

# A GUIDE TO PRIMARY AND SECONDARY RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

Themes include: the impact of grassroots action and arts activism. Responsibility remains with educators to ensure that materials are age appropriate for their students.

## The Land Grabbers of Plaistow

On Friday 13 July 1906 unemployed men occupied wasteland in Plaistow. They established a living space called Triangle Camp and made a garden they intended to work themselves. They painted a question on the wall nearby: "What Will the Harvest Be?" About 14 men began the protest and the numbers increased over the weekend.

The occupation was an act of protest. Ben Cunningham, a member of the Social Democratic Federation and a councillor, was a leader of the Camp. He explained: "Continually for many years, and more especially during the last few months, I have had this cry ringing in my ears - men whom I know, often with large families, saying to me when I met them, 'Cannot you do something for us, Ben?' or 'When are you going to find us some work? For God's sake, Ben, help us' until I said to myself, I must do something. I can stand it no longer." Other land grabs were happening elsewhere. Triangle Camp received a message of support from the Leverhulme occupation site in Manchester.

Donations of money, food, seeds and plants were received, and "they fully tested the capabilities of a gramophone." On 1 August the court ordered them to leave the land at the request of West Ham Council. Four thousand supporters gathered at the camp and when Council official Mr Blain arrived to ask the men to leave the site, he was asked for a donation (which he gave) and left.

Photo thanks to Newham Archives and Local Studies Library



On 4 August the occupiers were evicted, with Cunningham carried off the land shouting: "the land was for the people." The camp was dismantled and some of the men moved to a neighbouring site. Those who attempted to reoccupy the site were chased off by the police.

Twenty police and thirty West Ham Council officials were sent to stop the men trying to return to the site on 1 September. Cunningham was again carried off. At a meeting later he said he was prepared to go to prison and that the Council had not been able to produce any deeds proving they owned the land. He was then imprisoned for going back on the site. In mid October he was released, having promised not to reoccupy the land. The papers reported: "Guarded by the police, the cabbages planted by the 'land grabbers' on Triangle Camp Plaistow have reached a great size and are shortly to be sold."

Historian John Field writes: "After serving his prison sentence, Cunningham duly appeared on the stage of the Bow Palace theatre and music hall, re-enacting the land-grab in front of appreciative local audiences." He was not re-elected as a councillor.

# JOURNEY TO JUSTICE STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEWHAM

## An inspired art project and community garden

The Land Grabbers inspired an art project to create a community garden in Newham. In 2006 the Friends of Abbey Gardens started working with Newham Council to clear a waste site near West Ham. Burnt out cars and rubbish were removed and English Heritage excavated the monastic remains underneath it.

In 2008 artists Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie created a shared harvest garden there for their project *What Will the Harvest Be?* They explained: "Returning the land to production was crucial to the project, influenced by wartime 'Dig for Victory' and... the 'Plaistow Landgrabbers': unemployed men who squatted on a piece of empty land to prove that the unemployed really wanted to work...". The site's Portacabin features a mural of the Land Grabbers.



Photo thanks to Nina Pope

Portacabin mural

In 2013 the site was handed back to the Friends of Abbey Gardens who run the garden for the local community. They explain: "Abbey Gardens is an open-access harvest garden... where anyone is welcome to participate in the communal growing of flowers, fruit and vegetables. Unlike the traditional allotment system, no one has their own patch and everyone gardens together at regular gardening sessions led by an experienced gardener. The produce is shared among volunteers and is also available to the local community in return for donations from one of the garden's two Honesty Stalls."

Occupying land as a form of protest has a very long history. The Land Grabbers show that we can question who owns land and what land is for.

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## Primary sources

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What Will the Harvest Be? art project, see <http://www.whatwilltheharvestbe.com/about/> and <http://researchonline.rca.ac.uk/665/>

Abbey Gardens, see <http://www.abbeygardens.org>

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To download this and other stories of community action for justice in Newham go to <http://journeytojustice.org.uk/projects/newham-history/>