

PARK BENCH By Edwin Heathcote

'We spend our life', said Samuel Beckett 'trying to bring together in the same instant a ray of sunshine and a free bench.'

A free bench. Perhaps, ideally, a bench in the park. There's something hugely attractive about even the mere idea of a free bench. It suggests pleasant idling, the enjoyable wiling away of a few minutes, a place for phone scrollers and baby strollers, paper readers and urban nappers. Perhaps that freedom is accentuated by the bench's own immovability, its fixed-point permanence, the nature of it being bolted to the ground. A place of repose.

But look at a few famous photographs of people on park benches - they can just as well embody a sense of loneliness, of isolation, of ennui. In England people tend to get quietly disappointed if someone sits beside them on a bench, it spoils their solitary moment (being English, of course, they would never in any way express this disappointment). In Mediterranean countries benches are more social spaces, places where the elderly sit and talk and watch the rhythm of urban life. Seats at a theatre. The bench can address a paradox, that of deliberate isolation in a crowd as well as enabling a presence in the public arena, becoming part of the life of the park or the street.

The park bench in particular is perhaps the most public piece of architecture, as available and amenable to the homeless as it is to lovers and lunchers, pigeon-feeders and paper-readers, phone scrollers and parents with baby strollers.

There are all kinds of seats in parks, from the characteristic green French steel chairs (as seen in the Tuileries in Paris) to concrete lumps, stone boulders and rustic log benches like those designed by Frederick Law Olmsted for Central Park in New York. (*figs. 47 & 48*) But the traditional bench of metal and wood is the most perfect. And of those there is one particular design that I like best. My favourite is one that I became familiar with from the park opposite the flat in which I lived for 20 years, Bishop's Park along the Thames in Fulham between Putney Bridge and Fulham

Football Ground. The park is typically Victorian, an amenity and side-effect of Joseph Bazalgette's building of London's grand embankment (Bazalgette designed Putney Bridge and the walls of the park beside it). It is the usual municipal mix of lawns, playgrounds and sunken gardens, once populated by a riot of garish council decorative flowerbeds, full of (now defunct) half-timbered Victorian lavatories and drinking fountains, now a little more restrained and neglected.

The bench is a deceptively simple design with a slatted wooden seat and back and a bent metal frame. Its legs describe an S-shaped curve, its arms a sweeping bow, a little like the chairs in some of the old photos of Paris parks. It looks old, but I don't think it is. It might have been designed in 1890, or it might have been designed in the 1950s (*fig. 49*). Unselfconscious but elegant it has few pretensions and is mostly comfortable, although its back could have a little more curve to better accommodate the body and, perhaps, an extra slat. Frankly, it looks like it belongs in a park, it has a municipal catalogue feel. As such a ubiquitous product, the bench has been a popular subject for designers, architects and artists, but few have come up with anything this good. The more designers attempt to design, the more awkward the bench becomes so that the generic versions seem to be the best.

The bench is also the most archetypal item of park furniture. Before there were chairs, or even tables, there were benches. The very name flows through our language - a judge sits at the bench, quality is benchmarked, the word 'bank' derives from the benches ('banca') once used to trade from, Parliament has its front, back and cross benchers whilst football subs might come off the bench. Open to all and so common they have become almost invisible, the park bench has become one of the most unerringly popular subjects for photographers. Like the bench itself, those occupying it are fixed enough to become a kind of captive audience for the observer of urban life, the observers of urban life themselves observed.

Photographers from Andre Kertesz to Gary Winogrand via Diane Arbus have used the park bench as cipher for the human condition, capturing couples and tramps, the



47. The Park Bench: New York (top), London (bottom)
(PHOTOGRAPHS EDWIN HEATHCOTE)

PARK BENCH



48. The Park Bench: Milton Keynes (top), Arles (bottom left), New York (bottom right)
(PHOTOGRAPHS EDWIN HEATHCOTE)



49. Park bench as seen in Bishop's Park, Russell Square and other London parks
(PHOTOGRAPH EDWIN HEATHCOTE)

50. *Broken Bench*, 1962, Andre Kertesz
(© ANDRE KERTESZ)

alienated and the loved up, the young and the old. (figs. 50 & 51) The bench in the park becomes a kind of framing device. One Ukrainian photographer, Yevgeniy Kotenko, documented the life of a single, sparse, backless bench in a bleak and bald-looking Kiev park over a decade, observed from the window of his mum's kitchen.

If the bench can appear as a kind of urban stage, it also begins to embody those who have used it.

In Edinburgh's Princes Street there is a bench with a brass plaque stating simply 'Remembering J.C.H. Who was often tired.' It's a moment of small pleasure. Another bench in London's Primrose Hill has a plaque reading 'In Memory of Roger Bucklesby who hated this park and everyone in it.' I doubt there ever was a Roger Bucklesby but the plaque has made him real.

The bench is a versatile thing, supple enough to embody both that ideal of a welcome place to sit in comfort for a few quiet moments in the park as well as its possibly very different meaning to someone whose last resort it is at night. It is able to change radically from sunrise to sunset in its meaning and use. Increasingly though that is itself changing and benches are being designed and built to discourage rough sleeping, with extra arms and dividers, the kind of thing seen in airports and stations. Huge amounts of thought have clearly been applied to ways in which benches can be made hostile to horizontality. Sleeping does not necessarily mean lying down. Jack London, more famous for his novels than his photography, recorded the poverty that so astonished and dispirited him in London at the very beginning of the twentieth century. His photos recorded the homeless sitting, rather than lying on London's benches. One, showing four men on a bench on the Embankment portrays the camel-sided bench (which you can still see today), another captures a pitiful group of women asleep on benches beside a Spitalfields churchyard.

A bench can be a place for the desperate, the dissolute and also the desolate. It is an extraordinary thing, for example, to sit in the Victorian seaside shelter at Margate, on the bench on which TS Eliot wrote '*The Wasteland*'. You feel the harsh sea wind and a

chill penetrates your bones whilst you peer out at the sea and the big Thanet sky. Some of that existential Modernist angst seeps into your soul. John Lanchester's novel, '*Mr Phillips*' meanwhile features an executive who has been laid off and, unable to face his wife with the news, spends a day on a bench in Battersea Park contemplating the meaning of life and encountering a tramp who may, or may not, be a performance artist.

If these images of park benches are mostly solitary there is another domain in which they appear as furtive meeting places. It is a familiar movie cliché: A figure will usually arrive to join another already seated on the park bench. As they both face ahead they can avoid the impression of contact. One might be pretending to be engrossed in feeding the pigeons or in reading a paper. Something enigmatic might be said, snippets of stilted conversation which might, initially, be code. Perhaps a particular newspaper will be involved, a dead drop or a briefcase swap. And then they're gone again, leaving at different times, with no goodbyes uttered. It is in the nature of random encounter but also the specific qualities of the side-by-side sitting, which paradoxically facilitates both physical proximity and a lack of intimacy and eye-contact - plausible deniability. It exploits the curious non-conviviality of the bench. From '*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*' to '*Red Joan*', the park bench is ubiquitous, the liaison point par excellence. And it seems a particularly London type of encounter, that presence of anonymity seems to suit the character of the city. In '*The Ipcress File*', the liaison occurs in a park by a bandstand with the characters sitting on Parisian-type folding chairs. 'I think they're playing rather well' says Major Dalby about the band of the Irish Guards. 'Tell me who wins' replies Michael Caine's Harry Palmer, tartly, before striding off. But of course the military music of the brass band is the perfect cover for the conversation.

Boom time for benches though was the mid-nineteenth century. The industrial revolution had made the manufacture of cast iron cheap and easy. The material lent itself to the outdoors and to the complex, florid modelling adored by the Victorians. The extraordinary Egyptian-themed examples



51. *Lovers on a Bench and a Tramp, Boulevard Saint-Jacques, c.1932.* Brassai
(BRASSAI © ESTATE BRASSAI – RMN – GRAND PALAIS. PHOTO SCALA, FLORENCE)

inspired by the neighbouring Cleopatra's Needle on London's Embankment, with seats resting on camels and sphinxes, are among the most enjoyably overblown public benches anywhere. On the opposite side of the river stands another set of benches, their cast-iron ends formed into the shape of swans (although with the very strange modification of lions' feet).

But perhaps the best thing about park benches across London is not their sculptural detail or their elaborate forms but precisely their anonymity. They are backdrop only, the detail is provided by the trees, the theatre by the users, both human and animal. I was very pleased to see that after a recent house move, my nearest park, or at least the nearest thing to a park nearby - Russell Square - has exactly those benches that I liked from Bishop's Park. Simple, elegant, perfect. What could be better than a seat on a bench in a park with the weekend papers?

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THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PLEASURE GROUND AT CARSHALTON HOUSE ESTATE

By Jean Knight

In 1724 Daniel Defoe wrote of Carshalton that it was, 'the most agreeable Spot on all this side of London, as is abundantly testify'd by its being as it were, crouded with fine Houses of the Citizens of London, some of which are built with such Profusion of Expence, that they look like the Seats of the Nobility, than Country Houses of Citizens and Merchants.'¹ No doubt these Citizens and Merchants were drawn to the area because of its closeness to the Exchange in London, the commerce from the mills on the highly industrialised River Wandle, clear spring water, and the excellent recreational facilities of cockfighting, fishing, hunting and horse racing across Banstead Downs to the spa town of Epsom.²

One such 'fine house' was that of the tobacco merchant Edward Carleton, who had purchased an old Tudor farm and proceeded, in the very late seventeenth century, to rebuild it to create a fine modern red brick villa, with Portland dressing. Carleton, however, became bankrupt in 1713.³ The Royal Commissioners' Statement notes the garden was 1.5 ACRES, part of which may have been a formal parterre to the north of his villa, and a 'Wilderness', meaning an area where the trees were allowed to grow naturally, not coppiced or pleached, but would still have been planted in formal rows. Carleton's wilderness included walnut, cherry and plum trees. This may also have served as a bosquet to act as an estate boundary and separated from the grass plats by clipped hedges.⁴

The 1714 Estate sales documents list, apart from the Mansion, stables and garden, a spring or grove.⁵ This grove may have been the

1. Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, (published in 3 vols., 1724-1726), Penguin Classics, 1986, pp.167, 168.

2. Christopher Morris, Editor, *The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes, 1685 - c.1712*, Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1995, p.231.

3. A. E. Jones, *The Story of Carshalton House*, London Borough of Sutton Libraries and Arts Services, 1980, p.14.

4. John Dixon Hunt & Peter Willis, Editors, *The Genius of the Place, The English Landscape Garden 1620 - 1820*, Paul Elek, 1979, p.182; Batty Langley, *New Principles of Gardening*, 1728, General Directions, xxxiii, In Planning of a Wilderness; Jean Irvine Knight, *Carshalton House: A Landscaped Country Seat*, Carshalton Water Tower and Historic Garden Trust, 2018, pp.4-8.

5. Copy of Bargain & Sale, Manor House or Old Farm of Edward Carleton 1716, MSS Surrey Records Office.