

# Losing the plots

## Allotment holders fight back against Olympic bulldozers

by RUSS LAWRENCE

**A CAMPAIGN** has been launched to save scores of Hackney allotments which face being bulldozed to make way for the London Olympics in 2012.

Uncertainty surrounds the future of the 87 rented plots at Manor Gardens allotments on the banks of the River Lea near Waterden Road, Hackney Wick, because the site is earmarked for hockey pitches and a walkway to the Olympic stadium.

The allotments, which were featured in top chef Rick Stein's *Food Heroes* TV series, have been lovingly tended by generations of gardeners for more than 100 years.

Campaigners fear it will destroy a close-knit, multi-cultural community united by a shared passion for growing their own fruit and vegetables.

"Many plot holders have been here for decades, some since the end of the Second World War, taking over from their fathers," said allotment holder, Julie Sumner, who lives in St John's Church Road, Homerton.

"Nowadays it is a culturally diverse mix of old East Enders, Turks, Greeks, Cypriots and Jamaicans as well as English, Scottish and Irish, a kind of multi-cultural melting pot.

"For many elderly plot holders the allotments provide a place of companionship," she added.

Campaigners hope to block the re-development by exploring whether there is a covenant on the land that would make it illegal for its use to be changed.

The land was bequeathed by landowner, philanthropist and founder of Eton Manor Boys' Club, Major Arthur Villiers, on his death to be used in perpetuity as allotments.

However, after he died in 1969 it was



Pitch battle – Julie Sumner and Hassan Ali at the Manor Gardens allotments site in Hackney Wick

taken over by trustees and sold to the Lea Valley Regional Park Authority in 1975.

Despite promises by Olympic Games chiefs to relocate the allotments, plot holders say they have been left in the dark about any future move.

Rumour has it they could be shifted to a site close to the M11 link flyover at Hackney Wick.

The campaign to save the allotments has been backed by Darren Johnson, the leader of the Green Party on the London Assembly.

He has tabled a question to London mayor Ken Livingstone calling on him to intervene and explore alternatives that

will safeguard its future. "While the Olympics are obviously the cause of great excitement, this should not be at the expense of prized community assets like Manor Gardens allotments," said Mr Johnson.

Campaigners believe the allotments should be kept as part of the Olympic development and would be a valuable enhancement to it.

"What a unique stage it could be to demonstrate to the world Britain's capacity to acknowledge, respect and integrate a working, multi-ethnic community into its plan rather than create a ghost-town legacy," said Julie Sumner.

Hassan Ali, who lives in Livermere

Court on the Acton estate in Dalston, has been cultivating his plot for the past 13 years growing tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes and carrots.

"If the allotments go, it will have a devastating impact on very many people who depend on the enjoyment they provide," he added.

The London Development Agency said the allotments had been identified as land needed to be acquired for the Games.

A spokeswoman said there would be a two-year re-location programme to two possible sites in the vicinity. However, she was unable to say exactly where they would be.