

COMMENT



Credit: London Fungus Network

Mike, founder of London Fungus Network, introduces the borough's first ever Fungus Fortnight

Straddling urban East London and rural Essex, Waltham Forest is one of London's greenest boroughs. As well as providing habitats for wildflowers, trees, birds and mammals, its parks, woodlands and urban landscapes are also home to a wonderful diversity of fungi – if you let them find you.

The fungi and their reproductive organism (mushrooms) play a vital role in recycling nutrients and providing nourishment for plants and animals, as well as being a source of fascination for people.

Though unlike many countries in Europe and beyond, wild mushrooms have something of a bad rep in the UK. "Is it poisonous?" is often the first question people ask when they encounter a wild mushroom. Sadly, it's all too common to find patches of mushrooms stamped on, kicked over, or cut down in the prime of their life by a lawnmower. There's a perception that there is something 'harmful' about all encounters between humans and our fungal neighbours.

But in recent years, we have seen

a shift in attitudes on fungi, from fear to fascination. So during the lockdown of summer 2020, the London Fungus Network was launched to help city-dwellers get to connect with the urban fungal kingdom/queendom.

Led by volunteer rangers from London National Park City, the network is hosting a programme of fungi-fuelled art, inspiration and fun this autumn with support from Waltham Forest Council. Waltham Forest Fungus Fortnight will take place from 2nd to 17th October, bringing people together for films, forays, workshops and art installations celebrating the



Credit: London Fungus Network

world of fungi at local venues across the borough.

The fortnight kicks off with the UK premiere of *Planet Fungi* on 2nd October, a documentary following Australian photographer Stephen Axford and local tribal guides on a fungal safari of the Eastern Himalayas.

We'll also be exploring the fungal diversity closer to home, with outdoor education, arts and mushroom forays on Shroom Sunday (10th October) at Chingford's Pimp Hall Nature Reserve, where people can learn first-hand how to identify common species of mushroom and the role they play in the ecosystem.

Other highlights include mushroom-inspired food and poetry workshops. We'll also be co-creating a sculpture of 'the first mushroom', called Prototaxites – a giant fungus which dominated the Earth's landscape in prehistoric times – with artists from the Leyton-based Casa Mundi Studio.

For further details, visit fungusfortnight.org or follow @londonfungusnetwork on Instagram

Find the Facebook event at facebook.com/events/353928199435885

The Mill's decade

Iranzu Baker and Zoe Dowsett explore the past, present and future of Walthamstow's vibrant community centre

In September 2011, the former St James Street Library building became The Mill – following a 'Save Our Library' campaign, ran by local residents, with help from Nesta's Neighbourhood Challenge grant.

Since then, the centre has let the community choose what they want to make happen. The Mill provides space, resources and support for local people to run groups, events and activities, and to give something back.

Alison Griffin – one of the original St James Street Library campaigners, now a trustee of The Mill – has seen first-hand how the centre has brought Walthamstow together over the last decade.

"There's so much incredible work that goes on day-in, day-out at The Mill," she explains. "The events that stand out the most include hosting an Olympic Torch breakfast, when it touched down in Walthamstow [during London 2012], as well as signing the long-term lease for the building with Waltham Forest Council."

Mumtaz Ahmed, one of The Mill's long-standing volunteers, first visited the centre when it opened in 2011, and started volunteering a couple of years later.

"I knew straight away that I wanted to get involved," she shares. "The Mill makes sure that everyone who visits feels welcomed – it's been really inspiring for me."

To celebrate the decade, The Mill is hosting a tenth birthday party on Sunday, 19th September at its Coppermill Lane (E17 7HA) address.

Everyone's invited to enjoy an afternoon of dancing, arts workshops and performances by locals. In the run-up to the party, The Mill is also running arts classes with children, who will then showcase their creations at the anniversary celebration.

Victoria Bureyko, who is one of many organisers, encourages everyone to get involved.



"We've got loads of events happening, including birthday card-making workshops and a grow-your-own-idea scheme, where we will help you to run your own community project."

"Very excitingly, we're launching our first oral history project, where volunteers will be trained up to gather stories from inspiring Walthamstow residents."

Wondering what a second decade of The Mill might look like? Chair of trustees Ingrid Abreu Scherer says it's all about being a consistent presence.

"The Covid-19 pandemic hit our community hard, and we'll be continuing our mission to reach people who feel lonely, or isolated, and to support ideas that can bring people together again."

Centre manager Natasha McFadzean says new upgraded facilities could be on the cards, too.

"One of our focuses is to invest in improving the building and facilities through our Build The Mill project."

"Although The Mill is a fantastic space, it wasn't originally designed for how it's currently being used, and for the many ideas that people have for activities. Some of the groundwork has already been done... [but] it's a huge undertaking."

"The project will require a big effort in fundraising, community engagement and refurbishing the space, but when the project is complete, we'll have a sustainable space that will be there for the community for decades to come."

To find out more about The Mill and its 10th anniversary celebrations, visit themille17.org/events or email info@themille17.org



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Leyton's Asha Philip (far left) celebrating her bronze medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, with 4 x 100m relay teammates Imani-Lara Lansiquot, Dina Asher-Smith and Daryll Neita. Read more on Waltham Forest athletes' Olympic success on p7 © Team GB/Sam Mellish

Council court battle over young Afghan refugee's age

High Court ruling says age of refugee, who arrived in the UK in 2019, was "not lawfully assessed" by Waltham Forest Council. The case continues

by Victoria Munro,
Local Democracy Reporter

Waltham Forest Council is embroiled in a High Court battle after claiming an Afghan refugee lied about being a child. According to the refugee, known

only as M to protect his identity, he fled Afghanistan at the age of 13 and arrived in the UK, alone, in October 2019 at age 14.

He was taken into care by Waltham Forest Council but the council later decided he was really an adult man, estimating he was between 19 and 22 when he arrived in the UK.

The council based its decision on M's "mature physical appearance" and alleged "deliberate withholding of vital information" during an interview with two social workers in May 2020.

Charity Refugee Council helped M challenge the decision, arguing he had not been allowed to defend himself, but in October

that year, the council argued his lack of growth and wisdom teeth proved their original conclusion was correct.

Following a hearing in June 2021, High Court deputy judge Dan Squires QC ruled the council had "not lawfully assessed" M's age and carried out its assessment "in a procedurally unfair manner".

In his written judgement, he wrote: "The ability to accurately assess a person's age, especially when they may be close to 18, from the development of their teeth is an area of significant controversy on which there is not a clear and reliable expert position."

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