

# HISTORIC PUBLIC PARKS

## Improving a vital community asset

The high priority the Government has given to urban green spaces has led to increased funding to reverse the decline of historic public parks

**‘The time for a renaissance of parks and urban green spaces is now.’**

Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions, 7 May 2002

Built as statements of civic pride, historic public parks continue to provide a sense of place, fostering community spirit and enabling social interaction. Flexible and highly adaptable, they have the potential to meet the changing demands of modern society. They are a facility accessible to all: park gates offer no discrimination nor do parks have the ‘threshold’ factor of many other cultural institutions. Used by millions on a regular basis – over 296 million visits per year by all sectors of the community (*Public Parks Assessment*) – public parks make a substantial contribution to urban life. As a result, they are central to the Government’s ‘liveability’ agenda. According to Sally Keeble, when Minister for Regeneration, ‘quality parks and open spaces are fundamental to making towns and cities better places to live’ (news release for *Green Spaces, Better Places*, 7 May 2002). The Urban White Paper, *Our towns and cities – the future: Delivering an urban renaissance* (November 2000) emphasises that well-managed public parks are ‘vital to enhancing the quality of urban

environments and the quality of our lives’ (Section 4, 38), and notes that, together with historic buildings, ‘parks and open spaces make a great contribution to the character, diversity and sense of identity of urban areas’ (Section 4, 36). The Government’s recent statement on the historic environment, *The Historic Environment: A Force for Our Future* (December 2001), also acknowledges these merits.

Well-maintained parks contribute greatly to the value of a neighbourhood, providing attractive areas that encourage inward investment, business retention, employment opportunities and an increase in tourism. Restoration of poorly-maintained sites can provide a focus for urban regeneration, and no doubt much will be said on this matter during the forthcoming inquiry into the Role of Historic Buildings and Public Spaces in Urban Regeneration, to be held by the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee.

Thus investment in urban parks can offer a triple dividend: a better standard of living for a significant element of the population, regeneration and conservation. Without investment, though, parks become un-used, derelict, crime-ridden and vandalised.

Handsworth Park and Old Church, Birmingham



Handsworth Park and Old Church.

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Locke Park, Barnsley

## Urban Parks Programme

Sadly, in the mid- to late-20th century, the condition of many public parks deteriorated through the lack of major capital expenditure on repair and maintenance. Increasing professional and public concern was expressed in *Public Prospects: Historic Urban Parks Under Threat* (1993) and *Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal* (1995).

In response, the Heritage Lottery Fund launched its Urban Parks Programme in 1996, a £50 million grant scheme designed to run over three years. The UPP, extended because of huge demand, has proved immensely successful, breathing new life into an impressive number of individual sites and bringing into sharp focus the severity of the situation. It is predicted that by the end of 2002 the UPP will have provided £255 million to restore and improve parks and gardens in the UK (Urban White Paper, Section 4, 36). As of May 2001, it had awarded grants to 161 parks at an average of around £1.4 million per scheme, primarily for the repair of infrastructure and the replacement of lost or worn-out features such as soft landscaping.

## Underfunding and lack of leadership

In *Power of Place: The future of the historic environment* (December 2000), the report of the English Heritage-led review of policies relating to the historic environment, the continuing trend of

under-funding historic public parks was revealed as a cut in real terms of local authority expenditure of 16% between 1990/1991 and 1998/1999 (paragraphs 40–1). The report also drew attention to a lack of overall leadership and welcomed the decision announced in the Urban White Paper to give the Regeneration Minister responsibility for improving England's public parks. This decision, and the accompanying major Government programme to coordinate policy on public parks, was prompted by the findings of the Inquiry into Town and Country Parks held in 1999 by the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee of the House of Commons.

The Select Committee's comments also triggered the survey initiated and funded by English Heritage, HLF, DETR/DTLR, and the Countryside Agency, carried out by the Urban Parks Forum and published as *Public Parks Assessment: A survey of local authority owned parks focusing on parks of historic interest* (May 2001). This research provided some of the basic statistics, found by the Committee to have been lacking, to assist decision-makers in a variety of ways. Its findings confirm that urban parks in the UK have had, in general, a history of 'devastating decline' and that historic parks have fared worse than other types of recreational open space: 'The loss of individual features traditionally associated with parks is widespread and alarming with up to 75% loss of some historic features.'

### Historic public parks

The Local Government Association also responded to the Select Committee's work. Its report, *The Value of Parks and Open Spaces* (2001), draws upon local authority case studies to illustrate how local councils use parks and green spaces as part of their corporate and community planning to contribute to social inclusion and community regeneration.

### Urban Green Spaces Taskforce

Following the Urban White Paper, and in line with a recommendation in *Power of Place*, an Urban Green Spaces Taskforce was set up to advise the Government on its proposals for improving the quality of urban parks and green spaces. Convened in January 2001, the Taskforce produced its interim report the following November and its final report, *Green Spaces, Better Places*, in May 2002. The report is comprehensive, exploring all aspects of the management, maintenance, creation and financing of the whole range of green spaces. Its wealth of detailed recommendations should inform the Public Space Cross Cutting Review and contribute to the Government's proposed new public realm strategy.

The recommendations include the setting up of a new national agency for urban parks and green spaces to champion the cause, issue advice and improve coordination among all those

concerned. An interim Steering Group has already been set up to maintain momentum. *Green Spaces* looks at new funding mechanisms and urges that £100 million in capital funding per year for each of the next five years will be needed to begin reversing the decline of public parks. The New Opportunities Fund, with its schemes worth about £80 million launched recently to support improvements to urban green spaces, is given as a possible future source of money. Regeneration programmes, such as those funded by the Single Regeneration Budget, Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and New Deal for Communities, are identified as having potential. The Taskforce has also recommended that Government introduce a funding and management scheme for parks similar to the Countryside Stewardship scheme.

### National strategies

In tandem with the work of the interim Steering Group and pending publication of the Government's policy statement, the Urban Parks Forum, a national voluntary sector organisation, is being supported by Government (ODPM, with HLF and the Esme Fairburn Foundation also providing funding) to promote best practice among park managers. The Beacon Council theme of Improving Urban Green Spaces should also help inform standards and good practice while the Local Government Association has set

Royal Terrace Garden, Torquay



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up a Parks and Open Spaces Panel. In the light of the advice now on offer, it will be interesting to see what is included in the revised Planning Policy Guidance note 17: Sports, Recreation and Open Space (PPG17).

## Knowledge is essential

*Green Spaces* acknowledges that public parks are part of the heritage and culture of local people and communities. It advises that, to create a good quality green space, it is essential to understand the site, both its history and its social, cultural and economic context. 'We want parks and green spaces to meet people's needs today while preserving their historical and cultural importance' (paragraph 16). Additionally, in recommending that the Government should establish nationally acceptable quality standards for managing and maintaining parks based on those promoted by the Green Flag Awards scheme, the Taskforce promotes 'the value of conservation and care of historical heritage'.

When the Select Committee considered public parks, it observed that, in the past, English Heritage had not placed a high priority on designed landscapes. The Committee itself fully appreciated the importance of public parks as a key part of our urban heritage and criticised English Heritage for its apparent lack of interest (paragraph 127). *Green Spaces* notes that English Heritage has 'important responsibilities' for historic parks and gardens (paragraph 47).

English Heritage has responded positively to this criticism through several initiatives, one of which has been to accelerate the thematic survey of historic public parks to improve the coverage of such sites on the national *Register of Parks and Gardens of special historic interest*. Our work in this area will be discussed in the next issue of *Conservation Bulletin*. □

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The illustrations for this article are from the Nigel Temple Postcard Collection at the National Monuments Record.

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