

form but looks as fragile as a blubber'. Cockerell, no doubt, must have been fascinated by the structure's lightness of effect – for *blubber* was, at the time, another word for jellyfish.

Wisdom's School: LONDON'S
PRE-VICTORIAN CEMETERIES
By Roger Bowdler

One summer's evening, when the western clouds in the variegated robes of gold and purple spoke declining day, I left the noisy town and its gay inhabitants, for the silence of the verdant fields, and the sequestered enjoyments of study and meditation; longing to be freed from the cares and tumults of the crowded city, I hastened to the flowery meads, the peaceful abodes of solitude and retirement; passing on the way hither a well-known repository of the dead, I found the doors thrown open to receive an expected funeral, and my curiosity prompted me to enter...¹

George Wright's Rousseauesque ramblings of the mid 1770s took him to Bunhill Fields, the great Dissenters' burial ground in Finsbury Fields (fig. 12). This was the largest and among the longest-established of London's suburban graveyards. Wright was in search of spiritual instruction, and turned to what he termed 'wisdom's school': a burial ground. Attention has hitherto been concentrated upon celebrated Victorian commercial cemeteries of the 1830s and 1840s: on Kensal Green and Highgate, on Nunhead, West Norwood and Brompton. What has generally escaped notice (and still sadly escapes appreciation, maintenance and care) is the necklace of Georgian cemeteries that lies around inner London. Its components form a telling contrast to the country churchyards of outer London and the planted grandeur of their Victorian successors.²

The necklace survives, but in parts. The principal elements are Bunhill Fields, off the City Road; St George's Gardens, in Bloomsbury; St Andrew's Gardens, on Gray's Inn Road; St James's Gardens, on Hampstead Road; St Martin's Gardens, on Pratt Street in

Camden Town; St John's Gardens, on Horseferry Road in Westminster; Paddington churchyard, north of Paddington Green; the Chelsea burial ground, on the King's Road; the several Jewish burial grounds of the Mile End Road; the Huguenot burial ground in Wandsworth, and others besides. They are burial places separated from places of worship, and which thus cannot be described as churchyards. These have not previously been considered a group: this piece will touch briefly on their genesis, on attitudes to burial, on their appearance, and on their decline, and will end with a rushed glimpse at the 1880s movement which sought to return these places of the dead to the use by, and enjoyment of, the living by their conversion to public gardens.

Medieval Christianity had turned its back on the Roman practice of extra-mural burial. The result by the seventeenth century was a city with a scattering of overcrowded vaults and churchyards. John Evelyn, Sir Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor all decried the custom of crowded graveyards. Evelyn in his post-Fire musings on the reconstruction of London wanted a return to the Roman manner:

I would have [churchyards] universally proscribed to the very utmost wall of the city northwards, upon which inscriptions, and monuments, might be aptly inserted, and the dead interred, either in vaults, or in the open ground, affording a useful diversion to the contemplative passenger of his mortality, and human frailty; for as to that superstitious custom of burying in churches, or having their dormitories in the very heart of cities, where frequently churches are built, I neither think it decent, nor sufferable.³

It was left to small religious minorities to return to the Roman model. Perhaps the earliest of all of London's post-Conquest cemeteries was the Jewish burial ground outside Cripplegate known as the *Jew's Garden*, acquired by the Jewish community in 1177;⁴ later suburban Jewish burial grounds were established close to Mile End Road.

The Dissenters, too, preferred burial grounds on the edge of the city, often near meeting houses: the great resting place of Non-Conformity, Bunhill Fields, began to be used for the interment of dissenters in the

1. British Architectural Library, Royal Institute of British Architects, MSS Collection.

1. George Wright, *Solitary Walks: In which are added, the Consolations of Religion in the Views of Death and Loss of Friends*, 3rd ed. (1775), pp.3-4.

2. The most recent surveys of pre-Victorian burial practices are found in Chris Brook, *Mortal Remains* (1989), chapter 1, and Howard Colvin, *Architecture and the After-Life* (1991), chapter xvi.

3. E.S. De Beer, ed. *London Revived. Considerations for its Rebuilding in 1666* (Oxford 1938), p.40. His chosen site was between Cripplegate and Aldgate.

4. Mrs Basil Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds* (1896), p.155.

1660s; the East Hill Huguenot burial ground in Wandsworth was opened in 1687, and the Long Lane burial ground in Bermondsey was acquired for such a purpose in 1697. London and Westminster parishes relied upon the choked receptacles of churchyards and inner city burial grounds.⁵ Out-of-town interment was the province of Jews and Dissenters. Only the freakish severity of the Great Plague of 1665 had driven mass-burials to the outskirts of the city, prompting the use of mass graves in outlying fields⁶, and the purchase of ground for London's first cemetery by the City Corporation, ground that, significantly, had to wait until it entered the Dissenting hands of Mr Tindal before it was put to use.

The appeal of the Roman model began to affect burial customs in the 1710s, following the 1711 *Act for Building...fifty new churches of Stone and other proper Materials, with Towers and Steeples to each of them; and for purchasing of Sites of Churches and Church-Yards, and Burying Places, in or near the Cities of London and Westminster, or the Suburbs thereof*.⁷ The Act sanctioned the creation of cemeteries: that is, burial grounds not in the shadow of a church. Such places enjoyed several advantages: cost, propriety and size. Sites 'in the Skirtes of the Towne'⁸ cost less than inner city ones; fewer neighbours could object to the siting of new graveyards hard by their houses; and a more generous lay-out and lower density of burial was possible. Sir John Vanbrugh's *Proposals about Building ye New-Churches of* 1711 relished the chance to remove burials from within the city to outside, on the pattern established at the colonial cemetery outside Surat.⁹ Land values would preclude the purchase of graveyards within the city:

'And since therefore there must be Caemitarys provided in the Skirtes of the Towne, if they are ordered with that decency they ought to be, there can be no doubt but the Rich as well as the Poor, will be content to lye there.'

Vanbrugh wrote prophetically of a socially-

stratified alternative to intramural burial:

'If these Caemitarys be consecrated, Handsomely and regularly wall'd in, and planted with Trees in such a form as to make a Solemn Distinction between one part and another; there is no doubt, but the Richer sort of People, will think their Friends and Relations more decently inter'd in those distinguished places, than they commonly are in the Aisles and under the Pews in Churches.'

Finally, he advocated a wholesale shift in monument-making for relicts of the wealthy, who would:

'think them more honourably remember'd by lofty and Noble Mausoleums, erected over them in Freestone (which no doubt will soon come into practice), than by little Tawdry Monuments of Marble, stuck up against Walls and Pillars.'

Outdoors rather than inside churches; mass rather than pettiness of scale; and native stone rather than imported marbles. The rise of the outdoor monument was part the self conscious emulation of classical exemplars, part in reaction against intramural burial, and part the result of the rise of the cemetery.

Vanbrugh's ideas for a suburban cemetery first approached realisation in the creation of the twin burial grounds of St George's, Bloomsbury and St George the Martyr, Queen Square.¹⁰ These grounds now form St George's Gardens. The ground, sited immediately to the north of the future Foundling Hospital, was bought in July 1713, enclosed by a wall, and made ready to receive Bloomsbury's dead. These were slow in coming. Not until January 1714 was the first corpse, that of Robert Nelson, laid in London's first Anglican cemetery, beneath a fine urn-crowned monument which still stands. Nelson had stipulated in his will that his body was to be buried in this burial ground 'to overcome the aversion that has been discovered to its use'. One likely cause for such aversion was the association of cemeteries with Jews and Dissenters. An inspection of the burial registers for St George the Martyr reveals that the late 1710s and early 1720s saw a steady increase in the cemetery's use: thus the initial scruple at burying London's dead away from places of worship was gradually breaking down. Thomas Lewis's

5. See Vanessa Harding, 'And one more may be laid Here': the location of burials in early modern London *London Journal*, xiv (1989), pp. 112-29.

6. See Holmes, *Burial Grounds*, p.120 ff. for an overview of suspected plague pits; and Vanessa Harding 'Burial of the Plague Dead in Early Modern London', J.A.I. Champion, ed. *Epidemic Disease in London* (Institute of Historical Research 1993), pp. 53-64.

7. See Howard Colvin's introduction to E.G.W. Bill, ed., *The Queen Anne Churches* (1979).

8. *Viz.* Vanbrugh's *Proposals* for new churches: Kerry Downes, *Sir John Vanbrugh* (1987), p.355.

9. Vanbrugh's sketch of the British cemetery at Surat, reproduced in K. Downes, *Vanbrugh* (1977), pl. 55, shows a mausoleum and obelisk crammed enclosure within a sturdy, pyramid-capped perimeter.

10. See *Survey of London* xxiv (1952), pp.77-9, and plates 66-67, and Walter E. Brown, *St Pancras Open Spaces & Disused Burial Grounds* (2nd ed., 1911), pp.54-8. The ground was first purchased for the use of St George the Martyr: only in 1730 was the northern half devoted to the use of St George's, Bloomsbury.

11. Greater London Record Office (GLRO), P82/GE02/14.

polemical *Seasonal Considerations on the Indecent and Dangerous Custom of Burying in Churches and Churchyards* of 1721 was even able to assert that: 'we find, in greater Cities, as London, where Necessity has forced them to look for Burying-places at a Distance from the Town, there is no scruple of burying in them.'¹² Lewis, the author of *Churches no Charnel House* and avowed enemy of intramural burial, was anxious that any taboo concerning cemetery burial be banished. In 1732, a petition was submitted by the parishioners of St George's, Bloomsbury to the Commissioners for New Churches, requesting improved access to the burial ground,¹³ and suggests an early appetite for the elegiac practice of visits to burial grounds.

What did eighteenth-century graveyards look like? The best guide is John Rocque. His *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster* of 1747 shows London's burial grounds in some detail. The majority were bare, with a few chest tombs punctuating the arid expanses. Some had trees planted around the perimeter. A very few, such as St Anne's, Limehouse, attempted something more ambitious: this churchyard had a semi-circle of trees around its west end, together with a tree-flanked path (fig. 13). For most burial grounds, however, space was at too much of a premium for there to be room for planting schemes. The combination of graves and gardens, formal or informal, had to wait until the arrival of the massive commercial cemeteries of the mid-nineteenth century. The celebrated London gardener Thomas Fairchild left money in his 1728 will for the preaching of a memorial sermon. One of the specified topics was to be 'the proofs of the resurrection, as manifested in the natural world'. However, nature was held firmly in check in the London churchyard and cemetery: the parable of death and regeneration that deciduous trees proclaimed each autumn and spring was not heard until the nineteenth century. These were practical places, of interment, rather than places of resort. Thomas Gray's *Elegy* (1751) is set in a *country* churchyard, not a town's. As for some monuments, these tended to consist of isolated chest tombs and irregular ranks of head and foot-stones. Although St George's Gardens do contain

some individual monuments of some splendour, there is nothing to compare in London's Georgian cemeteries with the sepulchral riches of the outer London churchyards such as Snaresbrook or Richmond, Lee or Wimbledon.

Britain was seen as the home of graveyard melancholy. The *Graveyard School* of poets, fronted by Edward Young,¹⁴ had combined the ancient patristic theme of the contemplation of decay with the proto-romantic sensibility and appetite for cadaver-prompted *frissons*. The country churchyard had on its side loneliness, ruins, sylvan settings and a low rate of burial: the town churchyard, especially London's, was busy, densely-packed, largely without planting, and surrounded by the energies of a growing city. There are thus profound cultural reasons why London's cemeteries were generally ignored for all purposes beyond that of burial.

The high priest of graveyard rambles in the late eighteenth century was George Wright. Never happier than when in front of a yawning tomb, his sentimental version of the *Memento Mori* is best summed up in the title of one of his books: *Pleasing Melancholy* (1793). He described Bunhill Fields as 'wisdom's school', as 'this extensive receptacle of mouldering flesh', and gloried in its death essence: 'I entered the instructive cemetery [sic] all pensive and alone; a pleasing melancholy filled my mind as I cast my eyes around and surveyed the almost innumerable monuments in every part'.¹⁵ Wright even enters open vaults to peruse their charges. In this 'silent dormitory - I am in no danger here of being interrupted by the men of the world, nor intruded on by the young, the fashionable or the gay; no, they would rather shun the *thoughts*, much more the place where the dead repose'.¹⁶ Scornful of 'this sensual and degenerate age', Wright rivalled the putrefying depths of the Counter Reformation piety in his exhortations for the worldlier elements of London's populace to visit cemeteries:

'Let the young, the gay, ambitious and the fair, take a serious walk into this place of skulls, and see the end of

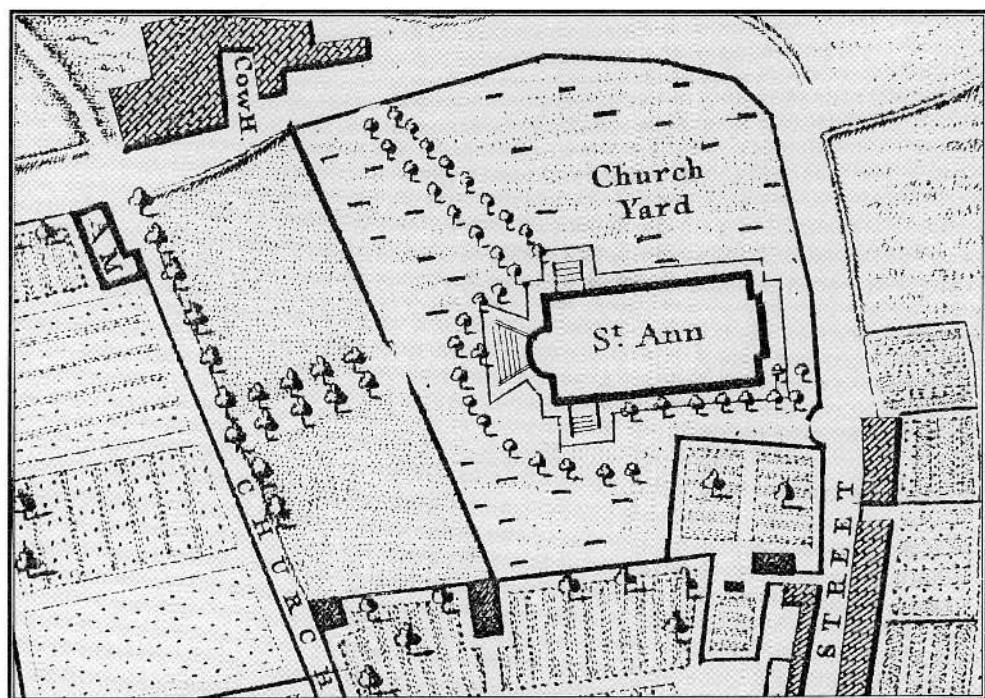
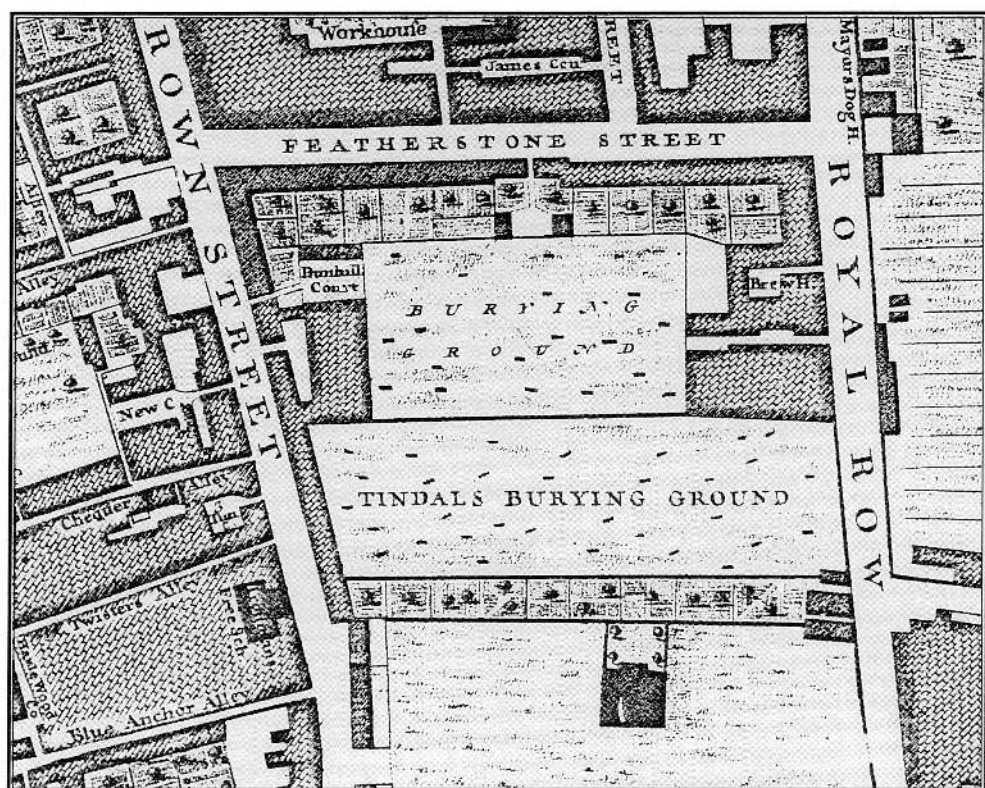
12. Lewis, *Seasonal Considerations*, p.62.

13. Bill, *op.cit.*, p.61.

14. Edward Young (1683-1765), poet and dramatist. *Graveyard poets* was the common term for those 18th writers, never a formal school, who found inspiration in graveyards and the temptation of mortality. They were especially popular in the 1740s and 1750s. The *graveyard poets* included Thomas Parnell, Robert Blair, Thomas Gray and James Hervey.

15. George Wright, *Solitary Walks*, pp.25, 5, 27.

16. Wright, *Solitary Walks*, p.43.



12. Bunhill Fields, also known as Tyndal's Burial Ground, as depicted in John Rocque's *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster*, 1747. (PRIVATE COLLECTION)

13. The churchyard of St Ann Lincolne as shown in John Rocque's *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster*, 1747. (PRIVATE COLLECTION)

all sublunary triumphs...Let the haughty, vain and proud, behold the body turning into putrefaction, or the bones of a haggard skeleton rotting in yonder tomb'.¹⁷

Wright was extreme in his devotion to the graveyard, and had a particular interest in the context of Bunhill Fields as the location for such grisly *meditatio mortis*. However, the extreme paucity of other references on views of London's early cemeteries suggests that they were not commonly frequented in the way that Victorian cemeteries were to be. One undoubted reason for this indifference towards such places could be their sorry condition. The St George the Martyr burial ground was described in a faculty of 1819 as 'in many places much sunk and in a very bad and ruinous condition as well as many of the tombs and grave-stones therein and the earth swamped and in want of draining'.¹⁸

When, then, did London's older cemeteries come to be seen as places for reflection as well as places for the disposal of bodies? The answer would seem to be as late as the 1880s. In that decade, several initiatives were underway: each of them sought to rescue these closed and neglected fields of the dead, and restore them to public use. The intended result was the creation of 'outdoor sitting rooms',¹⁹ places where the amenities of the garden were allied to the interest and importance of the graveyard. By then it had been thirty years since the last bodies were laid to rest: not even decomposition was taking place. The last body laid to rest in what was to become St George's Gardens was interred in 1855, and the place was then effectively abandoned. It was described in 1872 as 'a wilderness...standing in disgrace to the parish...will no churchman look to this, and see that the resting place of departed christians is worthy of the name?'²⁰ Graveyards were fast becoming rubbish tips, following the prohibition of burials in them: one clergyman told his congregation in 1878 that upon a single tomb in the Marylebone churchyard, he had found 'twelve old kettles, two coal scuttles, three old hats and an umbrella'.²¹

Rescue came in the 1880s. Shame at the forlorn conditions of these abandoned cemeteries, combined with anxiety at the lack of pub-

lic open spaces, led to a multi-pronged campaign for their conversion into public gardens. Foremost among the promoters for such a change was Reginald Lord Brabazon (subsequently 12th Earl of Meath), who in 1882 established the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association,²² and Octavia Hill, who among her many philanthropic activities sat on the open spaces committee of the Kyrle Society - a body formed in 1877 with the splendid aim of 'bringing beauty home to the people'.²³ One aspect of this was the conversion of disused cemeteries into gardens, for the creation of 'outdoor sitting rooms'. In 1896 Mrs Basil Holmes expressed her sense of the special potential of these places thus:

'I would not say that a converted graveyard is a better garden than a converted square, but yet there is something more interesting about it - it is so very human; and where there are monuments to notable persons (which naturally are undisturbed) they form something with an historical flavour about it which is attractive to look at'.²⁴

With the introduction of fresh soil, the laying-down of gravel paths, and drainage, and the provision of seats, of planting trees, shrubs and flowers, and the removal of detritus, the resting places of the dead were capable of revivification. And this duly came to pass. By 1895 the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association had been involved in 320 successful undertakings, including the laying out of thirty graveyards as gardens in the years 1885-96.²⁵ The Kyrle Society helped with the conversion of the graveyards of St Nicholas, Deptford, St Peter, Bethnal Green and the two constituent elements of St George's Gardens. The latter garden was opened in two stages, in 1884 and 1889. With its serpentine paths, abundant planting, retention of the principal monuments and provision of good boundary railings and gates, it epitomises the achievement of the cemetery conversion movement.

And what of to-day? The picture is not a happy one. Neglect and insensitive 'improvement' schemes; vandalism; bomb damage; pol-

17. Wright, *Solitary Walks*, pp.69 & 72.

18. GLRO, 182/GE02/73/5.

19. Gillian Darley, *Octavia Hill* (1990), p.182.

20. F.T. Cansick, *A Collection of Curious and Interesting Epitaphs...of St Pancras* (1872), p.xii.

21. Holmes, *Burial Grounds*, p.237.

22. The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association is still a very active and thriving organisation. The present Secretary, Mrs Joyce Bellamy, sits on the Executive Committee and the Council of Management of the *London Historic Parks and Gardens Trust*, and was a founder member of the *Trust*.

23. See Holmes, *Burial Grounds*, p. 226 ff, and Darley, *Octavia Hill*, p.179 ff.

24. Holmes, *Burial Grounds*, p. 246.

25. Holmes, *Burial Grounds*, pp. 235-36.

lution; organic decay; the cultural complexity of death in life; indifference: these and many other factors have worked against the fortunes of the Georgian cemetery. The result, all too often, has led to a dispirited ensemble of collapsing tombs, sinister undergrowth, sullied or trampled ground and forlorn planting.

What is needed is an appreciation of the interest and importance of these special places, and a return to the spirit of the 1880s that saw their potential, while being anxious not to eradicate the special qualities that made burial grounds more than just gardens. The recent formation of the Friends of St George's Gardens suggests that this spirit is indeed waxing. It is not necessary to indulge in the *Pleasing Melancholy* of George Wright. What is required is a grasp of the potential of London's older cemeteries, of their special combination of sculpture and nature that provides so fitting a resting-place both for the dead of the past, and the workers and walkers of the present. Then can tombs be consolidated, gardens replanted and maintained, and pleasure as well as instruction will be available from *Wisdom's School*.

Persons interested in joining the
Friends of St George's Gardens
should contact Jane Monahan

13 Regent Square, London WC1H 8HZ.

PUBLIC PARKS - *A Rant*

By the *Perambulator*

Sometimes the historical escalator just won't run fast enough. How long will it take before we see the quality of Victorian parks the way we now see the quality of Victorian buildings, to which we were blind thirty years ago? Is it really that they are still too recent to be fairly viewed, still not distant enough to be enchanted? Or is the blindness to the level of design theory and money which went into them (easily comparable to *our heritage* of eighteenth-century landscape parks) more wilful? Perhaps the last thing a hard-pressed and desperate Leisure Services Department needs to be told is that its parks are historic sites needing careful and expensive research and restoration plans.

I favour a still more sinister, long-term conspiracy - I think that the problem for public parks is that in our wretched times they are not politically correct. Public parks are fundamentally alien to the ideology of our spiritually bankrupt Government, the tentacles of which have reached into every part of public life to strangle it. There is only one threat to urban parks and that is the infamous and incalculably pernicious eighties' dictum that *there is no such thing as society*.

Not that the problems began in the eighties. I am not exactly sure when to date the beginning of the decline: Hazel Conway points to the removal of railings during the War - dumped at sea for the sake of morale - another friend who worked as a gardener in the 1970s dates it with certainty to local government re-organisation in 1974 - with cities other than metropolitan counties having to siphon off so much of their budget to the new counties - but there is little doubt that there was an appalling acceleration during the 1980s.

And if you look at it from a slightly different angle - that of what is *cherished* (a good word, now given official status in the DOE's new Planning Guidance note on the historic environment) as distinct from what is heritage (a *bad* word) - you can alternatively see the reason for public parks being given scant regard by this Government is that their greatest value is to the unempowered: the old, the young, the poor, those without gardens of their own or transport into the country. It was of course the unempowered who were often the beneficiaries of the original munificence when Victorian parks were laid out. But unlike their nineteenth-century counterparts, our Tories are at war with the very notions of *Society* and communalism. While you cannot sentimentalise the motives behind the creation of urban parks, often tied as they were to lucrative land and development deals or to monumental egoism, there was then an ethic of paternalism which, sometimes only incidentally, resulted in much good.

As for reasons for the present decline, of course crime and fear are often the immediate reason for declining use; and of course vandalism is often the immediate threat to the fabric of the park. And of course local authorities can do more or less within the stranglehold of Central Government's near-total control over