

## **The story of Little Wormwood Scrubs.**

In the beginning there was only one Wormwood Scrubs.

Part of the ancient forest of Middlesex standing on 38 million year old, agriculturally inhospitable London marl. It had resisted attempts at cultivation, unlike the rich well drained alluvial and gravel deposits of the Thames floodplain to its south. It was considered “waste” ground of the Manor of Fulham, used for “despasturing cattle and swine of copyhold tenants”.

The ancient track of Turvens Lane passed along the east side of the Scrubs going north to the Harrow Road. In 1844, following the road, an embankment was built for the Bristol, Birmingham and Thames Junction railway. Later known as the West London Railway. It dissected Wormwood Scrubs and brought Little Wormwood Scrubs into existence.

In 1840 The Ecclesiastical Commissioners and Homage Jury of the Manor of Fulham which administered both parts had let a strip of land in the Little Scrubs to gun maker Charles Lancaster of 151 New Bond St as a rifle range. A feature of this was a mechanical running deer target. The range was situated about half way up Little Wormwood Scrubs and the deer target track ran along the banks of Counters Creek with the shooting range at 90 degrees to it.

Counters Creek, one of London’s lost rivers, is central to the story of Little Wormwood Scrubs. It rose to the north in Kensal Green Cemetery and emptied into the Thames at Chelsea Creek. It marked the Parish Boundary between Kensington and Hammersmith and formed the basis for the ornamental ponds.

Little Wormwood Scrubs boundaries have changed substantially over the years. In the Tithe apportionment of 1847 it was 26 acres. In 1859 the Great Western Railway took a strip of 12 acres in the north of Little Wormwood Scrubs for sidings and maintenance buildings. This took away an area known as Wormholt Wood, a very old piece of forest.

The Homage Jury of the Manor of Fulham agreed in 1870 to exchange the northwest corner (now Mitre Way Industrial Estate) occupied by a gasworks and the Red House farm for 5 acres at the south east corner.

This land bounded on one side by the railway, the other by the eastern edge of the Scrubs stretched from North Pole Road to a arch in the Railway embankment at Mitre Way/ Dalgarno Gardens. It was purchased for £300 by Arthur Dalgarno Robinson. The vicar of St Helen’s Church on St Quintin Avenue (built on the site of Notting Barns farm) he had also founded St Clements in Treadgold St and St Andrews in Silchester Road. He was known as philanthropic vicar and had established a “ragged” school in the Notting Dale Potteries. The land he bought was for designated for use as “Glebe Land”, land used to make money for the Church. The result was the dense housing development that took place in Bracewell Road, while Arthur built a large vicarage at the bottom of Brewster Gardens, now demolished. The

space is now occupied with two houses, Coronation Court and the Post Office and row of shops.

In 1880 The Ecclesiastical Commissioners passed on their responsibility and “leased” the whole of the remaining land to the Metropolitan Board Of Works, the forerunner to The London County Council and Greater London Council. They built Dalgarno Rd (later Gardens), named in honour of Arthur Dalgarno Robinson for his good work for the poor in the Parish.

Not much changed on the Little Scrubs – 1890 saw “agricultural draining” but in 1891 a petition was presented to the Metropolitan Board of Works from local residents asking that there be no playing of cricket on the little Scrubs. Minutes for the Metropolitan Board of Works council meeting On 7th April 1891 say “We have for some time past had our attention called to Little Wormwood Scrubs – certain of the inhabitants of the locality desires that it should be layed out as a park. Meanwhile one of the pleas for a park is that it would be more suitable for the recreation of old persons and young children. And there is ample room for the rougher games on the larger Scrubs”. The Metropolitan Board of Works could not recommend the work necessary to create a park but “The Council do prohibit the playing of all games except Lawn tennis and games for children on Little Wormwood Scrubs”

In 1892 another petition, was presented to the Metropolitan Board of Works by colourful Hammersmith MP Sir William Bull on behalf of residents of North Kensington and Hammersmith who were keen to proceed with a plan for converting Little Wormwood Scrubs into a park.

On 5th July the Metropolitan Board of Works said that beyond drainage work, the erection of a boundary fence and the planting of trees nothing had been done to Little Wormwood Scrubs since possession had been obtained. They agreed that a “portion of the brook on the eastern boundary should be widened and kept full by means of weirs and that a gravel walk should be formed alongside with a plantation for shade”. The cost for this was estimated at £720. In May 1893 M Macvey was authorised to carry out further improvement works “and construct un-climbable fences to protect the shrubberies and stream improvement works”. Obviously “vandalism” was a problem then.

However in February 1894 the minutes state: “The expenditure upon the improvements has been £760 3s 6d as against £720 authorised, an excess of £40 3s 6d. This increase was partly due to the heavy cost of excavation for the stream owing to the exceptional hardness of the ground during last summer”.

Eventually the cost for all the work done on the stream, the improvements and a path entirely round Little Wormwood Scrubs was £1,100. An extra £380 was voted through to cover the shortfall. For the period quite a considerable sum of money.

In May 1894 it was discovered that part of the money the council intended to use to drain footpaths was not needed so it was put to good use planting a shrubbery on the north perimeter “so as to screen the GWR carriage depot which joins the council's land”. Some of this planting still remains with the rare pine trees that are almost hidden by the copse.

In 1904 London County Council the successor to the Metropolitan Board of Works wanted to encourage live music in its open spaces so authorised the construction of bandstands in some of its parks. The winning tender for the one to be built on Little Wormwood Scrubs was from a Duncan Tucker of Tottenham with a price of £357 10s. It was to be positioned in the centre of the park circled by trees and to be constructed of oak with window panes in sliding sashes. Though from the photographs of the bandstand there does not seem to be any glazing.

1912 bought a petition from local residents to allow dogs off the leash on Little Wormwood Scrubs. Then obviously due to public demand 1919 saw the construction of public toilets in the north west corner. While in 1921 the London County Council undertook cleaning and puddling of the rivulet. Further concreting of the Counters Creek rivulet took place in 1924 at a cost of £1,230.

1926 saw draining of what was described as the Hockey Field (a space yet to be identified) at a cost of £490. Further agricultural draining took place the following year.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly when the ponds and weirs were removed. The 1935 OS map shows them intact but the 1955 OS map shows the shape of the park, with children's playground and toilets, shelters but no ponds. The last buildings that were constructed in this period were two staff lodges in 1962.

In 1971 stewardship of Little Wormwood Scrubs passed and was handed to the Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. In 1977 the play area which had been situated in the north west corner was moved to the south east corner with a “One O Clock Club” being built along side changing rooms and storage. These constitute the buildings there now. The jigsaw that is the full history of Little Wormwood Scrubs has still to be assembled. More research is needed on the changes that have occurred in the last 25 years. We hope to fill in the gaps and welcome all contributions to this story. We certainly need to create an oral history of the Little Scrubs.

Little Wormwood Scrubs has always been passed by and forgotten about, its boggy wildness even avoided any of the military use suffered by the big Scrubs.

It was also always hanging half way between Kensington and Hammersmith. For historical reasons – the parish boundary between Hammersmith and Kensington ran down the route of Counters Creek. The “owners” frequently were struggling to deal with what they had, swapping bits of the land to make some use of it.

The story of the last 120 years tells of the isolation of Little Wormwood Scrubs, as it chronicles the pressure from residents to make things happen and create what people want from a open space.

And it tells us the different things that different people want at different times from a naturalised open space. Current users of Little Wormwood Scrubs like the oasis in the West Ten urban desert. It is still providing residents with what they want. Tastes might have changed in the last 130 years but not the needs.