

Green spaces in cities in the twentieth century

To use and to protect: municipal parks of London in the twentieth century– a natural approach

Matti Hannikainen, University of Helsinki, Finland

Introduction

The municipal parks of London are a much-studied topic but from both an urban and environmental historical perspective, their role as green spaces for various species as well as for people has not been properly discussed. In environmental history, cities are often linked with pollution and seen as a contrary to the countryside. In the 1990s, an urban-orientated approach has been established in this field.¹ However, no model has been presented to compare the environment in both natural and urban surroundings. As both the rural and the urban can be seen as polluting, it seems essential that environment be discussed in a natural but built-up nexus. As many cities like London possess a great variety of green spaces, an urban historian should be able to take account of this ‘natural’ dimension.

The municipal park provides us with one of keys to the natural world of London. Yet in urban history, the current emphasis in park history is both man-oriented and leisure-oriented, as in Douglas A. Reid ‘s recent survey of developments in leisure activities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.² This accords with the contemporary emphasis on the cultural and recreational value of parks. According to the London County Council for example the main feature of the municipal park in the first half of the 20th century was its importance in providing for leisure activities.³

This paper will argue for the importance of municipal parks as parts of the natural world of London in the first half of the 20th century with a brief comment also on the attitudes of Londoners towards these artificial but natural-like environments. Battersea Park provides the main exemplar although some points on developments in London’s municipal parks more generally will also be attempted. The intention is not to provide a thorough explanation of the contribution of parks to the natural world but rather to illustrate another approach in urban environmental history.

A municipal park - a part of a network

The first point to make concerns the diversity of open green space in London. By the late 19th century, London had acquired a large number of green spaces. In 1889, the acreage of open green spaces in London occupied nearly 5,300 acres (~2145 hectares)⁴. The nucleus of royal parks and preserved commons, heaths and even existing woods were supplemented with e.g. new municipal parks, greens and recreation grounds to name just a few of the open space provisions made from the 1840s. The period of constructing major municipal green spaces in the LCC area was already over by the 1930s, although minor green spaces and private green spaces like golf courses and sport grounds continued to be constructed throughout this period.⁵ The increase of open green spaces consisted of relatively minor green spaces in acreage, but their number and distribution was important for attracting species that were returning to London. The total acreage of public open green spaces of London accounted for nearly 7,500 acres (~3035 hectares) in 1939.⁶

Simultaneously, open green spaces formed a green network in London as contemporary naturalists acknowledged. Nor was it only the green spaces that featured as sanctuaries for remaining and returning species, but London's blue space contributed also. The Thames, reservoirs and even the docks remained open - although mainly for birds.⁷ The diversity of the natural environment existing in London in this network of green and blue spaces may have helped various species both to remain in the city and to return later, especially when we take into account the building density of London as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

Secondly, how did the environment of the municipal parks fit into this network? Most of these parks were constructed in the 19th century and Hazel Conway, for instance, has argued that the idea of a Victorian municipal park was to provide an ideal landscape within urban surroundings. This idealistic landscape was designed to promote proper behaviour and reflected the moral views of the upper classes.⁸ Yet by the early 20th century, the LCC had begun to recognise the importance of the environmental features of its parks as green spaces.⁹ References to this environment in such publications as the Guide to Battersea Park (1904) may have been intended to promote the popularity of parks, but they also show that the natural world was becoming an issue for Londoners. Walter Johnson, a naturalist, wrote in 1910 that Battersea Park had most diversified environment of all the municipal parks of the

LCC. It seems that municipal parks had begun to interest naturalists, who had recognised that these natural-like areas had relatively rich natural worlds. Municipal parks were unique as according to Mr. Johnson each ‘park had its own organism with plants and insects to mammals’.¹⁰ However, for a common visitor to a municipal park, the natural environment was not its main attraction.



Figure 1.1 *An Aerial Photograph of London in the late 1930s.*

In general, and now we come to a third point, the natural environment of municipal parks was an artificial one. Philip C. Wheeler has written that, “The British landscape is semi natural at best” and he further continues by describing parks as artificial.¹¹ The way in which the environment of Battersea Park was laid out and managed in the twentieth century illustrates this point. Battersea Park had large areas designated only for leisure such as areas for playing sports. The annual season for parks was divided into summer, winter, and the growth season. Summer was the time for people to enjoy the beauty of the plantation of the park, while during the winter most of the flowers and plants were reared in palm houses, which hosted flower shows. Sport and other leisure activities took place even though different games were played in each part of the season. However, April was designated as the growth season, according to the superintendent's notes, and in this month most sports were not allowed and

other leisure activities were reduced to a minimum as gardeners put a great effort into replanting the beds and borders that made up an extensive part of the park environment.¹²

The maintenance of a municipal park's environment as that at Battersea Park was a heavy task because of the extent of the flowerbeds and shrubberies which not only needed annual replenishment but also occasional replacement – in 1924 for example all the shrubberies at Battersea Park were replaced, an action that raised no objection from Londoners, as it seems that heavy maintenance was a common feature for these green areas¹³. There were also nearly annual re-plantations. Between 1890 and 1951, more than half of all employees of Battersea Park were gardeners. In addition, during the growth season and summer months, extra employees were annually hired.¹⁴ Park keepers (in some references named as constables) formed the other major group of employees. Although they were not responsible for planting and rearing plants, they controlled the human usage in the park's environment.

A natural approach to park life

Because of the rapid expansion of London, Londoners welcomed and accepted municipal parks as part of the new urban world. In comparison with their surroundings, these green areas provided Londoners with a hiding place from their urban surroundings. Philip C. Wheeler has argued that trees not only reduced the amount of pollution in the air but also diminished the level of noise in the surrounding environment.¹⁵ As Battersea Park (and many other municipal parks accordingly) was surrounded by trees, its air quality would have been better and the level of street noise might have been lower than in its surroundings. Furthermore, if the trees in the park, as in the case of Battersea, were higher than opposite buildings, the park became an isolated environment. Moreover, in a predominantly flat metropolis, the trees surrounding municipal parks and open green spaces make the opposite buildings less visible. This in itself may have helped migrating birds to adapt to a new urban environment.

As for the kind of species inhabiting the municipal parks, in 1907, the LCC listed its stock of undomesticated animals and pointed out that it had no rarities in its list. There were, however, some 30 species of birds on the list; most of which were waterfowl.¹⁶ The LCC also kept deer and supplied various species of birds for display in its parks. The deer were kept in its first class parks like Victoria and Battersea, and the birds were held in aviaries, at least at Battersea Park. These animals and birds were provided for both educational and promotional

reasons. Although bird song had been a feature of municipal parks prior to the late nineteenth century it was not regarded as essential that birds should be seen. By the turn-of-the-century, however, the LCC had nominated a special attendant to rear species of waterfowl at Battersea Park.¹⁷ Moreover, in 1915, all keepers in the municipal parks and open spaces of the LCC were advised to feed and keep count of the number of birds and “[to] require birds for nesting purposes.”¹⁸ The change in attitudes towards birds and other species had begun in the last quarter of the 19th century, but it involved some curious features. Although the number of wild species paring at parks remained relatively low during the first half of the 20th century, their numbers were controlled nevertheless. At Battersea Park and additionally in other municipal parks, a surplus of waterfowl kept in the park was sold annually from 1910. According to the LCC Minutes, the intention of this surplus sale was to control the number of species and to gain profit for purchasing new ones.¹⁹ These sales continued into the 1940s.

By-laws were passed to protect the species that inhabited municipal parks well before any national protective legislation. Yet municipal parks had not as diversified a natural world as commons or even royal parks.²⁰ The varied functions that parks had to meet, and the extent of the maintenance and replacement work, as in the case of the Battersea shrubberies, may have contributed to the low number of species encountered at municipal parks in comparison with their royal ‘cousins’. At the same time, various strategies were employed to protect what was there. Thus particular areas were effectively protected from leisure activities by fencing, At Battersea Park, for instance, the island of the lake was protected from landing and human action from 1865. Later it proved an essential space for species, mainly birds that rested and paired in the park. By-laws prevented the capturing killing, and shooting of birds and other species at municipal parks; and the staff of an individual park had frequently powers to protect and control its fauna with other measures.²¹

It was not until the late 1940s when the practice of controlling wild life was ended. A number of drakes were shot at Battersea Park and the person to witness the affair made an inquiry to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). The Trust gave evidence to the LCC that most birds encountered at its green spaces were moving almost on daily-basis between them. Therefore, controlling their number by shooting was far from advisable. This statement underlines the existence of a network of green spaces. The case forced the LCC to pass the Wild Birds Act in 1949, which allowed only the shooting of wood pigeon when it was damaging crops.²² This short episode on a winter day in 1948 acted to end controlling the number of species at

municipal parks. One exception however was the grey squirrel which was regarded by the municipal authorities as a pest and they were ordered to be shot by the Ministry of Agriculture. Although this campaign was opposed, the grey squirrel retained its status until 1951.²³

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me combine these main points. Firstly, although the natural environment of London had become scarce during the expansion of the city 1840-1920, a kind of inner green belt had been established unintentionally by the early 20th century. It was formed of commons, royal parks, new municipal (public) parks and municipal open green areas. By the early 20th century, many species were returning to inhabit permanently these green spaces. It was not only the number of open green spaces in London that eased the return of species into the inner city. The conscious formula of greenness provided London with a kind of a network that connected green spaces with each other and with the remaining woods and countryside even in the Home Counties.

Yet municipal parks offered an artificial kind of natural environment. However, the diversity of green space of London allowed parks to maintain their idealistic features and layouts. LCC policy, which principally concentrated on the provision of leisure activities in its green spaces, was gradually modified to support the preservation of the natural world. This model was enforced by legislation, which protected especially species and the plantations of parks. Moreover, isolated areas became sanctuaries for a number of species.

Thirdly, the environment of municipal parks was heavily maintained and wild life fed and controlled by park staffs. In addition, the by-laws of parks effectively protected species from humans before general legislation - municipal or Parliamentary - was passed. The common practice at municipal parks of reducing the number of birds by shooting was banned in the late 1940s thus indicating a gradual change in the attitudes of Londoners and an awakening of early environmentalism.

The attitude of Londoners towards the natural world of the parks, which is my fourth point, changed only slowly however. For Londoners they presented places for leisure rather than as a model of a natural environment. Their artificiality was accepted as a principal feature; it

seems that commons and existing woods were to fulfil the vision of preserving a natural environment in urban surroundings. Yet the essentially artificial environment of the municipal park did succeed in attracting and sustaining wild life, a feature of the parks that gradually became more appreciated and commented on during the course of the twentieth century.

¹ Schott, Dieter *Urban Environmental History: what lessons there are to be learned?* Presentation in the Symposium organised by Nestling Foundation, Helsinki 9th of December 2003.

² Reid, Douglas, "Playing and Praying" in *Cambridge Urban History of Britain vol.III*, Daunton, Martin (ed.) pp. 745 - 807. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000

³ London County Council (LCC), *Minutes of Proceedings 1919*, p. 562-563. London 1920.

⁴ Gibbon, Gwilyn & Reginald W. Dell. *The History of London County Council 1889-1939*, p.501. MacMillan and co, London 1939.

⁵ Prince, Hugh. *Parks and open spaces*. in *London: Problems of Change*, Clout H, & P. Wood (eds.), 137 - 143. Longman Group Ltd, Hong Kong 1990.

⁶ London Statistics for 1931 vol. XXXV, p.163. London 1932.

⁷ Fitter, R.S.R. *London's Natural History*. p. 141 – 143, 165. Collin-Clear Type Press, London 1945, reprinted 1946.

⁸ Conway, Hazel. *People's Parks - The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain*. p. 10-21. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991.

⁹ Parks and Open Spaces Committee (LCC). *Guide to Battersea Park*. p. 7. London County Council, London 1904.

¹⁰ Johnson, Walter. *Battersea Park as a Centre for Nature Study*. p.50-51, 91,92. London 1910.

¹¹ Wheeler, Philip C. *Urban Habitats*. Routledge, p. xiii, 20. London 1999.

¹² London Metropolitan Archives. *London County Council (LCC) Clerk's Department, Parks Committee, Battersea Park, LCC/CL/PK/1.Superintendent's Quarterly Reports 1 - 25 /1893 - 1911*.

¹³ LCC *Minutes of Proceedings 1924*, p. 775. London 1925.

¹⁴ London Metropolitan Archives. *London County Council (LCC) Parks Department: Organisation and General, Battersea Park, LCC/PK/GEN/1/ 1,2,5,14-15, 24, 28*. Parks and Open Spaces Regulation

¹⁵ Wheeler, p.16.

¹⁶ LCC *Minutes of Proceedings 1907*, p. 316-317. London 1908.

¹⁷ London Metropolitan Archives. London County Council (LCC) Parks Department: Organisation and General, Battersea Park, LCC/PK/GEN/2/Parks Sub-Committee Memorandum on Staff 20th of October 1911.

¹⁸ London Metropolitan Archives. *London County Council (LCC) Parks Department: Organisation and General, Battersea Park, LCC/PK/GEN/1/14 Parks and Open Spaces Staff Handbook incl. By-laws 23rd of July 1915*, p. 54.

¹⁹ LCC *Minutes of Proceedings 1911*, p. 1100. London 1912.

²⁰ Fitter, p. 134 – 146, Wheeler, p.20.

²¹ London Metropolitan Archives. *London County Council (LCC) Parks Department: Organisation and General, Battersea Park, LCC/PK/GEN/1/ 2*. Parks and Open Spaces by-laws first of March 1982.

²² London Metropolitan Archives. *London County Council (LCC) Clerk's Department, Parks Committee, Battersea Park, LCC/CL/PK/1/84*.

²³ Fitter, p. 214-216, Shorsten, Monica. *Squirrels*. p. 194 - 1951 *The New Naturalist* 12. Collins, London 1954.

Figure 1.1 Rasmussen, Steen Eiler (). *London the Unique City*. (First Paperback ed.) Massachusetts University Press, Cambridge MA. 1967