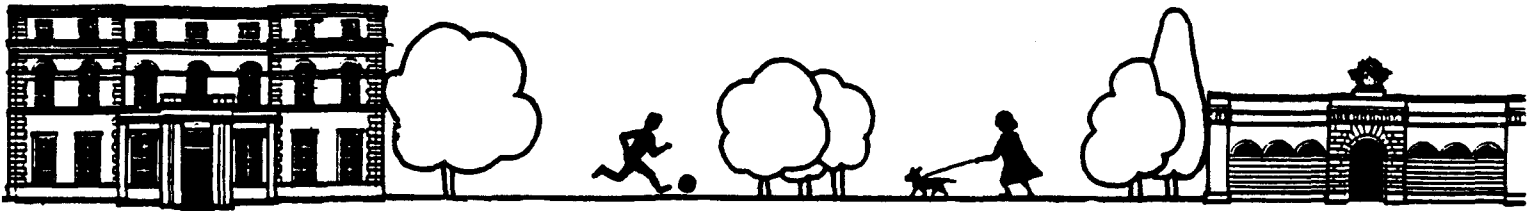


FRIENDS of GUNNERSBURY PARK & MUSEUM

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NEWSLETTER



THE FRIENDS' ANNUAL BAZAAR

On the First Sunday in September (6th) the Friends of Gunnersbury Park and Museum will be holding their annual fund-raising "event" on the grass in front of the Museum. We will be there with other local charities from 10.30 a.m. onwards. Do come along and find some bargains!

Joan Catterall (560 4262) or Marianne Booth (992 9891) will be glad to collect anything suitable for our stall or Tombola.

CIVIL WAR CAMP & EXHIBITION

As part of the activities to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War the Seige Group (a re-enactment group which specialise in living history displays) will be recreating a 17th century camp site in Gunnersbury Park, together with displays of pike and musket drills, on the weekend of 26/27 September. There will be four re-enactment displays, at 11.30 and 3.00 on both days.

At 11.00 on Saturday 26th September the Museum will open to show its exhibition to commemorate the Battle of Brentford in 1642, an exhibition which will show both the political and military background to the battle and the lives of the people of Brentford at that time. The exhibition will run until April 1993.

There is a full programme of events and talks related to the exhibition, all at the Museum:

Andrea Cameron (LB Hounslow's Local History Librarian) will cover "People, Places and Events around 17th century Brentford" at 7.30 on Wednesday 7th October.

Neil Chippindale (Author of "The Battle of Brentford and the Stand-Off at Turnham Green") will discuss "The Battle of Brentford, November 1642" at 7.30 on Wednesday 11th November.

Sarah Levitt (the Museum's Curator) will give a talk entitled "Puritans wore lace: Costume in the early 17th century" at 7.30 on Wednesday 13th January 1993.

Elizabeth Foyster (a postgraduate research student at the University of Durham) will talk on "Make-up or Break-up: Marital discord in the 17th century" on at 7.30 on Wednesday 10th February 1993.

Sue McAlpine (the Museum's Interpretative Officer) will talk on "Witchcraft and Superstition in the 17th century" at 7.30 on Wednesday 10th March 1993.

EDITH HARRIS

Long-established Friends will be saddened to hear of the death of Edith Harris, an Ealing resident who gave the Friends a good deal of support in our early days. Edith was already familiar with the skills needed to "tackle the Town Hall"; she had time, she was persistent and she was usually right! We showed our thanks for her work by sending flowers to her funeral.



Borough Gardens, Dorchester, opened in 1896: a legacy of the Victorians' burst of civic park-making, and part of our national heritage

Photograph: John Gilbride

Dark age of the public park

Just before the general election, recommendations were published for improvements to Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, London. The report, by the Royal Parks Review Commission, was widely welcomed and the Government responded by shifting responsibility for all royal parks from the Department of the Environment to the new Department of National Heritage. The minister in charge of parks, Robert Key, says the Government is now "committed to maintaining and improving" them.

Yet if the royal parks have been rescued from neglect (and many would doubt this), the plight of our urban public parks is worse than ever. This week, the Landscape Institute and the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (Ilam) are calling on the Secretary of State for

The public responds only to negative proposals such as banning dogs or shutting lavatories

National Heritage, David Mellor, to set up a national agency for their care.

Ilam's director, Alan Smith, says: "The present national agencies for sport, arts, nature conservancy, countryside and heritage have only a minor interest in urban open space, and have proved unable to protect or arrest the neglect of these national interests."

Our public parks are as much a part of our national heritage as their royal relations. Most are the legacy of the Victorians' burst of civic park-making, which it was hoped would alleviate the suffering of the new urban poor by providing open places for recreation.

By the end of the 19th century, open spaces in the image of the country-house landscaped park had been laid out for the working classes in most towns and cities. Since then local authorities have also ac-

The green spaces in our towns and cities are more neglected than ever. Susan Lasdun calls for a national agency to safeguard and promote them

quired many private country-house parks which were either bequeathed by their owners or bought by councils after they were encircled by the expanding town.

Public parks are administered almost exclusively by local councils. This was once their most important task, even though they were never legally bound to provide or maintain them. The only exceptions are the few parks acquired under the Open Spaces Act of 1906, which they are merely obliged to keep "in a good and decent state".

Today, councils have a statutory duty to provide a wide range of services, and parks are no longer a high priority. There is no definition of the standard of service expected in public parks and the problem is compounded by the Government's refusal to make parks a separate item in the Standing Spending Assessments, putting them instead under the general heading of "all other services".

This has led to financial restraints which discourage local authorities from protecting or developing the green spaces in their care. They also limit research into who uses parks and why; why some people do not; what people want from their parks; and how often they visit them. This information is needed to decide how best to allocate scant funds, and is vital for the future development and management of parks. So far, only about 10 councils have been able to complete such surveys.

Because there is little feedback from the public, it is difficult for those responsible to make positive decisions about managing parks. They complain that the public responds only when a negative proposal is suggested, such as banning dogs, removing trees or shutting lavatories.

Low funding and the lack of public involvement have caused a decline in morale among many park officers. In some authorities, they argue, maintenance rather than management has become the priority. Often there is neither a landscape architect nor a park manager, the latter the linchpin between the public and the officers.

Parks are vital to the welfare of a community. Recent studies in the US suggest a correlation between crime and social problems and the state of public parks, and have prompted an increase in funding — private and public — to restore them. In Boston, for example, the city's poverty action programme includes restoring the "emerald necklace" of parkland designed by the landscape architect Frederick Olmsted in the 19th century. The result bears out Olmsted's dictum that "a rural retreat" is an "essential recreational need in the heart of the city".

This view is echoed in many European countries. In Germany, it has been mandatory since 1976 for every city to produce a green-space plan. Spain and France have strong policies for improving their urban green spaces. But in England there is nothing to stop local authorities

... flogging public parks
To Sainsbury's and Marks and Sparks which, according to this versifier, is just what some are doing. What happens more often is that parks are nibbled away as councils bow to pressure to release parkland for roads, public buildings or private developments — all of which ultimately destroys the spirit of the place. An example of this erosion was the sale in 1990 of part of Gunnersbury Park, London, by Hounslow Borough Council for building.

Yet the Victorians' original purpose in

laying out public parks is as relevant as ever. After the Toxteth riots of 1981, Michael Heseltine, the Secretary of State for the Environment, called for open spaces to be developed and initiated a garden festival. On the other side of the Mersey, Bir-

kenhead Park — which Olmsted visited before laying out Central Park in New York — provides the countryside for a whole community. Children, in spite of the regulations, still build treehouses there and camp on the islands in the lake.

As well as providing a garden for those who do not have one, a local park can host a network of social activities and strengthen a sense of community and civic pride. It is also a potential tourist attraction — an asset which has hardly been tapped. When one considers how many people tramp around private and National Trust gardens open to the pub-

Studies in the US suggest a correlation between crime and social problems and the state of parks

lic, if local authority parks were improved and offered a wider variety of landscapes, flowers, trees and shrubs, they too could attract similar numbers.

It is time to establish a national agency to protect our public parks, as has been done for our country and national parks. Such an agency would advise both government and local authorities on the standards, legal obligations and resources needed to maintain and improve them. It would encourage grant-aided restoration schemes, and initiate comprehensive user-surveys. And it could ensure that when the national lottery is introduced, urban parks are a substantial beneficiary.

Susan Lasdun is the author of *The English Park, Royal, Private and Public*, published by Andre Deutsch at £20.

Public parks and spaces as a measure of a civilisation's greatness

From Mr Alan Barber

Sir: I am pleased that Susan Lasdun has drawn attention to the plight of our public parks ("Dark age of the public park", 27 July). The question is whether our 120,000 hectares of public parks and open spaces can continue to be the most accessible and popular recreation provision in our towns and cities, or whether they will become neglected no-go areas, as New York's Central Park became in the Seventies.

The current state of the Royal Parks has been fairly criticised but, uniquely, they enjoy the direct patronage of a Government that spends considerably more on their upkeep than it will allow most local authorities to spend on their parks. Indeed, the local authorities are encouraged, if not compelled, to neglect their parks by the lack of any factor for their maintenance in the formula used for calculating the Government's Revenue Support Grant, which accounts for more than three-quarters of local authority expenditure, the lack of any effective statutory duty on the local au-

thorities to maintain public parks, and the lack of any national agency to protect and promote them.

I hope the new Department of National Heritage can be persuaded to take the problem seriously now that two distinguished national bodies have joined forces to try to put our public parks back on the agenda. In considering this appeal, the Government would do well to heed the words of John Ruskin:

The measure of any great civilisation is in its cities and a measure of a city's greatness is to be found in the quality of its public places, its parks and squares.

Yours faithfully,
ALAN BARBER
Bristol
28 July

From Ms Kate Ashbrook

Sir: Susan Lasdun is right to deplore the neglect of, and threats to, urban open spaces. But a national agency for public parks will not be effective unless it has proper resources and clout.

One problem is that the law protecting open spaces was relaxed in the 1980 Local Government, Planning and Land Act. Before then, an authority wishing to sell or use an open space for another purpose had to offer land that was "no less in area and equally advantageous to the public" or submit its proposals to Parliament. Now it has merely to advertise its intention and "consider" objections.

While the law is so feeble, open spaces will remain under threat. Meanwhile, the Open Spaces Society, with funding from the Department of the Environment, is running an urban project to help communities care for and defend their local green spaces. And in four weeks' time we shall publish a do-it-yourself guide to protecting open spaces: *Making Space*.

So we are doing what we can — with the odds firmly against us.
Yours faithfully,
KATE ASHBROOK
General Secretary
The Open Spaces Society
Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire
27 July

From Mr J. H. Jeal

Sir: The article "Dark age of the public park" (27 July) gives me the opportunity to say publicly what I often say privately to friends who are visiting Nottingham.

I have lived in the city for some 10 years and during that time have become increasingly impressed with the efforts of both city and county in maintaining parks and large leisure areas, many of which have buildings or aspects of historical significance. What has been particularly impressive over the period has been the level and extent of restoration that has occurred.

Both city and county can be justifiably proud of what they have achieved in this area of their public responsibilities.

Hopefully, as employers, they will be equally proud of the dedicated workforce that has made aspiration a reality and will ensure that their work, which brings such pleasure to the public, continues into our uncertain economic future.

Yours faithfully,
J. H. JEAL
Nottingham
28 July

Parks and cemeteries in peril

From Mr James Wisdom

Sir: Susan Lasdun ("Dark age of the public park", 27 July) is right to call attention to the lack of statutory protection for public urban parks. There is a need to open up the debate on the purpose and future of these parks now that the world for which they were acquired has changed, particularly through the spread of car ownership.

For the last decade we have been observing the two London boroughs (Ealing and Hounslow), which jointly own Gunnersbury Park, losing the battle to conserve the park and its historic buildings. Today the stables, the East Lodge, Princess Amelia's Bath-house, the Potomac Tower, balustrades, arches, gates and even lamp standards (all listed) are in ruins. Even the two inhabited mansions are facing massive repairs, resulting from years of cut-backs in funding. Yet, throughout these years, we have had in English Heritage an agency similar to Susan Lasdun's proposal for parks.

While historic buildings' legislation can be powerful in the hands of local authorities over private owners, it is less effective when councils themselves are the owners, for their decisions are made within the annual spending round. A parks agency will need great reserves of authority and financial influence to meet the challenge.

The article was mistaken in saying that, in 1990, part of Gunnersbury Park was sold for building. At that time, the park's management committee was in favour of a scheme to fund the restoration of the stables with an office building, but Hounslow was opposed and the scheme — like many others — came to nothing. Many things can destroy "the spirit of the place".

We have found a long period in the public ownership of two conflicting councils to be remarkably effective.

Yours faithfully,
JAMES WISDOM
Chairman
Friends of Gunnersbury Park
and Museum
London, W4

From Mr Sam Weller

Sir: Your article about the plight of the public park (27 July), while highlighting an important point, misses an even more neglected area of urban space and heritage — our cemeteries. Those built by the Victorians were designed as parks to be enjoyed by the public and they contain many beautiful and historic monuments. Today these cemetery parks are overgrown and their monuments are disintegrating.

Even more dispiriting is the way in which modern cemeteries are blighting green spaces by perpetuating a sort of tombstone strip development which emerges as a monumental slum. Both old and new cemeteries have a value as works of art and architecture, repositories of history and environments of emotional and ecological significance.

Last year's International Encounter on Contemporary Cemeteries held in Seville, Spain observed that effective legislation has been hindered because it falls between different administrative departments. Any national agency to protect public parks should include cemeteries, old and new, in its remit.

Yours faithfully,
SAM WELLER
London, W8
29 July



THE INDEPENDENT

On 27th July The Independent ran this article by Susan Lasdun on the problems faced by public parks throughout the country, making a specific reference to Gunnersbury. A short correspondence followed, also reprinted here. The Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management have written an open letter to David Mellor (National Heritage Minister) asking for a National Agency, for statutory duties and financial provision and for Lottery money. We will be interested in his reply!

Friends might also be interested in "People's Park: The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain" by Hazel Conway (Cambridge University Press, 1991, £49.50) which shows how 19th century parks came about, how they were designed and how they were used. This is particularly interesting now that the debate on the future of public parks seems to be opening up (see the item on "The Green Strategy" elsewhere in this Newsletter).

The Newsletter was edited by James Wisdom, 25 Hartington Road, W4 3TL (994 4231).

PLANS & PROJECTS - UPDATE

Marianne Booth writes:

First, may we thank those who kindly offered help with "The Victorian Child", "Scrubbing The Staircase" and "Guides For The Kitchens" - all projects for which we appealed for volunteers in our last Newsletter. If we have not yet telephoned, we will! More helpers are needed, however - please phone me (992 9891) if you have some spare time.

We have more news about the Civil War Exhibition. We hope you will be able to come and enjoy the "Living History Camp" on Saturday 26th September or Sunday 27th - the details are above.

The programme of Talks during the winter is also detailed above. Make a note in your diaries now - Friends are invited free.

The weekend of the Civil War Living History Camp is going to be particularly busy for us. The Museum will be specially opened on both Saturday and Sunday mornings that weekend - and so also will the Kitchens. Marshals will be needed for visitors to the Camp. Each of these parts will run more smoothly with some Friends as volunteer helpers - would you come and join us? Please phone me to discuss how you could help.

"THE GREEN STRATEGY"

What sort of public parks and open spaces would you like to see in this area in the future? More open grasslands? More bedding displays? More trees and shrubs? Areas set aside for nature conservation? Wetlands? Scrub? Formal gardens? Nature trails and interpretation? The opportunities are endless and some of the most interesting ideas can be among the cheapest to maintain.

The staff of Hounslow's Parks section are asking us to comment on their plans and proposals, which they have put together in a 46-page consultation document and a 20-minute video (narrated by Alan Titchmarsh) called "Hounslow's Green Strategy". It raises many fascinating questions but is hard to summarise in a short article in a Newsletter. In the words of the authors:

"Hounslow, due to its location between Heathrow airport and the city of London, has developed rapidly since the 1960s. Like other urban growth areas around the country, this has brought economic benefits. However, it has also put immense pressure on open spaces. Hounslow Council has recognised this problem and consequently developed its Green Strategy Plan. This plan shows how fragmented open spaces can be co-ordinated for the benefit of people, wildlife and the global environment. The programme should be of benefit to schools and colleges, environmental study groups, local authorities and the business community."

We have copies of the Plan and a copy of the video which we can lend out to interested Friends. If you would like further information, please contact the Chairman (James Wisdom) on 994 4231.

SEATS IN THE PARK

Joan Catterall writes:

As you may recall, Gunnersbury recently acquired some lovely new seats (cast-iron Victorian replicas) which were placed along the terrace in front of the two Mansions - to the great delight of the Park's visitors. We think they were made by the same company that provided the new (Victorian) notice-boards and sign posts. But during the summer they seem to have disappeared. A keen-eyed seat-watcher has spotted some identical seats in Boston Manor Park but we know they cannot be the ones from Gunnersbury, because Gunnersbury's came from the joint Ealing/Hounslow budget. Cllr. Dunkley asked for a report at the last Joint Committee meeting, so we will keep you posted. Perhaps, like so many of their predecessors, they have gone for a refreshing swim in the Boating Lake!