

Paxton 150: Histories and Futures of Public Parks

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'The parks movement, 1990-2015'

(Fig.1)

At events like this, I sometimes feel like the ancient mariner at the wedding; buttonholing guests to tell my tale, cursed to repeat it to anyone who'll listen (Fig.2). Looking back, I'm surprised to find that even before the *annus horribilis* of 2010. I was still banging on about the same stuff but I have been here long enough to recognise with dismay that the narrow ideology of the 1980s is being revived by a new generation of zealots. And as always with zealotry, they have no wish to learn from, or even hear about history. Unfortunately, I doubt that any of them are in this audience but nevertheless that's the topic for this 25-minute lesson, in the hope that you at least can take some comfort from history and be reassured of the rightness of your cause.

From the early 1970s parks had been in free fall; local government reorganisation in 1974 had resulted in the merger of specialist parks departments into larger leisure departments beginning a period of homelessness, of refugee status, for parks professionals that continues today –many now suffering the ignominy of being in a street scene or cleansing team. The whole structure, including parks superintendents, gardeners and parks managers, took a body-blow, with many new service directors coming from a leisure management background with little or no understanding of the needs of parks. Then, from 1979 we entered what Lord Cavendish, once chair of English Heritage's Gardens Advisory Committee, called a war between local and central government, a war which, for all the talk of local democracy, has continued to this day more or less unabated.

In 1988, as part of its separate war on union power, the government introduced Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), the unforeseen (to be charitable) consequence of which was to drive down maintenance specifications in search of lowest prices. It was the age of peripatetic gangs with strict timetables, of grass-cutting teams ignoring overflowing bins, let alone the public, as they hastened through a park in order to meet their performance targets. And it was the beginning of large contractors 'buying' contracts at unfeasibly low prices and then having to skimp in order to maintain profitability. This was the age of closures and demolition of the amenities which had come to be seen as essential to well-run parks – toilets, cafes, play equipment, let alone glasshouses or bandstands. It was a time of a scorched earth retreat from good quality provision. And not just in

parks – as late as 1988 the Audit Commission report, *Competitive Management of Parks and Green Spaces*, was still encouraging local authorities to undertake monument clearance programmes in cemeteries as a way of ‘easing the burden of grounds maintenance.’

The black and white photographs (Fig.3) I took in 1992 and 1993 for *Public Prospects* (Fig.4) still shock me with the evidence of near abandonment by the authorities (Fig.5). This is my Ancient Mariner moment (Fig.6), to remind people of the state into which parks had fallen (Fig.7) and from which they have been rescued over the last twenty years (Fig.8). And because this is Paxton here is the Italian lodge at Birkenhead, where Edward Kemp lived (Fig.9)

The best data on the state of parks at this time comes from the *Public Parks Assessment (PPA)*¹ initiated by HLF, and published by the Urban Parks Forum in 2001. It tracked parks from 1980 to 2000 and the losses it reveals (‘lost, unused or abandoned’) are still shocking: (Fig.10) high maintenance features were the principal casualties – 50% of fountains, 57% of bandstands (Fig.11 – Woodhouse Moor) and nearly 70% of municipal glasshouses – but also 56% of paddling pools (Fig.12), 30% of tennis courts (Fig.13) and putting greens, 16% of bowling greens (Fig.14), along with nearly 29% of the public toilets (Fig.15), shelters and pavilions.² Over the study period, approximately £126m had been withdrawn each year from parks’ maintenance; the resulting total reduction in local authority spending amounted to £1.3bn.ⁱ The figures were staggering. And inevitably, the result was parks became less and less attractive, less and less safe, less and less fit for purpose. They became no go areas; icons of urban decay. (Fig.16; Fig.17)

It is no surprise that by the early 1990s, not only were parks on the rack physically, their whole rationale was coming under question as dwindling visitor numbers prompted questions about their continued relevance. It was being seriously argued that the rise in private transport and access to the countryside, the increase in private gardens as part of new developments, and the lure of home entertainment, were all reducing the need for such places

The very early 90s were probably the absolute nadir for urban parks and calls for action were already beginning to make themselves heard. The significance of Hazel Conway’s immaculate *People’s Parks*, 1990, the first academic treatment of the development of Victorian parks, can hardly be

¹ [ppa_merged.PDF](#)

²69% of municipal glasshouses; 57% of bandstands, 46% of boathouses, 50% of fountains – but in addition , 27% of tennis courts, 29% of public toilets, 28% of shelters and pavilions, 31% of putting greens; and 56% of paddling pools had been closed or demolished. 22% of lodges, 27% of ornamental gates,

quantified but suffice to say that it was the bedrock for a wholesale reappraisal of their historic importance. The GMB Union's *Grounds for Concern* was the first report to ring alarm bells in 1992, followed in 1993 by the Victorian Society and Garden History Society's *Public Prospects: historic urban parks under threat*. *Park Life* from 1995, written by Ken Worpole and Liz Greenhalgh for Comedia/Demos was a weightier piece of work on the social importance of parks and gained an influential readership. It was based on case studies with 12 local authorities and contained the first basic survey data on park use. It identified the problems of low investment, low resources and low priority, remarking that "today [parks] are often an afterthought at the bottom of the political agenda".

A very few enlightened local authorities also began to recognise the need for concerted action – Sheffield's *Parks Regeneration Strategy* came out in 1993, a joint publication by the City Council and the Wildlife Trust and its recommendations included that the City Council should:

- a) Recognise the significance of the green environment to economic development.
- b) Recognise the possible contribution of inner city parks in achieving a better quality of life in the most deprived areas.
- c) Implement the Sheffield Nature Conservation Strategy and
- d) Enable the voluntary sector to contribute more fully to the regeneration of inner city parks.

Public parks also benefited from the Royal Parks Review, which ran from 1991-96, and which established the multi-layered importance of at least these parks to the capital's environment and quality of life. The chairman of the Review, Dame Jennifer Jenkins, had the ear of the chairman of the new Heritage Lottery Fund, Jacob Rothschild, and one thing led to another and to the HLF's decision to begin a funding them. The Director of the HLF, Anthea Case,³ analysed the appeal of a programme dedicated to urban parks as follows:

There were two drivers. First, HLF put on a brave face but in 1996 it was still reeling from the controversy over its grant to the Churchill papers. In that context, urban parks, as a possibility raised by Lord Rothschild, looked democratic. Secondly, in those early days, Lord Rothschild and the Board of Trustees were conscious of being in a very crowded pool with a number of well-established sharks circling, and wanting the HLF's money. Parks, on the other hand, appeared to be a pool without such sharks. Finally, HLF had been convinced of the state of urban parks, for example by reports such as *Park Life* (1995).

³ Telephone interview, September 2002

There were other contributors to the upturn in fortunes. In 1996, the Pesticides Trust set up Green Flag, as an award scheme for good management of parks, which developed subsequently into something like, but not quite, a national standard. But the big deal was the HLF: with the secondment of Stewart Harding in 1995 to design and administer a new grants programme, its 3-year Urban Parks Programme was launched on a snowy day in Weston Park, here in Sheffield, in January 1996 and a renaissance of public parks was underway (Fig.18)

Impact of HLF 1995-2000

I don't think I'll be treading on Drew's toes, but having been involved closely since that day in Sheffield, I just want to emphasise, because HLF has always been bashful of doing so, just how stupendous this decision was. I should remind you that in 1995 the total English Heritage budget for registered historic parks and gardens was £200,000. Rothschild announced a budget of £50m for urban parks, the unloved bastard offspring of the great heritage landscapes like Stowe or Castle Howard, which had to make do with that £200 grand. The bounty was so great, that Rothschild never made clear whether that was fifty million for three years or for each year- in the end I think we got through £146m in those first three years. It was an astonishing turn of events.

The cash value forced sceptics to re-consider all the other kinds of value associated with parks – cultural, social, environmental – and forced a reappraisal of their heritage significance. At a stroke, they were heritage, registered or not, listed or not, and the heritage establishment scrambled to make sense of it all. One of the two great initiatives of the parks programme was that it discarded the national register as a criterion for assessing historic interest – instead it invited the applicants to make the case for each individual site, and accorded local historic importance as much weight as national. This may in part have been a reflection of the desire to spend the money, but it was the most radical innovation – ever since listing was introduced in 1947 it had been the absolute prerequisite of grant-aid.

The other great innovation was the HLF's willingness to fund new work as part of its programme. Of course one reason why this had not been funded by heritage bodies before is that the funds available were so meagre, but it was also due to the very nature of parks – they were public and if the public were not in them and enjoying them, then repair was pointless. And so the HLF, carefully

or otherwise, characterised its work on parks not as *conservation* but as *regeneration*,⁴ implicit in which word is the return of life, of people, to these places. There were other good reasons – without people and the policing effect of high levels of use, repair work in these open parks was much more vulnerable to vandalism. And in pursuit of regeneration, the HLF funded new playgrounds, toilets, cafes and community buildings (Fig.19). I can bear witness to the bafflement around the table of the advisory panel and indeed the board, when confronted with such items – not only did experts ask whether Victorian public parks were really heritage at all, but they also reacted with bemusement to the notion of spending on what they considered at best peripheral to the business of conservation.

A major boost to the HLF making parks a long-term area for investment rather than just a three-year one-off was the Secretary of State's revised Directions,⁵ to the Lottery Distributors in 1998. Here's the man himself at the opening of Coram's Field in 2001 I think (Fig.20). The Directions required that in making awards, HLF and the others ensured that grants

- Promoted the public good
- Covered the complete range of national heritage
- Promoted the knowledge and interest of children and young people
- Furthered sustainable development
- Ensured all parts of the UK had access to funding, and
- Took into account the scope for reducing economic and social deprivation.

Forgive me but I still think they are worth quoting in full. This was the moment when conservation spending was first linked to socially progressive policy, or rather tested against criteria based on social progress. It was in its own way a bombshell, which absolutely floored many of those who over the years had established a hierarchical and art-historical approach to assessing historic importance. When in response HLF managers cast around for any evidence that they had met any of these requirements, they found to their relief that, largely unnoticed, the Urban Parks Programme had already spent over £5m on play (Fig.21). I mention this only because it may now be hard to imagine a time when such criteria were not fundamental to public funding.

1999-2010

⁴ Heritage Lottery Fund (1995) *Annual Report 1994-95*. London: Heritage Lottery Fund

⁵ The Directions are reproduced as Annex 2 in Heritage Lottery Fund (1999) *Strategic Plan 1999-2002* London: Heritage Lottery Fund

Anyway, I will skirt round the wonderful work of the HLF and move on a few years, though I'll include a few beautiful slides to alleviate the dryness of my recital. There can be little doubt that without the HLF's demonstration of faith, urban parks would not have attracted the attention of the Environment Select Committee of the House of Commons, which in 1999 launched an inquiry into Town and Country Parks, focussed actually almost entirely on the former. The inquiry was the first national debate on the benefits of public open space and its provision since the 1833 Select Committee on Public Walks. The sector responded at length with written memoranda and the inquiry took six days' worth of oral evidence. The report was damning about the condition of parks and its analysis of their problems was smart and acerbically written. It lambasted central government for not recognising the cost of maintaining parks in calculating its funding grants to councils and for the lack of clear departmental responsibility (some things haven't changed). It recognised the lack of a champion body for parks and called for a new Urban Parks and Green Space Agency to mirror the CA. It criticised the Audit Commission for not having the basic data to assess value for money, and it slammed EH's neglect of urban parks as appalling.

The great thing about a parliamentary report is that the government has to respond. It led directly to the three pages dedicated to parks in the 2000 Urban White Paper,⁶ which led in the same year to the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce,⁷ set up in the same year which produced its report, *Green Spaces Better Places* in 2001, which in turn led to the Government's policy paper *Cleaner Safer Greener* in 2002 and then in 2003 to the establishment of CABE Space. The select committee also led to a rather forgettable LGA advocacy paper, but EH produced an extensive review of the Register, adding many new urban parks and upgrading others, and ensuring that urban parks were henceforth included in EH policy documents and government heritage advice; politically they became rather fashionable. Even the Prime Minister in a keynote conference speech on the Urban White Paper, said 'We ... want to improve the quality of green spaces in our towns and cities ... Well over £160 million has so far been offered under the Urban Parks Programme ... producing huge benefits for the local communities they serve'⁸ (Fig.20).

⁶ The Urban White Paper of 2000, *Our Towns and Cities: the Future: Delivering an Urban Renaissance*, was based on Lord Rogers Urban Taskforce report of the previous year, which had memorably dismissed green space as 'the glue between buildings' but we were lucky in the timing of the Select Committee report which resulted in three solid pages on the importance of urban parks.

⁷ The Government set up an Urban Green spaces Taskforce and commissioned a substantial piece of research by the University of Sheffield, the snappily titled *Improving Urban Parks, Play Areas and Open Spaces* to inform its work.

⁸ "Improving your local environment" Fairfield Hall, Croydon, 24 April 2001

The dawn of the millennium also saw a number of heritage organisations such as English Heritage (Power of Place), the HLF and the National Trust re-assessing and reframing conceptions of heritage, significance and value in more progressive, democratic ways. And it was notable how for the first time, public parks were being included, indeed showcased, in new policy documents such as EH's *Power of Place* (2000) and HLF's *Broadening the Horizons of Heritage* (Fig.23).⁹

Parks were being established as part of the heritage canon in documents such as DCMS policy statement, *The Historic Environment a Force for the Future*, 2001.¹⁰ Two three-year grant programmes at HLF were replaced by an open-ended annual budget as part of its 'core business'. Parks were politically popular at local and national level as an increasing number of HLF projects were completed to dazzling effect (Fig.24). The replacement of the hated CCT with Best Value in 1999 also contributed, freeing councils from the requirement to pick the cheapest when procuring external maintenance contracts.

What all this did not lead to was the new dedicated national agency which so many of the witnesses called for; CABE Space was a small team within the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. We also got GreenSpace, formed in 2003 with government support from the Urban Parks Forum, which the HLF had set up in 1999 as a self-help group for local authority managers who were running HLF-funded park projects. Both organisations did a great deal to promote good practice, carry out research and champion the sector, but they never had grants to go with the good practice and they never had anything like the resources of a national agency such as the Countryside Agency and both vanished in the blitzkrieg of 2010.

Heady days but for all the political attention there were worrying signs. First, that we were being asked over and over again by government to demonstrate the bleeding obvious – the health benefits of parks, the economic benefits of parks, the correlation between good parks and reductions in ASB. It felt like delaying tactics; anything but admit that the real issue was money. For all the studies, the one thing that was not tackled was revenue funding, how to ensure the necessary ongoing funds to maintain parks. The truth is that – as is still the case - all avenues led to the massive locked doors of

⁹ The HLF published *Broadening the Horizons of Heritage* (2002), as well as advice on Audience Development Plans and Access Plans; in 2006, Heritage Link launched *Embracing Difference*, a program to encourage the participation of minorities in heritage; and in 2007, the National Trust launched a major consultation on what its future priorities should be, *Join In*.

¹⁰ ('Another important development has been the gradual widening of the definition of what people regard as their heritage and the way in which the national organisations have responded to this. The National Trust's purchase of Paul McCartney's childhood home in Liverpool was perhaps the most high-profile signal of this responsiveness, but the investment in urban parks and gardens and the preservation of back-to-back housing in Birmingham and Manchester are also significant')

the Treasury and major political questions about taxation and the nature of central government's funding of local government. It felt like we were constantly being pointed off to the side to go and play, and write more reports. So, because it really was about money, the HLF remained really the only game in town (Fig.25).

Although in retrospect the first decade of the new millennium was a good one for parks, in fact all this time, parks budgets were still under relentless pressure – Stewart invited an audience of managers at a Great Cities Great Parks conference in London in 2004 how many had had to deal with budget cuts that year and almost all the hands went up. It may look like it was a golden age for parks but the pressure on local authorities to save money was still relentless and parks were still first in the firing line. You had to credit the Labour government with recognising that in theory parks do provide a host of benefits and improve quality of life; the problem was that they were still looking to realise this potential on the cheap.

2010

Well, nothing had prepared us for 2010. Within days of the election of the new coalition government, it had launched a major campaign to identify public spending as the cause of a national debt crisis – the fault lay not with bankers in America but with binmen down your street, and nurses in your hospital and gardeners in your park. The aim was not to shrink the national debt, which the deficit reduction programme actually increased but to shrink the state and privatise public services.

Within months the advances of the previous decade were being threatened; before the end of the year it was announced that CABI would be abolished; English Heritage was handed orders to find over 30% savings as part of the 2010 spending review, local authorities had to find 29% over four years, with most cuts inevitably falling on non-statutory services such as parks; Green Space struggled on until March 2013. Significantly, CABI Space's last publication was on asset transfer, while Green Space's last publication was Blue Sky Green Space, a desperate attempt to come to terms with the implications of the new ideology. I can remember the despair I felt when Paul Bramhill referred to local authorities 'as a busted flush.'

In 2013, HLF and NESTA launched Rethinking Parks, looking at alternative forms of ownership, management and funding for parks. Its reasoning was entirely understandable – the 'reality' of the cuts programme is putting local authority parks maintenance on a headlong road to chaos and

ruination. The report looked at the private sector, philanthropic giving, charitable trusts, the voluntary sector, community ownership, income generation, fundraising and sponsorship. But it was disheartening to find no resistance to this reckless dismantling of the traditional local authority model. Any understanding of history – as I am sure Katy will confirm - reveals why local councils have ended up as the custodians of public parks: for most neighbourhood parks, *there is no alternative*. In a subclause, the report acknowledged that, ‘...future funding for parks will still rely to a significant extent on local authorities,’ but it did little to champion them.

We currently have, with a few exceptions such as the Royal Parks and Milton Keynes, a *comprehensive* system of parks owned and managed by local authorities, the poorer ones cross-subsidised by the better ones. This is anathema to the present government. If ministers thought about parks at all they would probably conclude that the dead hand of the state has a monopoly provision and that what ‘the consumer’ really wants is a range of providers offering competition and choice - think schools and energy companies.ⁱⁱ Choice, as always, is a false and treacherous idol: people cannot choose their park anymore than they can choose their football team. To its users the park is local; it is not ‘a park,’ one among many recreational options, but ‘the park.’

I fear that what Rethinking Parks foreshadows is a Darwinian battle for dwindling resources, in which many communities, without doubt the poorer, will see their park enter into a spiral of decline, a process which should be all too well understood - we are still addressing the legacy of the cuts from CCT - but which government seems willing to allow to happen. In this new world, a few parks may thrive, but most will decline on the other side of an unjust and widening divide. And it will be for the want of a strategic, democratic approach to a city or town’s parks as a whole, because the only body capable of that kind of comprehensive approach is being starved of resources. Unfashionable as it now seems to be, I think we should still be focussed on resisting attempts to make us accept as a *fait accompli* what has basically been a *putsch* against local authorities. There is still no better place for a public park to be than in the hands of a democratically accountable, properly funded public body.

In 2014, HLF – again de facto the sector’s only champion – produced its State of UK Parks report, which rang the same alarm bells as the PPA had in 2001. It is an incredibly timely warning, for which we should all be grateful and which I shall leave Drew to describe. What I worry about now, is that in another five years, we will have reached an irrecoverable position; there will be no HLF appearing over the horizon to save the wagon train this time. In 2012 Ken Worpole wrote a short *ParkLife*

Revisited report for the HLF. While acknowledging the looming problems, he was confident that there was 'no going back. The political 'turn' to parks over the past twenty years contain a number of irreversible elements' he said, and he cited the rise in power of Friends and other local groups, the accumulated evidence of the sheer scale of everyday park use, the exceptional value for money they provide, the evidence of the effects on public well-being, growing awareness of the importance of parks in town competitiveness; and growing concern with public health. I have to say, three years on, I'm not convinced. I fear we really are seeing an unravelling of the consensus on public ownership and public goods, of which parks are such a beautiful example (Fig.26).

ⁱ PPA, 2000, 4.20.

ⁱⁱ It has been argued recently that Central Park, New York is an egregious example of the privatisation of a public park. See Oliver Cooke, "A Class Approach to Municipal Privatization: The Privatization of New York City's Central Park," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 71 (Spring, 2007), pp. 112-132.