

An [undated c2004] article in the history of Dagnam Park including the 20th and 21st century history accessed at:

<http://www.londongardenstrust.org/features/dagnam.htm>

This is an excellent example of a history which includes modern 'challenges' in the description! NOTE Dagnam is NOT a 'Registered/Listed Park.

The Story of Dagnam Park, Havering

Thanks to pressure from a 'Friends' group, the London Borough of Havering has taken the first steps to rescue a once famous park, Dagnam Park near Romford, on the fringes of Greater London.

For over 500 years, the house and gardens at Dagnam Park, then in rural Essex, were noted for their beauty and serenity. In the 1940s London County Council built the Harold Hill Estate on part of the grounds and the house was demolished in the 1950s. The surviving parkland was designated a recreation area, but over the years has suffered from lack of maintenance, neglect and vandalism.

Anger at the wanton destruction of this once beautiful open space led local residents to form the Friends of Dagnam Park. The inaugural meeting took place in May 2003. The Friends campaigned to have the park declared a Local Nature Reserve, and to include within it the surrounding "set aside" farmland owned by the council. The campaign had its first success last month. On 20th October 2004 Havering Council agreed to create the Manor Local Nature Reserve". The Friends hope this marks the beginning of a long-term rescue plan.

The Gardens at Dagnam Park

There have been at least three manor houses - and possibly as many as five - on the site of Dagnam Park, including a moated Elizabethan manor house in the sixteenth century. From the house, a drive led over the northern end of the surrounding moat via a causeway and then north towards Noak Hill and the South Weald road.

In 1772 successful City merchant Sir Richard Neave (1721-1814), then living at nearby Havering-atte-Bower, purchased the Dagnams Park estate and demolished the existing manor house to replace it with an elegant Georgian mansion with far-reaching views.

The gardens had been laid out in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, but Sir Richard had money and a social position to maintain (he was made Governor of the Bank of England in 1780). In 1812 he commissioned leading garden designer Humphry Repton to advise on a makeover of his estate.

Repton later recorded in "Fragments" (1816) that he found "the distance presented a pleasing offskip" but thought the round pond in front of the house (a legacy from earlier layouts) was disfigured by a hurdle used to keep out the cattle.

However, Repton felt that "there is something so cheerful in the glitter of water: we must always give it up with reluctance" and devised a fence to be planted out around the water's edge. He also devised a post and chain just below the water's surface opposite the house, to fence off a paved area which the cattle could enter,

so that their reflections could be admired in the water's surface by the house's residents. The Neaves' famous stone dog stood guard over the pond. In the nineteenth century the **old walled garden was converted into a rose garden entered by wrought-iron gates**. There were also magnificent elms and **specimen trees** in the park and a vast oak on the corner of the house supported by 26 pit props.

Before the first World War, the Neaves had a staff of over 40 servants. Afterwards, in 1919, Sir Thomas Neave, the fifth baronet, sold a large portion of his estates and retained only Dagnams, the park and Dagnam Park Farm, which amounted to 550 acres. The sitting tenants of the farms were given the option to buy their land before the sale and most did so.

The end for Dagnams came in World War 2: the house was requisitioned for the army, Sir Thomas died in 1940 and at the end of the war the house suffered a direct hit from a rocket which cracked the front wall.

After the war the London County Council made plans to re-house the many thousands of Londoners made homeless by the war. In "The Greater London Plan", published in December 1944, Professor Patrick Abercrombie recommended building a housing estate at Dagnam Park, for the overspill population of London.

Dagnam House itself was to be preserved, due to its architectural and historical qualities and the woodlands and meadows near and around Dagnam Park were to remain as Green Belt land, to be used as public parks and recreation grounds.
Public Inquiry

Uproar greeted the announcement in 1945 and a public inquiry followed. This found in favour of the LCC, who completed the acquisition of the Park in 1947. The surrounding farms, sold to the tenants by the Neaves in 1919, were also compulsorily purchased. The LCC installed a caretaker in the Dagnam Park house but he stole the lead off the roof. Water got into the cracks left by the wartime rocket and the house had to be demolished in the 1950s. An era had ended.

Actual planning for the estate started in 1945-46 and in 1947, the Dagnam Park estate was announced as a 'new-style suburb'. It was subsequently decided not to use the name Dagnam Park for the estate as this could lead to confusion with the LCC estate at Dagenham. Instead it was named Harold Hill which reflected the close proximity of Harold Wood, and the historical links to the area of the original King Harold. During the 1950s many East End families moved onto the estate.

Del Smith, spokesman for Friends of Dagnam Park, recalls that there were many young families and at one time over 5,000 children were living locally. The woods, grounds and old walled garden of Dagnam Park were a fascinating playground. For the adults there was little in the way of local entertainment and the Harold Hill Horticultural society thrived. Many residents "recycled" some of the topsoil from the estate, to improve their own gardens. Mr Smith says even today you can see celandines and wood anemones peeping out from some of the local front hedges.

The walls surrounding the garden at Dagnams on three sides were demolished in about 1959 and now exist only below ground level. At the far end of the gardens there were **large greenhouses**. Just beyond the north-east wall was a row of four

walnut trees, which were trained to hang over the wall. There is no sign of them today. There was also a mulberry tree which had survived and may still be there.

The round concrete "pond" (called the Lily Pond on the 1919 map) still exists. Contrary to local opinion that this was an ornamental fishpond, Lady Dorina Neave said in her memoirs that it was actually a bathing pool and there is still a step down into it.

In the late twentieth century Dagnam Park gradually diminished in extent as housing encroached. The ornamental park was neglected and fell into disrepair. The glorious old garden and Repton features have all but vanished. Local residents are particularly angry about the invasion by illegal motor cyclists and by joyriders in stolen cars.

It was this that led the residents to form the Friends of Dagnam Park and campaign for the Park and associated woods to be designated a nature reserve. On 20th October 2004 Havering Council agreed to declare the council-owned land at Duck Wood and Dagnam Park, including Hatters Wood, as the Manor Local Nature Reserve. The recovery has begun.

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