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Introduction

On a sunny September afternoon in 1882 a crowd of several thousand members of London working men's clubs and their families gathered in Epping Forest to celebrate the preservation of the forest and its opening as a public open space. Speaking to the assembly, James Lowe, president of Hackney Working Men's Club, declared that they were there to congratulate themselves on the success of the struggle for the forest. Referring to the formal opening of the forest by Queen Victoria in May 1882, Lowe noted that, although the greatest in the land had been invited to that event, working people had been ignored, which 'might also with perfect truth be said of those who had really fought the battle on the part of popular rights, seeing that all the honours had gone to men who had done comparatively little to deserve them'. This, he declared, had prompted the working men of London to come to open the forest on their own account and show how much they appreciated what had been accomplished.¹ Lowe was able to speak from experience, having been in the thick of east London radical politics throughout the previous decade. He was a Shoreditch vestryman, a member of a group that had played a leading part in the campaign for Epping Forest, and as chairman of the Hackney Advanced Liberal Association he had presided at the meeting in March 1877 that celebrated the great victory they had gained in the preservation of Epping Forest.²

In the spirit of such gatherings as these, the subject of this book is the largely forgotten role of ordinary Londoners in the struggles to save the open spaces threatened by the rapid spread of London in the mid-Victorian era. It tells how, during this period, the ambition of local landowners around the metropolis to maximise the value of their property through development was countered by the determination of a cross-section of Londoners, from elite campaigners to local residents, to save their time-honoured open spaces. The focus here is on the part played by popular protest in the campaigns across London to preserve valued open spaces for the ordinary people of the metropolis.

1. *Wigton Observer*, 23/09/1882.

2. *East London Observer*, 31/03/1877.

The role of middle-class campaigners in these contests has been recorded and celebrated from the beginning, but historical accounts both then and since have with a few exceptions³ either neglected to mention plebeian involvement at all, or subsumed it within that of a wider 'public'.⁴ By focusing solely on these elite campaigners historians have failed to recognise the importance of popular opinion and plebeian action in shaping the context of the contests over London's commons. Throughout the mid-Victorian period public attitudes coalesced in favour of preserving open spaces, reaching far beyond the affluent metropolitan middle class to include a growing urban proletariat of better-off artisans, small-scale businessmen and lower-level white-collar employees. At times of particular intensity in the struggle, these groups were reinforced by numbers of poor and disenfranchised east Londoners who felt the imminent threat to their enjoyment of Epping Forest. These times of ferment drew their energy from a widespread popular and emotive connectedness with Epping Forest and other unregulated open spaces. But they also gained intensity from the groundwork laid by campaigning radicals in east London, who worked tirelessly to win support for the cause, finding a ready response among a wide cross-section of east Londoners who had a profound attachment to the open spaces that they came to regard as their own.

Discussions of the struggle to preserve London's open spaces have concentrated in particular on organisations such as the Commons Preservation Society (CPS). Writing in the foreword to a history of the CPS, Dorothy Hunter, biographer of the Society's first solicitor, Sir Robert Hunter, had no doubt that it was the CPS that 'saved our commons, large and small, for the enjoyment of our ever growing population'.⁵ This resonates with accounts of evolving attitudes to the countryside that give prominence to the focus of the CPS on the commons in and around London as an example of the way in which preservationism became an important current in late nineteenth-century English culture.⁶ The story of the preservation of Epping Forest and other metropolitan open spaces has been told almost entirely from the perspective of these elite campaigners, who conducted parliamentary and legal campaigns against enclosures and development. In these accounts the engagement of proletarian Londoners is reduced to that of passive bystanders who occasionally broke out into violent action against the obnoxious fences.⁷ Notwithstanding the now longstanding enterprise by many scholars to recover 'history from below', the reconstruction of a distinctive narrative

3. For example Rob Allen, David George and Anthony Taylor, whose work is discussed below.
4. See, for example, E.N. Buxton and R. Hunter's introductory note in G. Shaw-Lefevre (Baron Eversley), *Commons, forests and footpaths: the story of the battle during the last forty-five years for public rights over the commons, forests and footpaths of England and Wales*, rev. edn (London, 1910), pp. v–vii.
5. D. Hunter's foreword to W.H. Williams, *The Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society 1865–1965: a short history of the society and its work* (London, 1965).
6. J. Burchardt, *Paradise lost: rural idyll and social change since 1800* (London, 2002), p. 124.
7. N. Thornton, 'The taming of London's commons', PhD thesis (University of Adelaide, 1988), p. 13.

for plebeian Londoners remains a challenging task.⁸ Their part in the story can be recreated, as it is here, only from a variety of sources that are, in the main, commentaries on the urban proletariat rather than their own words.

This story is also dominated by the words and actions of men. What women of the time thought and did about the issues addressed here are buried deepest of all. Although we know that women attended demonstrations, signed petitions and even spoke at open-space meetings,⁹ female Londoners are effectively a voiceless presence in this story; their menfolk nearly so. With the exception of a handful of personal narratives, we have to rely on legal records, petitions, printed ephemera and illustrations to piece evidence together. Above all, national and local newspapers have been invaluable resources, with the advent of digitisation enabling connections and patterns to be revealed in a way impossible to contemplate in even the recent past.

While there is as yet no comprehensive account of the campaign for Epping Forest, two detailed studies of aspects of the struggle have been written by Elizabeth Baigent.¹⁰ In them she summarily dismisses any plebeian role as ‘hard to establish and still harder to categorise in class terms’ and largely discounts non-elite involvement. Consigning working-class Londoners to the single category of ‘the poor’, she argues that they were ‘the followers rather than the instigators of action’ and finds scant evidence of direct involvement in the campaign to save Epping Forest. Baigent concludes that the struggle for Epping Forest was a ‘conservative and nostalgic campaign, which sought the restoration of a golden age and of ancient rights and to fend off modern urban and industrial threats to the forest’.¹¹

8. P.C. Bailey, “‘Will the real Bill Banks please stand up?’ Towards a role analysis of mid-Victorian working-class respectability”, *Journal of Social History*, 12/3 (1979), pp. 336–53.
9. For example, the early feminist and open spaces campaigner Harriet Law, now long forgotten. *Commercial Journal*, 11/05/1867.
10. E. Baigent, “‘A splendid pleasure ground [for] the elevation and refinement of the people of London’: geographical aspects of the history of Epping Forest 1860–95”, in E. Baigent and R.J. Mayhew (eds), *English geographies 1600–1950: historical essays on English customs, cultures and communities in honour of Jack Langton* (Oxford, 2009) and “‘God’s earth will be sacred’: religion, theology and the open space movement in Victorian England”, *Rural History*, 22/1 (2011), pp. 31–58.
11. Baigent, “‘A splendid pleasure ground’”, p. 118.