

London's Green Treasures

by David Long

Pavement-shuffling during the sales, or stranded bumper to bumper at rush-hour, it's hard to believe that London is still one of the world's greenest cities....

It's not just its celebrated 'lungs' - the more than 6,000 acres of Epping Forest on the one side, and on the other that great arc of historic parks and gardens at Bushy and Hampton Court, Syon, Osterley, Richmond and Kew. Nor indeed the well-known 'cultivated wildness' of Hampstead Heath or Hyde Park, the latter an especially surprising survivor on 350 acres of some of the most valuable land on the planet.

Rather, it is because it has so many lesser-known green spaces, many hundreds of them. From the deceptively lush shrubberies in the likes of Bedford and Russell Squares to the tree-lined walks along the banks of the Thames, and those hidden enclaves which make up the lawyers' ancient Inns of Court.

Some of the nicest, it is true, are still private. Between Pall Mall and Piccadilly, the shuttered doors of Clubland conceal elegant courtyards and gardens in which liveried servants still serve sundowners to the favoured few. Further west, on land held for generations by successive Dukes of Westminster and Cadogan Earls, only residents can avail themselves of the leafiest garden squares. And, of course, at the top of the Mall is London's largest private garden: 45 high-walled acres complete with a lake, flamingoes, rare shrubs (including a mulberry tree planted by James I) and who knows what else for Her Majesty to enjoy.

There are, even so, many others which offer easier access; some large, some small, some surviving fragments of ancient royal hunting grounds, and all offering an escape from the streets, from the sheer breathless pace of contemporary city life.

Peaceful Postman's Park, for example, so called because of its proximity to the old GPO building behind St Paul's, could not provide a greater contrast to its hard-faced, high-rise neighbours. Popular with city workers who come to share their sandwiches with the pigeons, it is also where the celebrated Victorian painter G.F. Watts proposed siting a national memorial to the heroism of ordinary people. Otherwise unsung heroes like Alice Ayres, a labourer's daughter 'who by intrepid conduct saved three children from a burning house at the cost of her own young life.' Thomas Simpson, who 'died of exhaustion after saving many lives from the breaking ice at Highgate Ponds.' And Harry Sisley of Kilburn, just 10 years old in 1878 when he drowned attempting to rescue his baby brother.

At Lincoln's Inn Fields, a dozen acres of lawns and plane trees are surprisingly quiet too (given the proximity of noisy High Holborn)



Thomas Coram (1668 - 1751), outside the Foundling Museum

making it hard to believe this is where, in 1586, thousands gathered to witness the grisly execution of 14 Catholic traitors. Sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered for a plot to oust Queen Elizabeth for her cousin Mary, the leader, Sir Anthony Babington, was still fully conscious when his evisceration began....

Hard to credit too that in the 1930s the authorities ordered these lovely gardens to be dug up, excavating hundreds of yards of deep trenches and armoured bunkers, lined with concrete and fitted with airlocks against poison gas attack. Who knows what purpose they serve now?

No less strange is Coram's Fields in nearby Bloomsbury, if only because its pleasures are technically off-limits to adults unless they are accompanied by a child. Occupying the site of a wealthy seafarer's Foundling Hospital, a niche in a pillar once contained a revolving 'All-Comers Basket' into which mothers could deposit their unwanted infants.

On the first day a staggering 117 were left in this manner, with 400 more in the weeks that followed and before long this chaotic admissions policy had to be abandoned. The hospital went eventually

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too (Great Ormond Street being just around the corner) but nine acres were saved by newspaper proprietor Viscount Rothermere, giving children who wish to treat their parents to some green space.

Fortunately adults are free to wander through the Royal Parks unaccompanied, but it wasn't always so. Queen Anne restricted access to 'foreign ministers, nobility, Parliament and the Queen's household'; James I kept crocodiles in one of them, and George II's wife once sought to claim both St James's and Hyde Park for herself. Happily she failed, but there are plenty of reminders of the days when these were the monarch's personal domain and some pretty odd regulations still linger. It is still illegal to touch a pelican without written permission, to beat a carpet or to brandish a sword.

St James's is perhaps the best of them, with its famous waterfowl - every native species, apparently, and then some - and on the lake, Duck Island where they can escape the crowds. The island's ornamental Swiss cottage was built by the Ornithological Society of London, and with typical Victorian ingenuity was steam-heated for the incubation of eggs. The skyline behind also lends the park some further distinction: the London Eye and the cupolas and almost fairytale roofscape of Horse Guards and Whitehall Court providing an exotic counterpoint to the magical combination of water, flowers and gnarled old trees.

But when it comes to trees, Regent's Park has the oldest, a clutch of fossilised stumps by the lake in the Inner Circle. The last surviving remnant of the defunct Royal Botanic Society, these are perfectly genuine, unlike and are typical of the peculiarities which abound in these places. The gardeners in Soho Square, for example, keep their tools in a rustic octagonal Tudor-style summerhouse. Those in Grosvenor Gardens store theirs in a tiny pavilion decorated with thousands of seashells, the gift of a grateful French nation after World War II.

Equally curious is the Art Nouveau rotunda in King Edward's Memorial Park, Wapping. No mere folly, despite its elaborate



*Statue of William III in classical garb, St. James's Square.
Note the molehill under his steed's hoof.*

appearance, this is actually an overdecorated flue designed to vent noxious fumes from Rotherhithe Tunnel - from cars now but once upon a time from the sheer volume of horse manure which used to amass down below. And back in town do look closely at William III's statue in the gardens at St James's Square. See that small hump under the horse's left rear leg? It represents the molehill upon which His Majesty's mount stumbled in 1702, throwing the king to an ignoble death. The anniversary of this was marked for many years by Bonnie Prince Charlie's men, who drank a grateful toast to 'the little gentleman in black velvet'.

As so often in London there is nothing on site to tell you all this, but so much to see - and to learn - for anyone who cares to hunt it down.

About David Long

*An award-winning ghostwriter, under his own name **David Long** has written and illustrated a number of books on London including Spectacular Vernacular: London's 100 Most Extraordinary Buildings and a sequel Tunnels, Towers And Temples: London's 100 Strangest Places. The latest, Hidden City: The Secret Alleys, Courts and Yards of London's Square Mile, has just been published. (<http://www.davidlong.info/>)*