

pasture and one acre of woodland'.<sup>28</sup> In 1660, the manor house was sold to a woollen draper, Hugh Jermyne, who used the land he purchased as a 'whiteing ground'. By the time the area was recorded by John Rocque in 1746, more of the land had been turned into tenteryards.<sup>29</sup> Also visible on Rocque's map is a road named 'Holland's Leger', running north of the old Paris Garden manor. This name would later be abbreviated to 'Holland Street', just south of Tate Modern today; other nearby streets are still called 'Upper Ground' and 'Paris Garden'.

So, in the end, all that remains of what appear to have been London's first public gardens are street names. One of these gardens – Spring Gardens – was on the site of a gracious, royal pleasure ground, conveniently located between the two major London residences of the monarch, where visitors of a certain level of society met to eat, drink and be entertained. The second garden – if that is indeed what it was – stood in the much rougher neighbourhood of Southwark and appears to have been a murky, dark place that attracted those who needed to meet in secret. Whether or not this was recognizably a 'garden', it served one of the major purposes of gardens in the Tudor and early Stuart periods: a place of refuge and privacy, as well as of recreation and entertainment.

### 'REASON NOT THE NEED!'

By The Perambulator

Your correspondent ought to be bringing you a bulletin from the frontline of the war against the government's brutal assault on our gallant forces in public parks across the country. However, having been plunged into the depths of despair by the Big Lottery and Heritage Lottery Funds' well-meaning but frustrating 'Parks Summit' in October (I was reminded of Chamberlain's piece of paper), the prospect of such a bulletin is far too depressing. Suffice to say that the forces of civic culture are being driven further and further back, the losses are spiralling out

of control, the advances made in the last fifteen years are being rapidly surrendered, the rout is becoming headlong and many parks are already being reduced to no-man's land. Instead, I would like to celebrate what for me is the essence of public parks and to remind readers what we stand to lose.

My starting point is an instructive contrast. At the same time as the Olympic Park was opened in the summer of 2012, nearby there were celebrations of a different kind at the completion of the HLF-funded restoration of Victoria Park, the creation of which was one of the landmarks in the development of public parks in the nineteenth century. At its heart is its West Lake, now restored, and on an island in the lake now stands, of all things, a beautiful new Chinese pagoda (*fig. 13*), a reconstruction of one that stood here for over a hundred years. The original had been erected in Hyde Park to house an exhibition of 'Ten Thousand Chinese Things' in 1842 (the year in which the first Opium War ended) and was relocated to the new park in 1847. Despite this original role in commemorating violent imperialism, the building came to be a much-loved feature of the public park.

By the end of the nineteenth century it had no function but to enchant the park's visitors. George Lansbury in 1928 remembered seeing it as a child:

We did not understand what was on the island, which had, then as now, a Chinese pagoda.... we children thought that Chinese lived in the pagoda and at night came out to take care of the ducks, swans and waterfowl.<sup>1</sup>

By the second half of the twentieth century its ability to enchant had become severely handicapped by its deteriorating condition, and so it was demolished, amidst much public outcry, in 1956. The rebuilt pagoda is utterly charming and utterly useless and that is its point: the reinstatement, a brilliant and brave decision, epitomises the exuberant excess, the *gaiety* at the heart of Victorian public landscape design.

This same summer, on the other side of the A102(M) Cross Route, the Olympic Park was also nearing completion. The new park is

28. SOL 22, citing P.R.O., C54/4055.

29. SOL 22, citing P.R.O., C54/4050.

1. <http://eastlondonhistory.com/2010/11/27/victoria-park>.



13. Chinese Pagoda, Victoria Park, East London, 2012  
(PHOTOGRAPH SALLY WILLIAMS)

in its way as ambitious as Victoria Park had been, regularly referred to as the first great new urban park in a hundred years or more, an exemplar not just to the country but to the wider world, demonstrating the latest ideas in engineering, architecture, landscape design and horticulture. Apart from the sporting venues, it has its own prodigious sculpture – the 115m high ArcelorMittal Orbit, writhing chunkily upwards (*fig. 14*). It has display gardens with flora from across the globe, and areas of different landscape character, and like its forebears it has been designed to accommodate large numbers of people while retaining a sense of spaciousness and beauty. In a new twist on the English landscape style, its planting is designed to imitate the nature of meadows and grasslands. Its design has been 'driven by biodiversity and sustainability objectives'.<sup>2</sup>

The new park landscape in the north of the site is one of smoothly sculpted mounds, and groups and swathes of native trees, shrubs and flowers, through which winding paths gently rise and fall above the rejuvenated river. To a certain generation, telly-tubby land comes irresistibly to mind. Apart from the great sporting venues, elegantly embosomed by the landscaped bunds, its features include reed beds and wetland habitats, sustainable drainage systems in the form of swales or ditches, log-piles for invertebrates and nesting and roosting sites for birds and bats. It is not entirely clear what will be handed over to the future managers of the park in two or three years' time, but it is likely to be a fairly simple landscape of grass, water, trees and paths.

The difference in aesthetics is overwhelming. Perhaps most notably, the twenty-first-century park has few of the ornamental flourishes of its nineteenth-century predecessor. For the elaborate stone-carving of the Burdett Coutts fountain in Victoria Park we have the sleek pared-down lines of the velodrome, while for the wildly elaborate form of the landscaped lakes, we have the reed-fringed river Lea. In terms of planting, Victoria Park's landscape-garden style of structure-planting and elaborate formal flower-planting is replaced in the

Olympic Park with what one of its creators, Nigel Dunnett, terms 'a meadow aesthetic, [ranging] from the purely native meadows of North Park, through to the synthetic annual and hybrid native-exotic meadows around the stadium, through to the stylised meadow aesthetic of the 2012 gardens'.<sup>3</sup>

Floral display, quite as ingenious and artificial in its way as nineteenth-century bedding-out, takes the form of carefully cultivated 'flowery meadows', designed to mimic nature rather than to celebrate art. While the southern gardens incorporate a global range of plants, arranged by geographical themes in pedagogical fashion reminiscent of Paxton at the Crystal Palace, the north park comprises what the designers call 'designed versions of native UK habitats'.<sup>4</sup>

The 2012 gardens in the south, beautifully designed by Sarah Price, laid out on the basis of this meadow aesthetic, contain themed areas of different plants to represent 'a tour of the biodiversity hotspots of the world that have been the major source of plants for UK gardeners over the past 600 years'. The planting was organised not on the basis of detailed plans but on 'carefully worked out mixtures of perennials that are laid out on a random basis according to their proportions in the mix'. Although contained in a formal structure of clipped evergreen hedges, the artfulness of the planting is notably self-effacing.

The aesthetic presentation of both landscape and buildings in the Olympic Park is closely bound up with ecological and environmental issues, reflecting an anxiety entirely (some might say, recklessly) absent from nineteenth-century thinking. Despite the input of Price, Dunnett and his colleague James Hitchmough, especially in the south, the overall philosophy of the park remains predominantly that set out in the original EDAW masterplan – one driven by a 'habitat creation/restoration ecology approach'.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the profusion of the meadow-planting is strictly circumscribed, and the most notable characteristic in the Olympic Park is

2. <http://www.nigeldunnett.info/Londonolympicpark/styled-2/2012gardens.html>.

3. <http://www.gardensvisit.com/blog/2012/08/23/wildflower-meadows-in-londons-2012-queen-elizabeth-olympic-park/>.

4. <http://www.nigeldunnett.info/Londonolympicpark/styled-2/2012gardens.html>.

5. <http://www.gardensvisit.com/blog/2012/08/23/wildflower-meadows-in-londons-2012-queen-elizabeth-olympic-park>.

of a kind of austerity - aesthetic pleasure replaced by the thinner, if more pious, satisfaction at ecological improvement. Restrained good taste is the overwhelming characteristic; vulgar excess is utterly absent. In place of frivolity like the pagoda, everything in the Olympic Park is rational and indeed rationed; in place of frivolity and exuberance we have instead a kind of environmental puritanism.

While the Olympic Park is closed for 'transformation', in a popular vote organised by Keep Britain Tidy's *Green Flag Plus Partnership* Victoria Park has been nominated as the nation's favourite park in the *People's Choice Award*. More than 7,000 votes were cast and Victoria Park came top of 1,424 different parks. Those who voted were not heritage-buffs; the HLF project has restored Victoria Park's *joie de vivre*, and people love it. People like showiness; they like flamboyance and the joyful uselessness of features such as the pagoda.

It is only quite rarely that historical research and then reconstruction shows just how prodigious Victorian ornamentation in parks actually was: in the nineteen-eighties, there was a fashion for the use of black and gold to signify heritage, which could be seen at its most egregious in the rash of heritage litter-bins decked out in this livery. But research on Victorian colour theory and advances in the manufacture of paints shows that by the second half of the nineteenth century a huge range of secondary and tertiary colours were being employed with considerable sophistication about how they complemented each other.<sup>6</sup>

Edward Kemp, Paxton's assistant and later superintendent of Birkenhead Park, wrote in *How to Lay out a Small Garden* (1850) of combining 'pink and white, light blues, pale greens, straw-coloured yellows, the softest tones of crimson or vermilion' with smaller quantities of 'stronger colours ..rich, showy, and valuable in contrast'. Although referring principally to colours of flowers and foliage, he adds that these may also 'denote the colours which should be selected in painting either the exterior or the interior of buildings, fences, &c.'.<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel Cole, in his *Royal Parks and*

*Gardens of London* (1877), described a number of combinations by which 'some of the most refined and beautiful arrangements' could be achieved: deep blue and golden brown; amber and lavender; peach and dark blue; light purple and light orange-yellow; olive and russet; deep claret and sea-green; primrose and lilac'.<sup>8</sup> It is where we see this level of sophistication applied to the painting of structures in park restorations that we begin to get an inkling of what we have lost.

And when we do, as when confronted by that pagoda, or by the Swiss bridge in Birkenhead Park, or the bandstands in Roberts Park, Saltaire; Walsall Arboretum or Handsworth Park in Birmingham, we must exclaim: where now are the curlicues and the fol-de-rols, the flourishes and finials? Where the mosaics and bas-reliefs, roundels and medallions, the scrolls and swags, the flowers, fishes and faces? Where the spires and turrets, the bargeboards and ginger-breading? Where is the pretty, the exquisite, the refined; where is the whimsical and outrageous; where is the fantasy and fun? (Up the ArcelorMittal tower at £15 a pop, I suppose, but even that promises to be a funfair ride and disappoints, promises craziness and delivers sobriety.)

Victorian parks gave their visitors beauty, sublimity (where possible) and the picturesque. Alongside the high-tech of cast-iron glasshouses and conservatories, they gave us Swiss cottages, miniature castles, ruins, lodges, bandstands and pavilions in a riot of classical, gothic, Tudor and rustic styles; lakes, cascades, pools, dripping wells, rocks, caves, cliffs, bridges, all in the setting of a profusion of exotic and native planting, topped off with spectacular floral displays, worthy of a stately home, not just once but renewed every year to the same prodigious standard. They gave us drinking fountains, refreshment rooms, flagpoles, pergolas, statues, urns, tazas; grand staircases and terraces, belvederes and viewpoints, inscriptions from the poets and the Psalms, and above all they enshrined communal memories of events, organisations and individuals. Even the bench-ends and lamp columns writhed with delicately painted cast-iron foliage and fauna.

6. See for example Hilary Taylor Landscape Associates, 'Colour Policy for Fulham Palace and Bishop's Park' (2011).

7. Edward Kemp, *How to Lay out a Small Garden* (1850, 3rd edition 1864), p.126.

8. Nathaniel Cole, *The Royal Parks and Gardens of London* (1877), p.75.



14. ArcelorMittal Orbit, Olympic Park, 2012

Well, all this is not mere grumpy old pining after the never-never. The point is that the essence of the public park, and the social contract on which it is based, is its excess. It is about going beyond what we *need*: 'Reason not the need!' cried King Lear as he protested against the stripping of his royal trappings. We have been lured into spending the last fifteen years endlessly researching and demonstrating the utilitarian evidence for 'why parks are important' - the economic, social, health or ecological benefits, all measurable, all rational, and all utterly beside the point. It has got us nowhere. It's time to stand up for the inherent superfluity of parks and to celebrate that. It is excess that makes us human. That is why the great Londoner, William Blake, wrote in the *Proverbs of Heaven and Hell*, 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom'. Instead of trying to demonstrate need, we should admit, of course we don't need parks to sustain mere existence. But we do need them to be human, precisely because they are inherently useless, inherently superfluous:

Allow not nature more than nature needs,  
Man's life is cheap as beast's.

Which takes me back to my abandoned bulletin from the front-line. Parks are not about productiveness or outputs or anything that can be so easily reduced to a function: this basic fact is anathema to the series of Gradgrind, utilitarian governments we have endured since 1979. They are part of the superflux of human culture; they are about pleasure, and it is because they are uniquely about pleasure that they need to be so passionately contested. They are where we can be human - civil, tolerant, considerate. They are the canary in the coalmine, offering an advance warning of the future destruction of that which is not superfluous at all.

**'SO REMARKABLY AIRY' -  
BRUNSWICK SQUARE WCI**  
By Susan Jellis

The Great Plane of Brunswick Square has presided over many scenes in this quiet corner of Bloomsbury - one of the most recent being the theft of the plaque announcing it as one of the *Great Trees of London*, awarded only in 2009. Its widely spreading branches saw the encroachment of town into country in the early nineteenth century and watched over the building of the Foundling Hospital next door, endured the coming of the nearby Euston Road railway stations in the later nineteenth century, sheltered the Bloomsbury Group's walks and talks in the 1910s, saw off a vast scheme for a new Covent Garden Market in the 1920s, survived too-close-for-comfort bombing in the 1940s, endured demolition and rebuilding in the 1950s-1970s, won through parks' neglect and decay in the 1980s and 1990s, rejoiced in a heritage refurbishment in 2002-3 and emerged unscathed from two unsuitable proposals for a statue in 2012. Throughout, the Great Plane, said to be the second oldest in London, rose majestically over the indignity of children and adults swinging from its lowest, most temptingly bouncy branch.

It is not known exactly when the tree was planted. The well-known view of the neighbouring Foundling Hospital 'for the maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children' shows the Hospital standing in fields with a distant view of Hampstead on its hill in the background to the north-west. The Trustees of the Hospital purchased 56 acres of Lamb's Conduit Fields from Lord Salisbury for £6,500 and the Hospital was completed by 1753. Initially the children had been looked after in crowded Hatton Garden and over a third of them had died in the first year. But in 1790 the Governors of the charity, which counted Handel and Hogarth among its Governors and patrons, lost their government grant and decided to raise money by developing their estate. Samuel Pepys Cockerell was appointed to develop the land surrounding the Hospital, and his plan of 1790 had two squares.

The Governors commissioned the builder James Burton to create a garden