

Enhancing Historic Landscapes and Improving Social Amenity

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Most of you will be familiar with English Heritage being associated with historic buildings. It is probably less well known that there are over fifteen hundred historic parks and gardens in England. But like the building stock, these historic landscapes are under threat too. They often suffer from cutbacks in service provision.

75% of green spaces have lost historic features and a quarter have suffered the loss of basic facilities. Funding for local authority conservation provision has declined in real terms over the last five years.

In 2001 spending on parks and gardens in real terms was £126m less than in 1979. This rather bleak picture contrasts strikingly with opinion polls. 82% of people in London agreed that heritage in their local area is worth saving. There are 143 registered historic parks and gardens in London; in a MORI poll, 44% of Londoners chose the condition of parks and gardens as their top issue. Local heritage matters to most people just as much as internationally famous buildings.

Caring for the historic environment is often seen to be elitist, but it doesn't need to be. English Heritage recognises the enormous mutual benefits that can be derived from working together to protect the historic environment and provide social amenity. There are barriers that still prevent some sections of the community from participating, despite their obvious interest. This represents a significant challenge and a high priority for action to overcome.

Investment in the historic environment has been enormously successful in promoting economic and social regeneration. Effective consultation is an important element in developing public understanding of the challenges and potential problems as well as possibilities that communities face and the role that the historic environment can play in promoting regeneration.

Enhancement of parks and green spaces presents a potential catalyst for wider regeneration, using the park as a focus, creating the opportunity for social interaction between all parts of the community, and helping to address social exclusion.

Investment in parks and green spaces directly affects the capital's economic prosperity, sustaining its attraction, enhancing the working environment and creating prestigious settings.

It can be no coincidence that the principal strategy for reinvigorating and conserving the historic environment, long undervalued and neglected is the same as that for tackling criminality - community action.

The theories of defensible space and crime prevention through environmental design have underpinned recent developments in Home Office crime prevention strategy. At the heart of these theories is the belief that members of communities have traditionally taken responsibility for influencing behaviour within communal spaces, and that traditional building and space design incorporated many features that supported this behaviour. In recent decades these features tend to have been rejected or overlooked.

Now is not the time to enter a debate on the merits of these theories in detail - suffice to say that there is a synergy between these two strands. Improving the quality of our green spaces will largely be achieved by establishing an environment in which the sense of community is translated into responsibility for ensuring a safe, productive, well maintained space.

Clearly the decline of green spaces has not been caused exclusively by criminal activity or antisocial behaviour. Causes of crime and the quality of environments is intimately woven. The decline of local housing could encourage a concentration of disadvantaged people that could create nuisance behaviour and vandalism in the park, requiring makeshift repairs that degrade the quality of the setting; on the other hand, poor maintenance of a park (rats around bins) might discourage regular users and embolden criminals thereby having a negative effect on the locality.

There is a reciprocal relationship between park and neighbourhood; similarly between management regimes and park. However, whatever the initial cause, the signs of the downward spiral of decline are unmistakable the evidence of criminal activity is demonstrably perceived as "poor environment".

Criminals are attracted to environments that are anonymous and lack self-protection. Legitimate users abandon the parks. This itself has a negative effect - the absence of legitimate behaviour means that nuisance proliferates without regulation.

It has long been the policy of local authorities to replace damaged fittings and equipment with replacements that are vandal resistant, utilitarian and institutional in appearance. Instead of being provided with an environment in which park users can take pride and might desire to preserve, they are provided with one that begs them to test their ability to tear it down.

I would not suggest that a preconception of beautification for its own sake would be any more successful.

However, aesthetic considerations assume importance for the ways in which they contribute to the perception that parks are uncared for, undervalued and inferior. If the authorities have such little regard for public spaces, how do we expect to educate children to value the historic environment?

Parks that have been intentionally left open to encourage greater public use often end up unused, neglected and abused. It is also noteworthy that decline appears to be greatest where the loss of historic integrity is most severe - this might be railings, surface finishes and footpath layouts. Do these features actually help to prevent crime, or are they just indicators of neglect?

The factors that create criminal activity are numerous, interlinked and, despite much recent research, far from understood.

Criminal activity itself can mean many things. Where there is a building containing items of high value, the motive for stealing is fairly obvious and well recognised. Effective security measures can be devised and implemented. But we should never simply rely on putting bars on windows.

We should always look at the wider issues: the strategy should be holistic and multi-layered:

- Why that window?
- Is there a footpath?
- Is it secluded?
- Is there lighting?
- Is it overlooked?
- Are there patrols?

But nuisance, criminal damage and threatening behaviour do not respond well to “security measures”. And here it is best to drop the word security altogether. An overtly “security” approach is likely to antagonise local kids and disenchant the regular park users. In any situation, security measures are most effective when they are fully integrated with and indistinguishable from the overall management regime. Nowhere is this more true than in the setting of urban parks.

Whilst it is undeniable that serious crimes do take place in parks, it’s useful to analyse statistical evidence.

This is Southwark Park, a Grade II registered landscape and the subject of an HLF funded refurbishment project. Crime hotspots are shown in yellow, orange and red at worst - you can see that there is virtually no activity in the park itself. There is probably a distinction between what is reported and what isn’t, but there is an issue here that suggests we are dealing to some extent with perceptions of fear.

There are specific cues that people respond negatively to:

- Signs of physical and social disorder
- Poor lighting

- Darkened footpaths
- Areas of concealment

Users of parks are more sensitive to these cues because use is generally optional; we are not forced to use this facility, unlike say a car park, and it is normally associated with pleasure; most people avoid low quality environments when deciding where to take family and friends.

Chiswick Park

Chiswick Park is about to undergo a major re-development. In many ways it is not untypical of any other urban parks - vandalism, nuisance behaviour, litter, robbery, sexually motivated attacks had all become problematic.

However, Chiswick has unique historic importance. The Villa, built as a garden feature by the Earl of Burlington in the 1720s is an icon in the development of English architecture with international status. It is the quintessential English Palladian Villa - and visitors come from all over the globe to see and study it.

The Park and Gardens created by Lord Burlington, and originally designed by Charles Bridgeman & William Kent (Registered: Grade I) are of equal fame - inspired by Burlington's Italian journeys and his passion for ancient Rome - and praised by one of his contemporaries, Horace Walpole, as the birthplace of the 'natural' style of gardening which England gave to the world.

The Gardens were added to and embellished by the Dukes of Devonshire - and eventually sold by the 9th Duke to Middlesex County Council, for public use, in 1929.

It remains a much-loved public park and people both inside and far beyond the Borough feel passionately about it.

Since the late 1940s English Heritage and its predecessors have had responsibility for the villa and the twenty two 18th century garden buildings and ornaments, while London Borough of Hounslow own and are responsible for the park and gardens. Since then the site has been managed in an increasingly fractured way with no holistic strategy. During this period there has been substantial financial erosion. For example even during the last five years Hounslow's borough-wide investment in parks has fallen from £2.5m to £1.3m. The Estate has huge potential to become an exemplar historic house, garden, contemporary park, and cultural/community/educational/environmental and visitor resource. It is however nowhere near meeting this potential. In fact, I think it is fair to say, it is in steady decline - due primarily to:

- inadequate funding for maintenance;
- the split ownership and responsibility between Hounslow BC and English Heritage.

- English Heritage & London Borough of Hounslow recognise this, and in partnership aim to resolve the longstanding problem of inadequate management and funding. This is in order to secure and maintain the house and grounds to its appropriate standard - and ensure long-term sustainability of the estate.

It can be argued that the pervading quality of the space, supported by the dominating presence of a well managed historic house has helped to discourage the worst excesses of criminal behaviour. This perceived quality has helped to attract a critical mass of legitimate users that promotes self-policing. However, this current situation itself has not been arrived at without significant effort.

Parkwatch

Entirely spontaneously, without prompting or initial support from the authorities, a Parkwatch scheme was born, created by concerned dogwalkers. In the last two years this has grown to 80 or so members, including the area beat officer, Hounslow BC, local schools and English Heritage. They meet every two-three months. Signage is posted with contact numbers for incidents. The results are dramatic. There has been a 40% drop in the number of incidents and surveys suggest that females account for over 50% of users.

My guess is that the effectiveness is as much to do with perceptions than actions. The signs help create a sense of ownership and safety that encourage usage by the “positive” public. The type of users is also noteworthy - dog-walkers tend to get into the farthest reaches of the park that might otherwise become no-go areas.

Volunteers

Since Aug 2003 there has been a volunteer team of eight. The programme is undertaking gardening and maintenance programmes in support of the project.

Problems

But, as welcome and successful as Parkwatch is, it is a symptom of the underlying problems. Chiswick no longer has a dedicated site team; no keeper, no gardeners, no maintenance. There can therefore be days without a presence. Not only do staff lose focus, interest and ownership, but from a user's point of view there is no welcome. The desire for members of the public to relate to a focal point is demonstrated by the extent to which the cafe has become the unofficial focal point, reporting incidents and lost property.

The entrances to the park are unwelcoming and generally a missed opportunity. The plethora of signs do little to impart a sense of arrival into a special place, instead they signal neglect, a target themselves for vandalism and graffiti.

- The historic character of the park has mixed value in terms of its effect on criminality. On one hand it can be argued that this attractive historic

environment encourages legitimate use, and discourages vandalism. However it can have the opposite effect. It can stimulate an antiauthority posture - kids have been known to knock the heads off sphinxes using cricket bats; the historic walls are constantly damaged by graffiti (and this is particularly difficult to deal with because repeated abrasive treatments are not acceptable for fragile brick and render).

The fabric of the park is clearly in poor repair and looking sorry for itself. Another example of cost cutting affecting the park's appearance - large vehicles used to empty litter-bins cause damage to footpaths not designed for this type of usage; but the alternative is that the bins would not get emptied.

Litter can have as negative effect as graffiti; it is yet another display of deliberate abuse and lack of respect, is visually obtrusive and a statement of neglect; it passes judgement both on the litter dropper and the park authorities who will be perceived to not care.

The lack of presence manifests itself in deserted and boarded up residences on site. The flat above the pavilion has succumbed; regular tenants, not dedicated staff, occupy other properties.

The way forward

As a first step the partnership intends to set up a Chiswick House & Grounds Charitable Partnership Trust.

The main Partnership Trust Objective will be to:

- Provide unified management of the House and Grounds, to overcome the difficulties of divided ownership.
- Make a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (with matched funding to be raised from other sources) for the regeneration of the house and grounds.
- Provide for the long term future of the house and grounds, both financially and in terms of management.

Project objectives

At the core of the redevelopment scheme are two themes:

- To restore this internationally significant historic estate (with its buildings, structures, gardens and parkland), preserving it for future generations.
- To encourage strong community participation, to make this historic asset accessible to all, attracting increased visits and interest from new and more diverse audiences.

Firstly, restoring the historic estate - this will be done by:

- Completing the restoration of the principal features of the gardens created by Lord Burlington and his successors.

- Presenting the historic landscape, explaining its part in the evolution of landscape design and its significance as one of the birthplaces of the English landscape movement.

In the past, the expertise to fully understand the significance of the park and maintain it in a sensitive way has been missing. The need for an overall master plan that acknowledges and develops the quality of the park is of paramount importance - this will inform both refurbishment and the ongoing maintenance regime for the park.

It is essential that this plan addresses sustainability. If the park is to sustain its commitment to dedicated teams and thorough maintenance, this will require significant revenue in the order of £400-500k, compared to £155k currently spent. Where will this come from?

One option is to develop corporate sponsorship and events, using the appeal of the unique atmosphere, with semi-permanent new conference facilities being built. Of course opportunities for new development are few, and must be balanced against the conservation strategy.

Catering facilities will be upgraded and renewed. Vacant residential properties may be let to generate incomes. But this must be balanced against the benefits of reintroducing “incentivised” staff to live on site to avoid the empty syndrome and act as positive after-hours management to deter crime.

There is also a fine balance to be struck between the extent of income generation and the interaction with the local community. There must be no sense that the park has become a corporate theme park.

Community consultation is key to creating a new interpretive and site development strategy which is appropriate and meaningful for all user groups.

This will be done by:

- Providing facilities and staff to support educational initiatives and a volunteer programme.
- Providing exhibitions and displays, with facilities and support staff for activities targeted at different audiences including those of special needs.
- Developing new community uses or projects.

The park has a rich history of public carnivals and community events.

Other project objectives are:

- To realise the potential of this enormous educational resource.

This will be done by:

- Developing programmes, facilities - and providing staff to support continual learning experiences - for all sections of the community (to satisfy the life long learning agenda).
- Offering formal education opportunities for the inquisitive primary school child, through to study and research opportunities for higher education students.
- Offering less formal learning experiences, developing the heritage interest with programmes explaining and interpreting the historic context of Chiswick in a contemporary environment - allowing all communities to interact and engage in the project.
- To make this historic asset accessible to all, attracting increased visits and interest from new and more diverse audiences.

This will be done by:

- Undertaking an audience development plan.
- Developing this valuable resource to appeal to low income groups and those outside the economic market place. (Parks are free at the point of entry and these groups are often disenfranchised from quality leisure experiences).
- Making a visit a more rewarding and enjoyable experience for all.

Security

- Dedicated teams of staff - gardeners, maintenance teams
- Staff resident on site
- Introducing a Ranger Service and Community Liaison Officer to police the estate and develop positive community involvement through an increased presence on site.
- Repair/replacement and upgrading of worn out or damaged park fabric and furniture, with enhanced maintenance thereafter. This will contribute significantly to the regeneration of the Gardens and help create an atmosphere of care, ownership and security.
- Although the planting regime is largely dictated by the historic plan, cutting back and regular maintenance will enhance opportunities for surveillance.
- Entrances will be both more welcoming and will create a threshold. The character of the approaches will help to set the standard of behaviour expected in the park.
- CCTV may be used at a limited number of blackspots, but only where this use can be supported by Rangers and site staff.
- Lighting on main routes and at entrances.

Summary

- What then are the design considerations for restoring historic landscapes?
- Almost certainly we should reinstate original features.
- Perimeter fence.
- Limited number of access points.

- Lockable gates - fencing/gating is not elitist, and should not be seen as a manifestation of social polarisation or segregation. It is simply a means to manage a public facility so that it can benefit the whole community, as they wish it be used.
- Focal point/facility demanding staff presence.
- Formal layout creates surveillance opportunities - in traditional London squares, the planting layout allows surveillance opportunities - gap between perimeter hedge (for privacy from pedestrians) and underside tree canopy allows views from first floor living rooms of town-houses.
- Prevent vehicular access - street furniture, bollards, mounding and ditching.
- Improve lighting, but consistent with proposed locking regime, may have to avoid excessive lighting; concentrate lights on main routes to maximise usage and create safe routes.
- CCTV - inconsistent with vast areas of parkland with unrestricted movement; only feasible where management regime supports it, for example constant monitoring and rapid response. And to protect key areas, such as high value structures, known gathering points, car parks, routes etc.

Restoring the historic landscape and creating safer parks are mutual aspirations with virtually no conflict.

Traditionally, our public spaces have been an expression and reflection of public pride. Whilst we should avoid returning to some half remembered ideal of “civic pride”, we now have an opportunity to recreate high quality spaces that reflect the needs and aspirations of the current and expected community.

Improving historic parks and preventing criminal and nuisance behaviour will be best achieved by increasing community interest and use, establishing and maintaining adequate management resources and providing a well designed environment that enables staff and community together to develop and use the park to its full potential. Preventing crime, whether that be vandalism or serious assault, can be achieved by putting the odds in favour of the community, not the criminal.

In historic parks, more often than not, the blueprint already exists!