



Majorettes and the Whittington Cat (containing award-winning actor Tom Wilkinson) lead the Whittington Park Community Association festival procession down Tufnell Park Road in 1978

Pride and resistance

An archive of community activism was accidentally discovered by Katia Lom in the loft of Whittington Community Centre. She tells the story of people who stood up for their area

Last autumn, I found a portfolio in the community centre loft. Inside was a gem: nearly 300 photographs, mostly in black and white from the 1970s, of festival scenes in Whittington Park, beautiful hand-drawn posters, newsletters and original



artwork. I staged an exhibition of some of the photographs in the community centre, which is now on permanent display.

I began to piece together the history behind the photos with the assistance of Tim Coles, a postgraduate student at the CASS, and firsthand accounts of the centre's founding members and people who had used its services.

Whittington Park Community Association (WPCA) was established on 19 September 1972. It used the same buildings (dating back to the 1800s) as today to run its many activities. However, the area itself was quite different.

Until the 1970s, the area around Whittington Park was described as being close to a slum. The years after World War II had been particularly difficult as it had been bombed. This was exacerbated when, in 1944, Sir Patrick Abercrombie drew up the *Greater London Plan*. This led to both demolished and occupied homes in what is now

Girl with cat probably at the WPCA Festival pet show 1973; adventure playground, 1979

the park and nearby roads being designated as open space.

Many residents found themselves at risk from relocation and their homes being destroyed. This created an environment of uncertainty and planning blight.

Whittington Park was created in 1954. By the 1970s, the area was still suffering from dereliction and crime, particularly among young people. By 1971, growing discontent led to a movement of resistance from which emerged the WPCA.

"At times it comes about that in certain places a movement begins seemingly out of nothing," says Phil Miles, founding member of WPCA

"WPCA ... began as a protest, an expression of frustration and annoyance at neglect and uncertainty in the district.

"For years, the ageing area, with the threat of compulsory purchase and demolition hanging over it, had become run down. The worst four streets had already been demolished for the start of a 20-acre park, but that area was already derelict, while the rest, quite substantial Victorian housing stock of real potential, faced an uncertain future.... This affected virtually the whole area north of Tytherton Road and Wedmore Street from Campdale Road to Holloway Road."

Local residents recognised that the area had problems. However, they opposed most of the open space designations as this would break up the community and most did not want to leave.





Ann Wilson, a member of the WPCA's over 60s' lunch club, recalls how her house – designated for open space – was scheduled for demolition, and how, following WPCA campaigns, she has remained there since. Rupert Road residents held organised regular "Rupert Road reunions" after their homes were demolished.

Residents began to meet regularly in earnest in 1971, with the goal of resisting the council's planning schemes. They also decided to develop services for the community and improve the area, and started a newsletter.

This group named itself the Whittington Park Action Group. It did not have a building; meetings were held in people's houses, sometimes even in their cars.

The group pressed for All Saints Church Hall (where the nursery, cafe and lounge are today) to become a community centre, and this led to the formation of WPCA. The group remained in existence to campaign on local issues, especially the open space designations.

One member of this group was Emily Hope. She and her husband Tom had recently settled in the area. Emily was an American and a graduate of Vassar College in the US. Her education and cultural experience of 1960s political trends, in the US and London in the women's movement, meant she brought tremendous energy and expertise to the project. She was a main

force in establishing the group.

She put great efforts into securing a licence from Islington Council to use the building that is still used by the association today. As Phil Miles states, Emily "practically crucified herself in efforts to keep things going".

One of WPCA's first projects to come to fruition was an adventure playground in the park. Soon after it opened, local police found crime in the area fell.

Other activities were set up in the centre, including a lunch club for over 60s where people could



have freshly cooked meals, a one o'clock club and the Butterfly Nursery (today the independent Leaping Lizards Day Nursery).

From 1973 to the late 1980s, WPCA ran a popular annual summer festival in Whittington Park, which at its height attracted over 10,000 people.

The catalyst that first brought local residents together – housing demolition – stayed active well into the mid 1970s. As the October 1975 *WPCA Newsletter* attests: "1,057 people signed a petition organised by local

At the festivals: pram race, 1973; Bees Make Honey perform at the adventure playground, 1974; Emily Hope with mayor Harry Reid and the mayoress, 1973

residents in association with the WPCA to oppose the council's proposals for the further extension of Whittington Park which would require demolition of houses in Foxham Road, in Beversbrook Road and in Yerbury Road."

Eventually, WPCA's efforts were successful and Whittington Park covered just 10 acres. Even though much housing had been destroyed, Tytherton Road, Yerbury Road, Wedmore Street, Foxham Road and Beversbrook Road were spared and their open space designation was removed.

Although it had started out by protesting against Islington's plans, WPCA relies on council funding to support its work. Managing this dichotomy is also seen as a great achievement.

Another achievement may be how, by giving a place for people of all ages, WPCA showed how a community can transform itself by its own motivations, benefiting generations to come. ■

Katia Lom is project development and administrative support worker at WPCA. The archive can be seen at the Bishopsgate Institute: www.bishopsgate.org.uk, 020 7392 9270

Sources

Firsthand accounts from Phil Miles, Tom Hope, Ann Wilson and Bert Gafney
WPCA archive and newsletters
Islington Tribune
Islington Council