‘The Background to the Public Parks Crisis’

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I am always grateful for the opportunity to talk about the wonders of C19 public parks, and the risks we run by neglecting them. But these days, I find that I'm old enough to suffer the fate of seeing history repeating itself; my partner Stewart Harding and I have been telling the same story for so long, that we sometimes wonder if anyone is listening. (Fig.2). The mistakes of the 1980s are being made all over again in the 2010s by a new generation of unthinking political zealots and I only wish some of them were here today to have a history lesson. But I hope reflections on what we have got and what we risk losing will inspire you to fight for this unique part of our national heritage.

The twentieth century inherited an extraordinary legacy of Victorian public parks but by the latter part of the second half of the century, that legacy was in trouble (Fig.3). The loss of railings in the war dealt the maintenance of many a blow from which they never recovered – the surge in vandalism and theft spelt the end of parks as a place of top-quality horticultural standards, and broke many a park-keeper's heart. Parks also suffered during the 1960s' backlash against both Victorian *mores* and style; new ideas of leisure led to the notion for example of the 'gardenless' park, and in fact more railings were removed in this decade than during the war.

And then in the 1970s local government reorganisation saw the absorption of parks departments into larger leisure departments. 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. This began 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.

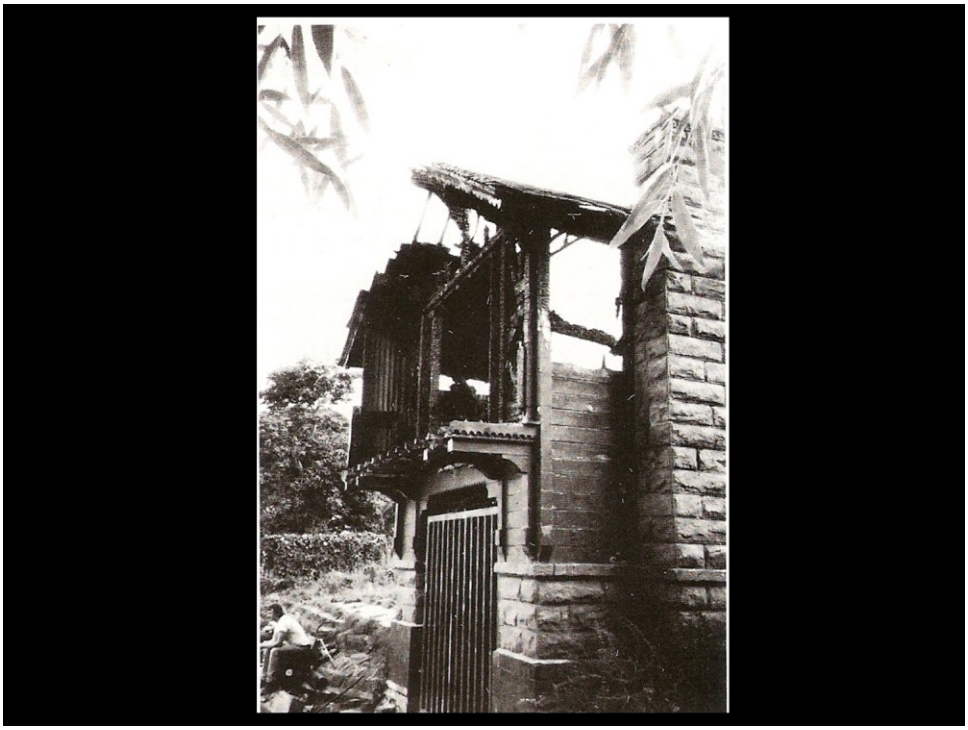
The trouble accelerated when after 1979, central government began to exhibit an increasingly hostile attitude towards local authorities as it sought to centralise power. Lord Cavendish of Holker Hall, far from a radical, but a Tory county councillor and chair of EH gardens committee, described it as a war between central and local government. And for all the rhetoric of local democracy that war has continued to this day more or less unabated.

During this period, parks came to be seen literally as poor relations of leisure centres and swimming pools – literally, because they generated no income (Fig.3). They had no turnstiles so no one knew how much they were used, and because they couldn't be sold or redeveloped, they were considered to have no asset value. In place of staff dedicated to one particular park under a head gardener, parks started to be maintained by roving gangs, and so the cost of running an individual park was lost in borough-wide budgets. As a result, it became impossible to hold onto the budgets required to carry out annual maintenance and planting because they were no longer possible to identify: buildings were demolished as this translated into expensive repair bills, and the dreaded spiral of decline began in earnest. As civic investment was withdrawn, the signal went out that these places weren't valuable to the community, vandalism grew and ordinary users started to withdraw (**Fig.4** Baxter).

Then in 1988, the government introduced Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), which forced local authorities to bundle up services as contracts to be offered to the free market. The consequence of this – we should be charitable and say it was unforeseen - was to drive down maintenance specifications in search of lowest prices. Private companies won the contracts on the basis of cost and because of that, they had a vested interest in cutting corners. The point I'd like to make is that it was a reckless experiment, the highly damaging consequences of which were barely considered when it was launched - a recklessness we have seen in more recent government decisions.

This then 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. This was the age of closures and demolition of toilets, cafes, play equipment, let alone glasshouses or bandstands. It was a time of a scorched earth retreat from good quality provision in the name of 'easing the burden of grounds maintenance.'

The black and white photographs I took in 1992 and 1993 when researching the GHS and Victorian Society report *Public Prospects* still shock me with the evidence of near abandonment by the authorities. These were listed buildings (Fig.5-11) and registered parks; ….




NO SWIMMING
NO FISHING
ALLOWED
IN THIS POOL

…and this is my Ancient Mariner moment (Fig.12), telling my tale to anyone I can fix with my glittering eye, to remind people of the state into which parks had fallen and from which they have been rescued over the last twenty years. A whole generation of politicians is now in charge who do not remember this.

The best data on the state of parks at this time comes from the *Public Parks Assessment* (PPA) 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. High maintenance features were the principal casualties – 50% of fountains, 57% of bandstands (Fig.13 – Woodhouse Moor) and nearly 70% of municipal glasshouses ppa_merged.PDF

– but also 56% of paddling pools (Fig.14),

30% of tennis courts (Fig.15)

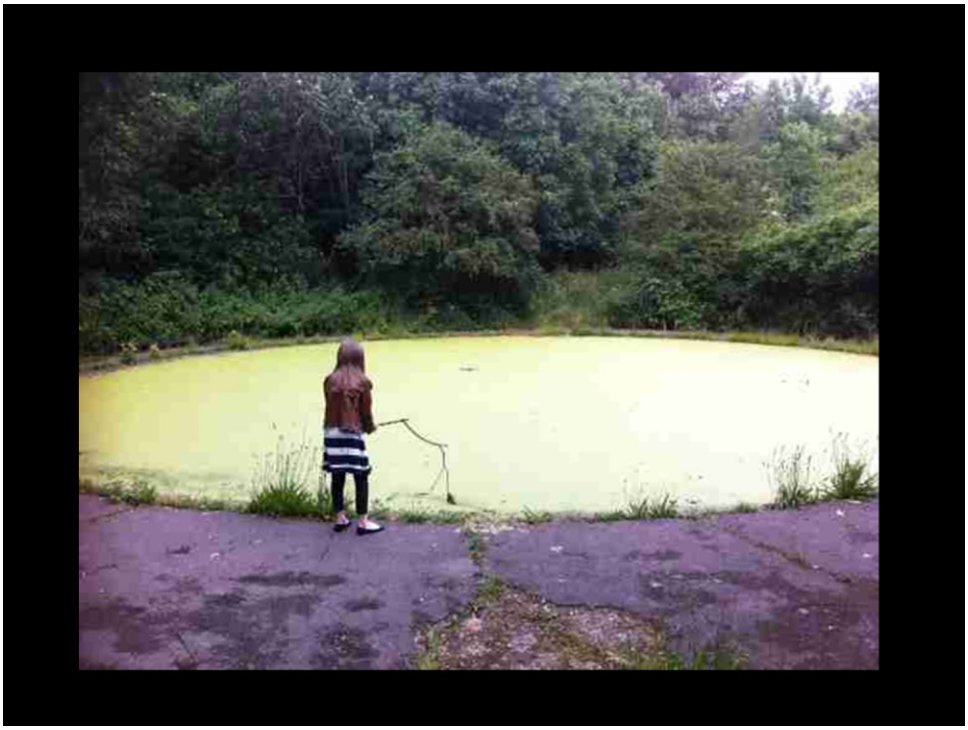
and putting greens, 16% of bowling greens (Fig.16),

along with nearly 29% of the public toilets (Fig.17), shelters and pavilions*.

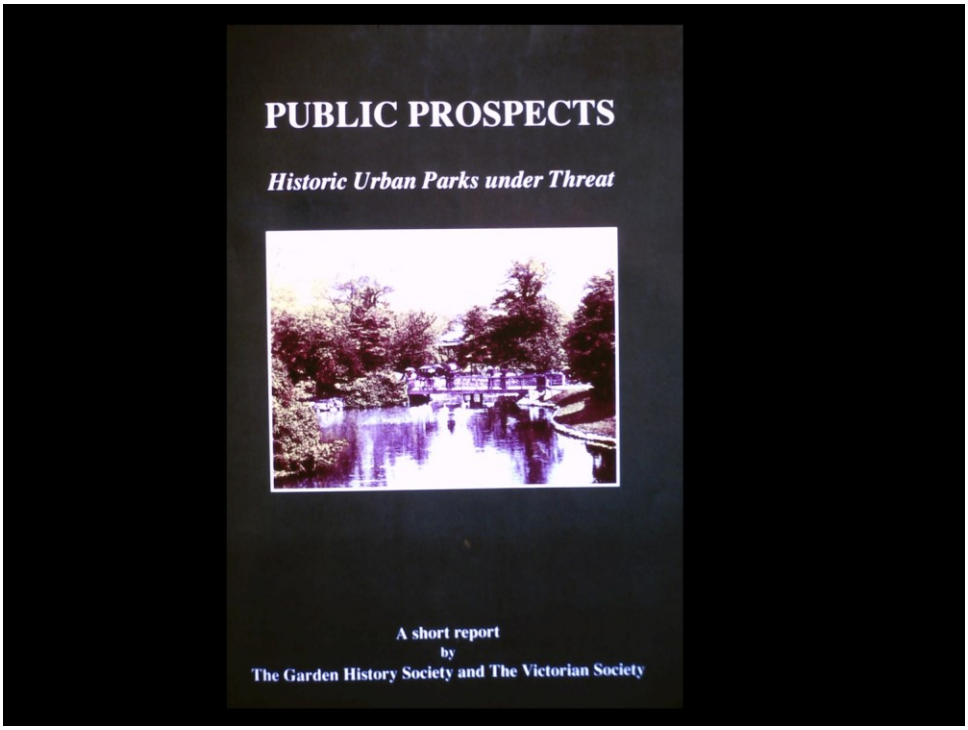
*69% of municipal glasshouses; 57% of bandstands, 46% of boathouses, 50% of fountains – but in addition , 27% of tennis courts, 29% of public toilets, 28% of shelters and pavilions, 31% of putting greens; and 56% of paddling pools had been closed or demolished. 22% of lodges, 27% of ornamental gates,

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. The figures were staggering. And inevitably, the result was parks became less attractive, less safe, less fit for purpose. They became no go areas; icons of urban decay. (Fig.18;19)

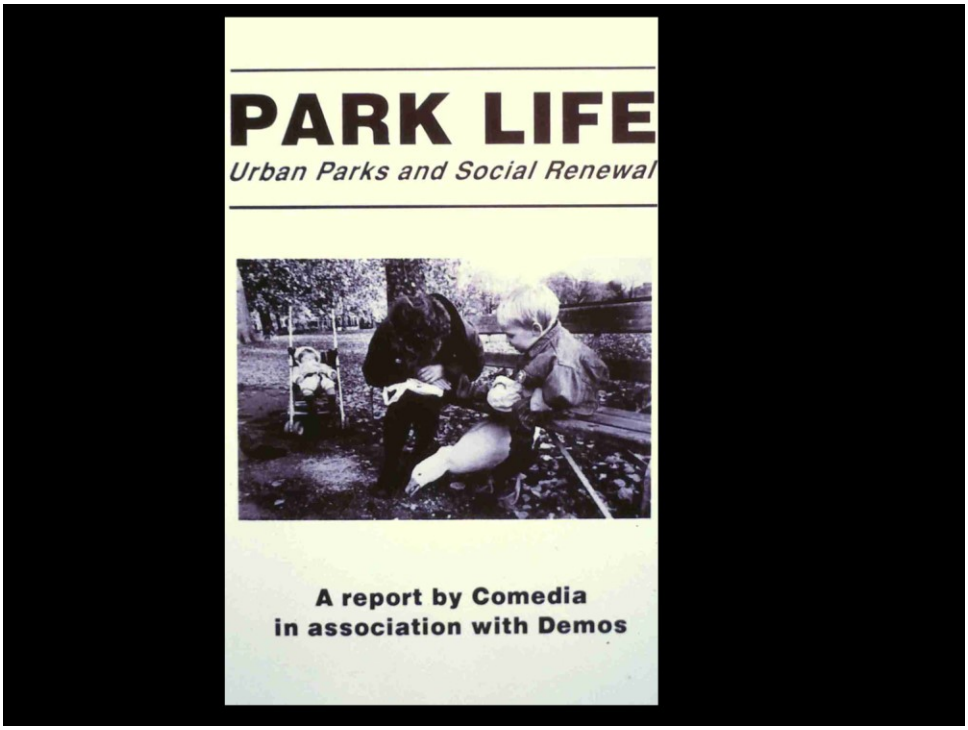
PPA, 2000, 4.20.



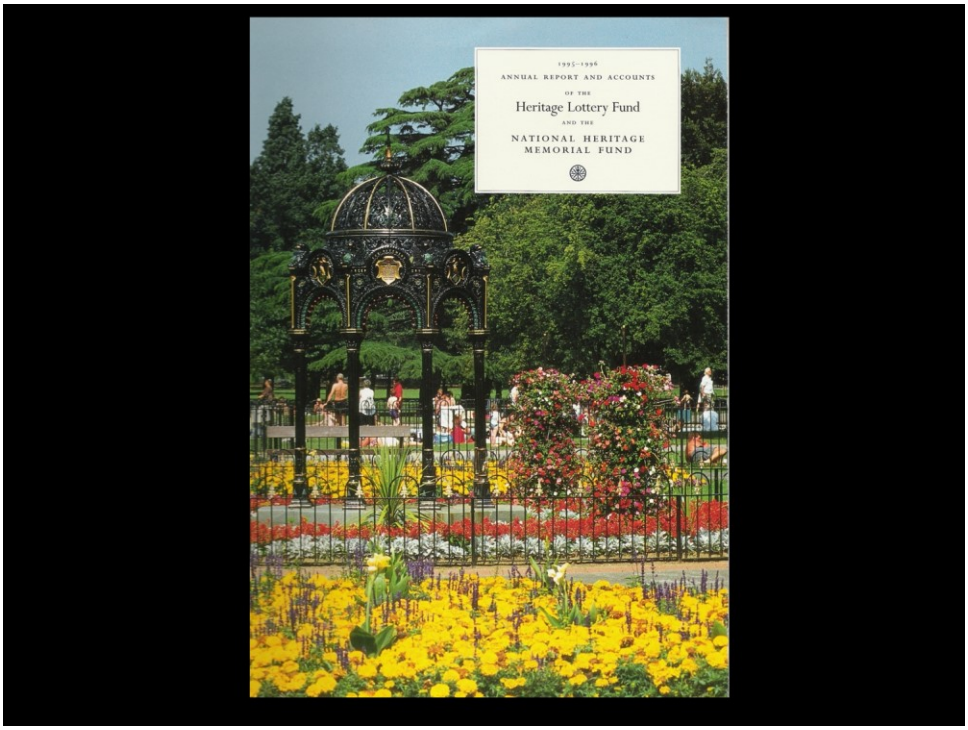
It is no surprise that by the early 1990s, the rationale for the very existence of public parks was coming under question as dwindling visitor numbers prompted questions about their continued relevance. It was being seriously argued that the rise in private transport and access to the countryside, the increase in private gardens as part of new developments, and the lure of home entertainment, were all reducing the need for such places.



We came to a nadir around 1990, at which point calls for action began to make themselves heard. We had the publication in that year of Hazel Conway's authoritative history, P*eople's Parks*. In 1992 the GMB Union published *Grounds for Concern* about the loss of staff and expertise in parks, and in the following year the Victorian Society and Garden History Society produced *Public Prospects: historic urban parks under threat* (Fig.20), illustrated with those grim pictures I showed earlier. We were attempting a) to raise awareness of the historic design quality of many C19 public parks and b) ring alarm bells about their often dire condition.



Park Life: urban parks and social renewal from 1995, (Fig.21) written by Ken Worpole and Liz Greenhalgh for Comedia/Demos was a weightier piece of work, which for the first time collected quantitative data about how parks were used, and numbers of users and it gained an influential readership.



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 funding them. With the secondment of Stewart Harding in 1995 to design and administer a new grants programme, its 3-year Urban Parks Programme was launched in January 1996 and the regaining of paradise was underway (Fig.22)

Impact of HLF 1995-2000

I should emphasise, because it's easy to forget, just how stupendous this decision was. In 1995 the total English Heritage budget for all registered historic parks and gardens was £200,000 – the sites like Stourhead and Stowe and Castle Howard which Pevsner called Britain's greatest contribution to European art. Rothschild announced a budget of £50m for grubby, unloved urban parks. 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 Director of the HLF, Anthea Case, 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.

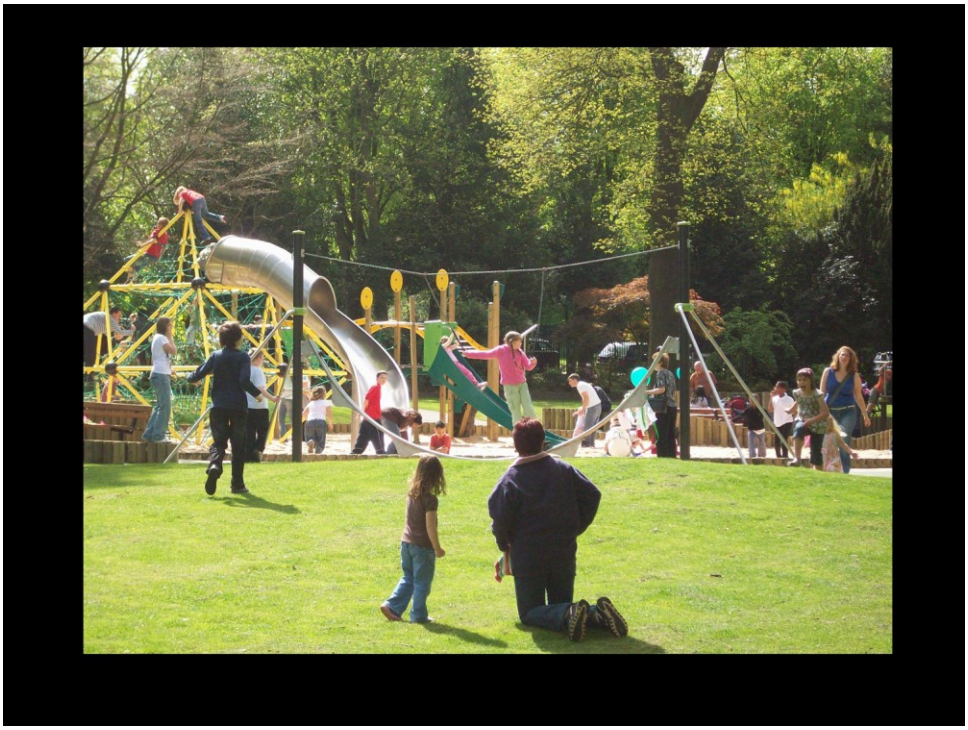
The cash led a reappraisal of their heritage significance. At a stroke, they were heritage, Rothschild had in effect declared them so, and still more baffling, it did not depend on whether they were registered or not, or their buildings listed or not. One of the two great initiatives of the parks programme 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 - 'get the money out of the door' - but it was the most radical innovation; ever since listing was introduced in 1947 it had been the absolute prerequisite of grant-aid.

The second great initiative was spending heritage money on new works. The HLF recognised that if parks were genuinely to be restored, repair and conservation were not enough. In fact, the HLF set itself the aim not of conserving but, in the words of its first annual report, of *regenerating* parks, that is repopulating them as well as just repairing them. Without that regeneration, it recognised that repairs would simply enter into a familiar spiral of decline. This meant that the HLF put money into new cafes (Fig.**23** – Towneley) Telephone interview, September 2002

and new toilets (**Fig.24** Southampton),

new park buildings (**Fig.25** Avenham, Fig.26 Baxter),

new exhibition and meeting spaces (**Fig.26-27** Baxter)



Incredibly, some within HLF queried spending money on toilets, but this only showed a profound unfamiliarity with public parks: how can you expect anyone, especially children to stay in a place for more than a brief hour without access to toilets, and how can you expect them to enjoy the park unless those toilets are in good order? Likewise the money poured into new play areas, to make the park a magnet once again for young children and their parents, was essential to that regeneration (**Fig.28**).

The third point I want to emphasise is that although credit for the national lottery should go to John Major's government, after the 1997 election almost the first thing the new Secretary of State did was issue directions to the lottery distributors, which in the case of HLF, radically challenged the ideology of the heritage establishment. Chris Smith (here at the opening of Coram's Field in 2000 **Fig.29**), lest we forget a walker and a lover of Wordsworth, insisted that every heritage grant should promote the public good, cover the complete range of national heritage, achieve an equitable geographical spread, maximise the potential in grants to reduce social and economic deprivation, address the needs of children and young people and further the aims of sustainability. There was I assure you much bafflement around the desks and boardroom table of the august NHMF: the specialist art-historical aim of 'heritage benefit' had to be matched by the deeply unfamiliar notion of 'public benefit.'

Enough of the abstract stuff. I want to celebrate these regained public paradises, and to remind you all just what a wonderful experience it is to turn from the street and enter a well-maintained public park is (**Fig.30** Grosvenor).

If you visit a private property open to the public, you are a customer, defined by a cash-exchange; you are welcome but you are emphatically entering into another territory not your own; hence the cash. Even at a NT property, you enjoy the place with a certain deference, a consciousness of the place private as it once was. In a public park, by contrast, the moment you walk through the gates, and see a place being enjoyed by hundreds, possibly even thousands, for free, as part of their birthright, the experience is palpably different (**Fig.31** Bute). People may no longer dress, as they did in the nineteenth century, in their Sunday best, but by and large they are behaving with a discreet tolerance of and consideration towards others.

It is a profoundly different type of experience from other types of parks and gardens, and one to which, as social animals, we respond at a deep level. (**Fig.32** Southend Cliff Gardens).

A public park is above all a moral lesson – not in the sense of paternalistic Victorian encomia to the working classes, but in the sharing of beauty, not as consumers who have bought a ticket but as citizens in a civilized society (**Fig.33** Handsworth).

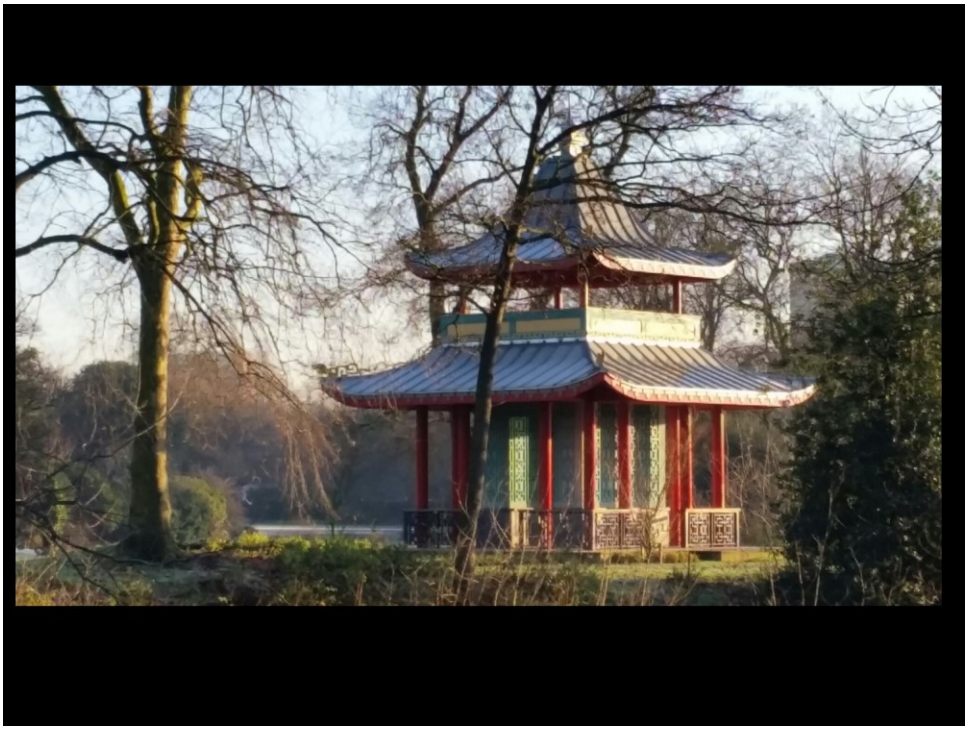
The HLF's programme has produced fantastic results. We can all now see once again gorgeous Victorian bandstands (**Figs.34** Sefton)

and conservatories (**Fig.35** Alexandra),

promenades (**Fig.36** Alexandra),

Fountains (Fig.37 – Paisley)

ironwork (**Fig.38** Jephson),



pagodas(**Fig.39** Victoria Park),

the designed vistas, the bedding displays (**Fig.40** Southend Cliff Gardens), and the brilliant management of space through planting and built features.

The HLF's insistence on the key importance of planning for activities likewise builds on the axiomatic metaphor of Tim Marshall, deputy of the Central Park Conservancy, who said the successful park was a three-legged stool, comprising restoration, management and programming. The third was a puzzle when he first introduced the concept to HLF in 1998, but his insistence that without events, activities, outreach, volunteering and training programmes, the stool would not stand, was taken to heart and proved correct. The HLF has also succeeded in that more complicated objective of regenerating parks (**Figs.41-42 – Derby Arboretum**), not just repairing them.

The HLF has not been turning the clock back, or returning parks to their golden age, as so often described. The idea that in restoring a Victorian park you restore Victorian ideas of leisure (**Fig.43** West Park) or its regulation (**Fig.44** skinnydippers) is absurd;

a regenerated repopulated park is one that is simply fit for purpose: at Lister Park in Bradford (**Fig.45**) the HLF funded a new Mughal water garden where children were encouraged to bathe rather than chased away. But it's an article of faith for HLF that that the purpose of parks has not changed fundamentally since the nineteenth century and that people's needs now are much the same as then: well-maintained, secure places for informal recreation, enlivened by planting, punctuated by architectural or landscape features, places for public events like concerts or fireworks, where large numbers can enjoy a beautiful place together and yet can still find peace.

This faith set the HLF somewhat at odds with the landscape design lobby. In the early days its work on old parks was not matched elsewhere in towns and cities by opportunities to create new parks, and there was pressure to remodel them in a contemporary style for a contemporary audience. A pressure which won a good deal of support because new designs generally promised to be sustainable, i.e. cheaper than the old parks whose maintenance had proved impossible in the seventies and eighties. But the HLF - a heritage body after all - was building on the serious re-evaluation of public parks encapsulated in Hazel's book, and required that grant-applications be grounded in a detailed analysis of, and respect for, the original design and the changes it had gone through, whether planned or accidental. Above all it was based on a respect for the ingenuity and the elegance, the sheer fitness-for-purpose, of nineteenth-century design (**Fig.46** Birkenhead),

and a faith that this amazing legacy, battered and bruised though it so often was by the late twentieth-century, again to produce landscapes of great beauty and public pleasure (**Fig.47 Handsworth**).

1999-2008

I just want to summarise briefly the great decade of park revival ushered in by the Lottery. In 1999, the House of Commons Environment Select Committee launched an inquiry, doubtless inspired by the HLF, into public parks, the first national debate on the benefits of public open space and its provision since the 1833 Select Committee on Public Walks. 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 criticised the Audit Commission for not having the basic data to assess value for money, and it slammed EH's s neglect of urban parks as appalling. And above all 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.

The Government had to respond and in the 2000 Urban White Paper set out

three pages on the importance of public parks; this led to an Urban Green Spaces Taskforce*, mirroring Lord Rogers' Urban Task Force of the late nineties, and a report, *Green Spaces Better Places* in 2001. The Government then published its policy paper *Cleaner Safer Greener* in 2002 and then in 2003 it established CABE Space, and also funded the start-up of the charity Green Space. In addition, the LGA produced a report and EH carried out 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.

The dawn of the millennium also saw a number of heritage organisations such as English Heritage, the HLF and the National Trust re-assessing and reframing concepts 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* and the DCMS policy statement, *The Historic Environment a Force for the Future*, 2001. Parks were politically popular at local and national level as an increasing number of HLF projects were completed to dazzling effect – in 2004 even the PM got in on the act and praised their contribution to 'our towns and cities'.

But behind the platitudes, parks budgets were still under relentless pressure. It may look like it was a golden age but they were still first in the firing line for budget savings. Politicians queued up to say that parks 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. Increasingly, the restoration of parks had to be justified in terms of policy objectives and measurable outcomes and the simple faith that parks were the measure of a great city's civilisation, was forgotten.

In all the hoopla of political attention, the champion body never emerged – good work was done by CABE Space and Green Space but neither ever had the ability to support their advice with grants. Frustratingly, none of the piles of research reports these two produced, all more or less directed /funded by government, ever tackled the key issue of money, not capital for projects but the annual grind of revenue funding for staff, equipment and maintenance. And – our Achilles Heel - parks remained a non-statutory, discretionary service for local authorities and so remained first in line when savings had to be found. That moment came with the financial crash of 2008 and the catastrophic policies of the coalition government.

(*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.)