

23. Clissold Park, Hackney – the inimitable pleasures of a public park on a sunny afternoon, 2013
(Courtesy LDA Design and photograph © Robin Forster)

POPS Muzak

By The Perambulator

A catchy new acronym has come our way: POPS, for Privately Owned Public Space. With apologies, it prompts me to return to where I left off a year ago, in Regent's Park, worrying about the nature of public open space. Since then, so-called austerity has continued to wreak havoc on local authorities, which are increasingly looking to off-load what are termed 'liabilities', including public parks. It seems worth thinking about the notion of a public landscape in order that it can be hung on to.

Public parks are generally taken as a given, a Victorian heritage which has descended unchanged to the present. In fact, there have been significant changes to the management of many since they were established. The nineteenth-century portfolio was much more heterogeneous, much more of a rag-bag, than we might assume.

It is true that most of today's public parks originated as local authority properties, the land bought and the park laid out by local authorities, especially after the 1875 *Public Health Act* enabled central government loans for the purpose. But in the nineteenth century there were also many public spaces that were not in local authority control but which were privately owned: subscription gardens, botanical gardens, commercial pleasure gardens, zoological gardens, cemeteries, commons, moors and former village greens, owned by private individuals, businesses or charitable bodies. Many of these, such as the Willesden People's Garden Company, collapsed financially and their sites were redeveloped, but of those that survived, nearly all were eventually adopted by local authorities, and have become municipal and truly public.[1]

Victoria Park in Bath was created in 1830 on private land by private subscriptions and donations; it was maintained by a Park Committee of twenty 'public spirited' individuals, which faced a continuous struggle with funding by annual subscriptions until taken over by Bath Corporation in 1921. Princes Park in Liverpool was part of a speculative development, reserved for the pleasure of the occupants of the adjacent houses, but was transferred to the City Corporation in 1918 as the reserves of the Trust which owned and ran it were overtaken by maintenance costs. Alexandra Palace and its park, first built by a private company and then transferred to a trust, were handed over to the London County Council (LCC) in 1967. Even Crystal Palace Park, where a plethora of rackety, income-generating entertainments developed in the early twentieth century, in the end proved beyond the resources of the private company which ran it, and which in 1951 transferred it to the LCC.

Most of the larger London squares of course were originally privately owned and maintained, with restricted access, and were gradually transferred to boroughs or the LCC as income declined. The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association also acquired sites which private owners could no longer maintain. And many of Greater London's heaths, commons and village greens were transferred from other forms of ownership – the lord of the manor, a board of trustees, parish vestries for example - into the guardianship of either the Metropolitan Board of Works or the LCC.

What we have today then is not a stable inheritance, but a culmination of historical changes which have brought the large majority of public parks and gardens into public ownership, run by democratically accountable public bodies and paid for through general taxation. This is what we now understand to be public landscape. As Ali Smith wrote of Regent's Park:

> … now it's now. The park that began with the lords and the ladies in their carriages. The park that evolved, that learned to open its gates to everybody, to hold all the city's hundreds of languages, the city's efflorescence, in the one place.[2]

1. Historic funding models for public parks are the subject of a forthcoming Historic England Research Paper due to be published summer 2016.

2. Ali Smith, 'The Definite Article,' in Sarah Pickstone, ed., *Park Notes: an anthology of writing and art inspired by a London park* (London, 2014), p.10. Regent's Park is of course run by the Royal Parks Agency not the local authority, but the RPA is funded by government through general taxation.

The free, multicultured, multi-historied park of today is the product not only of the nineteenth century but also of the twentieth century, with its historical tendency towards democracy. The park has advanced from the original paternalistic vision of 'correct leisure' with its strictly enforced bye-laws. (Your correspondent was alarmed to find that the Victoria Park bye-laws of 1893 allowed subscribers to take a perambulator into the park but forbade the privilege to non-subscribers.) A hundred and fifty years or more of informal day-by-day negotiation between users and the authorities has resulted in a more complex, largely self-regulating world of communal pleasure, tolerance and courtesy.

Consider the experience of a public garden, free to all, run by the local authority and paid for through general taxation, and that of a pay-per-entry garden, such as a National Trust property. The components are the same but, at a deeper level, there is a qualitative difference: in a municipal park we are not customers; we have a right to be there. And we are constrained not by rules, not really anymore, but by our sense of sharing. This makes today's public park a precious resource, and ignorance among politicians makes it vulnerable.[3]

The social contract which maintains the public park is unwritten and can easily be forgotten, or indeed torn up, and since 2010 deep budget cuts have been forcing councils to look at changes which will undermine it. At a simple level that contract depends on authorities keeping their side of the bargain – security, tidiness, and a decent level of maintenance and public amenities. On the other side, with the exception of vandals, the public will treat it reasonably and act with consideration towards fellow-users. Over most of the twentieth century, the contract was proved to work, but disappearing funds make the authorities' side of the bargain increasingly difficult to keep, and if it is not kept on that side gradually it will not be kept on the other. We know this because of what happened in the seventies and eighties when a near-catastrophic decline set in, only reversed through the investment of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

Having cut and cut again, local authorities are facing an unsustainable future, and are looking at the most drastic option of all.[4] The HLF's 2014 *State of UK Parks* survey found 45% of them are considering selling or transferring parks into new ownership. The Big Lottery has this year launched a *Community Asset Transfer* grant programme to assist with transfers of assets such as parks to community groups. And in June last year, the chairman of the Environment Committee of the umbrella group, London Councils, warned that a lack of funding makes it increasingly likely that parks will be sold to private companies. Council budgets have been cut in real terms by 47% since 2010, and in the last four years, London boroughs' spending on parks has fallen by 18%, and with cuts set to continue indefinitely, parks are reaching a tipping point: 'If we pass the tipping point communities risk losing control of parks, along with democratic accountability for the open spaces that they value so much.' The warning was stark: if the cuts continue 'councils may be unable to stop the parks being sold off and run privately by 2025'.[5]

We are already seeing the rise of private control of so-called public spaces. The increase in POPS in London has been the subject of research and indeed protest over the last ten years, and only in February this year, Will Self was addressing a 'mass trespass' protest outside City Hall. His point was that private space is qualitatively different from municipal space:

> What people don't understand is that it does affect you psychically. It constrains you in how you think about what you can do in a space, and it constrains your imagination....The kind of ludic, playful

3. When politicians compare today's POPs to the ducal estates of the eighteenth-century city and point to the inheritance of squares and other places, they ignore the nineteenth-century protests and processes which led to the removal of their gates and sentry-boxes and their adoption by municipal authorities (see Anna Minton, *Ground Control,* (London, reissued 2012), pp.19-20).

4. Liverpool City Council is forecast by 2018 to have insufficient funds for even its statutory services; its annual £2.5m parks budget is set to completely disappear. A report on options – not called Desperate Measures - commissioned by the Mayor is available at http://liverpool.gov.uk/mayor/mayoral-commissions/strategic-green-and-open-spaces-review-board.

5. Councillor Julian Bell, 21 June 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-33205239.

potential of living in a city is being significantly impoverished by this kind of stuff.

The risk in *rethinking parks* is that we lose that potential, the unique characteristic of a place owned and managed by the local authority for the benefit of all. Differentiating different amenities through charging for some, such as the *GoApe!* franchise in Battersea, and not others risks creating two-tier leisure. A central part of Grosvenor Park in Chester is now occupied every summer by the stockade of an outdoor theatre company; a large swathe of Hyde Park is effectively off limits to the public because of the concert use. These are uncomfortable presences in a public space. The controversy over charging for the Park Run in Little Stoke Park in Bristol should have opened up a real debate on the issues facing park authorities and the implications of rethinking parks, but quickly collapsed into entrenched positions. In Dolores Park in San Francisco earlier this year, the City trialled a scheme offering users the opportunity to rent grass by the hour for exclusive use of an area of the open grassland for picnics.[6]

With the relentless undermining of the role and power of local authorities, a blizzard of alternatives to the late twentieth-century municipal model is now engulfing us. Trusts, sponsorship, private philanthropy, business partnerships, community asset transfers, volunteer management and maintenance, are all being explored.[7] History should teach us that most of these models have already been tested and found to fail, and that is why parks are now run by municipal bodies.[8] Public parks need to be subsidised as common goods if they are to be of benefit to all.

To confuse the picture, local authorities seeking to increase provision of open space while not being saddled with the maintenance costs are being tempted by a dubious host of ersatz public spaces: the wretched Sky Garden at Fenchurch Street, with its tortuous claim to be both 'exclusive' and 'public', and its booking system and photo-ID, has been written about at length. The new Renzo Piano tower at 31 London Street in Paddington, withdrawn in March for redesign, promises 'a 5,000 sq ft public roof garden inspired by Kew Gardens'.

We have the promise too of Malaysia Square in the Battersea Power Station redevelopment, privately owned and patrolled 'public realm' (if it is a realm, who is king here?), while the enormous redevelopment of the former LCC Heygate Estate, 'Elephant Park' is dressed up with the promise of 'central London's largest new park in 70 years', in fact privately owned communal gardens for the 2,500 new residents of the new des-res apartments. To add insult to injury these have been built on twenty-five acres of Metropolitan Open Land previously owned by Southwark Council, hence the '122 retained mature trees' boasted of in the egregious publicity.[9] And now the proposed 480ft 'Toblerone Towers' in the same area promises to provide 'Elephant & Castle with its first free and publicly accessible roof garden'.[10]

The Garden Bridge is in the same bastard category. For all the visionary talk of 'a beautiful new garden floating above the River Thames', this will not be a public open space, nor a public right of way. However beautiful the planting, it will be privately owned and managed: there will be strict controls on permitted activities, it will be closed for income-generating events, and groups of more than eight people will require permission to visit. In this case, it is expected that the annual maintenance bill of £3.5m will be met from public funds. These are the corporatized public spaces which none other than Boris Johnson protested against in his 2009 public space manifesto, *London's Great Outdoors*, which make Londoners feel 'themselves excluded from parts of their own city'.[11]

6. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/24/san-francisco-dolores-park-reservation-policy-retracted.
7. See the February 2016 report on the Rethinking Parks pilot studies, http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/learning-rethink-parks.
8. Historic England, *op. cit.*
9. http://www.elephantpark.co.uk/elephant-park/green-spaces.
10. http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/toblerone-towers-plans-for-londons-newest-skyscraper-revealed-a3292591.html.
11. The Mayor of London, *A Manifesto for Public Space: London's Great Outdoors*, 2009, p.8 (https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/londons_great_outdoors_-_mayors_manifesto.pdf).

So this is unexplored and potentially dangerous territory, in which we could easily lose what we most treasure about public parks and gardens. We should return to Regent's Park, and the 'efflorescence' of the modern city which the twenty-first century public landscape represents. We should consider what is truly public space - the inimitable sensation of entering a well-maintained public park on a sunny afternoon - and then we should defend it *(fig. 23)*.

The First World War on Hampstead Heath

By Carrie Cowan

The use of Hampstead Heath during the First World War can be seen as a mirror reflecting wider events. At the outbreak of war, Hampstead Heath was used for army recruitment meetings, patriotic speeches and concerts as well as pacifist meetings. Soldiers drilled and trained on the heath.

At the August Bank Holiday weekend of 1914 people had to focus on the prospect of war.[1] Although the usual Bank Holiday fair was held on the heath with merry go rounds, refreshment stalls, coconut shies and side shows, the *Hampstead & Highgate Express* reported that the holiday spirit was not very strong, the crowds were less dense than usual and people were grave and thoughtful, wondering what was going to happen.[2]

By the end of August the French section of the Foreign Legion was drilling on the heath, some in khaki and some in everyday dress, whilst people watched.[3] The *Manchester Guardian* reported that there were squads of recruits learning company drill and that sometimes you came across 'queer people like the little Foreign Legion groups […] moving rapidly over the slopes to French or Italian words of command'.[4] The artist Paul Nash joined the Artists' Rifles London Regiment of Territorials, writing 'I enjoy the burst of exercise - marching, drilling all day in the open air about the pleasant parts of Regent's Park and Hampstead Heath'.[5] Photographs reveal that members of the Queen Victoria's Rifles, 9th County of London Battalion, were training on the heath in December 1914 and the 1st City of London, Royal Field Artillery, were making a camouflaged gun pit *(figs. 24 & 25)*, whilst men of the Royal Engineers Signal Service were training there in January 1915 *(fig. 26)*.[6] Members of the Royal Field Artillery (Territorial) were filmed making trenches and dugouts in January 1915.[7] In Parliament, Sir J D Rees detailed the volunteers' commitment to training:

> We have in the City of London National Guard some 2,000 men. Surely it is a good thing that those men are willing, at the end of their day's work in the City, to go and qualify by drill to form fours and perform other difficult operations of that sort, and to spend their Sunday in tramping over Hampstead Heath, and also to march the whole length of the City, as we all have done![8]

Photographs show also that members of the Queen's Westminsters brigade were digging practice trenches on the heath[9] and the Royal Horse Artillery were training in the heath ponds *(fig. 27)*.[10] The Invalids Magazine Album shows photographs from 1915 of a

1. Before 1971 the bank holiday was held at the beginning of August and not the end of the month; the Bank Holiday that year was Friday 31 July–Monday 3 August. Britain entered the war on 4 August 1914. http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/war-as-revolution/august-1914-england%E2%80%99s-difficulty-ireland%E2%80%99s-opportunity/ (date accessed 20 October 2014).
2. Licences for 1914, London County Council (LCC) minutes, 16 February 1915, p.256; *Hampstead & Highgate Express*, 8 August 1914.
3. *Hampstead & Highgate Express*, 22 August 1914.
4. *Manchester Guardian*, 6 September 1915.
5. From a letter to Gordon Bottomley, 27 September 1914 http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/ARTnash.htm (date accessed 19 May 2014).
6. Imperial War Museum 53597, 53466, 53457, 53458, 53593.
7. Members of the Royal Field Artillery (Territorial) on Hampstead Heath (British Film Institute (BFI) National Archive Film, 20 January 1915) http://collections-search.bfi.org.uk/web/Details/ChoiceFilmWorks/150582093 (date accessed 19 May 2014).
8. Hansard, 1 March 1915 http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1915/mar/01/city-of-london-national-guard-uniform (date accessed 19 May 2014).
9. Photograph 47: 2nd Lieutenant Cyril Asquith, son of the Prime Minister, drilling with the Queen's Westminsters on Hampstead Heath; Photograph 90: Lieut. Swainston explaining to the Queen's Westminsters the methods followed in the construction of a traverse dug under his direction at Hampstead Heath; Photograph 91: The Queen's Westminsters trench-digging on Hampstead Heath. Edgar Wallace, *Kitchener's Army and the Territorial Forces: The Full Story of a Great Achievement* (London: George Newnes Ltd, 1915) http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/bookmark/kitcheners-army-and-the-territorial-forces-the-full-story-of-a-great-achievement-by-edgar-wallace-university-of-california-libraries/ (date accessed 19 May 2014).
10. Undated photographs, EU001349 and EU001350 http://www.topfoto.co.uk/imageflows/preview/t=topfoto&f=EU001350 (date accessed 19 May 2014).