

EAST END JEWEL — ETON MANOR BOYS CLUB BY FRANCESCA WEBER-NEWTH

There is a myth about this corner of the East End. In the trenches of World War One, a soldier asks his neighbour: 'So what is this Hackney Wick famous for?' The reply came 'Fleas, flies, kids and Clarnico's Jam'

Hackney Wick is set to appear on the global map next year – sitting alongside the Olympic park when it opens in 2012. Tourism, spectacle and their eventual successor – regeneration – are expected to make The Wick sparkle.

Rewind to the 1890s and Hackney Wick was on an altogether different map. It was Charles Booth's poverty map, in which each road in London was coloured to represent the social class of its inhabitants. The businessman-cum-sociologist showed that Victorian cities were overcrowded and bleak, with a third of Londoners living in poverty. On Booth's map, the streets of Hackney Wick are dark blue; characterised by 'casual earnings and chronic want'. This was a time when fear of fleas, flies and the workhouse were prevalent. Bounded by the railway on one side, the marshes, factories and canal on the other, the area formed a bowl that housed some 6,000 of the most deprived people in London. But in amongst the poverty and industrial pollution, there was something in Hackney Wick that sparkled – it was called Eton Manor Boys Club. The Club took its name from Eton College, whose former students came to Hackney to help the poor.

Today critics question whether The Wick will be able to foster a community feel within the new Olympic landscape. In contrast, community spirit and sense of 'place' was something that thrived during the Eton Manor Boys days. 44 years after the closure of the Club in 1967, many of the 'Old Boys' remain friends and still talk fondly of 'those days'. Perhaps there is a lesson to be learnt.

It must have been an extraordinary sight. Eton College Boys, members of the most privileged families in Britain, were living amongst the poorest East Enders. These Eton Boys came to Hackney Wick to teach the local boys values of leadership, comradeship and respect.

Four ex-Etonians came to Hackney Wick in their early twenties and founded the Club. They were Gerald Wellesley, Arthur Villiers, Edward Cadogan and Alfred Wagg. Wellesley wrote in 1909 "The Boys' Club is run for the very roughest class of working boy. It is not so much that the appearance of the Boys themselves has altered in any appreciable degree, as that an atmosphere of order and self-respect has grown in the Club."

HE IS DESCRIBED AS DRESSING 'LIKE A TRAMP' AND LIVING A SIMPLE LIFE ON THE CLUB GROUNDS. HE ALSO DROVE HIS ROLLS ROYCE AROUND HACKNEY WICK AND DISPLAYED A MOUTH FULL OF GOLD TEETH.

Arthur Villiers, often cited as having the most enduring commitment to the Club, arrived in Hackney Wick when he was 24. He never left. He was son of the 7th Earl of Jersey, heir to vast landed wealth, but also made his money as an investment banker – as director of Barings bank. He was an eccentric man, his appearance perhaps reflecting the contradictions of his life. He is described as dressing 'like a tramp' and living a simple life on the Club grounds. He also drove his Rolls Royce around Hackney Wick and displayed a mouth full of gold teeth. He poured much of his wealth into Eton Manor and survived The Blitz while in residence there. After dedicating

many years and boundless energy to his beloved Club, he died on the grounds in 1969, aged 86.

Villiers never married and had no children, but many former Eton Boys recall his role as 'father' to all the Eton Manorites. Within Villiers' own story, the significance of place and spirit of the people who lived in The Wick becomes palpable. This Old Etonian didn't want to leave.

Eton College was the first of the public schools to set up a 'mission' in London. It was to provide 'gentleman's company' as well as practical and financial assistance to improve the prospects of the poor. In the early days, the mission and Boys Club were part of a joint endeavour. A dispute within the mission resulted in a split. The mission was keen to build a church tower to mark the success of its large congregation, at a cost of £10,000. Gerald Wellesley believed the money would be better spent on facilities that had a more direct effect on the Boys. It was from this quarrel that 'Eton Manor' Boys Club was born – officially splitting from the Church mission in 1909. The defectors could start their own Boys

mark that the outlook of the boys had been transformed.

Peter 'Wiggy' Wilson, now aged 65, is one of those former Boys who shows-off his Eton Manor smile. There is a sense of East End pride. He joined the Club in 1959, aged 14, a few months after the official admission age of 13 years 11 months. Wiggy talks of the absolute commitment that the founders of the Club showed the boys. "Villiers was nicknamed 'Soapy' because he would buy industrial quantities of soap. When it arrived at the clubhouse, he'd chop it up and give the boys a few pieces each.

WHEN ETON MANOR BOYS WERE FIGHTING IN WORLD WAR TWO, VILLIERS WOULD POST THEM INDIVIDUAL LETTERS AND SENT COPIES OF CHIN WAG - THE MONTHLY ETON MANOR MAGAZINE - TO OUTPOSTS AS FAR AS CAIRO AND BAGHDAD.



Club, but the mission stipulated 'not in my parish!' In an act of defiance, Wellesley moved the Club to St Augustine's, the parish next door.

In the following years the modest clubhouse, which first opened above a coal shop would be replaced. A state-of-the-art clubhouse, designed by the architect Harry Goodhart-Rendell, was built in 1913. Over the years, the founders bought an additional 33-acres of land to create what became known as 'The Wilderness'. This well-loved sports ground housed, amongst other things, a swimming pool, tennis courts, a bowling green, cricket pitches and an athletics track – facilities the boys of Hackney Wick wouldn't have even dreamt about.

The Club provided a mix of sport, philanthropy and social improvement to the boys of Hackney Wick. Those less keen on sports could take up chess, drama classes or even learn first-aid. Perhaps testament that the Club provided much more than material improvements was the famous Eton Manor smile – a character trait that represented the optimistic spirit of the Manorites. The smile was a visceral

Then he sent them onto the streets to knock on doors and sell the soap for tuppence. The earnings would be their pocket money," he says.

Although there was a lower age limit, there was no upper limit as the Club was committed to help the boys throughout their lives. Villiers in particular was committed to the long-term prospects of the boys. He would help them find jobs, setting up placements with his contacts in the city. He bought houses for the boys and their families, and even paid for the wedding of a young couple when the groom returned from the war. Like a veritable Lord of the Manor, Villiers shaped the fabric of Hackney Wick, with the Club playing a central role within the community.

This sense of community extended further than the East End. Cuckoo Weir, Eton College's swimming facility near Windsor, was made available for the boys of Hackney Wick and many would spend summers there, taking part in timetabled sports, camping and singing.

The founders also went to great pains to ensure that the Manorites retained their close ties, even beyond

UK borders. When Eton Manor Boys were fighting in World War Two, Villiers would post them individual letters and sent copies of Chin Wag – the monthly Eton Manor magazine – to outposts as far as Cairo and Baghdad. This was a way for the boys to keep in touch with their friends in Hackney and around the world, and acted as a reminder of the home they had waiting on their return. Camaraderie was a central code of the Boys Club.

According to Wiggy, the Boys at Eton Manor were so smart and well liked and had such good manners that many girls in the area were keen to marry an Eton Manor Boy. The Brookfield Manor Girls Club was dubbed 'the marriage buro' as a consequence of the high success rate of the love-matches between the members of the two clubs.

Sport was an important part of the Eton Manor ethos. Olympic gold medallist boxer Harry Mallin was a local Hackney Wick boy and trained at Eton Manor. On 'The Wilderness' sports ground, the boys were able to train with the best facilities. The height of this was Villiers' purchase of the 1948 Olympic athletics track, brought to The Wick

insight into the power of place and the connection between the boys and their landscape. It seems the efforts of the founders, to create a functional and beautiful place for the Hackney Wick boys, has seen success, if we are to measure success by emotional response and sense of belonging.

Down on the Wilderness
No place for wavy or stylish dress
Any old clothes your form may grace
Long as you come with a smiling face
Green grass and glorious air
Blimey it's fit for a millionaire
There's every delight that a man may possess
On our wonderful Wilderness

Bearing in mind these powerful emotional associations, the world-class facilities and the commitment of the founders, it is difficult to imagine the demise of Eton Manor Boy's Club. The beginning of the end was the building of the A12 dual carriageway in 1968, which saw the demolition of the much-

'DOWN THE WILDERNESS' WAS THE ETON MANOR SONG. PETER 'WIGGY' WILSON'S EYES WELL UP WHEN HE READS THE LINES. 40 YEARS ON THE WORDS STILL HAVE RESONANCE.

loved clubhouse and 'The Wilderness' sports ground split into two. Without a central place to congregate, the Club lost its appeal. This came alongside other social changes, improvements in social conditions, cheap holidays abroad, mods and the rockers and cheap popular entertainment. Perhaps there was less need for a club, with absolute poverty not the central problem it had been.

Eton Manor has now vanished from the physical landscape. On official 2012 Olympic maps The Club lives on, in name. A small parcel of land, formerly 'The Wilderness', has been named Eton Manor. The area will have temporary training pools and will host the wheelchair tennis matches during the Paralympic Games. With 'legacy' the buzzword for all things Olympic, here is a tangible legacy that the Olympics could seize. The common denominators – sporting excellence, friendly competition and sustainable social benefits – could provide the ideal point of convergence.

Undoubtedly the sporting heroes of today will never know the significance the place holds for The Wick. It is unlikely that the Olympic athletes will ever find out that the poorest boys from Hackney Wick could train on the 1948 Olympic track, which a philanthropist from Eton College bought over to this corner of the East End.

Peter 'Wiggy' Wilson wants Tom Daley and Usain Bolt to realise the connection. However, he remains philosophical about the loss of Eton Manor and the changing landscape. "Hackney Wick for me is now like a phoenix rising from the ashes. But, what its success does depend on, is community." His words are saturated with hope. Hope that the sustained efforts of the Eton Boys to effect change and support a community will provide a lesson for those who want to 'regenerate' Hackney Wick today.

The legacy of the London 2012 Games, we have to hope, will not be the Westfield shopping centre. We have to hope that the Games will not just prove to be a major theatrical staging that signals the 'death of content'. We have to hope that the Games will represent some continuum with the old East End panache and Eton Manor Boys Club's spirit of community.

