

of social housing estates by setting up gardening clubs have also received assistance in the London Boroughs of Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Camden and elsewhere, as have similar schemes at day centres, schools, hospices and community centres. Moreover, the MPGA still contributes to the acquisition of sites for new open spaces when such opportunities arise in London.

Joyce Bellamy is Secretary of the
Metropolitan Public Gardens Association

A WELCOME to our NEW CHAMPION

By The Perambulator

We have a new Minister for Parks, the Rt. Hon. Keith Hill MP. You lose track but I think that makes five since 2000. He spoke at this summer's *Great Parks Great Cities* conference in London. His opening gag was a swipe at 'the Victorians', and in particular at the nineteenth-century MP Richard Slaney, for arguing that the lack of decent recreational facilities for the urban poor might contribute not only to public health problems but also to political discontent. So Slaney got a cheap poke because he realised how important public parks were. Slaney in fact was a tireless campaigner for improvements to the conditions of the working-class, who, using a wide variety of arguments including topically the threat of political unrest, led the calls for Parliament to consider the scandalous lack of public open spaces in the new industrial towns and cities, and who in 1833 chaired the pioneering Select Committee Enquiry on Public Walks. He collected evidence on the lack of access to open space and the dire implications for public health, and wrote with passionate conviction:

During the last half century a very great increase has taken place in the population of large Towns, more especially as regards those classes who are, with many of their children, almost continually engaged in manufacturing and mechanical employments. During the same period, from the increased value of Property and extension of buildings many enclosures of open spaces in the vicinity of the Towns have taken place, and little or no provision made for Public Walks or Open Spaces, fitted to afford means of exercise or amusement to the middle

and humbler classes. ...Any provision of public walks or open spaces would much conduce to the comfort, health and content of the classes in question.

Hazel Conway remarks in *People's Parks* that Slaney's contribution to the promotion of public parks was 'probably the most sustained and effective of all those who were working in this area'. In addition to chairing the Select Committee he also promoted one of the key pieces of nineteenth-century legislation, the Recreation Grounds Act 1859, which encouraged the donation to local authorities of money or land for recreation. In short, he was the first and greatest Parliamentary champion for public parks and the needs of the working class, a cause he promoted for over a quarter of a century. And then in 2004, our new Minister of Parks, our new Parliamentary champion, has a go at him.

I wonder what Hill knows of all this? How long will he be tireless; how deeply will he delve into the issues? What will he be doing for parks in twenty-five years? Not a lot, not long and not much, judging by the tripe he spouted in July. Truly, without a knowledge of history, we are cabbages in this society.

After knocking Slaney, he proudly stated that his audience could tell that he was not 'one of those who hark back to a glorious past of the Victorian Park', going on to say, with dreary predictability that 'we need to ensure that parks and green spaces in today's cities meet today's needs'. How many of you have heard this before? What does Hill think those needs are, and how does he think they differ from those of people a hundred years ago? This trope serves merely to dress up a disingenuous hope that people might now "need" or make do with something cheaper.

Needs unfortunately have not changed that much. Of course nineteenth-century parks were created for a different society, but that does not mean they are no longer relevant. We know, from countless citizens' panels, quality of life questionnaires and community surveys, what people want from parks – fresh air, tranquillity, flowers, trees, lawns and water, a place to walk and sit, push a pram, meet their friends, a place for children to play free from fear and danger; a place of communal civil enjoyment, free to all. (*fig. 23*) People want clean public toilets and decent refreshment facilities; gardeners and wardens.



23. Children watching a performance of Punch and Judy at Kennington Park, July 1954
(COURTESY LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)

The only difference now is that the funds are not there to supply and maintain these places, and local authorities no longer have the power to raise funds locally to dedicate to them. Whatever voters ("communities") want – and we know that they want: good parks – there is a financial cap on what their councils can do about it. Courtesy of the Government.

Anyway, who *does* 'hark back' to a glorious Victorian past? Certainly not the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which has paid for a host of new buildings and features in historic parks. But it is not harking back – I do not even think I know what that stupid phrase means: gazing mistily out of the window and dreaming of stove-pipe hats? – it is not harking back to recognize that in the nineteenth century a huge amount of thinking as well as unparalleled sums of money went into designing and managing beautiful public parks.

In the wake of the HLF's pioneering work, no-one now suggests 'going back' to research and understand, and in some cases restore, original designs for some narrow academic reason. Where views and features, flower beds and park-keepers are reinstated it is because it is recognised that they still work in providing beauty and pleasure for users. There are simply important lessons to be learnt from history about design and management. And it is stupid not to learn from history, stupider still to mock it in ignorance.

No one who admires the levels of architectural and horticultural finesse of Victorian parks does so because they admire canes over the knuckles, children working cotton looms, cholera, imperialism or the death sentence. The whole argument is spurious – what we have is a Government, perhaps even a culture, that will not support the levels of spending necessary to maintain parks at a decent degree. Of course we also have a Government that is almost pathological in its desire to appear go-ahead and to express its loathing of the word 'history'. If you have not done so recently, re-read the description of Winston's work on the memory hole in Orwell's *1984*.

The throttling grasp of central government around the throats of local authorities remains, and tightens, since they were first seized by Mrs. Thatcher. Stewart Harding, formerly head of the Urban Parks Programme

at the Heritage Lottery Fund recently wrote:

How's this for duplicity? *Horticulture Week*, 15 July: 'Government repeats pledge to green space at parks conference. Minister of State Keith Hill has reaffirmed the Government's commitment to green spaces.' *Sunday Times*, 18 July: 'Prescott squeezes council services ... Departments will be asked to identify options for ensuring that local authorities can live within budgets based on no more than 5% council tax increases. These might include ... accepting reduced levels of service where legally possible. ... Expenditure on environmental services such as street cleaning, parks and refuse collection might also be "legally" cut'.

If Keith Hill had taken a straw-poll of the park professionals in the audience, asking who had had their budgets cut this year, he would have found the vast majority raising their hands. Wearily. Instead, they clapped. Wearily. For all the Government support, when the grasp tightens, it is still parks budgets that are cut first. You must credit the Government with recognising that parks do provide a host of benefits and contribute significantly to the quality of life. The problem is that it is still looking to realise this potential on the cheap.

Hill's speech was unbearable: 'This Labour government believes people need good quality public space to express their identity, and to express themselves as members of a caring, inclusive and more equal society.' Our society is getting more unequal under 'this Labour government', with the gap between rich and poor expanding annually, with the middle-classes still migrating to the suburbs and beyond, with the North-South divide widening, with more people voluntarily disenfranchising themselves.

As he rounded up, Hill scornfully distanced himself from 'a paternalistic concern for [people's] well-being, or a philanthropic desire to do good'. These apparently are bad. In place of these shibboleths of active engagement and investment, he promoted instead his commitment to 'working with people to foster a sense of community, a sense of pride and a sense of social justice'. What is all this working with people if not trying to get things done on the cheap? And if people do not want to work with him, if they have more pressing priorities than joining a local committee or focus group, such as getting by, they won't get a thing. A Government that does not have a concern,

paternalistic or otherwise, for the well-being of people who cannot help themselves, is a failure. A civilized society judges its government by precisely that test.

And finally, none of this is incompatible with creating dazzling new parks and public gardens out of the thousands of acres of dead-ly "green space" that blights our towns and cities. Go to Paris and see it being done. But it's being done there by a local authority with real power, because that takes money too. And real champions.

ST. GEORGE'S GARDENS: THE EARLY and BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES of TWIN BLOOMSBURY BURIAL GROUNDS

By Roger Bowdler

The Georgian pre-history of London's cemeteries was touched on in an essay entitled 'Wisdom's School' which appeared in the first volume of *The London Gardener*. Perhaps the most interesting of the Anglican burial grounds to be opened in the metropolis was that for the parishioners for St. George the Martyr, Queen Square, and St. George's Bloomsbury. It opened in 1715. This cursory overview will look in more detail at the intriguing development of Holborn's sylvan *Golgotha*, following the approach of a straight-forward chronicling of happenings.

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

London's dramatic expansion outwards created a real demand for new places of worship and new places of Christian, and specifically Anglican, burial. Building new churches within fast-rising parts of town was costly enough without setting them in ample churchyards. Places of worship and places of burial were thus for the first time separated from each other early in the eighteenth century. This represented a major development in the allocation of sacred ground in the capital. Nonconformists – Jews, Quakers and Sectarians – had long had their own burial grounds, but for a Church of England worshipper to find their long home in a detached cemetery was quite another. Some older churches had of necessity to acquire overspill burial grounds: but to start out from the outset with a detached cemetery was a precocious act

of neo-Roman extra-mural sepulchral practice.

The earliest such cemetery to be established was the burial ground of the chapel of St. George, in Queen Square. It received its first burial in 1715. It occupied half of a three-acre plot, purchased by the Commissioners for Building Fifty New Churches in 1713: the northern acre and a half was reserved for a second parish burial ground, which turned out to be that of St. George, Bloomsbury. This opened in 1730. (*fig. 24*) The twin burial grounds, walled around and divided by a spine wall, were served by eastern entrances leading to Gray's Inn Road. When laid out, the three acres lay amid fields. The arrival of the Foundling Hospital immediately to the south connected these two enclaves to the bustle of living London.

Thereafter, they became enveloped by the later eighteenth-century growth of Bloomsbury. (*fig. 25*) Little is known of the appearance of these burial grounds in their active years; map evidence suggests that these densely crowded acres were devoid of planting, and crammed with burial shafts, tombs and some very opulent memorials indeed, which must have been hugely potent signifiers of social standing. The heavy soil was poorly drained and frequently disturbed. The seething subterranean activity of the cemetery led to constant tomb collapse: the desperate need for repair was as real then as it is today. The only difference is that the vivid memory of the remembered dead led to repairs taking place, whereas today such repairs are given a very low priority.

By the time they closed for burials in 1855, tens of thousands of Londoners (and others) had found their last resting place here. A precise body count could be arrived at, had one the appetite for a whole day at the microfiche reader, and the taste for morbid precision. Suffice it to say that at least 50,000 bodies lie buried in this quiet enclave of north Bloomsbury: an intensity of death and physical decay that places this verdant oasis alongside the traffic-buffed, and commercially enveloped stretch of paving on Tottenham Court Road (opposite Heal's) that is the former Whitfield Tabernacle Burial Ground, in terms of mortal saturation. The history of London's open spaces is incomplete without proper acknowledgement of the sheer quantity