



Ilford Historical Society

Dear All

I hope that you are all keeping well. In case you are getting IHS withdrawal symptoms, your committee has put together a mini newsletter for you.

Alan Simpson gives us a fascinating account of Ilford's role in defending the country against Napoleon (a contemporary map of the area is below:

Ilford's killing fields [1]: the River Roding and London's defence against a French invasion

Over two hundred years ago the United Kingdom [2] was facing a crisis. Much of the nation was in fear of a threat from overseas.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789, Britain and France were at war almost continuously from 1793 to 1802 and from 1803 to 1815. For more than 20 years, the French army, amongst whose leaders was Napoleon Bonaparte, was supreme in continental Europe. Only at sea was British power dominant, though even with this crucial advantage the British population lived under the fear of a French invasion for much of those two decades.

By the end of 1795, concerns were growing about the likelihood of an invasion, for in October France had annexed the Austrian Netherlands. French attempts to invade Ireland as a stepping-stone to Great Britain occurred in the winter of 1796-1797 and, in February 1797, a ragamuffin French force of criminals and adventurers landed at Fishguard in Wales. They were quickly rounded up by the local militia, but the country was so jittery that the idea of a successful landing caused a run on the banks.

Notice was now taken of those who had been warning about the military threat to England itself. One such was Colonel George Hanger [3] who, in March 1795, had published *Military Reflections on the Attack and Defence of the City of London*. He argued persuasively that the British fleet was no guarantor of defence, citing the 1779 fiasco in the American Revolutionary War, when the combined French and Spanish fleets had threatened Plymouth. Hanger thought that the main danger was to the river Thames on the Essex side, describing very exactly how invasion could be accomplished; and he urged that works should be thrown up around London and its defence planned.

Hanger identified the river Roding, from Barking to the north of Ilford, as somewhere armed citizens and regular soldiers could defy a force greater than the French could possibly bring to effect a 'coup de main' [4]. He advocated making the Roding an impenetrable fortress to the defence of London, and set out the manner in which this could be executed. He believed that a French army could not pass over the marshes between Barking and the river Thames, and that from Barking to Ilford the Roding was not fordable; the two bridges over it in those towns could be easily defended. He

therefore proposed flooding the valley of the Roding for many miles above Ilford by means of a sluice to be constructed 'at such a convenient spot, where the water begins to be shallow, and where the enemy might find a ford' [5]. Hanger identified his 'convenient spot' as about half a mile north of Ilford at the confluence of the Cran Brook and the Roding. He also proposed deepening the Cran Brook along its length. Thus improved, the Cran Brook would also form a strong and formidable position for British troops: '... a few heavy guns posted near to the Roding on our side will so effectually scour the approach to that rivulet between it and Ilford, that our troops posted behind the Cranbrook rivulet need fear nothing on the right flank as it cannot well be attacked'.

At the Cran Brook's eastern extremity in Hainault Forest, Hanger considered that light troops and riflemen should be posted 'with a strong abattis [1] before them, supported by some cannon and regulars. I am of the opinion also, that even 1,000 skilful marksmen, placed in the forest behind an abattis, with a few pieces of cannon, could not without great difficulty be driven from their station, and would, for a considerable time, impede the progress of a very numerous body'.

If a flooded Roding valley, a deepened Cran Brook, and marksmen in Hainault Forest all failed to halt the French advance, Hanger proposed that the British army should retreat 'to the commanding ground in the front of Claybury ... Figure to yourself what destruction heavy cannon planted on this eminence would cause amongst the enemy's ranks, whilst forming and advancing to a closer attack; observe well also that this position is strongly flanked by the forest on the left flank, where our light troops and riflemen should all be posted, and from whence they might destroy thousands before they ever come to attack the main body. The right flank is doubly guarded by the river Roding'.

In the event, a French invasion in the 1790s did not occur, being first sidelined by Napoleon's concentration on campaigns in Egypt and against Austria, and then shelved in 1802 by the Peace of Amiens. However, when that peace broke down and Britain declared war on France in May 1803, French preparations for an invasion began again in earnest. Napoleon's 'Army of England' – a force when at maximum strength, of 167,000, concentrated in the French Channel ports – left the politicians and people in no doubt of his intention to invade.

It was always assumed by the government that London was to be Napoleon's main objective and detailed plans were drawn up in 1803 for encircling an invading French army. These involved trapping the invading army 'in a net' in the south-east of the country, held there by very large numbers of volunteers from the north. Not all agreed with this plan and a more public disagreement came from George Hanger. In 1804, he published a revised version of his invasion warnings (*Reflections on the Menaced Invasion, and the Means of Protecting the Capital*) again stressing that the likely choice of the French would be the river Thames and the Essex coast, though he noted the improvements in the defences and militia to the east of London, as well as the building of many gunboats and small naval vessels suitable for the defence of the shallow rivers and creeks of Essex.

The potential of a French invasion force could not be ignored, until Napoleon suddenly, in August 1805, ordered his army to march to central Europe to counter a

new threat from Austria. By early October the British government calculated that the immediate crisis was over. A two-year interlude was then enjoyed while Napoleon was pre-occupied with campaigns in northern and eastern Europe until July 1807, when he signed the Treaty of Tilsit with the Russian emperor. Following that treaty, Napoleon once again turned his attention to an invasion of Britain; the fear of invasion never fully evaporated until Napoleon finally destroyed his army by choosing to invade Russia in 1812.

[1] A killing field, in military terms, is an area in front of a defensive position that the enemy must cross during an assault and is specifically intended to allow the defending troops to incapacitate a large number of the enemy.

[2] The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was formed in 1801, following the Acts of Union passed by each country's parliament.

[3] George Hanger, 4th Baron Coleraine (1751-1824) was a soldier, author, and eccentric. Author of several books on military and other matters, he wrote two polemical works arguing in favour of reinforcing the country's defences against the threat of invasion by the French during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. In 1801, he published a two-volume autobiography, *The Life, Adventures and Opinions of Col George Hanger*, describing his early life and his military career in America, interspersed with observations on the King's Bench Prison and female prostitution. Little is known about Hanger's personal life; his autobiography tells the colourful story of a youthful marriage to a gypsy, who left him for a tinker.

[4] A coup de main is a swift military attack that relies on speed and surprise to accomplish its objectives in a single blow.

[5] Rather more dramatic was a later scheme to flood the Lea valley to stop a French advance after a landing on the Essex coast. Construction of a dam and 'floating gate' was begun at Four Mills, Bow, under the supervision of John Rennie, who considered that it would take 26 days' stoppage of the river before flooding was complete. Under his direction it was partially completed, but abandoned in 1805.

[1] An abatis, abattis, or abbattis is a field fortification consisting of an obstacle formed of the branches of trees laid in a row, with the sharpened tops directed outwards, towards the enemy. Abattis are used alone or in combination with wire entanglements and other obstacles.



Dr Colin Runeckles has submitted an interesting account that, as he says, will be helpful in researching house histories:

Wanstead and Woodford Building Survey 1949

I have been working on transferring data from a huge pile of survey sheets (thankfully typed not written!) that Wanstead and Woodford Borough Council compiled about the state of the Borough's buildings after the war, and have now completed all of Wanstead.

Besides knowing precisely which houses were either demolished and the plot left vacant, those that were rebuilt, and those having damage repairs done to them; there are a number of other items of interest.

A mystery building which appeared on the post-war OS map just north of Clockhouse Parade in Wanstead High Street turns out to have been opened as a British Restaurant (communal kitchen during war time) around 1940.

Two Ministry of Labour / National Service offices – one in the car park of The George, the other in Highstone Avenue – were built as canteens for Plessey's. My first reaction was that Plessey's in Ley Street was a fair distance to go but then it dawned on me that they were almost certainly for workers in the factories that were in the underground tunnels during WWII (see the info board on the platform at Redbridge Station). Further research on this will be carried out once we return to normal.

The Wanstead section of the survey took a few months to input into a spreadsheet (all 5,500 lines of it!) and I know Woodford will take a lot longer once I get started. But when complete it will give an excellent picture of post-war Wanstead and Woodford and be a new source for those researching house histories.

Councillor Muhammed Javed, vice president of the society has worked with officers of LB Redbridge and TfL to arrange a plaque at Ilford station when it is refurbished. The plaque will describe the history of the station and Councillor Javed has ensured that it is credited to the society. The content of the plaque has been provided by the Jef Page based on information from Norman Gunby's book *A Potted History of Ilford* and will read as follows:

The Arrival of Ilford's Railway

The modern age came to sleepy Ilford village on 20th June 1839. This was the date the first section of line was officially opened and trains arrived from Devonshire Street Mile End station through Ilford on its way to Romford and the firing of a cannon announced its arrival. Sadly, as the station still hadn't been completed, no passengers alighted from the train. The line was run by the Eastern Counties Railway. Three months earlier in March a special train of just two carriages pulled by "*The Ilford*" made the journey as a trial run. It was welcomed by the Ilford Band and crowds of cheering people came to see the great new spectacle and entertainment was provided by the directors who organised races between two locomotives running on parallel lines. This caused a great change to life in Ilford. On Ilford Hill a large number of houses were demolished and families displaced, to make way for the track and Ilford station. The entrance to the station was on Ilford Hill behind the Red

Lion pub, though the platform was only slightly above the track. In 1854 Fenchurch Street station was opened and came into use, followed in 1874 by Liverpool Street. At first there were only two tracks but as Ilford grew from a village into a suburb more tracks and platforms were needed so in the 1890's the Great Eastern Railway moved the station up from behind the pub to its modern position on The Broadway and the new enlarged station opened in 1894. The arrival and opening of the railway was reported in a long article in the Chelmsford Chronicle, and is mentioned in a few of Ilford's local history books. What is happening now with the new Ilford Hill entrance is going back to the station's roots - back to the future.

Janet Seward describes a celebrity visit to Ilford:

Samuel Pepys comes to Ilford



Samuel Pepys made two recorded visits to Ilford. On 18 August 1662, he was working for the navy board. He started his long day by riding to Bow for breakfast and then on to Waltham Forest 'where we saw many trees of the King's a-hewing'. He was then shown how errors in measuring the timber by the workers was resulting in the king

being short-changed. He then rode to Ilford with his companion Mr Deane, 'and there, while dinner was getting ready, he and I practised measuring of tables and other things till I did understand the measure of timber and board very well'. After receiving Mr Cooper 'our officer in the Forest', he rode on to Barking to see where the timber is shipped to Woolwich and via Bow to home.

His second visit to Ilford occurred on 13 June 1665, the day that the Duke of York, later James II was engaged against the Dutch in the Battle of Lowestoft. Although James, in the *Royal Charles*, successfully engaged the Dutch, he was ordered to return to port because of his position as the king's heir. Pepys dined with the Lord Mayor of London at noon and then was driven to 'out of town to meet the Duke of York coming from Harwich tonight'. He got 'as far as Ilford, and there 'light. After eating a dish of cream,' he 'took coach again, hearing nothing of the Duke, and away home – a most pleasant evening and road'.

and last but not least, here is how I am spending lockdown:

The minutiae of a locked down day

Sue is working from home now. Her lap top is on from 7.30am on the dot. Well today for something different in these trying times, instead of walking around the local streets at 4.30- where the other day we discovered a new estate we'd never seen before- Columbus would have been proud of us- Sue and I strolled into the forest. Epping Forest is virtually behind our house and although we've often walked around Valentines Park, Fairlop Water lake, Connaught Water, High Beech, today made a nice change. The weather wasn't great but at least the rain held off and a fox waited till we passed by but wouldn't come over to say hallo probably fearing he'd catch something. Few birds around which was a bit disappointing. Of course,

Sue never got any mud on her trainers, just tiptoes around, but I of course... But fortunately she is very broad minded about these little things which are sent to try us. Breaking trail is such fun, Sue was a Guide leader so you'd think she'd understand about these mighty treks. The Forest is surrounded by local streets, even a golf course, we sauntered across one of the greens and apologised and a small little stream, the Ching. Once in Dorset I said I'd walk on the stones and cross a stream without getting my feet in it and you'll never guess... On the way back a nice white chubby cat came over to say hallo. Probably after some food. He walked away disappointed.

Well at least all this trouble is only a hoax... said someone wise!

We hope you enjoy our mini newsletter.

Keep safe and I hope we can meet again soon.

Jef Page
President

April 2020