

## The Plaistow Land-Grabbers

by Neil Fraser

One Friday morning in July 1906 Councillor Ben Cunningham led a band of about 14 unemployed men of West Ham in taking possession of a piece of waste land sandwiched between North Street Passage and St. Mary's Road in Plaistow. The land, once a gravel pit and later used for dust and refuse, was about three acres in extent. By the end of the day 20 men were working upon it with picks and shovels, uprooting the dry grass and turning the soil in preparation for growing vegetables. They named Cunningham "The Captain", and appointed a minister of agriculture who decided to divide the ground into four triangles, thus arriving at the name, 'Triangle Camp.' A 'Triangle Hotel' was erected from boards, poles and tarpaulin, and on Sunday night 25 men slept there. A notice inside read "You are requested not to spit on the floor of this hotel."

So began the actions of the Plaistow Land Grabbers, a band of unemployed men who, having grown disillusioned with the efforts of the government and local authorities to adequately address their plight, moved into action. The unemployed question had been hanging in the air over West Ham for several years, and Cunningham, perhaps taking to heart Keir Hardie's words at a speech in Hyde Park two months earlier, decided that patience on the issue would indeed lead to further neglect by the powers that be. For him and his small band of men, the failure of the Distress committee set up the previous year had led them to only one conclusion. Symbolic or otherwise, they were prepared to make a stand.

Some of the men had no knowledge of gardening, to the extent that they were downhearted when told that it would be a month or more before the fruits of their labour would be ready for picking. On the Monday this planting began with cabbages, and from various sources around 1,000 plants were obtained, including broccoli, savoy cabbages and celery. By Tuesday most of the planting had been done, and the men busied themselves watering the dry ground. Donations from outside the camp included not just money and plants, but food and items for entertainment. A Mr. Joseph Terrett donated lamb which the men dined on in the hotel, served with peas, a gift from another friend. The same evening some of the men's wives joined them at the camp for tea, bread and butter and watercress. A phonograph and mouth organ contributed to the atmosphere.

Cunningham told a local reporter from the Express that the men were anxious to demonstrate to the public that they wanted to work if only given the chance, and that they "wanted to get the people back to the land."<sup>1</sup> On the wall at the rear of the plot someone had painted in large white letters, "What will the harvest be?" This phrase has become synonymous with the Land Grabbers, but less well known is that, according to the Express article, someone had written beneath it "One month's hard."



*Dawn at the Triangle Camp, 24 July, 1906.  
Cunningham is front left in the white hat.*

It wasn't long before the authorities decided to do something. Councillor Cunningham received a letter from the Mayor saying that, as Chief Magistrate of the county borough, he would act accordingly to deal with the illegal act of this forcible possession of land. Cunningham responded by writing in reply that "with all respect to your worship's opinion I don't consider that I have acted illegally in taking possession of disused land which rightfully belongs to the people."

The land-grabbers busied themselves with the task at hand; soon just over half an acre of land was under cultivation. It was hoped that within a week a further acre would also be under cultivation, and thus half the whole site. Water was proving to be a problem until someone discovered a disused well nearby which was re-employed. The men stuck to their task in a fittingly puritanical fashion, save one who was expelled from the camp for allowing his thirst to tempt him into drinking, as the Express reporter described it, "somewhat liberally".

At the time of Triangle Camp, although Plaistow was well on its way to complete urbanisation, there were still open areas of land nearby. Just 40 years previously it had been a large, growing village in the middle of rural land, and the older men of the camp would have lived through the urban transformation. For them, the enclosure acts may have meant that the common man was no longer part of the common land, but now the very land itself was being obliterated by industry and the houses of the people who worked in these industries – including many who had come to the city precisely because the land now offered no means of survival.

On July 26th the local authorities made their first move to eject the men from the camp, with a large force of police stationed in the vicinity, as well as several thousand curious onlookers, many of whom were themselves unemployed. With funds low, the opportunity to raise money from such a large audience in attendance was taken, and collections boosted their coffers. At around midday Mr G.

<sup>1</sup> Plaistow "Land Jumpers" - Express, 1906

## The Plaistow Land-Grabbers (cont.)

Blain, road foreman, formally demanded possession of the ground. Cunningham replied that he and his men were unable to comply with the Mayor's request, whereupon Blain withdrew. A reporter for the Western Times reported that "there was no disorder, and the utmost good feeling prevailed."<sup>2</sup> Good feeling wasn't forthcoming from the Corporation, however, who promised to instigate civil proceedings to reclaim the land.

On Saturday 4th of August West Ham Corporation officers returned with the police and cleared the camp. Cunningham refused to leave and was carried away, after which the men of the camp left. The 'Triangle Hotel' was pulled down, and along with the men's bedding put in an adjoining field where the men also collected. A second band of men then reoccupied the land, but leaderless they decided to flee when the police returned at night. Cunningham and his men were not finished however, and a month later an attempt was made

to seize the land once more. The presence of 120 constables, ten of whom were mounted, and 30 employees of West Ham Corporation overwhelmed them, and only four managed to get onto the land. Cunningham, one of them, was wrestled to the ground and along with the others arrested. He was sent to prison for contempt of court and served a five week sentence. Meanwhile the vegetables he had helped to plant grew quietly in the soil from which he and his men had been evicted. No one knows who, if anyone, tended them, and if they did who reaped the harvest. At the municipal elections in November Cunningham stood as an Independent Labour candidate but, disowned by his own party, came bottom of the poll, and was never to regain his seat. As if to underline the hopelessness of the men's cause, the following year over 1,000 local residents emigrated to Australia and Canada on government advice to solve the unemployment problem.

<sup>2</sup> *The Western Times* - July 27 1906



### About Neil Fraser

*Neil Fraser is the author of the forthcoming book *Over the Border: the Other East End*, to be published on 16th July by Function Books. Neil has lived in East London for 21 years, in West Ham, Barking, Stratford and now Leytonstone. He has worked in a betting shop, a mail-order book club and is now a teacher. *Over the Border* is his first book.*