

Cockneys and commoners

NOTHING more beautifies a roundabout on the A11 at the rush hour than a herd of dreamy-eyed heifers. Beware. They may make sudden decisions and charge across the road in search of fresh rosebuds in a Woodford garden.

Cattle, rather than trees, can be the first sign to the motorist on his way out from the East End that he is approaching East London's great green lung: Epping Forest. And they are there, of course, because they belong to people still enjoying commoners' ancient grazing rights.

Epping Forest, as ancient as history itself, survives thanks to a famous Act of Parliament which, after years of costly and involved legal wrangling, was finally passed 100 years ago this month. The Epping Forest Act of 1878 secured for eternal public enjoyment nearly 6,000 acres, all that remained of a once vast royal hunting ground.

The events leading up to the Act started with a curious alliance between an illiterate and elderly woodcutter, Thomas Willingale, and a wealthy landowner, Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton.

Tom was having a battle with his local squire, the Rev. John Maitland, rector of Loughton. The rector had determined to enclose a huge chunk of the woodland to sell to developers and horticulturists and a plot had been devised, worthy of a Hardy novel, to deprive Tom and other woodcutters of their rights to fuel from the forest.

It was the custom of the woodcutters to light a fire at midnight on Nov. 11 (Lopping Day) to symbolise their claim to those rights. On one Lopping Eve early in the 1860s, local landowners organised a huge banquet with plenty of ale at the Kings Head, Loughton, believing that the woodmen would become too drunk to perform the ritual, and thus eschew their rights.

But someone warned Tom. And when midnight arrived he was swinging his axe with vigour. In Loughton today Tom is a folk hero, with various local place-names to his memory.

The years between that defiant gesture and the entering of the Epping Forest Act on to the statute book are punctuated with stories of courage and sacrifice. Sad to say, poor Tom did not live long enough to see his victory completed. But his example had caught the imagination of Sir Thomas Buxton, and of other zealous men wealthy and learned enough to spearhead the enormously expensive lawsuit which dragged on for 15 years.

The campaign was eventually strengthened by the support of the City of London Corporation, which has administered the forest ever since.

The commoners' victory was a milestone of enormous significance. It was the first time the



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right of the public to use and enjoy open spaces had been recognised in law.

What a boon those acres must have been to weary Londoners seeking refreshment and relief from the choking air of the capital of Queen Victoria's Empire.

Firms' outings, trade union and men's club excursions, Sunday school treats, boy scout adventures—all these were to use London's favourite picnic spot.

Those picnics were sometimes starchy affairs. Hats—straw ones for children and great floral masterpieces for mother—were worn at all times. Dresses to the ankle, neatly pressed, and a parasol, were essential. Father

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Take a Bank holiday look

at Epping Forest

may have loosened his collar when no one was looking, but city etiquette was carried along with picnic baskets to the "Cockney paradise." Today's visitors are less formal, but according to Mr Alfred Qvist, who retires this year after 29 years as the forest's superintendent, they still come for the same reason—just to sit and enjoy the air.

Victorian temperance was responsible, in part, for a comparatively new phenomenon, the retreat. Designed as wholesome alternatives to the many inns and their demon drink, these retreats—now vanished—catered for the family. There were roundabouts, helter-skelters and donkey rides, with lemonade, tea and cakes.

"I observe," wrote Edward Buxton, a kinsman of Sir Thomas, in the early 1900s, "how small a percentage of our summer visitors ever venture far from the point at which they are set down by train or vehicle. This is hardly a desirable state of things; and as steam merry-go-rounds and 'five shies a penny' can be enjoyed

with equal facility in London, it seems a pity not to encourage a more enterprising spirit."

He continued: "It appears that this reluctance to enter the thick-
et springs, not from indifference to the attractions of the forest, but solely from a dread, not unnatural to those unaccustomed to the country, of losing their way."

This reluctance has not altogether disappeared today, but the huge increase in the number of visitors inevitably takes its toll on the flora and fauna of the forest. The number of species catalogued in my treasured 1911 guide-book reads more like a scroll of remembrance.

The Epping Forest Act came just in time to save a remnant of the once great forest which spread to the sea. In it, according to a 16th-century writer, "the largest and fattest deer in the kingdom" were to be found. But the red deer have long vanished, together with many other species of animals, birds, insects, fungi and flowers. Hidden ponds where wolves and bears once watered are now sought out by big tadpole hunting expeditions. There are more school nature classes than nature can really support, and yet somehow the frogs and toads claim to their share of the forest.

Glades where a few years ago white admiral butterflies were seen now rarely produce anything more dramatic than a brimstone.

The famous, unique herd of "black" fallow deer—devastated by years of road accidents—survives still.

Epping Forest is the manna of nostalgia, but for how long can it last? Its body is being attacked from all sides, in particular it is being sacrificed on the altar of motoring.

Queen Victoria visited the forest soon after the 1878 Act and dedicated it "to the enjoyment of my people for ever." Today Sir William Addison, author and a forest verderer for nearly 30 years, asks: "How long is for ever?"

"If all the demands of the motoring public alone were allowed," Addison says, "Epping Forest would be reduced to a series of decorative borders to motorways in a single lifetime."

The posthumous victory of old Willingale 100 years ago wrangling from Parliament what was supposed to be an eternal benefit for the public. But, the verderer warns: "That which Parliament gives, Parliament also can take away."

Maybe the forest needs knights like Willingale still, with spunk and character to stand up to the dragons. One dragon is the roads lobby, which is planning a motorway in these parts. There are other dragons wanting to feast on Epping's fragile acres. If no knight is found, there is little hope of the Cockneys' paradise being available to London's masses for another 100 years.