mr Douglas was invited to attend the meeting of the Association, held on the 4th of December 1889. He did so, and asked the association to use its influence to get permission for his boys to play football on the marshes. The association, however, decided that the right course would be to take up a larger field of enterprise altogether, and to make application to the Board of Agriculture to grant a regulation scheme under the Metropolitan Commons Act 1866, by making use of the powers conferred in the little known and little used Metropolitan Commons Amendment Act, 1869, (32 and 33 Vict., c. 107), whereby 12 or more ratepayers of the parish in which a metropolitan common lies, can present a memorial to the Board of Agriculture, asking for a scheme.

On the 5th of March 1890, the association decided to incur expenditure on the prosecution of a scheme for the regulation of the marshes, which would place them under control of the London County Council, but which would not necessarily entail the purchase by the Council of any existing beneficial interests in the marshes, unless they were proved to be detrimentally affected by the putting in force of the powers which the regulation scheme conferred. As a first step, the association decided to promote a public meeting on the subject, which was duly held on 21st May 1890, at the Eton Mission Hall, Hackney Wick, the Bishop of Bedford, and subsequently Sir Charles Russell, Q C, M P, (now Lord Russell of Killowen) in the chair. The association was represented by its secretary, solicitor, and other members, and the following resolutions were unanimously passed--

(1) That in the opinion of this meeting of the ratepayers and inhabitants of the district, it is desirable that the hackney-marshes should be preserved as an open space for the enjoyment and recreation of the public, and that a memorial should be presented to the Board of Agriculture praying the Board to make a scheme for the regulations and improvement of the marshes.

(2) That Mr Tyssen Amhurst MP. (now Lord Amhurst), Lord of the Manor of Hackney, and other owners of Lammas lands be invited to give expression to any objections to such scheme.

(3) That a committee be appointed with power to add to their number for the purpose of giving effect to the purpose of this meeting.

In July 1890, the following account of the meeting was publicly circulated--

At a meeting which was held a few weeks ago (May 21st) in the Eton mission-hall at Hackney-wick to consider the possibility of securing the Hackney-marshes as an open space for the people, which meeting was well attended by ratepayers and residents in the district, and presided over, first, by the Bishop of Bedford and subsequently by Sir Charles Russell (now Lord Russell of Killowen, Chief Justice of England) a resolution was unanimously passed expressing the opinion that a memorial should be presented to the Board of Agriculture, praying the Board to make a scheme for the regulation of the

marshes as an open space. The memorial, having been largely and influentially signed, was duly presented, and we are glad to say, has been favourably received. The Board inform us that they hope to be able shortly to draft a scheme. The deposit of £60 is required, and this the Metropolitan Gardens Association have kindly promised to advance for the present. Other expenses, however, must necessarily be incurred, and the Committee have therefore decided to issue an appeal for funds. They have already received a promise of £10 from the Bishop of Bedford, and of some smaller sums from other sympathizers, among whom Mr Walter Johnson has promised £5. The movement has the support of the local members of Parliament, county councilors many of the leading clergy of the district, members of the local boards etc. The Executive Committee consists at present of The Bishop of Bedford, Chairman; Rev E K Douglas of Eton Mission, Vice Chairman; Rev E W J Bankes; Rev F W Kingsford; Rev B Meredyth Kitson, and Rev E S Hilliard (East London Church Fund); Messrs J Jones, JP, LCC; G B Holmes, J P, LCC; J Lowles, LCC; T H Empson, Hackney Vestry; B A Forrow, RNR, and E J Funge, members of the Hackney District Board of Works; James Hart, MLSB; R Parker, Chairman of Open Spaces Committee Hackney District Board of Works; T R Pitt, BA, Hackney Board of Works; with Mr W Johnson, LCC as treasurer; Captain G Yarrow Baldock as hon sec, to either of whom subscriptions may be sent, and Mr H W Fuller, assistant hon, sec.

In September 1890, the Board of Agriculture issues a draft scheme on the lines mentioned for the regulation of the marshes, and on 31st October 1890 signified to the association its intention to hold an enquiry, the association having meanwhile paid £60 required by the Board antecedent to his doing so.

The inquiry was opened at the Hackney Town Hall on 1st December 1890, by Mr Geo Pemberton Leach, Assistant-Commissioner to the Board of Agriculture. The association was represented by its solicitors, Messrs Horne and Birkett who also represented the local committee. The London County Council was represented by Mr Freeman. The Earl of Meath, as chairman of the association was one of the witnesses in favour of the scheme.

The acquisition in connection with this scheme however was adjourned by the Commissioner in order to afford the Council an opportunity of buying the marsh. This opportunity the Council took, offering £50,000 for the property, £10,000 of which was to be found by the Hackney District Board. This offer was refused and the matter dropped for the time, but negotiations were speedily renewed with the result that the lord, the commoners, and other owners of rights combined for the purpose of selling the marsh, and agreed to take £75,000, which finally, was the amount paid. Of this the Council contributed £50,000, the Hackney District Board £15,000, the Lord of the Manor £5,000, and private subscriptions £5,000. Throughout the whole negotiations a most active part was taken by Mr G B Holmes, J P, LCC, the local representative on the Council, and it is in very great part due to his untiring energy that this result was brought about. The land was finally transferred, free of all its previous existing rights, to the Council under the Board's London Open Spaces Act, 1893, and has been since that date open to the public, but the Council considered that it would be desirable to give it a formal ceremony to dedicate it for ever to the use and enjoyment of the public. As already stated, the area of the marsh is very considerable, and owing to its flatness it is a most valuable acquisition to the playgrounds of London being equally suitable for cricket in the summer and football in the winter. The steps which the Council propose to take, and which are detailed further on will it is hoped, prevent the overflowing of the marsh which has taken place in previous years, and thus render it equally available at all periods of the year.

General description of intended works

The works at present decided upon by the Council are confined to the main or central section of the marsh, ie the portion lying between the Hackney navigation on the west and the river Lee on the north and east, and the old marsh ditch on the south.

It is intended, with a view to the future prevention of floods, to form four new cuts, to take off the severe bends of the Lee and so enable the more rapid discharge of flood water, retaining the old channels, and thereby forming islands, which by suitable planting may be made pleasing features of the river. In connection with one of these cuts a bathing pool will be made. Further it is proposed to erect a low flood bank and gravelled promenade parallel to the Lee, and also a small bank alongside the waterworks drain between the Temple-mill and Homerton roads to prevent flood water from backing up from the south. These measures will, it is expected, prevent the possibility of flooding from the Lee in future; and as regards the natural drainage of the marsh and the disposal of the surplus rainfall from it, this will be

provided for by a main drain laid alongside the Temple-mill-road, which will receive the flow from the necessary minor drains which will be laid where required in low places on the marsh. This main drain will discharge by gravitation into the river at low water.

The numerous old boundary posts are to be removed and the old watercourses and other irregularities on the general surface of the marsh are to be made up as far as possible with surplus soil from the river cuts.

These works will occupy the remainder of the current year, and will exhaust the provision made in the Committee's estimates for the purpose. Other matters will require attention in the near future, for instance, the erection of proper fencing on the unprotected boundaries of the marsh to prevent cattle trespass, and the provision of a protective fence to the river banks; also the planting of trees for shade and ornament, and the placing of seats for the public, etc. No doubt also the eastern section will be protected from floods and drained in the same way as the main portion; whilst it is probable that by arrangement with the Hackney Vestry the western section will be raised, levelled and properly drained. It may fairly be expected that the result of the various works indicated, combined with proper maintenance of the area, will be to make the marsh one of the best and most attractive, as it will certainly be one of the largest playgrounds under the Council's charge.

Hackney marshes are situated in the manor of Lordshold, one of the two divisions into which the Lordship of Hackney was divided, and in 1290 Edward I granted 'free warren in this district to the Bishops of London provided that those lands be not within the metes of this forest.' This continued until the reign of Edward VI, when Bishop Ridley surrendered the manor to the King, who presented it to his Chamberlain, Lord Wentworth, in whose family it continued until its confiscation in 1652. It subsequently, in 1697, passed into the possession of the Tyssen family, and the head of a branch of that family is the present Lord of the Manor.

The river Lea and the buildings around the marshes have some very interesting historical associations. One of its branches known as the Mill river, or the Lead Mill river, supplied the water to the Temple Mills, originally erected and owned by the Knights Templars. After the dissolution of that order they became the property of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem. There were three water wheels, and by the various adaptation of the machinery thus set in motion, corn was ground, and trunks of trees were bored to form water-main pipes, some of which are still found in digging along the main thoroughfares. Points were also ground to pins and needles, as many as 120,000 needles being pointed in a day. The rough needles were then sent down to Worcestershire, where the eyes were made and the steel tempered and they were returned here to receive the finishing polish. Prince Rupert, grandson of James I, a leading Royalist commander in the wars of Commonwealth, after his retirement became governor of Windsor Castle, and spent the greater portion of his time in chemical experiments. Having invented a composition for making guns called Prince's metal, he used these mills for boring the guns after they had been cast. When, however, he died in 1682, the secret of its manufacture died with him.

Near the Temple-mills Bridge the old public house or hostelry 'The White Hart', said to have been built in 1513 (temp Henry VIII.), still stands open for refreshment, and a 'toll bar,' one of the very few survivals of that kind, levies a charge of two-pence on every horse. The road from Hackney Wick over the marshes now crosses the Lea by means of a massive iron bridge erected by the Hackney Board of Works. Formerly horses and vehicles had to ford the stream which is shallow except at flood times, whilst pedestrians crossed by a narrow plank with a hand rail.

BY H. CHIPPERFIELD

The acquisition of this vast tract of open meadow land on the borders of Middlesex and Essex,- the latest addition to our list of open spaces,- to be held in perpetuity for the benefit primarily of the dwellers now and to come of the adjacent crowded districts of East London, is a matter of congratulation, mingled with regret at the tardy accomplishment of a design first mooted a generation back, when the *locis in quo* still retained something of its pristine beauty, very different from its present state of desolation.

Hackney Marsh proper consists of about 337 acres, and extends from Lea Bridge on the north to Old Ford and Stratford on the south, and from Lower Clapton on the west to Leyton in the east. Hitherto the Marsh has formed what is known as Lammas land: that is land of which the fee simple is vested in

the Lord of the Manor, subject to certain rights of user for grazing etc, and at all times except during the hay season, here defined as from the 6th April to the 12th August in every year.

Those of us who remember what the place was like 30 or 40 years ago, feel inclined to exclaim 'Ichabod, the glory is departed.' At that time the main features of the Marshes were similar to the present, except in regard to many buildings and other encroachments of modern day; but it is the surroundings generally and the effect of them to which may be ascribed the woeful deterioration of the prospect and its air of neglect and departed attractiveness. Where green fields and wooded heights on the horizon once closed in the scene, colonies of small houses and noxious factories with lofty chimneys have sprung up, poisoning the air all around. On the Leyton side which is not so bad as that nearer to us, the Cambridge line of the Great Eastern Railway-along which at one time the traffic was comparatively light- has been converted into a huge goods exchange depot from which the shrill whistling of the engines and the banging together of the shunting trucks continues without cessation both day and night. Then again the detached parts lying between Homerton and the navigation cut have for years past been used as receptacles for dust yard refuse, probably with the view of raising the level, and so adapting the land for building purposes, save the mark!

The only portion of the Marshes which has really escaped from profaning hands is that lying between the cut before mentioned and the Lea, with the addition of the land in the rear of the White House running back to the mill-stream which issues out of the main river on the Essex side, at a short distance above the house. Even this has cruelly deteriorated and wears a forlorn look miserable to behold, The picturesque trees and thick clustering bushes, which in time gone by fringed the margin of the Lea, have mostly disappeared, and those which remain are stunted and withered. The silvery waters of the grand old river of yore as it peacefully meandered through the verdant plain; here sparkling over clear gravelly shallows with graceful trailing aquatic plants of brightest emerald rising and falling like living creatures on the bosom of the current; anon, in darkest shadow, where, in deep pools edged with waving bulrushes and the broad leaves and golden blossom of the water lily lurked the great pike, hushed in grim repose, expecting its evening prey; the straggling banks on either side clothed as spring passed to summer and summer to autumn with the turquoise blue of the forget-me-not, the ivory white of the crowfoot, the modest pink of the ragged robin, the purple loose-strife, and many other simple but beautiful wild flowers with their wealth of brilliant colouring; all around the bright yellow carpet of buttercups, set off by the russet brown of the sorrel and dock, the air fragrant with lovely odour of the meadow sweet, and wild rose, and resonant with the delicious song of the feathered tribes- these are things of the past. Now the river is usually low, and the sides and clumps of rushes in mid-stream are covered by a filthy black slime, showing the pollution of the water by the Walthamstow sewage, which has dealt destruction to both fish and plants.

Let no one imagine that the picture is overdrawn: the present speaks for itself, and, as to the past, information can be easily obtained to satisfy the incredulous.

In the good old time, the approaches to the Marshes from Hackney Wick, Homerton or Clapton respectively, were of an extremely rural character. By way of the first, after passing under the railway arch, there were but few houses, and these principally of the quaint cottage type. Just before the meadows were reached, nearly opposite to where the present police station stands, was a tumble down looking structure, the occupant of which eked out a scanty existence by retailing ginger beer and doubtful looking cakes to the passers by, together with the fish netted by him in the adjacent cut, the latter being displayed in dishes, so that by the outlay of a few pence the unsuccessful angler was able to avoid returning home with an empty creel. Beyond were hedges laden with hawthorn bloom in early summer, and on the left side a ditch and pond, covered with green duckweed, forming a great resort for frogs and newts, whose capture was eagerly sought after by young, ragged, and shoeless aspirants armed with primitive nets and carrying wide mouthed pickle bottles to receive their spoils.

The road through Homerton has altered less than the others, except that on the outskirts of the sleepy old village, street after street of small squalid houses have sprung up where formerly green fields reigned supreme. Coming from Clapton past the pond with its swans and annual brood of cygnets, down Pond or Pound Lane, now Millfields Road, the neighbourhood is changed beyond recognition. With the exception of the pretty old houses and cottages at the entrance and the Clapton Cricket ground, some distance along, nothing remains to identify the spot. It is true that the present South Mill Fields -which extend to Lea Bridge- have escaped the despoiler, but one looks vainly for the narrow winding countryfied lane of old, with its high banks and thick hedgerows; for the paddock on the left where the

open air tea meetings and festivities of the local chapels and Sunday schools were held, as well as for Horning's well known dairy farm and its rustic barns and sheds, the old watch dog chained up near the gate, the bright green turf and numerous cows. Here various well known cricket clubs were located, of which the best remembered were the Hope, Shakespeare, Amhurst and Lower Clapton, the last named, now playing elsewhere, being the sole survivor. The Clapton Cricket ground- surrounded by a loft hoarding- alone remains in the hollow below; the club, year by year increasing its reputation, and being one of the strongest amateur organizations in or near London.

There were monsters in the Lea in the old days, and rare birds were often observed along its banks. All who are interested in natural history, when visiting the neighbourhood, should take the opportunity of inspecting the White House museum. The house stands isolated in the centre of the Marsh, beside the river, over which it is approached by a rustic wooden bridge. The gem of the collection is a fine specimen of the cream-coloured courser, so called by reason of its speed of foot and the colour of its plumage. It is a native of Barbary and Abyssinia, and during the last century only three or four examples have been taken in this country. Among the other birds exhibited are the smew, goosander, spur-winged plover, golden plover, lapwing, dotterel, sandpiper, greenshank, redshank, shrike, nightjar, snipe, summer snipe, jack snipe, woodcock, kingfisher, water-rail, land-rail, waxwing, kestrel, owl, ruff, reeve, stint, oxbird, dabchick, moorhen, coot, tern, heron, gull, curlew, whimbrel, besides such freaks of nature as a white sparrow and a cream lark. The fish shewn include a jack of 25lbs., trout 11 1/2lbs, barbel 13 1/2lbs., chub 7 1/2lbs, carp 11lbs, bream 5 3/4lbs and an eel of 6 3/4lbs. At the period these were principally taken the White House Fishery boasted of nearly 150 annual subscribers, in addition to being patronised by many humbler disciples of Isaak Walton, whose limited means only enabled them to take daily tickets; now hardly a fisherman is to be met with from one end of the water to the other, and the chances of sport stand at zero. Mrs Beresford, the courteous hostess, and her sons are all the time ready to afford information to visitors, but if a quiet view is desired, a day should be chosen other than a Sunday, Monday or Saturday, when the place is inconveniently crowded. Mrs Beresford lost her husband six or seven years ago, and any account of the Marsh would be incomplete were his name omitted. George Beresford- as he was familiarly known- was a popular man all round; a splendid shot and a keen fisherman; most of the stuffed birds and fish at the White House being examples of his prowess with gun and rod. Mounted on his grey horse, knowing every inch of the ground, he was a perfect terror to evil doers and did much to maintain order in this lonely spot, at one time seldom visited by the custodians of the peace.

Another famous fishing station, but of a remoter period, was the 'Horse and Groom' at Lea Bridge, which, with some very fine trees surrounding it, was demolished many years ago in order to make way for the works of the East London Water Company then in course of construction.

At the opposite end of the Marsh, that is to say, at Temple Mills, is the White Hart, a well known pleasure resort of east-enders. The road from Hackney Wick over the Marshes now crosses the Lea by means of a massive ugly iron bridge. Formerly horses and vehicles had to ford the stream, which is shallow except at flood times; whilst pedestrians availed themselves of a narrow plank guarded by a hand-rail. In the gardens of the 'White Hart' has stood for many years a large pollard popular, the spreading branches of which support a capacious platform approached by a flight of steps. Here, mounted aloft, the frequenters of the house, on a fine day, smoke their pipes and quaff their beers, monarchs of all they survey.

The Lea is a tidal river to Temple Mills, and flounders were often caught in its waters in days gone by, and occasionally as far up as the 'White House'.

The most interesting fact in connection with this part of the Marsh is that which occurred in the ninth century, when the Danish Vikings or Norsemen- those daring sea-robbers, then the terror of all Christendom- in their vessels painted to represent dragons, with banners flying bearing the emblem of the raven, sailed up the Thames and ascended the Lea, penetrating as far as Ware in Hertfordshire, where they built a fortified camp, pillaging the adjacent villages on their way. The citizens of London turned out to dislodge the foe, but after a fierce battle were repulsed with heavy loss. Whereupon, by order of King Alfred, channels were cut here and at Waltham by which the current of the Lea was diverted and the depth reduced:- according to Stow's annals 'soe that where shippes before had sayled, now a smal boate could scantily rowe,' and thus the enemy's fleet was prevented from returning to the Thames. The Danes, finding themselves thus deprived of all subsistence, and their ships rendered useless, were obliged to break up their camp with the utmost precipitation and to depart without their vessels. The citizens

immediately set about the demolishing of their works, and having restored the navigation of the river Lea, brought several of the ships in triumph to London and destroyed the remainder.

In the vicinity of the 'White Hart' traces of the channels cut are still in existence. Doubts have often been raised as to the possibility of the Danish vessels *sailing* up to Ware inasmuch as the Thames high water mark is at least 40 or 50 feet below the level of the Hertfordshire town. During the time of the Romans the Lea valley was a wide estuary, tidal as far as Waltham; and it will be bourn in mind that the Danish craft were undecked, only about 40 feet in length and of very slight draught, and those in command were bold sailors and men of ready resources. The old writers of authority were unanimous in opinion that the Danish fleet did get up to Ware, and whether the last part of the voyage was accomplished by actual sailing or other means is a question which may be well passed over.

The Lea valley estuary began to contract when the Old Ford near Stratford- the 'ford of the street' or Roman road into Essex was abandoned. This road, by some historians called Ikenild street, by others a branch of Watling street- which ran from Dover to London and thence on to St Albans- is said to have led eastwards up Old street and over Bethnal green to Old Ford, where it crossed the Lea and went on to Colchester. Afterwards what was know as the Street Ford came into use. Lysons refers to the old arched bridge which succeeded the primitive mode of swimming or wading across, and states that at an inquiry taken 'before Robert de Retford and Harry Spigurnell, the Kings Justices, in 1303, the jurors decided, upon their oath, that at the time when Matlida, the good Queen, lived, the road from London to Essex was by a place called Old Ford where there was no bridge, and during inundations was so dangerous that many passengers lost their lives, which, coming to the Queen's ears, she caused the river to be turned where it now is, namely, between the towns of Stratford and West Ham; and of her bounty caused the bridge and road to be made'.

This bridge was allowed to get into decay, and became almost as dangerous as the former Old Ford; when another good queen- Elinor- 'of her bounty ordered it to be repaired, committing the charge of it to William de Capella, keeper of her chapel'. From drawings still existing, the bridge appears to have been a quaint old pile, narrow and without a footbridge, the perils of which were provided for by a wooden foot-gallery attached to one side of it. This spot was known in Chaucer's time at Stratford atte Bow, meaning the bow or arch.

In the year 1361, the plague having made its reappearance in France, the State thought it advisable to use every precaution against its spreading in England; and as it was imagined it might be communicated or revived in London by the putrid blood and entrails of beasts killed in the city and thrown into the streets, the King, Edward III, by way of precaution, issued his commands in a letter addressed to the Mayor and Sheriffs, in which he says 'Because by killing of great beasts, etc, from whose putrid blood running down the streets, and the bowels cast into the Thames, the air of the city is very much corrupted and infected; whence horrible and filthy stinks proceed, sicknesses and many other evils have happened to such as have abode in the same city or have resorted to it, and great dangers are feared to fall out for the time to come, unless remedy be immediately made against it; We, willing to prevent such danger, and to provide as much as within us lies, for the honesty of the said city, and the safety of our people, by the consent of our Council in our present Parliament, have ordained, that all bulls, oxen, hogs and other gross creatures to be killed for the sustenation of the said city, be led as far as the town of Stratford, on one (the east) part of London; and to the town of Knightsbridge on the other (or west) said; and not on this side to be killed; and that their bowels be there cleaned and be brought together with the flesh to the said city and be sold; on the penalty of forfeiture of the creatures killed, and one year's imprisonment of the butcher. This ordinance to be publicly proclaimed and held; and all butchers doing otherwise to be chastised and punished according to the form of the ordinance aforesaid. Witness the King at Westminster, the twenty-fifth day of February'. This and every other precaution taken to keep out the plague, however, proved ineffectual; the pestilence reached London, and its ravages were so destructive, that upwards of twelve hundred persons are recorded to have fallen victims in the course of two days.

Half a century ago flourished near Old Ford the then celebrated Clare Hall tea gardens, one of the attractions being a large model of a mill, which, according to the proprietor 'ground old people young'. This was accomplished by means of a mechanical contrivance consisting of two endless bands carrying revolving figures of old men and women on one and boys and girls on the other. When the mill was set in motion it had the appearance of taking in the old at the top and bringing them out young at the bottom.

Another more recent place of entertainment patronised extensively by the sporting fraternity was the White Lion at Hackney Wick, perhaps more generally known as Baum's running ground. This

adjoined the up platform of the old Victoria Park station of the North London Railway, and was built over when the station was removed to its present site, a couple of hundred yards away, some twenty five years since. At these grounds famous pedestrian, boxing and wrestling matches took place; that which created the greatest sensation being the victory of Teddy Mills, the English champion over the much-vaunted Indian runner, Deerfoot.

On the railway, a short distance eastward from here, occurred, in the sixties, the cruel murder of Mr Briggs, a respected inhabitant of Clapton Square- on his way home from Fenchurch Street station to Hackney- by a German named Muller, who threw his victim's body from the carriage on to the line where it crosses Sir George Duckett's canal. Muller was afterwards arrested at New York; tried at the Old Bailey, convicted principally on circumstantial evidence, and ultimately expiated his offence at Newgate. This, of course, happened previous to the opening of the Broad Street terminus, and likewise to the opening of the Great Eastern suburban line to Hackney Downs. The only means of communication between Hackney and the City at that time was by rail from Fenchurch Street and by the London Omnibus Company's and Breach's busses from the Royal Exchange.

Across the Marsh to the east of Lea Bridge is seen the square turreted church of St Mary, Leyton. Formerly this was a picturesque little village, but is now swollen in dimensions and certainly not improved in appearance by the addition of a number of small houses. There still remains traces of its rural character in the handsome old residences yet existing. In one of these, called, Eltoe House, in Church Lane, the late Cardinal Wiseman for many years lived. In Park Place, close by, William Morris, the poet, was born and resided with his mother, for a long period.

The Church contains some fine brasses and monuments, several of the latter being by Flaxman. The Rectory House once belonged to George IV and was presented by him to the Rev Purdoe, together with the advowson of the benefice.

The soil of the network of streams forming the Lea delta from the Thames as far as Tottenham is composed of a rich peaty alluvium. From time to time, along the valley, discoveries of the remains of huge mammalians- including those of elephants- belonging to the pleistocene and postpliocene periods, have been made, together with large numbers of flint and bronze implements.

The otter, as well as hares and rabbits, used often to be seen in neighbourhood of the Marsh, but these, like the water rat or water sole- the sole representative of the ancient race of beavers in Great Britain- have entirely disappeared; the latter in great measure, having been exterminated by the land or sewer rat, which is now only too plentiful. A ghastly story, known as the 'Lea Mystery' is told, the events of which occurred barely a couple of years ago. A woman, young and attractive, disappeared at Lea Bridge under suspicious circumstances, which have never come to light. The water was dragged without avail, but a day or two afterwards the body was discovered in the early morning, embedded among the reeds on the edge of the river, close by the White House, with one side of the face eaten away by rats.

ANECDOTES AND RESEARCH BY JOAN HARDINGES

Hackney Marsh

I remember my parents telling me that when they first moved to Marsh Hill in 1929, it was quite rural. There were water cress beds on the site of Kingsmead Estate and there was a narrow wooden bridge over the canal. At that time Trehurst Street was the last road off Marsh Hill before the marshes. The north end of Adley Street had been built, but my flat and the Homerton Road end of Adley Street was not built until 1926.

My father had a shop on the corner of Daubeney Road and Marsh Hill which was built about 1906. Before this there was open fields and farms along Marsh Hill. There used to be flooding when it rained and the houses on the south side of Marsh Hill would get flooded, even as late as the 1930's.

At the outbreak of World War II, I remember my parents taking me across the marshes to the riverside near the White Hart Pub where there was an army camp. I was quite frightened seeing the soldiers in their uniforms and the barbed wire. I don't know what regiment this was. I remember the search lights and guns at this site.

My father had an allotment on a triangle of ground in front of the Eton Manor Boys' Club. There was a soldier on guard at the entrance to Temple Mills and the wall of the Club ground was painted with camouflage, with sand bags at the bottom and barbed wire on the top.

Corn was grown on part of the field to the north east of the Canal near Homerton Bridge and we used to glean the ears of corn at harvest time for our chickens. My father played cricket on this field for a local team before the war and there was a slope from the road down to the field. During the war rubble was dumped here from bomb sites which formed huge hills all over the field. We children used to go over there and search for goodies amongst the debris. After the war this was levelled over to form the playing fields we know to-day.

There was a barrage balloon site on Mabley Green, and Kenny Stubbs who lived opposite me in Marsh Hill was the air force mascot. He would have been between the ages of 8 and 11 years and he used to dress in a miniature air force uniform and go along to the site. I don't know where Kenny is now, but his sister lives in Basildon. Trenches were dug out on Mabley Green and what is now Wick Field.

In 1947 during the hard winter the canal and river overflowed and the snow melted with the consequence that Wick Field and the cricket field on both sides of the road between the canal and the river were like lakes with all kinds of water fowl swimming on them.

OTHER NOTES FROM JOAN HARDINGES

Beresford White House

It is believed that the Beresford White House became derelict in 1917 and was pulled down. I remember some time just before the war when I was a small girl, my father taking me over the marshes and lifting me up to look over a fence, behind which there was a derelict house. I thought this was the White House, as it was on a path near the river or canal, and I have not been able to discover another house in the area. This would have been about 1937. I know that it was to be let or sold in 1911 but what happened to it after that I don't know.

In 1996 I corresponded with several people regarding the Beresford family and the White House Fishery:

A Mrs Hilda Jones of Farnham, Surrey, had written an article on the White House for 'Cockney Ancestor'. She had been in touch with a Mrs Patsy Williams in New Zealand who said that her gt.gt. Grandfather, James Muir Mc.Guffie, who was Vice Consul of Gonaives in Haiti, had written letters to the Foreign Office in 1845 from the White House, but she had not been able to trace any family connection with the Beresfords.

I helped with some Monumental Inscription (M.I.) indexing at St. Barnabas Homerton a few years ago for the East of London Family History Society. We cross referenced the M.I.'s with the burial registers. I kept my notes and have just noticed that an Archibald McGuffie was buried at St. Barnabas on the 8 Dec 1847 aged 79, and a Mary McGuffie on the 8 Oct 1849 aged 71. It is possible that the Vice Consul was a relative staying at the White House whilst visiting Archibald and Mary. Perhaps the White House did B & B.

I remember seeing in the burial registers several folk who were connected with the marshes and river, such as Marsh Gate Keepers, etc.

A Derrick Beresford Johnson of Chigwell, descendant of the Beresfords, wrote to David Mander and myself in 1996 regarding photos of the family and the family history. One of these was of George Beresford and his three year old grand daughter Louise Maria taken in 1863. Another was of the family in the garden of the house and one of the Beresford family Cricket team. I believe Hackney Archives have copies of these photos. I only have photo-copies which are not very clear, which Derrick Beresford Johnson sent me.

Other findings

There is a 1745 map of Hackney Marsh showing the plots of land belonging to the proprietors.

I am researching the history of Newcomes School which was on the site of the Congress Hall in Lower Clapton Road, and in the 17th and 18th centuries several folk living on the east side of the road had a few acres of land on the marsh leased or rented from Tyssen, Lord of the Manor. Details in the Lordshold Manorial Records at the London Metropolitan ArchivesA. The school had land on Hackney Downs.

George Grocott in his 'Hackney Fifty Years Ago' written in 1915, describing Hackney in 1865 said that 'The Marsh formed a hunting ground for Cockney Sportsmen attracted by the trap shooting contests which were constantly taking place on that part of the marsh adjoining the White House public house and lying between the main river and the Lead Mill Stream.'