

that time closed for burial, had been converted into a public garden by the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA), which was established in 1882 to create public open spaces to cater for the growth of the urban population and expanding suburbs of London. The MPGA had begun its pioneering work by opening churchyards and burial grounds. Both public gardens are within the St Anne's Church Limehouse Conservation Area, designated by Tower Hamlets in July 1969, and the trees within both spaces are protected by Tree Preservation Orders and regularly maintained by the Council.

The Rectory Garden of St Anne's Limehouse has witnessed a rich layer of London's East End history over its lifetime, and today is open to all, but seemingly visited by relatively few. I hope this glimpse at its history will encourage the weary traveller along Commercial Road to take a break to sit beside the now clear waters of the old canal.

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Acknowledgements

My research for this article arose as a result of the London Parks & Gardens Trust's *Volunteer Research Project*; I would like to thank Sally Williams and Todd Longstaffe-Gowan for their helpful suggestions.

PUBLIC PARKS AND THE BIG SOCIETY

By The Perambulator

These last few weeks of late summer have driven everything but rage from my head. The scale of the Government's wretchedly ill-thought out cuts threatens disaster not only to society (you may take issue with that) but to parks (on which subject I feel competent to speak). This perambulation veers unavoidably into the political; off the pleasant, well-maintained path and into the abandoned scrub just beside it.

Since May, even many of those readers who voted for our present government - although I suppose that technically nobody actually voted for it - will be feeling ambushed by the Chancellor. But also by the rest of them: you will have watched fascinated while Mrs

Thatcher's 'no such thing as society' has been recast by Cameron, Clegg and assorted lickspittles as 'the big society', while the same old pernicious sub-text of hostility to the public sector remains unaltered.

I am exasperated at the Orwellian manoeuvres through which the Government and the media established, within a matter of weeks of the election, a consensus that the real issue was the public sector, not the banks; not the unfettered free market, but local government and its huge burden of services. The way in which a whispering campaign subtly shifted the focus from the private sector to the public sector as the chief source of all our woes - the feather-bedded working conditions of teachers, nurses, firemen and park-staff, their enormous pensions, their general fecklessness - is breath-taking in its effrontery.

I am depressed that the government's assumption that rolling news would quickly cauterise the public memory of the workings of the casino-banks has proved correct. Their calculation that binmen, speeding charges and local council help-lines would be as popular as well as an easier target has also proved correct. It's easy to sell shrinking the state on that basis.

I am enraged at the apparent success of their rhetoric. The 'Big Society' will, it seems, hand over key services to the voluntary and charitable sector, who will inevitably turn to the private sector to actually deliver those services. A *Friends* group may indeed agree to take over the running of a park, with a budget or endowment from the Council, but will soon find that the cost of running the park exceeds the allowance from the Council. It's bound to because the Council itself would struggle to maintain the park on the money that is likely to be available, and there is no extra. So they will either bow out or be encouraged to turn to private contractors to deliver.

Those contractors will comprise directors on huge salaries and then hundreds of workers on the minimum-wage, on impossibly tight schedules, working to reduce maintenance to the bare minimum; just like Compulsory Competitive Tendering in the eighties. Whoever runs the park, the money required to do so well remains the same - shifting the bill to volunteers or trusts will not



29. A herald of the future for public parks?
(COURTESY THE PARKS AGENCY, WWW.PARKSAGENCY.CO.UK/CRAP_PARKS)

change that irreducible fact. The wisdom of one commentator who pointed out that effective voluntary involvement takes *more* civic leadership not less has been drowned out.¹

And 'localism' - I remember Ken Worpole and I deciding that 'the situation is local' was quite a good slogan in one chapter of the 2001 *Green Spaces Taskforce* report - has been twisted to fit the Government's agenda. It will mean nothing more than the haves getting more while the have-nots miss out still further. Parks in wealthy areas will get resources, because the residents have the time and experience to understand the system, whether it's about getting grants, demonstrating need, or how to lobby effectively. Parks in poorer areas will get scraps if they are lucky because their residents will not have that capacity. In 2000, research proved the blindingly obvious, that parks in poor areas were in poorer condition than those in wealthy areas.² That divide between rich and poor, as in the rest of the society, has remained and is about to get much wider.

The greenspace sector - the champion body, GreenSpace, the Government's CABE Space, and far too many professionals - is by and large either silent or playing along to this tune, accepting the government's assertions about the need for and scale of cuts, and the uselessness of local authorities, and is obediently looking at 'alternative models' - trusts, boards, charities, Friends and other voluntary groups - to take on parks. But they should not accept the basic proposition; they have been sucked into an argument on the wrong terms, when what they should do is stand back and fight those terms and those assumptions.

The message we should be sending out is that parks cost money to run adequately, let alone properly. But the benefits of well-maintained parks in terms of health, social cohesion, economic regeneration and the rest should be shouted from the roof tops, and they are fantastically good value. The returns on investment in parks have been proved over and over again in studies during the last decade. A recent study in a northern city confirmed - as usual the bleeding obvious - that compared to

any other leisure facility, a park's per capita running costs are miniscule.³ They are assets worth literally billions of pounds, and reducing maintenance and supervision is like leaving the door to the local museum wide open.⁴ On reflection, that latter scenario no longer seems as incredible as I might have hoped.

Instead, we have a new generation, a generation that never knew the misery of CCT, of eager politicians and chief executives busy exploring alternatives: the total outsourcing of a county council's services to the private sector ('Suffolkation' as one wit termed it), another metropolitan authority which offered voluntary redundancy to every officer on a salary over £40,000, another which simply walked out of a park trust it had set up only eight years ago, abandoning every element of its maintenance - grass uncut, bins uncollected, beds unweeded - and of course up and down the country proposals for the 'rationalisation' of parks services involving more or less catastrophic cuts in staff numbers.

Do none of them know this has all been tried and shown to be a waste of time and money? It was a failure demonstrated by years of misery, which have only recently begun to be turned around, as a result of the massive investment of the HLF, and the heroic efforts of, yes, today's villains, local authorities and their staff. There is no evidence that the private sector will maintain parks better, only more cheaply. There is plenty of evidence of the public sector managing parks brilliantly if they are not strangled by central government budget controls.

So what is going on? It seems obvious to me that the Conservatives have, with breathtaking speed and minimal mandate, simply taken up where they left off in 1997 in their relentless and pitiless war on local authorities and those who depend on them; their hostility to local democracy, which if it could speak would speak up for local parks above almost anything; and their ideological antagonism to the shared public realm.

3. The number of park users was estimated at 28 million and the total cost of maintaining the parks was £6.5m, a *per capita* cost of each visit of 23p. Alternatively, the cost per head of population of maintaining the parks was £15.80 per annum, a cost of 4p per day for each citizen.

4. CABE Space, *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2008.

1. David Donnison, *Policies for a Just Society*, 1998.

2. *Public Parks Assessment*, HLF and ILAM, 2000.

The gated community, the private road, the private golf club, the policed shopping mall is their realm. The municipal library, the town square, the swimming baths, the public park are utterly alien to them. The rhetoric of local democracy, devolved power, or fairness, is all a choking poisonous smokescreen, behind which central government is working, as it did under Thatcher, in precisely the opposite direction. This is not about a fairer or bigger society; it is just about tearing open the public sector to the profiteering of the private sector.

In the end parks are political - you either believe in the civic realm and its maintenance or you don't. Parks were produced by an enlightened middle-class - you could argue that it too had its own self-interest in making parks - which believed in one nation. Civics means a society being taxed for the benefit of all, but especially of the poorer and weaker members of the society. It is essentially a redistributive agenda. The Victorians got it, because it was a Christian, Anglican, agenda, and because the fear of social unrest was still present. Now, with bread and circuses liberally distributed to the underclass, and Christian socialism, or even liberalism, seen as an oxymoron, there seems little prospect of a revival of that faith.

GERTRUDE JEKYLL'S LOST LEGACY IN WIMBLEDON

By Tony Matthews

In the years just before World War 1, Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) was commissioned to design three gardens in what today is the London Borough of Merton - two in Wimbledon, one just to the south in Merton Park. At least two of these were successfully created and seem to have survived to some extent for half a century before disappearing from view. One of them was restored in the early 1990s and, although now closed to the public, remains largely intact. The third commission was for a garden that may never have got off the drawing board. However, the property for which it was intended has just been rediscovered and the current owners may even be considering implementation - nearly 100 years later. This is the story of all three commissions.

Jekyll was at the height of her career in the early 1900s. She designed more than 100 gardens with the architect Edwin Lutyens alone and is known to have been commissioned no less than 346 times between 1868 and her death in 1932, albeit in most cases for garden sections rather than complete gardens.¹ Working from Munstead Wood - her home near Godalming - from this period onwards she concentrated on properties within a 25-mile radius, so Wimbledon fitted the bill. It was also home to many prestigious figures from all walks of life so offered a highly attractive client base.

In 1906 Sir George Stegmann Gibb (1850-1925), former head of North Eastern Railways, moved south as managing director of the Underground Electric Railway Company of London - the Tube - and subsequently saved it from bankruptcy.² He had a large three-storey house built a few yards from Caesar's Camp, the site of an Iron Age fort on Wimbledon Common, which was recognised as a national monument despite the destruction of its ramparts by a developer working for landowner John Samuel Sawbridge-Erle-Drax MP some years earlier.³

In November 1906 Jekyll was commissioned to design a garden for Gibb's new house. The original plans show an elaborate creation with winding pathways, steps, a holly border, a multiplicity of flower beds containing roses, lavender, hollyhocks, berberis, lilies and many other species, a rock garden, and a six-bed kitchen garden with clearly defined borders.⁴ Jekyll also stated succinctly which plants she could supply and others that were recommended.

The project was evidently successful as Sir George, his wife Dorothea and their children lived at No. 1 Caesar's Camp (fig. 30) - soon renamed 35 Camp Road - from 1907 until 1919 when he returned to the North Eastern Railway after chairing a series of government bodies during the war. An aerial photograph shows the property outline intact in 1923 (fig. 31) and the house continued to be occupied by a series of residents until 1959⁵

1. Jane Brown, *Gardens of a Golden Afternoon* (Penguin Books, 1982), Introduction.

2. *Dictionary of Business Biography 1860-1980* (Butterworths).

3. Richard Milward, *Historic Wimbledon* (1989), pp.1-5.

4. Reef Point Gardens Collection, University of California, Berkeley.

5. *Electoral Registers*, British Library and Merton Local Studies Centre.