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For 2020

CONTAINING

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**ATTACKING THE LUNGS –
COVID AND THE STATE OF PARKS**
By The Perambulator

During this impossible year, both alarming and miraculous, when the heat-engine of global consumerism was closed down in a matter of days and bird song rang down deserted city streets, public



26. Locked up in lockdown: public parks have been recognised as an essential service for millions of city-dwellers, but closed playgrounds, closed toilets and taped-up benches have been an unwelcome feature of the crisis
(PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR)

parks took centre stage in the story of lockdown. They regularly featured on the front pages with stories of the relief they offered to desperate city-dwellers, restricted for weeks during the early stages of the crisis to a single brief period of release from their homes. Countless thousands of vox pops and photos celebrated the importance of parks to mental and physical wellbeing.

When Brockwell Park and Victoria Park were closed in early April after crowds proved unmanageable, there was a widespread outcry and the decisions quickly reversed (fig. 26). The arguments reframed in contemporary language the plea of nineteenth-century campaigners like the MP Richard Slaney, who chaired the Select Committee Inquiry on Public Walks in 1833. In his report, he said that in the rapid urban expansion of the preceding decades there had been:

... little or no provision made for Public Walks or Open Spaces, fitted to afford means of exercise or amusement to the middle and humbler classes. Any such provision of public walks or open spaces would much conduce to the comfort, health and content of the classes in question.¹

Today, there is of course no mention of class, but the argument is the same; 'if you're stuck in inadequate accommodation, you've got no back garden, you've got nowhere to go and you're all on top of each other,' then parks have been a 'lifeline'.² 'Parks are keeping us sane right now,' was one headline in early April, speaking out for people who had no garden other than the public park.

Parks have always been contested space, the locus for continuous negotiation, formal or informal, over what constitutes 'correct leisure' or what we would now call acceptable behaviour. People who have adapted to an increasingly atomised society have been asked by cynical politicians to dredge up folk memories of acting for the common good and it is wonderful what a reservoir of such common decency and kindness still remains. For many of us, in this time of social isolation, parks have seemed more sociable places than ever.

But parks have seen those negotiations reach boiling point in places, fuelled by the confusion sown by the wilful mismanagement of government, ideologically incapable of leadership. During the most extreme period of lockdown, sunbathing was classified as an antisocial activity, with the police seeking to move on people who were seen as lingering for too long on the grass, while the activities of people cycling, running and walking briskly were viewed as acceptable. In some of the commentary there was more than a whiff of Victorian morality about vice and virtue, idleness versus industry.

Open spaces are important in times of epidemics and disease: the history of parks is intertwined with sickness and death. In London, many open spaces today – Charterhouse Square, Golden Square, Vincent Square, parts of Blackheath – originated as mass graves developed during outbreaks of bubonic plague.³ And we owe the development of public parks in large part to concerns over public health in the rapidly expanding industrial towns and cities, and in particular the cholera epidemics of the mid-nineteenth century. In Sheffield, the cholera burial ground created during the outbreak of 1832 was marked first by a monument and then by the development of a park adjacent, which subsequently incorporated the burial ground after it closed in 1883.

Until the later nineteenth century most understanding of how disease spread was based on the theory of miasma; bad air which arose from foul water, decomposing matter and human waste. The idea that bad air was the vector for disease led in turn to the metaphor of the modern city as a living organism, with parks and open spaces functioning as its lungs. It was first ascribed by William Windham to Pitt the Elder, during a parliamentary debate in 1808 over a proposed housing development which would encroach on Hyde Park. In 1839, G F Murray excoriated the London Commissioners over the lack of public parks in the city, saying that as soon as 'pestilence completes its ravages...we are too happy to dismiss it from our thoughts and to forget all enquiries as to the means of prevention for the future'. (A scenario all too

1. Select Committee on Public Walks, 1833, report summarised in *The Westminster Review*, vol.XI, 1834, pp.496-514 (<https://tinyurl.com/ybqsffiyw>), p.500.

2. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8188953/Labours-new-deputy-leader-Angela-Rayner-blasts-Matt-Hancock.html>.

3. <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/LondonPlaguePits/>.

easily anticipated now.) Murray continued: in great cities there is 'an under-current of pestilence at all times':

bad drainage, bad air, bad water, and bad smells, perpetuating the epidemics they originate....every city has its public pulmonary organs – its instruments of popular respiration – as essential to the mass of the citizens as is to individuals the air they breathe. ⁴

Dickens in *Sketches* (1843) remarked, 'If the parks be "the lungs of London" we wonder what Greenwich Fair is: a periodical breaking out, we suppose, a sort of spring rash.' ⁵

The metaphorical resonance is as strong today as ever. London is choking. Air pollution levels have soared in recent years, with levels of toxic gases and particles way beyond the limits recommended by the World Health Authority. Levels of the ultra-fine PM_{2.5} particles are at 15 MG/M₃ – 50% above the WHO-recommended limit. In April last year it was confirmed that two million Londoners are living with illegal levels of air pollution, with nearly 9,500 premature deaths each year ascribed to respiratory problems. ⁶

The Mayor has called London's air 'lethal' and a public health crisis; children in Tower Hamlets were estimated to have a lung capacity 10% smaller than average.⁷ People were wearing face masks long before the virus: we are living in our own era's version of the *Great Slink* of the nineteenth century or the pea-soupers of the twentieth. One of the miraculous blessings of the lockdown has been a 60% fall in levels of poisons in London's air, ⁸ but the correlation between vulnerability to covid and communities living in the poorer areas of the city, where air pollution is highest, is shocking.⁹

It is an irony that the vital importance of London's lungs is being rediscovered during the outbreak of a disease which attacks the

body's respiratory system; ironic because the city's respiratory system is also under attack.

In 1853 an article in the *New York Times* about the early arguments over Central Park, commented that 'if the Park be the lungs of the city, as the phrase goes, then the city has got the consumption, for its lungs are in bad case.'¹⁰ The lungs of London may not be consumptive but they are showing signs of serious disease. Lottery-funded work from ten or twenty years ago is ageing. After ten years of austerity, during which core-funding for London councils has reduced in real terms by over 60%, the condition of parks is now in a rapid spiral of decline. ¹¹ In 2016, the Heritage Lottery Fund's *State of UK Parks*, analysing trends in condition, reported that by 2020 the condition of parks would be worse than in 2001; any lasting benefit of the Lottery's £1BN investment has been negated by a deliberate starving of the lifeblood of public funding. ¹²

At the end of June, it is sobering to see the financial chaos wrought by the lockdown. Eight out of ten local authorities, the key providers of public parks, are facing bankruptcy. The situation for charitable trusts managing parks is equally if not more dire. Wicksteed Park Trust in Northampton, funded by the Lottery in 2018 and hailed as a pioneer of the flawed *Rethinking Parks* agenda, has gone into administration; the leisure trusts set up to run leisure centres are handing back the keys to their local authority owners, after months of zero income made them untenable.

The lockdown has demonstrated in dramatic form just how important parks are. Free access to good quality parks and gardens is as fundamental to physical and mental health as free access to health care. That they provide not a discretionary but an essential service was recognised by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government when he insisted that parks remain open at the height of the lockdown.¹³ Parks staff have made heroic efforts to

4. John L. Crompton, 'Evolution of the "parks as lungs" metaphor: is it still relevant?', *World Leisure Journal*, 59:2, 2017, pp.212-13.

5. Charles Dickens, *Sketches*, (Leipzig: Bernh Tauchnitz, 1843), p.107.

6. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jul/19/nearly-9500-people-die-each-year-in-london-because-of-air-pollution-study>.

7. https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/ign/environment_and_waste/environmental_health/pollution/air_quality/Air_quality_information_and_campaigns/What_we_are_monitoring_and_why.aspx.

8. <https://www.dailymail.com/uk/sciencetech/article-8332273/Air-pollution-London-dropped-60-cent-coronavirus-lockdown.html>.

9. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jun/07/omission-of-air-pollution-from-report-on-covid-19-and-race-astonishing>.

10. *The New York Times*, 28 March 1853.

11. <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/local-government-finance/london%E2%80%99s-local-services-investing-future/decade-austerity>.

12. <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/publications/state-uk-public-parks-2016>.

13. 'People need parks. That's why I have made it clear to councils that all parks must remain open.' (18 April, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/communities-secretary-robert-jenrick-on-covid-19-response-18-april-2020>).

accommodate unprecedented numbers of visitors.

But it has also brought into the sharpest possible relief the results of austerity. Instead of standing up for local authorities, parks ‘experts’ have played along with that disastrous project to reduce councils to mere commissioning bodies, siphoning public money into the private sector and selling off public assets. The warnings of history, which show indisputably that local authority management is the only option for the vast majority of public parks, have been ignored.¹⁴ As the nation recovers from covid, parks must be nursed back to health too, as part of a similar national effort to make us more resilient to the shocks coming in the future. And that means public ownership and public funding for public goods.

* * * * *

¹⁴ Katy Layton-Jones, *History of Public Park Funding and Management (1820 – 2010)*, Historic England Research Report 20/2016, <https://research.historicengland.org.uk/Report.aspx?i=15442>.