

A History of LONDON FIELDS

Hackney was not mentioned by name in the Domesday Book, most of the land then being part of the Bishop of London's enormous **Stebunheath (Stepney) manor** or vill. This is thought to have been part of the foundation grant of the see of the Bishop of London, possibly acquired by the bishopric as far back as 604. Queen Elizabeth transferred the Lordship and manors of Stepney and Hackney, in the first year of her reign (1558) to a Lord Thomas Wentworth. Later, "in the 20th year of the reign of James 1" (1621-22) the two manors were separated by a later Lord Wentworth and had this confirmed by an act of parliament. Manorial Courts for the whole manor were still held in Stepney until the 17th century.

In **1275** the area that is now London Fields was recorded as common pastureland adjoining Cambridge Heath. It was not until **1540** that the name London Field is found recorded as a separate item consisting of around 100 acres in changing ownership of land (it generally didn't become plural until the later half of the 19th century). London Field was one of the many 'commonable lands' of Hackney where the commoners of the parish could graze their livestock on the fields from Lammas Day (Anglo Saxon for bread mass), August 1st, celebrating the first loaf after the crops had been harvested, to Lady Day, March 25th. This arrangement was known as **Lammas Rights** and was protected by law.

Hackney, **the largest parish in the county of Middlesex** and so very close to the City of London, had been a favourite residence of wealthy Londoners from the Middle Ages to the 19th century. Hackney was known for its healthy air and pure spring waters. It became increasingly attractive following the "Great Plague of London" in 1665 that had not affected Hackney greatly (only 132 died in all the villages of the parish) and the Great Fire the year after. Wealthy residents, who wished to be close to the court, entertainment and the financial centre of the kingdom, but also enjoy country living, built large houses in Hackney.

Hackney was declared **in 1756 to excel all other villages in the kingdom in the opulence of its inhabitants**. These houses were surrounded by open countryside that was used for agriculture, hunting, nurseries, market gardens and the meadows along the Lea and elsewhere for grazing and production of hay (the largest crop, to power London's large horse population). The bricks for these grand buildings would have been made in the many local brickfields using the abundant local clay. By 1806, with all the development, brickfields occupied 170 acres; more than all the market gardens and nurseries.

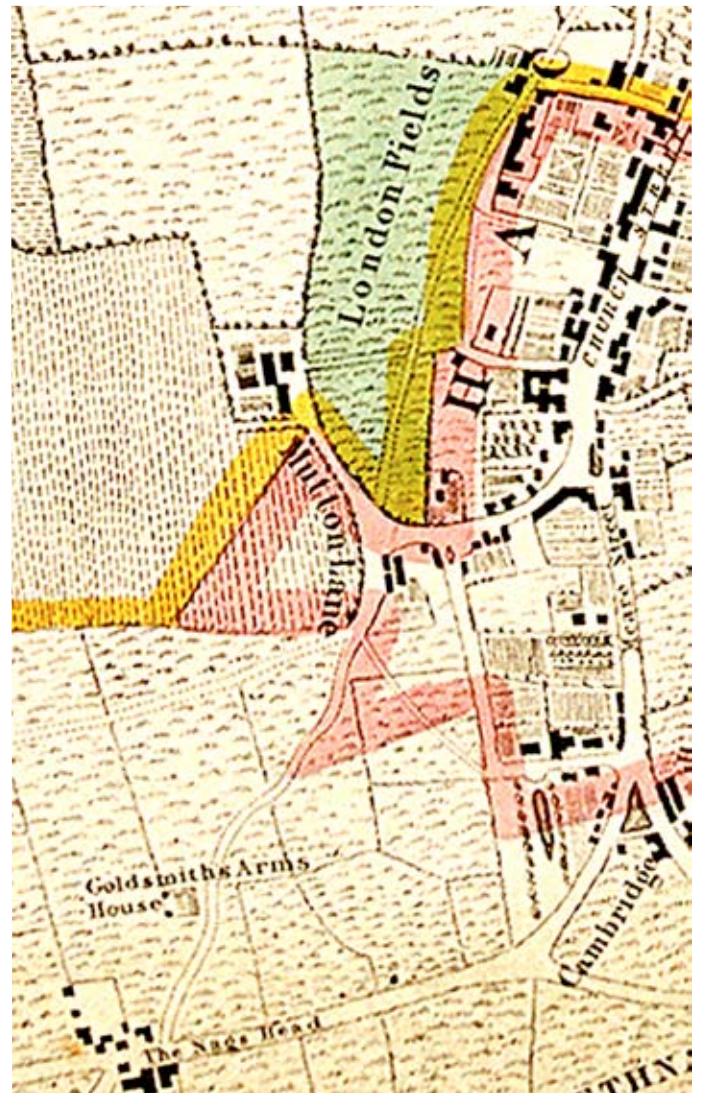
Although it is unclear how the name London Field came into being, the most likely explanation is the field's position, on what had been for centuries the main footpath from the village of Hackney and beyond the river Lea, from Essex, to the City of London. They knew when they crossed this field that they were only 2 miles from the City gate.

The route ran from Hackney Grove, the site of the present Town Hall Square, down Grove Passage (which was Church Path before 1907) and along Martello Street (before 1938 Tower Street); the present cycle route through the Fields to Broad-

way Market (formerly Broadway 1881-1937 and Duncan Place 1811-1881- prior to that Mutton Lane); Goldsmiths Row, named for 6 almshouses built in 1703 for the Goldsmith's Co. (once also Mutton Lane); along Columbia Road (once Bird Cage Walk leading to the Bird Cage Inn); Virginia Road; Shoreditch High Street; through Norton Folgate and on to Bishopsgate (once known as Bishopsgate Without as it started outside of the city's Bishop Gate).

This path was used by market porters and drovers to take produce and walk animals - from both near and distant farms and the local nurseries, to Cheapside produce market within the City or Smithfield meat market without to the west of the city. The importance of the route is illustrated by a number of bequests for the upkeep of the path. In 1616 a Mrs. Margaret Audley left £35 a year, "part for repairing bridges, stiles and rails," between Clapton and Shoreditch and in 1633 David Doulben, a former vicar of Hackney, left £30 for a similar purpose.

In the early 16th century sixty one acres of London Fields are recorded as belonging to the Hospital of Savoy, by 1553 however, the hospital had been dissolved and its holdings passed to St Thomas' Hospital. St Thomas' Hospital still owned land in the area for centuries and later built on its nearby land, at Shore Place, just east of Mare Street, becoming St. Thomas's Square in 1771-2 (connected to London Field by London Lane). In 1700, London Field itself is recorded as being divided into six strips belonging to four people. Apart from its use as a thoroughfare, London Field was for long used to graze livestock.



1745 John Rocque's Map

By the ends of 16th century the area between Mare Street and London Field had become a distinct settlement along the route from London to Cambridge and Newmarket, the names of the local inns or posting houses of the time; the old Flying Horse Inn with courtyard at Flying Horse Yard (from 1821 Exmouth Place) leading to the London Field; the Nags Head in Hackney

Road; the Horse & Groom, with a rear “tea gardens extending to the Church Path” (its latest reincarnation by Elingfort Road was renamed Madigans and then AMP recently), all reflect the area’s strong coaching links.

By 1723 Mare Street had 19 licensed inns; it must have been very popular. While the names of the inns surrounding London Field, the Lamb Inn and Shoulder of Mutton named after the field opposite (from 1798 known as Shoulder of Mutton and Cat, later to be shortened to Cat & Mutton), and the local street names Lamb Lane (in the 18th century named Tower Street, for a large house on the corner of Church Street), Sheep Lane and Mutton Lane, suggest that the area was very much involved in sheep farming.

During the 18th century the rural nature of the area changed little, although by the end of the century Samuel Rhodes of Hoxton, farmer, brickmaker and land speculator bought some of the lands east of Kingsland Road, including the Lamb Inn at Lamb Lane (now Forest Road) and all or part of London Fields farm, in 1788-9 from F. J. Tyssen’s trustees. Tyssen (d. 1781) was the **Lord of the Manor for Hackney** and probably the last to live in the parish. Those lands were later said to form the Lamb Farm estate of around 140 acres, stretching from behind the buildings fronting Kingsland Road eastward to London Field, northward to Dalston Lane and Pigwell brook, and southward to the parish boundary. He and his forbears became the largest property developer in the area.

His land was divided between his 3 sons in 1795, one of them, William, had something of a **ruthless reputation** and was found to have obtained the lease of 150 acres of what had been the Balmes Estate, after he had persuaded the elderly Rev. Richard DeBeauvoir to give him the land at a very favourable rate. It was said to be the largest single development proposed by a speculative developer in London. Had his luxurious plans been completed before the “west end” was built the finest part of London could have been known as the “north end” in Hackney. However Rhodes was found to have obtained the lease unfairly and the land reverted to the DeBeauvoir family and in the long, 10 year legal wrangle, this unique opportunity was lost.

Whilst William Rhodes (d. 1843) was very successful in land acquisition and development (his lands can be seen marked with “W. R.” on the Thomas Starling 1831 map) he was somewhat overshadowed by his later relative Cecil Rhodes.

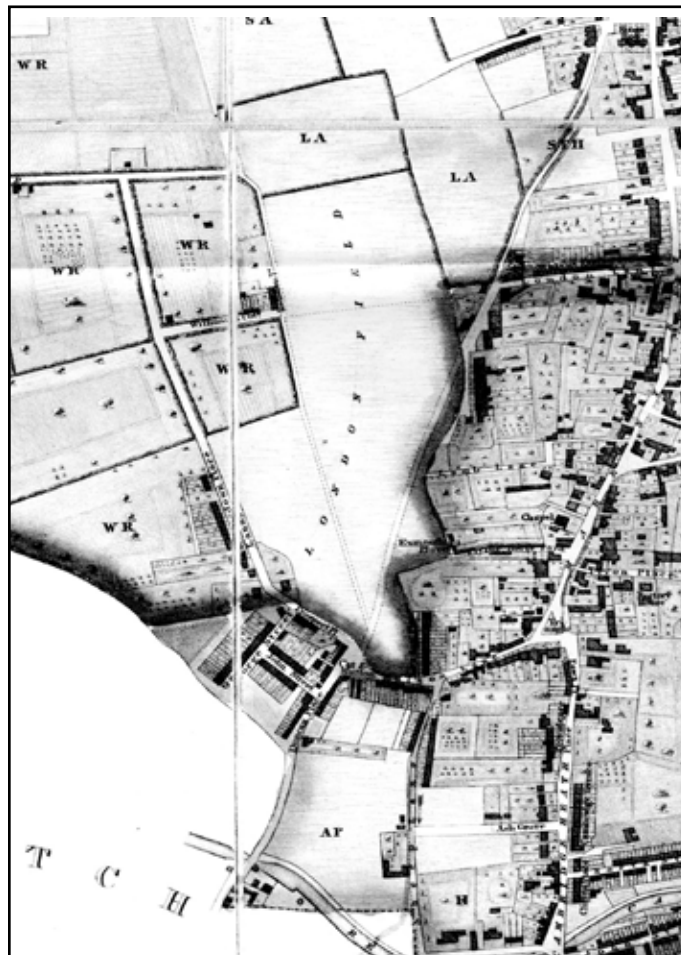
John Rocque’s Map of 1745 shows the current line of Broadway Market and its’ continuation northward then called Mutton Lane, curving around the Leg of Mutton field, leading to some farm buildings. This is the early beginning of what is now known as Lansdowne Drive on the west of London Field. Mutton Lane was later the name for the crescent around the south of the Field, (later known as West Street by 1859 and from 1911 Westgate Street) to meet Mare Street at the triangle.

The Hackney section of the Regent’s Canal was opened in 1820. This probably helped the development of the area along Broadway Market to the south of the Field. Acton Lock, named after the local landowner, was located close by and passing boats may well have stopped there for provisions, possibly buying from local farmers. A market has been held there from at least 1835. While a map of 1809-10 shows early development to the eastern side of Broadway Market, then called Duncan Place. It was renamed the Broadway in 1881 and became Broadway Market in 1937. The present built form of the houses and shops on Broadway Market were substantially developed as they are today by about 1860.

The earliest housing developments facing the Field were at the northeast corner, by Church Path, part of which with development became Tower Street (Martello Street from 1938). It was partly developed on the east side well before 1820 and the staggered section completed before 1827. All that’s remains of the large early buildings in Martello Street are No. 10, which had another story added to it at a later date and No18 that was refurbished in 1990. Both lost their enormous garden with the coming of the railway. London Place, a row of small houses in the south-east, (named before 1810, later part of London Fields East Side) leading north off Mutton Lane. This can be found in maps up to 1939, suggesting it was another casualty of the war (the Ann Tayer Centre was built on its site).

Prospect Place was then built in two sections at the north end of Mutton Lane (now 172-186 Lansdowne Drive [LD]), and short-

ly after Lansdowne Place (only 170 LD remains) and Terrace (the large terrace facing London Fields on the west side 126-148 LD [refurbished by the GLC]). Both were built in Lansdowne Road before 1827 (changed to Lansdowne Drive from 1938). Helmsley Terrace in the middle of the eastern side was finished by about 1852 (now London Fields East Side). The Shoulder of Mutton Field (see shape in 1745 map), to the southwest of Lansdowne Drive had become built on and named George and John Streets by the 1820’s (later known as Hamburg and Bremen Streets). Then by 1918 after WW1 they lost their German names and took their modern names of Croston and Dericote Streets.



1831 Thomas Starling Map

Lastly, there was Twemlow Terrace in Mutton Lane, later West Street (now Westgate Street), showing on the 1831 Starling map. Now with London Fields Primary School on most of their site.

Benjamin Clarke, a local doctor who lived at 224 Mare Street (on the corner of what is now Darnley Road and once the entrance to the famous Loddiges Nursery) writing in a series of articles under the pseudonym of “FRCS” in 1892-3, published in The Hackney Mercury, reminisced about his childhood in the early part of the century. “Well do I remember the surroundings of London Fields as nearly all fields, save the belt of good houses known as Lansdowne Place and Terrace – the favourite dwelling-place of many wealthy Jews some sixty years ago. Richmond Road on their northern side was pastureland, with no thoroughfare direct from Mare Street”.

He continues, “we crossed (London Field) by a footpath from either Lamb Lane or London Lane, and found ourselves in a wide grass-grown farm road, by a pasture field...” By the early 1860’s all the streets around London Field were completely built upon. He continues to recall how on the east side, “there were no houses between London Place and the top of Lamb Lane.” “On the east from Lamb Lane northward is Tower Street, formerly the residence of some of our wealthy parishioners.”

Some modern descriptions mention that London Field once had a pond at one end and a stream down the west side, but these cannot be found on any of the old maps. There was a pond at the triangle on Mare Street, which accounts for the widened street there. Clarke mentions a brook, which had once ran from

Hampstead, across Islington, through Kingsland and far to the west of London Field which once formed part of the “boundary between Hackney, Shoreditch and Bethnal Green,” flowing just south of the Regents Canal. It dried up with the canals construction. Traces of its existence were still in evidence years after. In fact in an 1827 map a string of pools can be seen south of the Regent’s Canal. A small brick bridge over a dry ditch was all that remained. “The stream fed a very large, deep and dangerous pond,” ... “between the canal and Hackney Road,” ... “where the three gigantic gasometers now stand” (the Imperial Gasworks).

Benjamin Clarke also mentions how the Nags Head in Hackney Road (see 1745 map), “a somewhat old tavern, and a meeting place for the cricketers whose pitches were in London Field”. In fact the first record of a cricket match on London Fields is in 1802 was when a team of “11 gentlemen” from Clapton played a local team of “11 gentlemen” for a wager of 500 guineas. This was an enormous sum of money for the time and could have bought a village. The visiting side ran them out victorious, defeating them by an innings and 49 runs.

Clarke also remembers, that “during the summer months” on the Fields, “the East India Company’s Volunteer Regiment - a strong, well appointed force - used frequently to come there for drill and field manoeuvring”. There was also a 1st Royal Tower Hamlets Militia Barracks nearby since the mid 19th century, to the south of Shrubland Road (the barracks was later to be turned by c. 1910 into a bus garage). A number of voluntary militia organisations sprang up in the mid 1850’s due to a fear at the time of a French invasion.

At the beginning of the 19th Century the area around London Field was still largely rural. Meanwhile Sir William Middleton, heir to the Actons, was the second largest developer; building on land he may have bought from William Rhodes. He built Queen’s Road (now Queensbridge Road), partly through Rhodes’s land. It was apparently designed by Sir William’s surveyor George Pownall (also responsible for the layout of Albion Square) as a carriageway from his property near the Regent’s canal through more spacious streets, commemorating the Middleton family.

Exchanges of lands took place with Rhodes in 1843 and 1845. The development of Middleton’s outlying land north and east of London Fields involved his buying a field behind Hackney Grove in 1838 from the executors of Dann’s estate and an agreement with St. Thomas’s hospital and with Spurstowe’s charity in 1843, for extending Richmond Road eastward to Mare Street. It was only by the early 1860’s that Richmond Road lined with houses on both sides completed its connection to Mare Street at the south end of Hackney village, sealing off the north end of London Fields. With houses crowding onto the northern side and then with Eleanor Road on the north-eastern side of London Fields; the country atmosphere of the area was finally lost.

After the enabling Act of Parliament was passed to build the Great Eastern Railway line in 1870, the railway was opened, running on the viaduct, arching along the eastern boundary of London Fields. With its building, some of the fairly new housing along the route had to be demolished. London Fields station was opened on May 27 1872, at the same time as Bethnal Green, Cambridge Heath and Hackney Downs stations. It had a large impact on the area; most of the owners of the few remaining large houses moved out, while the area east of the railway was further developed, with workshops moving into the railway arches. This area already had some workshops, but now it began to take on more of the industrial air than ever, that exists to this day,

With the rapid development of housing in the area, certain predaceous developers were already nibbling away at the edges of common land. London Fields and other common land were in danger of succumbing to the great building bonanza. Parts of London Fields were lost to houses. The developers were looking for any strip of land they could find. Vendors in 1862 appealed to builders, dismissing Lammas rights as little used and of no value, while gravel digging on much of the common land, almost brought riots and started litigation. Fortunately the campaign by preservationists grew to a momentum that reached parliament.

Enough commons and Lammas lands were preserved from 19th-century building to make Hackney relatively rich in open spaces, although most were useful rather than ornamental. Under the Metropolitan Commons Act, 1866, the district board organized a petition for the inclosure of nearly 180 acres, col-

lectively described as Hackney commons, whose transfer to the Metropolitan Board of Works (M.B.W.) was confirmed in an Act of 1872. The lands were Clapton common (9¼ a.), Stoke Newington common (5½ a.), North and South Mill fields (57½a.), Hackney Downs (50 a.), Hackney or Well Street common (30 a.), London Fields (27 a.), and strips of waste in Dalston Lane and Grove Street (later Lauriston Road). The Lord of the Manor while repudiating his agent’s digging for gravel on Stoke Newington common, in 1875 provoked protests by inclosing part of Hackney Downs and the Mill fields. His fences were torn down, as were notices put up by the Grocers’ Co. in 1877, but Chancery upheld him against the M.B.W. in 1879. His rights were purchased by the M.B.W. under an Act of 1881 and those of other freeholders under a further Act of 1884. Shortly after in 1893 Hackney marshes were also saved.

After becoming a park under the supervision of the Board of Works (the unelected predecessor of the LCC) it was necessary to flatten and level its surface. It was then sown with fresh grass seeds and shortly after the well-known lines of Plane trees were planted.



1862 Edward Stanford Map

Being rather young the trees were planted much closer than you find them now, to be thinned out in later stages. There was a small bandstand built in the middle of the park showing on the 1894 Ordnance Survey map. Later to be demolished and replaced by a larger, grander one slightly to the southeast, which itself was removed shortly after WWII. This was shown in the 1913 Ordnance Survey map surrounded by 8 oak trees; there are only 3 oaks remaining on the site today.

Many of the properties around London Fields became multi-occupied and increasingly neglected and dilapidated. Charles Booth’s 1887 poverty report and its map show how there was an incredible mix of wealth and poverty in this area at the time.

<http://www.umich.edu/%7Erisotto/partialzooms/ne/50nek12.html>

His later reports indicate increasing deprivation towards the end of the century in Hackney. He was shown around the district by a local policeman, inspector Fitzgerald, and mentions how it was noticeable how the streets between London Fields and

Mare Street became progressively worse as they worked their way south. He comments on Helmsley Terrace, the row of well built houses facing on the east side of the Fields, how it had become "all boot and shoe factories" ... "They should be good dwelling places".

The streets to the south were noted as being "very rough and poor". "In Warburton Street was a notice that 12 freehold dwellings were to be sold", the 12 bringing in a total rental of £218-8s-0d per annum. He comments, "It is strange that there should be so much poverty in the neighbourhood of a fine open space like London Fields".

This naturally influenced the Fields, which by then was controlled by the LCC. He complained that they were "a dreary waste. The grass is coarse and tussocky. There are no shrubs, no flowers", while the southern corner by the Broadway market had been asphalted. His notebooks can be viewed on the web. This one, Book 347, is on <http://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks/b347/jpg/43.html>

Hackney was the largest Middlesex parish until it was included in the County of London in 1889 under the London Government Act. Its creation was forced by a succession of scandals involving its predecessor the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW). The MBW, which had run London's infrastructure such as roads, drains, water supply and bridges, had not been directly elected.

The London County Council (LCC) was created as the principal administrative body for the County of London; a lower tier of 28 metropolitan boroughs was created in 1899, replacing the earlier parishes and vestries. Hackney had become a metropolitan borough and the first borough council was elected in 1900, superseding the parish vestry and trustees.

In 1904 the new London wide authority, opened the first of its blocks of council flats in Hackney one of them overlooking the south corner of London Fields; Darcy Buildings (later Darcy House) with 40 dwellings. The other block being Valette Buildings in Valette Street. Darcy was built on the site of Pacifico's almshouses (c. 1851) originally built for Spanish and Portuguese Sephardic Jews.

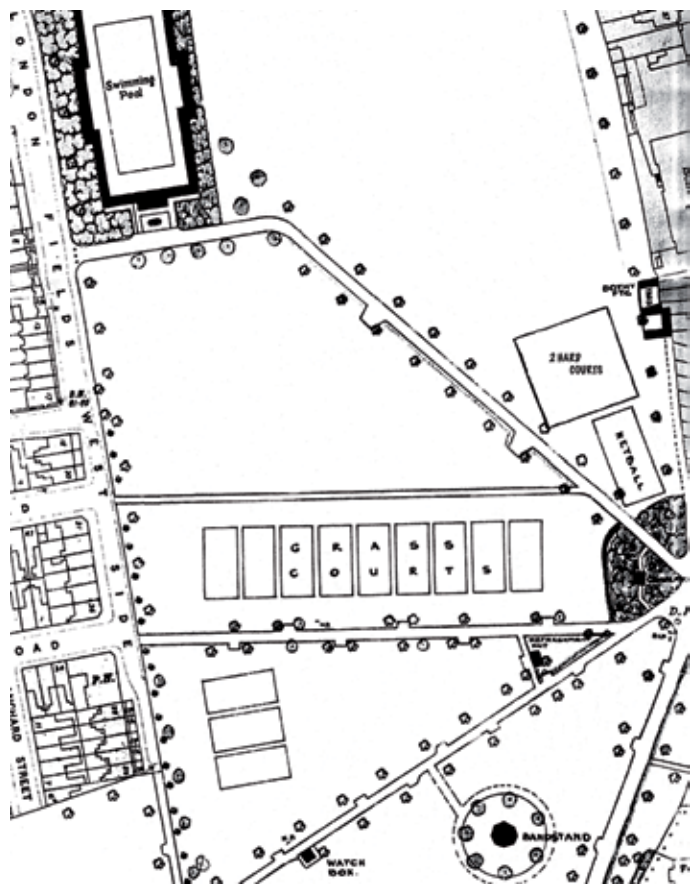
The years of the Great War saw renewed military activity on London Fields as volunteers were drilled there before their departure for France. The First World War had shown the widespread under nourishment of many of the British troops and the 1926 General Strike confirmed the widespread discontent; this reinforced the growing concern among many politicians of the mean conditions that the poor lived in (possibly with the cloud of the Russian revolution at the back of their mind).

Particularly in the 1930's the LCC became involved with widespread slum clearance with the demolition of what had become slum property and the extensive building of municipal flats. Along with the clearance of the mean streets, there was the loss of some historically valuable, originally good quality houses that had not been maintained. What with the further destruction of housing during World War II, this resulting in the council estates that now surround parts of London Fields.

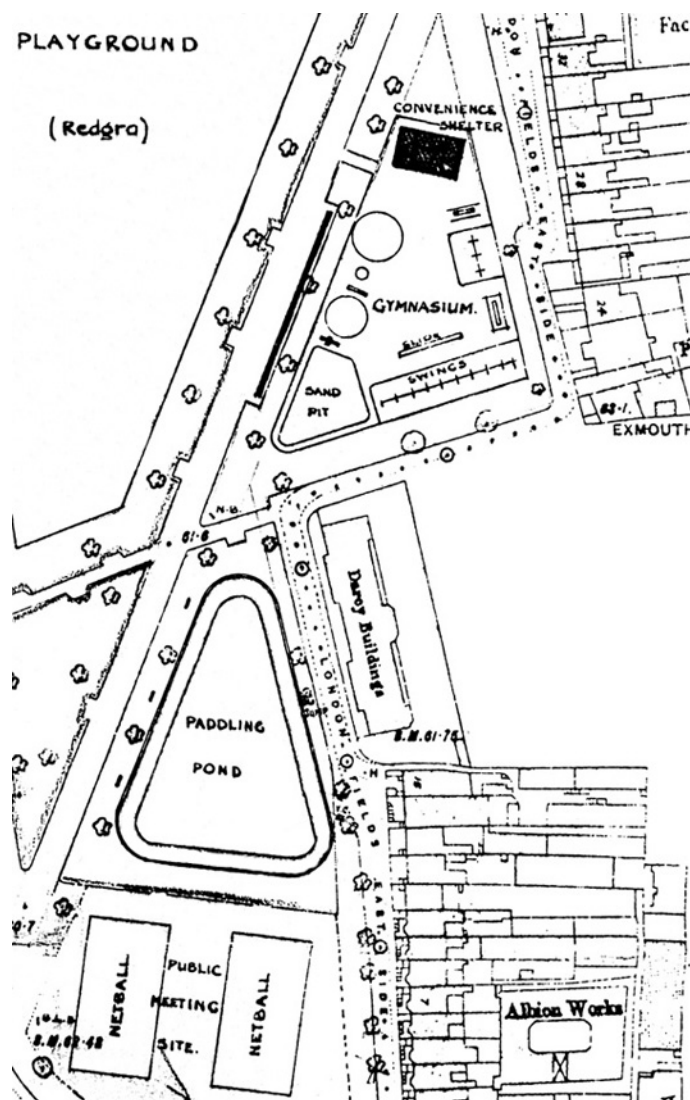
The LCC encouraged by the success of the 6 lidos it had already built, offered the local boroughs the chance to build their own lidos with a large subsidy. Hackney first investigated the idea in 1928 and after some initial disagreement over where the lido should be situated, London Fields or Hackney Marshes, an agreement was made between Hackney & the LCC on 9th July 1930; the cost of building was estimated at £10,870. The Lido opened in 1932 and remained open apart from the war years, until its closure due to lack funds in 1988. **See Lido History.**



London Fields Lido around 1939



1939 Council Plans for London Fields North



1939 Council Plans for London Fields South

It was probably in this period that the first children's playground (then called a gymnasium) was constructed in the south-east of the Fields. With a tall slide; a heavy roundabout (to be pushed or pulled around before jumping on); a tall pole with ropes hanging down from a turning crown (to run and swing round on); another pole with a cone shaped metal frame with a wooden seat around the base (this could be turned around and swing on its axis); rows of various size swings and a row of 3 long seesaws (big enough to hold 8), all built to heavy industrial standards. There was also a large sand pit for the younger children to play in. A low, curved art deco building with sheltered seating for the parents and a chalet for the permanent supervisor, to keep an eye on the kids and where she had her first aid kit.

There was a shallow paddling pond at the southern end from quite early in the 20th century. It was also used for sailing toy boats. There was at one time permanent water in it and children undoubtedly caught sticklebacks from it using blood-worms found in the pool. A 1939 plan shows 2 netball pitches to the south of it. The pool was drained and lay empty for many years, later to be made into a skateboard area, with concrete mounds, but the outline of the pool can still be seen. This area is now overlooked by the 2 concrete market porters, created by the Free Form Arts Trust. The 1939 council plans showed a total of 3 netball courts; 2 hard tennis courts; 12 grass courts; the Lido, as well as the large bandstand.

During World War II, London Fields again played a military role, providing an anti-aircraft battery with "ack-ack" guns and powerful searchlights in the southwest corner near the Broadway Market. With the "blitz" on London many men from Anti-Aircraft units based in other parts of the country were relocated to the London area and had to endure periods of 24-hour duty with very little sleep. There were both male air gunners and women WRAF attached to it. Apparently "a lot of courting was done during the quiet periods under their oilskin capes".

There were also underground air-raid "trench shelters", "tunnels" to the south of the present cricket field (the depressions at their entrances were filled again in 2006). People caught out during air raids were "made to go down the underground shelters by the ARP (air raid precautions) wardens". The government launched the 'Dig for Victory' campaign in 1940 and encouraged the cultivation of gardens and allotments for food to supplement the wartime food rations. This included nearly all London parks.

London Fields itself became a casualty, on the night of the 21st of September 1940 the area was heavily bombed and Richmond Road and Eleanor Road received direct hits. The houses on the north and northeast border of the park, along with the Eleanor Road, Board School, were so badly damaged that they were demolished after the war and the park extended to its present boundaries. The sole survivor, as far as buildings are concerned, was the Queen Eleanor public house (now the Pub on the Park). The lines of mature London Plane trees (planted circa 1880), surrounding the cricket pitch to the north and east, mark the old park boundary. Even with this increase the present area is only just over 31 acres, about a third of its original size.

London was harder hit than any other British city, both in number of bomb attacks and number of casualties. While later in the war, between June 1944 and March 1945, London received 41% of the attacks by V1 flying bombs (doodlebugs), and 49% of attacks by V2 rockets. The war left many people without homes. The Ordnance Survey map of 1948 shows 18 emergency prefabricated (asbestos walled) bungalows in 2 rows on London Fields, facing London Fields West Side. Another 21 "prefabs" were also found on the remains of where the south end of Eleanor Road had been before the bombing. These were removed by 1951 when the park was extended over the area. The West Side 'prefabs' lasted into the 1960's.

After the war the netball pitches were lost. The hard tennis courts were transferred to its present site on the ruins of demolished houses in Richmond Road. The grass tennis courts remained until the 1970's and only then were removed. The park keepers' service yard, with manager's office, storage and rest room were added (next to the Lido) around 1960. It is first found on the 1964 OS map.

With the London suburbs stretching further out, in 1963 the LCC was extended by the government with the addition of the

outer London boroughs, creating the Greater London Council (GLC). The boroughs were also rationalised with some of the smaller ones being absorbed into larger ones. Hackney at the time swallowed Stoke Newington and Shoreditch.

With the southern paddling pool not in use a new, improved children's paddling pool was added next to the Lido in 1978. We were later to discover how it was originally very poorly built. While at the same time the original fountain in the Lido was taken out, with the excuse that it was "to make an additional sunbathing area". An alternative reason that was also circulating was that the water source for the fountain was diverted to the Paddling pool.

In the 1980's there were numerous cutbacks in government funding to councils. Because municipal parks and other leisure facilities (like swimming) are not a legal requirement for councils, they were among the first items to suffer cutbacks at times of funding shortages. By 1986 Prime Minister Thatcher abolished the GLC, while the services previously provided by the GLC were carved up between central government, the boroughs and a new set of London-wide non-representative bodies (quangos). Leaving a lack of integration of services and a further burden for the councils. By 1988 the London Fields Lido closed, like many others that year. Of the 68 Lido's and open-air pools in the Greater London area at the time, there was eventually to be only 10 surviving in use.

With the coming of the excessive health and safety concerns in the 1980's the children's play equipment was seen as far too exciting and dangerous (they did not come up to "insurance safety standards") and one by one pieces of equipment were removed. While the permanent child attendant became unaffordable with the further cut backs of the early 1990's. This playground was removed in 1998 to make way for its present replacement.

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Hackney Archives and contributions from the public.

Written by Mike Martin of the London Fields User Group - a local parks community organisation.