

lawlessness of their origins. The withering of any consensus on what is acceptable has been an inevitable accompaniment to the withdrawal of maintenance, the decline in user numbers and the disappearance of staff, whether keepers or gardeners.

There is a wonderful story from the *Daily Chronicle* of how 'feeding the rats' became one of the attractions of Peckham Rye Park: 'The little park ...is one of the prettiest in London, and the rats have made it also one of the most popular. You can find peacocks and pigeons in the park. But if you discover a little group of children with paper bags in their hands, you may take it for granted that they are there not to feed the birds, but the rats.' Today, feeding the squirrels or the Canada geese is now an equally popular engagement with vermin. And yet, these are the memories of the park which will be deepest for many users.

Feeding the rats in Peckham is unusual in being documented: by their nature, most transgressive activities are not recorded, except in people's memories, but occasionally fugitive traces can be found: everyone in Corporation Park, Blackburn, staff and users alike, knows the Cigarette Tree, where children from the adjacent school have for generations smoked furtive cigarettes, to the point where nicotine poisoning through its roots is damaging the tree. Likewise, we can see a tradition of use in the sneakers invariably hanging from the Shoe Tree in South Marine Park, South Shields, where they are traditionally thrown, or the neatly inscribed bricks on the pavilion in Mesnes Park, Wigan, where the tags and messages never stray beyond the confines of a single brick.

As much as for their design, public parks are special because of their place in people's personal histories. They are places where rites of passage take place – childhood adventures away from the parental eye, the landmark events of courtship and parenthood. It is the venue too for other rites of passage – the first brush with authority, the first kiss, or the first illicit smoke or drink – which may actually find themselves outside the park's by-laws and the authorities' vision of 'correct leisure'. To recognise a wider range of uses and values than the Victorians as legitimate is not to recognise them all as equally acceptable. The challenge is

to establish new codes of behaviour which accommodate the widest range of use while protecting the park and ensuring the enjoyment of all.

(For a more detailed study of many of the themes in this article, see 'Rituals of Transgression in Public Parks in Britain, 1846 to the Present' in the forthcoming *Dumbarton Oaks volume, Lay Ritual Practices in Gardens and Landscapes*, 2006)

LT-COL. J.J. SEXBY – FATHER OF LONDON'S MUNICIPAL PARKS – AN APPRECIATION By Hazelle Jackson

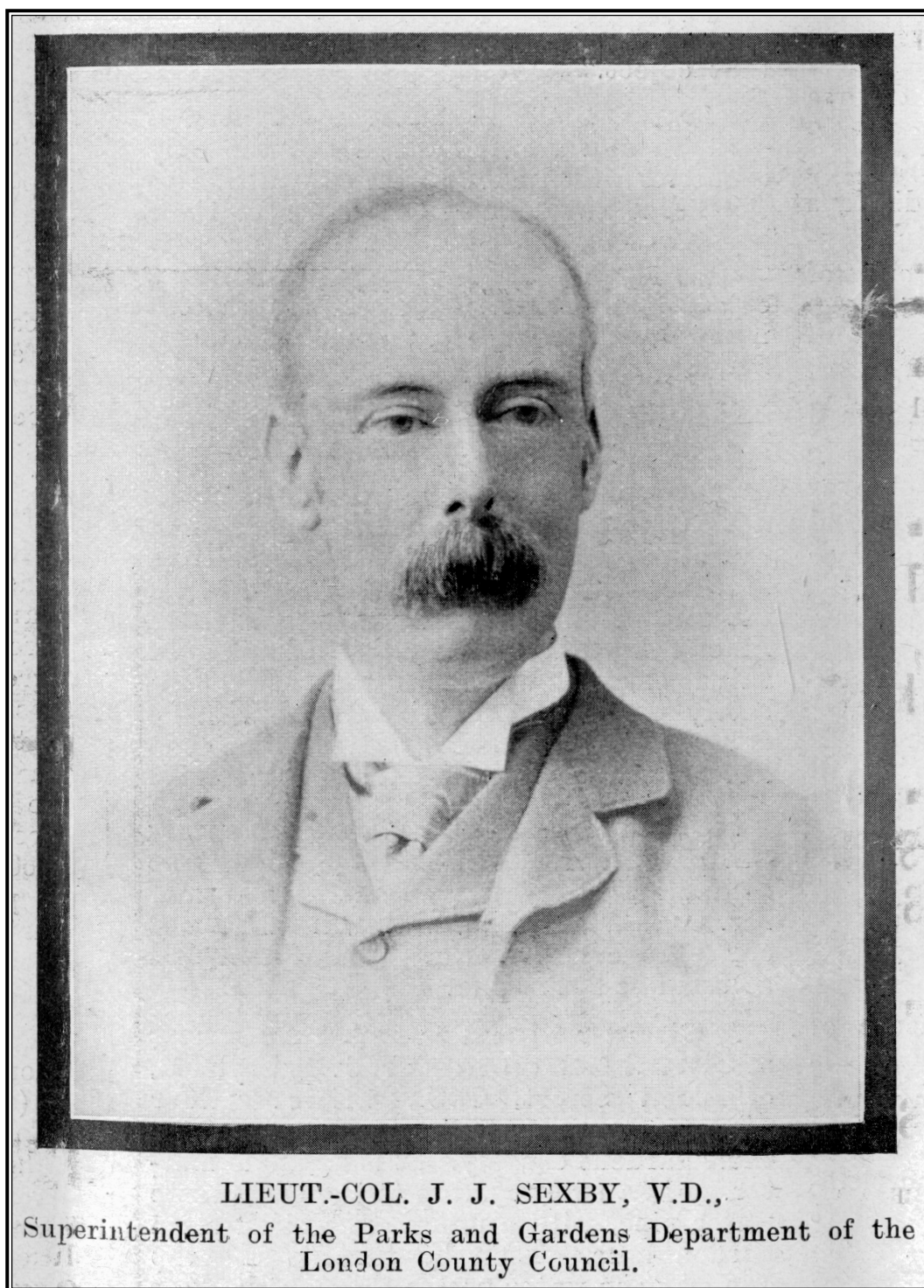
Being an appreciation of Lt. Col. J.J. Sexby, the London County Council's first chief officer of Parks from 1892-1910

As the first chief officer of London County Council's Parks Department from 1892-1910, Lt-Col. John James Sexby had a profound influence on the style and quality of London's municipal parks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For nearly twenty years Sexby managed a vast estate covering thousands of acres and employed many hundreds of staff, all dedicated to making London's parks the best in the country, if not the world. (*fig. 24*)

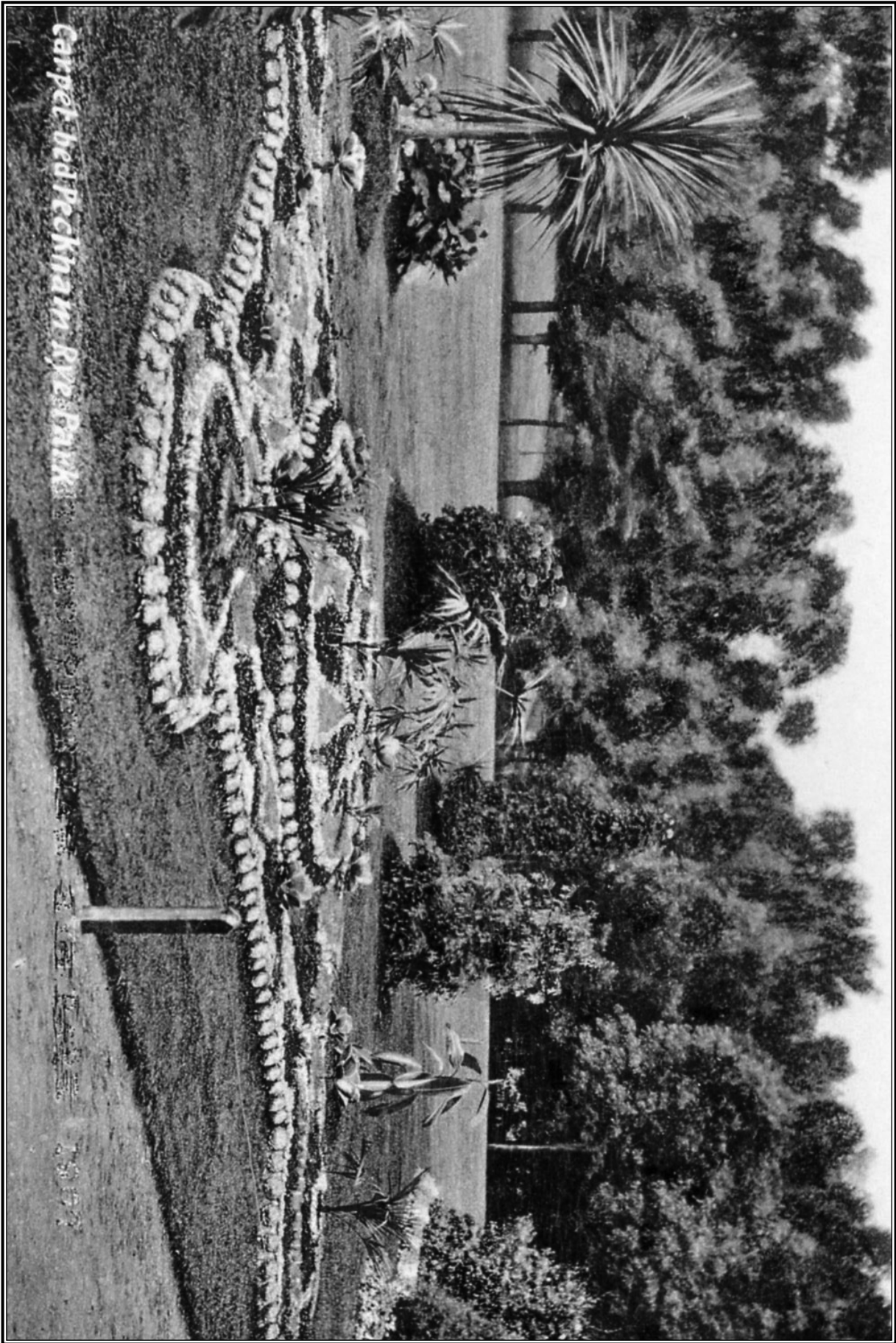
Many of London's most distinctive and much loved municipal parks date from this period and the measure of his success must be that Sexby set standards in public park design and management worldwide that still prevail today. Yet he remains a shadowy figure in the annals of garden history. (He does not even rate a mention in *British Gardeners – A Biographical Dictionary*.)¹

I first encountered Sexby's work when Paula Johnston, Manager of Peckham Rye Park, invited me to document its restoration in 2004. I was fascinated by the park, designed

1. Hadfield and others *British Gardeners – A Biographical Dictionary* (London: Zwemmer, 1980).



24. Portrait of Lieut.-Col. J. J. Sexby
(COURTESY RHS LINDLEY LIBRARY)



25. Peckham Rye Park, carpet bedding, postcard c.1910
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

under Sexby's supervision in 1904, and wondered about the man responsible for it. (figs. 25 & 26) But finding out more about Sexby's early life and career proved difficult. Sexby never married and the current generation of the Sexby family has no family papers, souvenirs or reminiscences of him. We know he was born in 1848 in Lambeth, in the County of Surrey. In 1879 he is recorded as a surveyor in the Superintending Architect's department of the (London) Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW). In 1880, at the age of 32, he qualified as a chartered surveyor. The 1881 Census records him living at 15 Studley Road, South Lambeth with an unmarried aunt, Agatha West (who may have acted as his housekeeper) and a young female general servant, Annie Stone.

Sexby's house in Studley Road no longer exists. The road was heavily bombed in World War II and the site redeveloped with grim municipal tower blocks. Nearby, however, are rows of neat mid and late Victorian houses, which give some flavour of how the neighbourhood must have looked when Sexby lived there. Originally market gardens, the area was rapidly industrialised after the arrival of the railways in the 1840s, which attracted many small businesses and tradesmen. Studley Road would have been a respectable road but not a particularly affluent one and the fact that the Sexby household could only afford one teenage servant suggests money was tight.

During the 1880s, the parks and open spaces estate of the MBW grew rapidly as the Victorian public parks movement accelerated. The MBW found itself the reluctant recipient of transferred responsibility for managing an increasing number of parks in London. By 1889 when the London County Council (LCC) replaced the MBW, following a series of corruption scandals, the Board held 46 parks which employed 382 people and had a budget of £49,000 on the working account alone.² This did not include Brockwell Park, which was then in the process of acquisition, and further parks that would follow when Sexby was Superintendent.

Responsibility for managing the MBW's parks and open spaces was shared between the Clerk to the Committee, and the

Superintending Architect. In 1887 and 1888, faced with the huge increase in the workload caused by the rapid growth of parks under their control, the Clerk and Architect urgently recommended an increase in staff working exclusively on the parks estate together with upgraded travel allowances and salaries for those of their existing staff engaged on parks' work.³ Sexby must have been drawn to parks work early on, as his name appears here as the Surveyor in the Architect's Department assigned to be in charge of parks works.

The actual division of responsibilities at this time between the Clerk and the Architect is made clear in a briefing note written by the Architect to the LCC Committee later in 1891:

In the time of the MBW [up to 1889], the Parks Committee sat fortnightly and dealt chiefly with general works and construction which were brought up by the Architect, matters relating to the observance of bye-laws which were brought up by the Clerk; and matters of gardening upon which they instructed the two Parks Superintendents who had full control of the Gardening staff. But these superintendents and all the men employed under them were treated as part of the Architect's staff and were paid upon his certificate.⁴

In 1889, faced with the growing workload associated with its parks estate, the LCC parks sub-committee submitted a report to the main LCC board with a proposal to establish a Parks Department led by four dedicated Parks officers: a Principal Officer, a Chief Surveyor, a Forester and a Gardener. They recommended the appointment of the Clerk, Mr Nairn, as Principal Officer, Mr Sexby as Chief Surveyor and the incumbent forester, Mr Wilkie, to be Chief Forester.

In recommending Sexby to be Chief Surveyor, the report said:

Your sub-committee have had ample opportunity of judging of the ability in his profession, of Mr J. J. Sexby who for 19 years past has actually carried out, under successive Architects, all the surveying and architectural work required in the parks and open spaces. They consider him admirably suited for the office of Chief Surveyor in which he would be personally and directly responsible for works to the committee.⁵

The only area where the committee failed to agree an appointment was that of a 'superior' Gardener. The gardening in the

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

2. London Metropolitan Archives, PK/GEN/2/1 PS134.

parks was managed by the park superintendents in most cases and it was emphasised that the responsibility of the new Gardener would be to:

...superintend all gardens where only a foreman or labourers are employed, and also to visit whenever ordered to do so by the committee, and to report through the Principal Officer, as to the state of such place and the efficiency of the staff, but in so doing, he shall deal only with the superintendents in charge, so as not to lessen the authority of the latter over their men.⁶

In practice this paragon seems to have been hard to find and there is no record of a subsequent appointment. The limited records available in the London Metropolitan Archives only refer to the lack of suitable applicants. By 1891 the need to sort out a rational structure for the parks service had become acute. In his briefing note of 1891 the Architect explains:

Soon after the Council [LCC] came [into being]..... the whole of the works including the gardening are done under the Architect, the park-keepers also are under him and he brings up to Committee the whole of the business relating to such works and the staff employed thereon.⁷

This change in division of responsibility, together with an increase in sub-committees, had increased his work, he said, to the point where he could not long do it all himself. 'Under these circumstances I have to leave a very great deal more to my staff than formerly, relying upon Mr Sexby for all but the most important matters.'⁸

Only fragmented records exist of what happened next between 1891 and 1892, but by 1892 J.J. Sexby had been appointed the first chief officer of the newly formed LCC Parks Department.

For Sexby this must have been the dream job and he held the post, to widespread acclaim and respect, until his retirement in 1910. It was a job with major responsibilities. In *Public Parks*, Hazel Conway writes that, 'Sexby was in charge of all the municipal parks, gardens and open spaces in London maintained by the LCC and had a staff of one thousand. Of these 503 were trained gardeners and 320 were park-keepers.'⁹

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. Hazel Conway *Public Parks* (Shire Garden History Series, England, 1996), p. 36.

There is a general but mistaken tendency, when considering the history of public parks, to assume these parks were managed historically as they were in the middle of the twentieth century. This was not the case. There were no dedicated in-house landscape architects or garden designers working in the Parks Department in Sexby's day. (Nor any outsourcing of maintenance.) High-profile landscape designers were usually only commissioned for major flagship parks. As Hazel Conway has pointed out, 'by far the majority of public parks were designed by borough engineers and surveyors, nurserymen and park superintendents'.¹⁰

At the LCC, the Parks Department's surveyors did the basic surveying and design for new parks and supervised the ground works. The list of staff for the Parks Department in 1902 includes a Principal surveyor, 5 assistant surveyors, 8 surveying assistants, 22 parks superintendents, 80 parks officers of various grades, 56 propagators of plants, 196 gardeners, 188 labourers, well over 200 policemen, and a fleet of 14 coachmen to take the surveyors to inspect the parks. There are notably no designers, or draughtsmen or garden designers.¹¹

Planting was largely left to the superintendents, who were restricted by the heavy pollution in the atmosphere to a limited range of suitable plants, mostly grown on site. (All the major parks had plant nurseries.) Park superintendents were required to live on site and be present during opening hours and had to live with the results of their regime. This tended to focus their attention on running a park appreciated by the public.

Sexby himself seems to have had a keen interest in the horticultural aspects of parks once he took over as chief officer. One of his first tasks was to supervise the planting at Dulwich Park, (*fig. 27*) which had been started by the MBW in 1884. In the 1890s American-style gardens were very popular in London, using a range of plants that were believed, not always accurately, to be North American in origin, including rhododendrons and azaleas. At Dulwich Park Sexby was much involved with the planting of the American Garden where he was able to give full rein to his

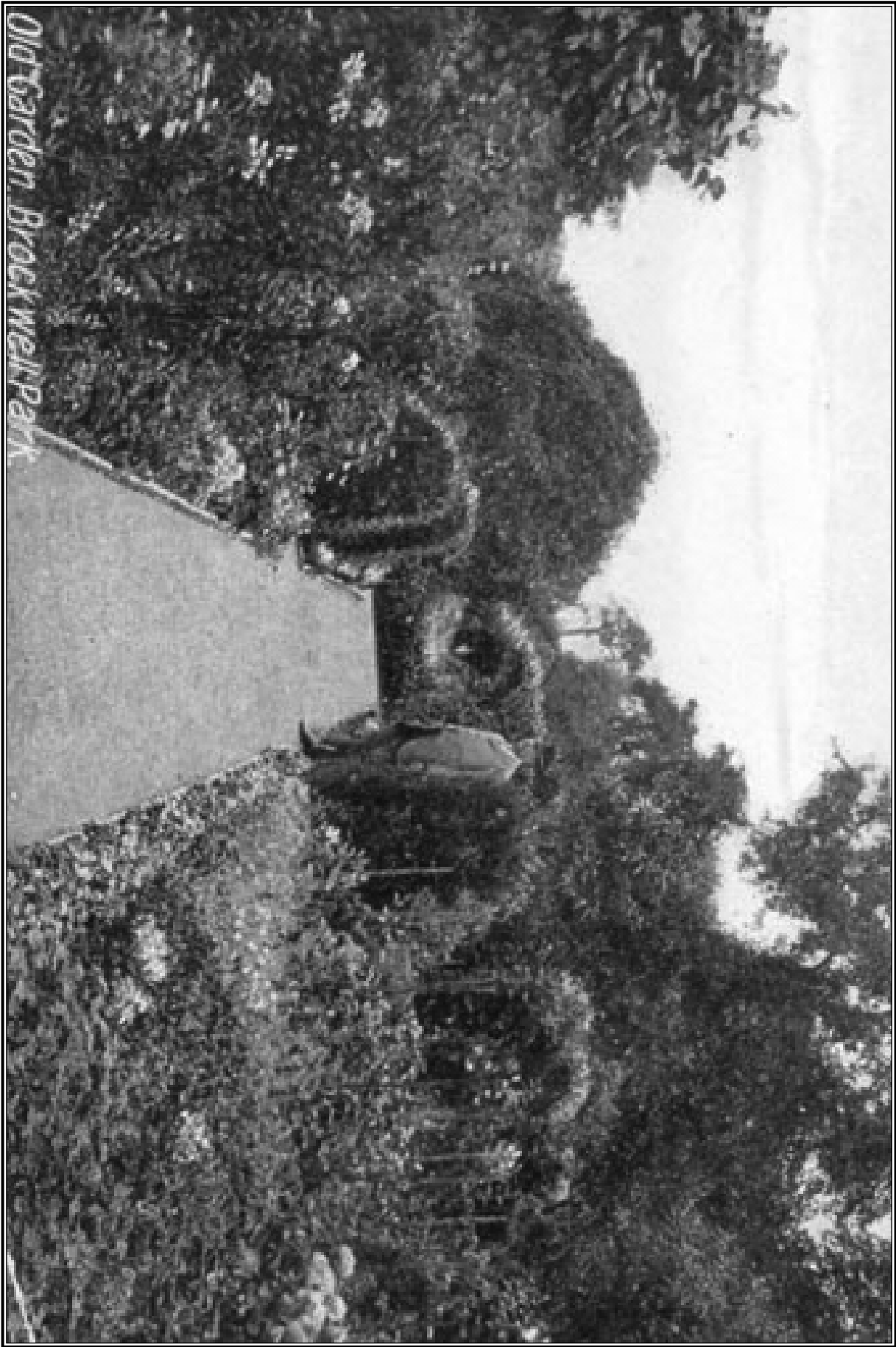
10. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

11. London Metropolitan Archives, PK/GEN/1/27.

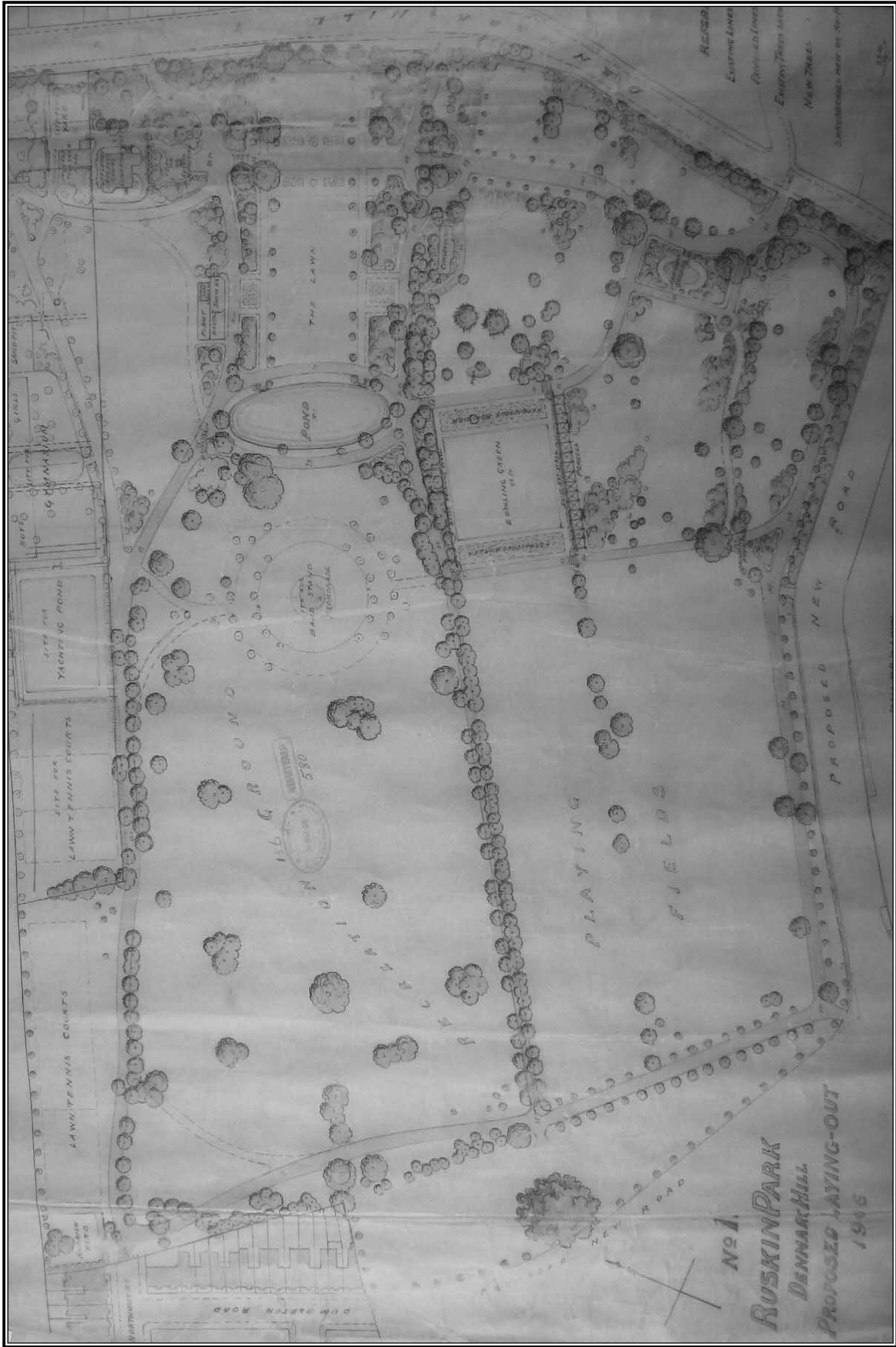


26. Peckham Rye Park, pond, postcard 1916
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

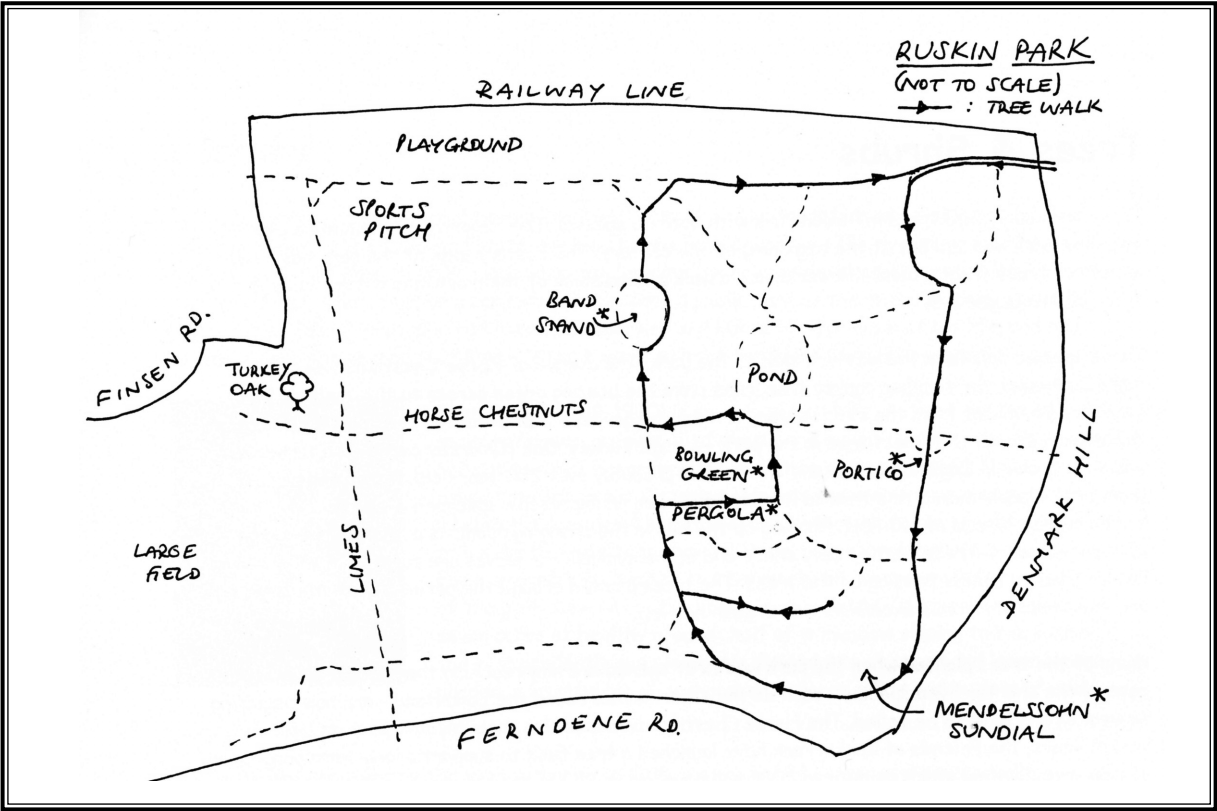
27. The Lakeside, Dulwich Park, postcard
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)



28. Old English Garden, Brockwell Park, postcard 1900
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)



29. Ruskin Park layout, 1906
(COURTESY LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)



30. Ruskin Park, sketch map showing current layout, 2002
(COURTESY FRIENDS OF RUSKIN PARK)

31. Telegraph Hill Park, postcard
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

interest in horticulture. At its opening in 1891 the park was much praised for both the planting and the amenities provided. *The Gardeners' Chronicle* in 1891 reported, 'as to the landscape gardening, not even St. James Park was more skilfully laid out...than this one under the supervision of Mr Sexby'.¹²

Much of Sexby's original planting at Dulwich has survived and been restored as part of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) restoration. Other Sexby-era American gardens that have recently been restored as part of major HLF restorations exist at Battersea Park and at Peckham Rye Park in south-east London.

As well as Dulwich, Sexby had another major park to plan in the late 1880s when the LCC acquired the Brockwell estate from the Lambeth vestry and set about turning it into a public park. The Brockwell private estate was originally laid out largely by J.B. Papworth, and Sexby took great interest in its conversion to a public park, describing the estate as:

a wildness ... the beauties of Nature unadorned ... long stretches of undulating grassland dotted here and there with fine specimen trees ... When it was bought for the people of London, it was already a park - not a park site.¹³

At Brockwell Park Sexby's masterstroke was the conversion of the old kitchen garden into a stunning Old English Garden. (fig. 28) The Old English or Shakespearean garden, planted exclusively with contemporary Elizabethan plants, was a great hit with the public and was repeated in other LCC parks during Sexby's period of office, and even after his death. Features usually include a pergola, a sundial, a central pool and fountain, and rustic seating from which visitors can admire the old fashioned planting, which included creepers and climbing roses. The old English Garden at Brockwell Park is still much admired today.

Old English Gardens, inspired by Sexby's original garden at Brockwell Park, quickly spread across London and continued to be planted right up to the 1920s. There were examples at Kennington Park, The Rookery in Streatham, Ruskin Park in Camberwell, Peckham Rye Park in Peckham, the Horniman Gardens in Lewisham, Waterlow

Park in Camden, Ravenscourt Park in Hammersmith, Golders Hill Park in Barnet and Battersea Park.

In 1898 Sexby published his celebrated work, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens and Open Spaces of London*.¹⁴ Much praised at the time as 'the very model of what such a book should be',¹⁵ this work describes more than fifty parks and spaces 'which are maintained by the London County Council at the expense of the Metropolitan ratepayers'. Copiously illustrated, the book is written in a dryly humorous style but alas contains no references by Sexby to his own work or background.

Outside work, Sexby's main interests seemed to have been military. His title was an honorary one. Sexby was an active member of the Queen's (Royal West Surrey) Regiment for many years as a Volunteer (reservist). In 1898 he was promoted to the rank of honorary Lieutenant-Colonel by which rank he was always known thereafter. Experience of running a military chain of command, even in a voluntary capacity, no doubt stood Sexby in good stead when managing his vast estate at the LCC.

Under Sexby's management even allotment land was turned into public parks. In 1898 the LCC purchased allotment land on the Thames waterfront at Wandsworth in south-west London for £33,000 with contributions from its own funds, the Wandsworth District Board and public subscription. Remedial work was carried out to shore up the bank against the tidal river and a riverside promenade was laid out. The planting scheme here was influenced by the rising interest from the 1880s onwards in organised sport, which can be seen in many LCC parks of this period. The centre of the park was laid out as a playing field and ornamental planting concentrated in the south-eastern corner. Wandsworth Park opened in 1903.

In the early 1900s Japanese gardens were all the rage and a number were installed around the metropolis. A classic example is the recently restored Japanese garden at Peckham Rye Park, which dates from around 1904. Although in the recent HLF-funded restoration, many plants in the American

12. *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, 1891.

13. Lt-Col JJ Sexby *The Municipal Parks, Gardens and Open Spaces of London* (London: Elliott Stock, 1898), p. 71.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *The Gardener's Magazine*, 8 June 1907, Vol L - 2, 797 pp. 403-404.

garden at Peckham had to be replaced, in the Japanese garden many of the original plants had survived and these have been incorporated into the restoration of the original layout, which includes a Japanese shelter, bridge and small pond.

In 1907 Sexby created one of his last parks in the traditional manner at Ruskin Park in Camberwell where the grounds of former houses, including one once occupied by the social reformer John Ruskin, were converted into a small public park. Once again, in a small area we find an imaginative layout, a duck pond with a central island for nesting, sophisticated water works, a bandstand, fine specimen trees, and walks and recreational facilities including a (now sadly derelict) bowling green. (figs. 29 & 30)

The recent HLF restorations of many municipal parks in London have been informed by painstaking research on the original designs produced by the LCC Parks Department. Many restored LCC parks can now be viewed, at least briefly, with their original layouts, features and planting. The sheer magnificence of the formal beds of flowers, tended by armies of gardeners, can only be glimpsed at in old photographs and postcards.

Seen in this way, distinctive characteristic features of 'Sexby'-era parks start to emerge: imaginative layouts that maximise the use of small spaces, fine specimen trees, rustic bridges and seats, pergolas, boating lakes and serpentine ponds with central islands, (fig. 31) themed gardens, a wide range of recreational facilities catering for all the family with playing fields, tennis courts and bowling greens, bandstands and, of course, the Old English or Shakespeare Garden.

The formal style of LCC parks during the 1890s and early 1900s has its critics among those who prefer a more natural and organic style of planting. Yet it was a creature of its time, reflecting the formality with which Victorians approached their lives; and the features the Victorians admired in parks - spaces for recreation, exercise and well maintained flower beds - remain those the general public appreciates in parks today. (figs. 32 & 33)

The measure of the respect in which his contemporaries held Sexby can be judged by a short profile of him which appeared in *The Gardener's Magazine* in 1907. Under a photo-

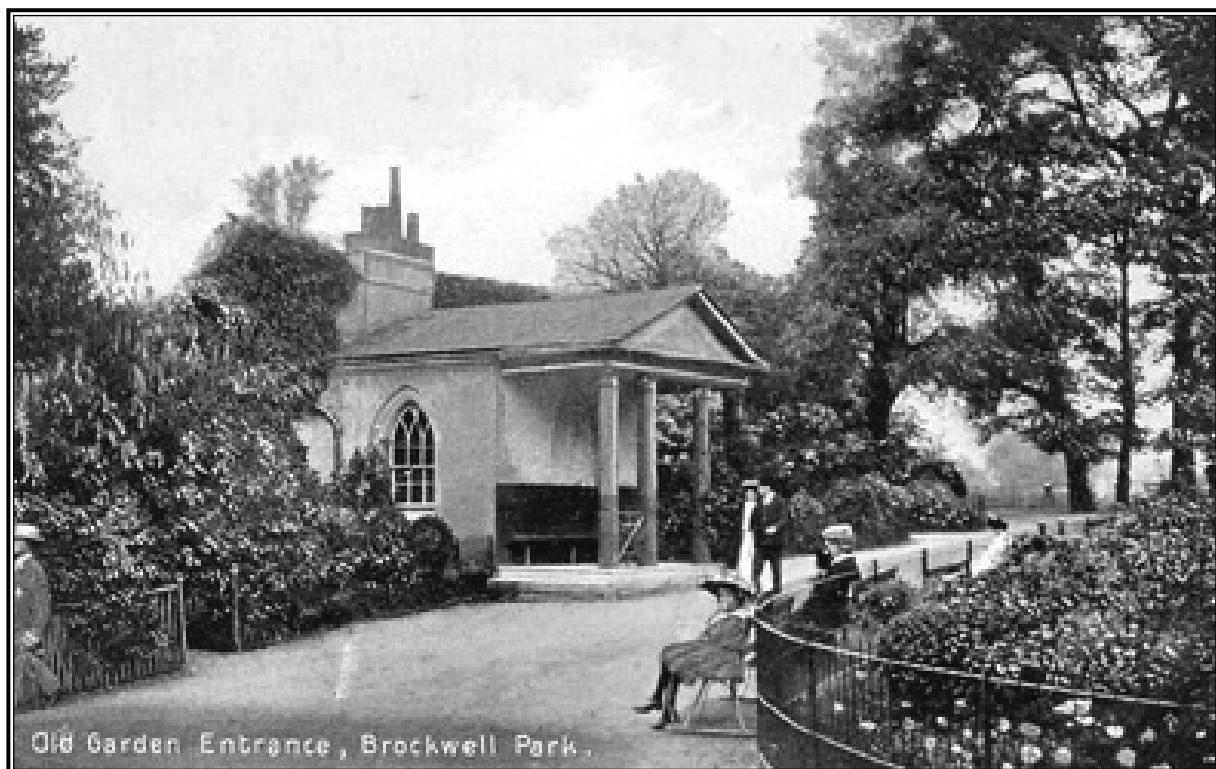
graph of Sexby, a delicate featured man with heavy eyelids and a huge Victorian moustache, the caption reads:

The area of open spaces under the charge of the London County Council is about 4,000 acres and the maintenance of such an immense area divided into several parks and gardens in the highest possible state of keeping, affords the best possible proof of Lt Col Sexby's great administrative ability.¹⁶

After his retirement in 1910 Sexby once again disappears from public view. He died in Kingston upon Thames, still in his beloved Surrey, in 1924. Today his legacy lives on in the many fine parks around London which still bear the imprint of his style and in the numerous old English gardens that give pleasure to so many in London parks. It is a fitting tribute that these have continued to be planted since his death and several have been named in his honour.

Acknowledgements: In writing this article, I should like to acknowledge the advice of Dr Brent Elliott and of John Medhurst and to thank John Medhurst particularly for lending me his unpublished dissertation, *The Old English Garden in LCC Parks*, and Joyce Bellamy of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association for additional information and insights. Thanks also to Sally Williams and David Lambert for sourcing the original layout design for Ruskin Park.

¹⁶. *Ibid.*



32. Brockwell Park, Edwardian postcard
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

33. Brockwell Park, Temple and toilets, 2005
(PHOTOGRAPH: HAZELLE JACKSON)