

# THE CITY OF LONDON'S OPEN SPACES

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13 October 2008

There are two main reasons why it is natural that I should choose the City of London's Open Spaces as the subject for this paper.

Firstly, for many generations my family have been keen gardeners and I was brought up with this as a key element. Plant lists and seed catalogues were studied avidly and new themes were introduced into family gardens. There was a keen rivalry in developing woodland gardens and such like, rather in advance of the then fashion for more regulated planting. My father even used pigs to clear scrub and undergrowth; a policy that is now used in some of our City open spaces. However on the debit side, I regret to say that my maternal grandmother never visited a garden without bearing home a bag of spoils, almost all illegally; an inherited habit which I am trying hard not to match.

Secondly, when I became a Common Councilman almost twenty-two years ago, my Ward Deputy, Harry Duckworth, instructed me that I should join the Planning Committee because he thought it would keep me busy. How right he was! At that time the Committee had a Sub-committee, Trees, Gardens and Open Spaces, which was responsible for the numerous small areas within the City boundary, together with Bunhill Fields. After a year I became a member of this. Later I was elected to all the other Open Space Committees. Thus began my involvement with the marvellous places owned and managed by the City.

The story of how the City acquired over 10,000 acres of open space starts in the late nineteenth century. London was rapidly expanding and the open areas around the centre were being rapidly encroached upon, much to the dismay of those foresighted individuals who realised that it was vital to preserve the ancient forests and woodlands surrounding the metropolis. Free access to open space was being threatened by landowners wishing to enclose their land and by building development. It was natural for these environmental trailblazers to turn to the powerful and, perhaps more importantly, wealthy City of London to seek support, both verbal and, even more importantly, financial to preserve the natural aspect of these places.

However, to keep things in some sort of chronological order, I must go further back and start with Bunhill Fields, just outside the City boundary. The name originates from Bone Hill and the area was associated with burials from Saxon times. In 1685 it was set aside as a common cemetery for the internment of bodies for which there was no room in their church cemeteries, largely due to the plague. However, it was never actually used for this purpose and so William Tindal, a landowner in nearby Islington, leased it and converted it into a burial place for the use of dissenters. Later it was used for the interment of any persons who practiced a religion outside the Church of England. The land was used until 1855 for approximately 120,000 burials. Amongst

those buried there are William Blake, Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles Wesley, Daniel Defoe, John Bunyan, the hymn writer Isaac Watts, and George Fox. The City took the site over in 1867 for use as a green space. It is a place of remarkable peace and quiet, just off the busy City Road, with Wesley's Chapel just opposite and the Quaker meeting House also close by.

West Ham Park was the next to be acquired. References to it date back to 1566 as part of the Upton House Estate. In 1762 it was acquired by the philanthropist Dr. John Fothergill, a name to conjure with botanically. A physician and a Quaker, he was a keen botanist. During the building of his garden he would often waive his medical fees and accept a plant instead. He developed a fine arboretum and today many of his trees are still giving pleasure to visitors. After Fothergill the garden passed into the hands of the Quaker Gurney family, amongst who was Elizabeth Fry, the great prison reformer, who lived for a time in a house on the estate. When they wished to sell the property in the 1860's local residents worked with the City of London and the family to raise funds to purchase the estate of 77 acres to enable it to be preserved as open space. It was officially opened by the Lord Mayor on July 20<sup>th</sup> 1874. As a band played, details of title were presented, declaring the Park 'open public grounds and garden for adults, children and youth' and that the City of London should maintain the Park forever at its own expense. Clearly Chairmen of 'Coal, Corn and Rates Committee' as it then was, had more money then than now. The Park is run by a Committee of Managers, who includes members of the Gurney family, the City and local Parish Members. It is a most popular area, fulfilling its dedication by providing a young children's area and sports facilities. It is also home to the City nursery which provides magnificent plants and flowers for use in the Square Mile.

In 1878 two Acts of Parliament were passed; the Epping Forest Act, which made the Corporation Conservators of the Forest, and the Open Spaces Act, which enabled the City to acquire and safeguard land within a 25 mile radius for the 'recreation and enjoyment' of the public. This was in effect the forerunner of the 20 century Green Belt Policy. Thus Epping Forest, originally a royal hunting park and an area of almost 6,000 acres, stretching for twelve miles from Manor Park in East London to just north of Epping in Essex was opened by Queen Victoria on May 6th 1882.

On this occasion the Aldermen were travelling to Epping Forest by coach or chaise, but were delayed and missed the opening ceremony. The Queen had more prudently made the journey by train. Her reaction to the missing Aldermen is sadly unrecorded. However, notwithstanding their absence the Forest was saved from development and remains a real 'lung' for London, enjoyed by thousands of people who come to marvel at the ancient trees, wonderful woodland and prehistoric earthworks. More recently there was an opportunity to purchase some extra land to act as a buffer to the ancient forest and the City again had the foresight to do this. The Committee responsible for the management of the Forest consists of Corporation Members and four Verderers. These are elected every seven years by a franchise of Commoners who must own three quarters of an acre of land. The Election takes place in two centres, the Northern and Southern Parishes, and is conducted by the Recorder of London. The result is then announced in Guildhall Yard to an assembled 'crowd' of, normally, about half a dozen. The royal connection with the Forest is maintained by having the Dukes of Gloucester as Ranger, a post which the present Duke takes very seriously. The Commoners of the Forest have the right to graze their animals, but

latterly this usage fell into decline. Happily, English Longhorn Cattle are now once again to be seen in the Forest and there are plans to increase their number. The Duke assists at the branding of the cattle on his visits.

The Open Spaces Act also allowed the City to acquire Burnham Beeches, in Buckinghamshire, in 1880. Actually I am not sure that this is within the 25 mile radius specified. On my frequent visits my mileage has exceeded this; maybe the measurement is 'as the crow flies.' However the journey time is amply repaid by the sight of magnificent beech pollards, many over 500 years old. The considerable sum of over £10,000 pounds, which included conveyancing and road improvements, ensured that this wonderful area of 540 acres was saved from development. As with Epping and the buffer lands, there has just been an opportunity to acquire the ownership of Stoke Common, adjacent to the Beeches. Buckinghamshire County Council has transferred the ownership, together with a modest dowry. New management guidelines are currently being agreed with the local community.

An area of land known as the Kent and Surrey Commons is also under City ownership. It is an outstanding area of chalk downland producing breathtaking flowering meadows. To walk there and not be able to avoid treading on vivid pink pyramidal orchids, or earlier in the year, primroses, is a magical experience. These sites, West Wickham, Kenley and Coulsdon Commons, Farthing Downs, Riddlesdown and Spring Park also came into the City of London's care as a result of the legislation of 1878. They are sprinkled in a crescent within the old boundaries of Kent and Surrey and vary in size from 374 acres to just 16 acres. Just recently a piece of land in the area was threatened with development and a group of concerned local people raised funds, matched by the City, to ensure that it became part of the Commons. Other small areas of land are also continuing to be saved in a similar way. Thus is our 'history' repeating itself, even if on a smaller scale.

Here I shall have to abandon chronological order and take a look at Ashted Common, a much more recently acquired area, but a part of the Commons nonetheless. At 500 acres it is also by far the largest and can be traced from before 1066 as part of the Manor of Ashted. It is an ancient wooded common with over 2,300 ancient oak pollards, providing a stable habitat for many endangered deadwood species. It also contains the remains of a Roman villa. Latterly it was owned by Lord Barnaby whose Trustees approached the City with a view to its purchasing the land. This occurred in 1990 for the very moderate sum of £29,125.

Now for North London! An area where I live and where I spent a very challenging, but happy time as Chairman of Hampstead Heath and its cohorts.

It is these that I must mention first: namely Highgate Woods and Queen's Park. Both came into the City's ownership in 1886 as part of the Open Spaces Act of 1878 and for this reason both came under the aegis of the Epping Forest Committee. For logistical reasons they are now the responsibility of the Hampstead Heath Management Committee. Highgate Wood is a part of the ancient Forest of Middlesex and comprises some 70 acres. It is an astonishing place, predominately oak and hornbeam, quiet and peaceful, amongst the bustle of busy North London, with perhaps one of the most delightful cricket pitches in London.

Queen's Park, by comparison, is the epitome of the Victorian Park. It was designed, in a figure of eight pattern, by a Superintendent of Epping Forest and Burnham Beeches, Major Alexander Mackenzie, no relation of mine, having been the site of the Royal Agricultural Exhibition in 1879. It remains a model local park of 30 acres, hugely popular with local residents and their children who are catered for by a paddling pool and a small animal collection.

Hampstead Heath, probably the most visited and popular open space in London, was formerly owned by the Greater London Council. Upon its demise, the Heath was passed to the London Residuary Body and thence, at the invitation of the department of the Environment, to the ownership of the City of London in 1989. The credit for its acquisition must go to two people, Peter Rigby, then Chairman of Policy and Resources, and Gordon Wixley, who became the first Chairman. He was an ideal choice because his skill and charm won over the, initially, very grave concerns of the local people led by the redoubtable Peggy Jay. By the time I became the Chairman she had completely revised her ideas and was unstinting in her gratitude to the City.

Hampstead Heath consists of 792 acres of diverse appearance from heath to mature woodland. It also contains bathing ponds and a lido, sports areas, a formal garden, and a zoo. The area has always been frequented by artists, poets, intellectuals and the like which makes it a complicated area to manage. Each focus group of people regards the Heath as their own and fights change, in any form, with passion and dedication.

In 1997 the City took over Keats House, close to the Heath. For this reason it is looked after by the Hampstead Heath Management Committee under the auspices of the City Archives Department. It is a charming house, once two regency cottages, in one of which John Keats lived from 1818 until 1820, the other being occupied by Fanny Brawne, later to become his fiancé, and her mother. During this time he wrote some of his finest poetry including 'Ode to a Nightingale' supposedly written in the surrounding garden. The house, which is coming to the end of a period of restoration, largely funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, contains books, manuscripts and memorabilia associated with Keats, Fanny Brawne and their circle of friends.

The gardens within the City itself are certainly the most important of our portfolio to those who come in daily to work and they are also greatly valued by the residents. There are some 150 gardens, churchyards, parks and piazzas scattered across the Square Mile. These range from real glories such as Finsbury Circus, St Dunstan in the East, the Barbican Gardens, and Postman's Park, with its charming and poignant memorial to those who lost their lives through unsung heroism, to small intimate spaces with a character of their own. They are all massively used by workers and visitors alike, and at lunchtime, even when the weather is not clement, it is difficult to find space upon which to perch. The post-war hero of the hour here was Common Councilman Fred Cleary, a property developer with a keen appreciation of the importance of open space within a modern City. He was the most notable Chairman of the Trees, Gardens and Open Spaces Committee, and on noticing small pieces of land on which nothing was happening, post blitz, would approach the owners with the request that it be handed over to the City for a peppercorn rent or even, in one case, an annual nosegay. Two examples of his success are the Pepys Garden in Seething Lane and the garden named after him off Queen Victoria Street.

Here the wheel has turned full circle for me. I now chair the Planning and Transportation Committee under whose remit large developments, which have or will be taking place, are required under section 106 agreements to provide environmental improvements and open areas in proportion to their increase in size from the existing buildings. This has resulted in a very great improvement in the City streetscape and in the provision of public open areas. It is a continuing process which is providing added open areas for public benefit.

Perhaps the greatest recent boost to the City Open Spaces has been the creation of an Open Space Department under a Director. This has led, for the first time in their history, to a cohesive management policy and, more importantly still, to co-operation across all the areas. Formerly each open space acted entirely independently. As a small example, at Epping they were having a disappointing result with re-pollarding mature beech trees, resulting in a death-rate of some 70%. Meanwhile at Burnham their results were almost 90% successful. Previously neither place would have known about the other's activities. Now, the contact is made and expertise shared.

The Directorate also ensures that bids for lottery funding are coordinated and that techniques, such as grazing for the management of environmentally supportable scrub and brush clearance, are shared. It has also led to large numbers of national awards commending the overall management of all our wonderful spaces. The Open Space Directorate is also coordinating the replacement to the Green Belt, now sadly eroded. The Green Arc should hopefully provide more protection for open areas circling London.

In conclusion, the City of London should be enormously proud of the diverse open areas it owns and maintains. The proud heritage continues to flourish which would surely be a source of satisfaction to those who started the whole enterprise in the 1870's and 1880's.

I leave you with the thought that more pleasure has been derived, and by a wider section of society, from these wonderful places than from any of the City's other core activities. However, honesty compels me to admit that none of this could have been achieved were it not for the wealth collecting powers of central City policy and development and for the continuing commitment by the City of London to the wellbeing of its open lands.

I owe a debt of gratitude for help given in the compilation of this paper by Elizabeth Scudder, of the learned London Metropolitan Archives, and to the individual Superintendents of the glorious City Open Spaces.