

“The Cultivation of Virtue” - Music and Entertainment in Public Parks from the 1830s onwards, with a focus on the Victorian and Edwardian Bandstand

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Abstract

Over the last thirty-five years, my knowledge of public parks and historic landscapes has evolved, eventually because of a chosen career in this field, working initially as a landscape architect, and then moving into a career of managing and researching public parks to regenerate these important spaces. My BA (Hons) degree in Geography¹ led to a Masters degree in Landscape Architecture². Initial restorations undertaken for which I was responsible for, included parks in Carlisle where my unpublished report based on original research led to a lottery funded restoration of the 1923 ‘*Pleasureland*’ called Hammonds Pond. Whilst at Middlesbrough Council, I led the heritage restoration of the Grade II listed Victorian Albert Park, which opened in 1868, again funded by the lottery. This also led to my detailed research and a study of the history of parks in Middlesbrough, including Stewart Park, the birthplace of Captain Cook, and grounds of the lost Marton Hall, and a further successful lottery funded project. My time in landscape consultancy also included detailed heritage research into the late-Victorian Wilton Lodge Park in Hawick leading to the eventual successful lottery funded restoration of this Borders public park. My move to Watford, Hertfordshire, led to one of the finest park restorations in England and the £7.2 million transformation of the Grade II listed Cassiobury Park, the former grounds of Cassiobury House, the estate of the long lost Earls of Essex. I published my findings after years of research in the archives of Watford Borough Council and Watford Museum, called *Cassiobury, the Ancient Seat of the Earls of Essex* published in 2017.³ It is the only complete study on this award winning park and has been referenced in recent work and research by Hertfordshire Gardens Trust into the work of Humphry Repton.⁴

My knowledge of the history of public parks grew during this period, leading to several publications, and in particular my interest grew in the icon of public parks, the bandstand, often the centerpiece of music and entertainment within these historic spaces. My desire to research further the role of bandstands stemmed from investigating the history of the lost structure in Albert Park, Middlesbrough, and my wish to see this replaced as part of the lottery funded project. My first publication on this subject, *Bandstands*⁵ was published in 2011, followed by a number of books on the history of the Royal Parks of London, with further books on bandstands in 2014 (*Bandstands of Britain*⁶), 2017 (*British Bandstands*⁷) and culminating in 2018 (*Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure*⁸). The latter is a comprehensive history of music, entertainment and leisure in public parks. No publication or study had covered this subject and, as will be identified and discussed in this commentary, this has largely been ignored by most historians of leisure and landscape/garden historians.

¹ Sheffield City Polytechnic, BA Honours (2:1) in Geography, 1987

² University of Edinburgh, Masters of Landscape Architecture, 1989

³ P. Rabbitts, and S.K. Priestley, *Cassiobury – The Ancient Seat of the Earls of Essex*, Stroud, Amberley Publishing, 2017

⁴ S. Flood and T. Williamson, *Humphry Repton in Hertfordshire*, Hatfield, Hertfordshire Publications, 2018

⁵ P. Rabbitts, *Bandstands*, Stroud, Shire Publications, 2011

⁶ P. Rabbitts, *Bandstands of Britain*, Stroud, The History Press, 2014

⁷ P. Rabbitts, *British Bandstands*, Stroud, Amberley Publishing, 2017

⁸ P. Rabbitts, *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure*, Swindon, Historic England, 2018

Additional publications on historic parks followed, including studies of park architecture⁹, park designers¹⁰, and the architect Decimus Burton.¹¹ Finally, my research and studies led to the updating and expansion of one of the most important works on public parks: *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* by Hazel Conway¹². This led to a significant new publication entitled *People's Parks - The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain* with joint authorship between the late Hazel Conway and myself.¹³ This will be expanded upon within this commentary but after discussions with Historic England as well as an appropriate academic publisher, it was decided that Conway's book should be expanded, rather than a new book commenced. The rationale was simple. Conway's earlier book was iconic and it was felt that her work from 1991 should be built upon with new case studies integrated and expanded by myself to cover the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. Copyright was therefore obtained from her daughter, Zara Conway as well as from Cambridge University Press with eventual publication by John Hudson Publishing in association with academic publisher Boydell and Brewer.¹⁴

Throughout this period of research and study, from 2011 to 2024, it was apparent that there had been almost no consideration of the influence of music and the wider scope of entertainment in the evolution of public parks, with historians of leisure failing to acknowledge the impact and influence on park design or recreation. Why was this? References would be made by a number of academics to the effect of parks in general and the idea of 'rational recreation' is frequently referenced. However, there was a lack of any study or research into specifically what became known as 'band houses', 'orchestra stands' or the bandstand, which was to become the central focus of music and entertainment in public parks. This is despite their existence in the earliest eighteenth-century pleasure gardens and eventually into the mid-nineteenth century onwards within the growing number of public parks.

This commentary briefly summarises the research findings from the submitted publications, and then considers a number of issues related to this study, in particular the methodology of research undertaken; the benefit of this research to wider society and what, if any, has been the measurable impact on public parks; and how has this work contributed to the current debate on music and entertainment and future of people's parks. This includes citing several of my earliest publications on bandstands to the major publication *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure* which is the culmination of many years of work and is the only body of work that covers this subject area. This commentary will also identify how this work has contributed significantly to the wider knowledge of bandstands, the role of music, and re-examines and re-asserts the importance of public parks in 'cultivating virtue,' among the

⁹ P. Rabbitts, *Parkitecture – Buildings and Monuments of Public Parks*, Stroud, Amberley Publishing, 2017

¹⁰ P. Rabbitts, *Great Parks, Great Designers*, Stroud, Amberley Publishing, 2017

¹¹ P. Rabbitts, *Decimus Burton – Gentleman Architect*, London, Lund Humphries, 2021

¹² H. Conway, *People's Parks - The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991

¹³ H. Conway and P. Rabbitts, *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, London, John Hudson Publishing, 2024

¹⁴ Boydell and Brewer. "People's Parks." Accessed September 17, 2024.
<https://boydellandbrewer.com/9781739822989/peoples-parks/>

labouring classes and its relevance today, particularly in a post Covid-19 world. This body of work also considerably increases our knowledge and understanding of how important music and entertainment was from the early part of the nineteenth century, within the growing movement of 'People's Parks' to the present day, and the challenges faced in the future.

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The Submissions

***Bandstands* – published by Shire Publications, 2011**

The first published book on the history of the bandstand, but covering initially the designs and development of bandstands in parks, seaside towns, the importance of foundries, decline and revival. It did not cover the social history of the bandstand or wider importance of music and entertainment in parks. Nevertheless, it was the first history of this important icon of parks, with sources of information from archives, the Scottish Ironwork Foundation, Historic Environment Scotland and other local studies.

***Bandstands of Britain* – published by The History Press, 2014**

What became clear from the research for the Shire book was many bandstands had stories and local histories attached to them. This book covered individual bandstands across the country and the wider regions. It was also the first book to develop a gazetteer of UK wide bandstands based on sources in local archives, newspapers and individual bandstand enthusiasts.

***British Bandstands* – published by Amberley Publishing, 2017**

A book that celebrated the revival and use of bandstands across the UK. Local histories were researched for each bandstand through local archives, newspapers, local studies including collating information from Friends Groups, history societies and local enthusiasts.

***Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure* – published by Historic England, 2018 [The principal submission #1, peer reviewed by Dr Brent Elliot of Gresham College and the Royal Horticultural Society]**

The three previous books were important in stimulating my wider interest in bandstands with significant works at the time being undertaken nationally in restoring public parks. These initial books were aimed at those interested in local history, heritage, architecture and public parks generally. The profile and use of bandstands and an awareness of their importance was strengthened as a result of my research, but what they lacked was a wider understanding of bandstands, the importance of music in public open spaces, the evolution of society from rural to urban and how the development of leisure pursuits developed. It was clear that no studies of the role of music in parks, the ‘cultivation of virtue’ as Hazel Conway had described, had been covered. The research was published by Historic England, and comprehensively covers the areas of the first three books, but investigated in depth the growth of leisure, highlighting the virtual lack of any academic study of the social and cultural history of the bandstand and its contribution to wider leisure in the country. The publication, ultimately overseen by Liverpool University Press, was aimed at a wider readership, but of clear interest to academic social and cultural historians as well as those interested in architecture and landscape design. It covers the national impact of bandstands across the whole country as well as references the international context of bandstands as places of music and entertainment. The study also includes the only comprehensive gazetteer of bandstands in the country, updated from the 2014 publication.

The book was positively reviewed by the brass band community, including 4BarsRest¹⁵ and Brass Band England,¹⁶ and is now available on JSTOR.¹⁷

***People's Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain* – published by John Hudson Publishing, 2024 [The principal submission #2, peer reviewed by Dr Carole O'Reilly of the University of Salford and Dr Katy Layton-Jones of the Open University]**

In 1991, author and landscape historian, the late Hazel Conway published *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain*. It was and remains a significant work. However, the growth of parks and their contribution pre-dates the Victorian era and of the 27,000 public parks we now enjoy, the majority of them are actually twentieth century. This updated and expanded book published in 2024 by John Hudson Publishing (an independent publisher, and former head of publishing from Historic England but distributed and marketed by Boydell and Brewer, an independent academic publisher) has added much to Conway's work on Victorian Parks as well as covers the pre-Victorian period including from the early twentieth century to the present day. This has built on further research by myself from local studies, archives, case studies, and in particular from the many Conservation Management Plans that now exist as a result of the wider interest in, and restoration of People's Parks. The final chapter of this work offers a critique of the role of parks in the 21st century.

The book was positively reviewed by architectural historian James Stevens Curl in *The Critic*,¹⁸ Hampshire Gardens Trust,¹⁹ and Kent Gardens Trust,²⁰ and is now available on JSTOR²¹ and through Cambridge University Press.²²

¹⁵ 4barsrest. "Book: Bandstands — Pavilions for music, entertainment and leisure." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://4barsrest.com/reviews/general/lit020.asp>

¹⁶ Brass Band World. "BBE Spearheads bandstand." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.brassbandworld.co.uk/news/1446/bbe-spearheads-bandstand>

¹⁷ JStor. Bandstands – "Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv179h1rj>

¹⁸ James Stevens Curl, "In praise of People's Parks," *The Critic*, December 23, 2023, <https://thecritic.co.uk/in-praise-of-peoples-parks/#:~:text=This%20very%20handsome%2C%20well%2Ddesigned,%2C%20Wolverhampton%2C%20and%20elsewhere>

¹⁹ Hampshire Gardens Trust. "Book Review". Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.hgt.org.uk/about/hutton-library/edens-keepers-2/>

²⁰ Kent Garden Trust. "Newsletter". Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk/documents/Autumn%202023%20Newsletter.pdf>

²¹ JStor. "People's Parks". Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.5558120>

²² Cambridge University Press. "People's Parks". Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/peoples-parks/73882F941F6E5C309DD3B043BD8E71EF>

Introduction

In April 2020, the *Guardian* quoted Robert Jenrick, the housing, communities and local government secretary who:

made it clear to councils that they must keep parks open during the coronavirus lockdown...He said that, while the virus does not discriminate, lockdown measures are much harder for people who do not have gardens or open spaces for children to run around in...People need parks. That's why I have made it clear to councils that all parks must remain open.²³

The country was gripped with the global pandemic of coronavirus, and as we dealt with the outfall of this catastrophe, the one place of escape and sanctuary that was recognised by government was the local park. Prior to the global pandemic, organisations including Fields in Trust, the National Trust, Keep Britain Tidy, the Landscape Institute, the Victorian Society and the Heritage Lottery Fund had been campaigning to ensure the long term future of these vital breathing spaces, many of them a legacy of the Victorian era. The *Mail on Sunday* joined this campaign in October 2018 with a campaign to save our parks.²⁴

Only three years earlier, in September, 2015, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) announced that it would continue to fund the restoration of public parks along with the Big Lottery Fund.²⁵ This was a milestone statement at the time. In 1996, the HLF's Urban Parks Programme (UPP) had been established. It followed years of research and evidence gathering by parks professionals, social historians and academics and many noteworthy organisations. What they discovered mirrored what the great Victorian reformers of the early part of the nineteenth century had also ascertained, that parks were an asset that enriched our lives, through recreation, activity, entertainment and fresh air. The Heritage Lottery Fund quoted:

HLF launched the Urban Parks Programme (UPP) in 1996, in response to the professional and public concern articulated in reports by the GMB Union, the Garden History Society and the Victorian Society combined, and the *Park Life* report compiled by Comedia/Demos and funded by local authorities. These reports set out the important contribution of public parks to the nation's quality of life; their role in the way people, particularly children, enjoy their leisure time and their potential contribution to social and economic regeneration and to the sustainability

²³ Aaron Walawalkar, "Coronavirus UK: Jenrick has 'made it clear' parks must stay open." *The Guardian*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/18/coronavirus-uk-jenrick-has-made-it-clear-parks-must-stay-open>

²⁴ Michael Power and Valerie Elliott, "Save our parks! Petition launched to rescue open spaces which are being sold off by cash-strapped councils," *Daily Mail*, October 13, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6273471/Petition-launched-rescue-open-spaces-sold-cash-strapped-councils.html>

²⁵ The Heritage Fund. "Story of People's Parks." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/blogs/story-peoples-parks>

of communities. They also argued that the increasing dereliction and decay of the UK's public parks amounted to a crisis. The introduction of the UPP reflected HLF's view that investing in urban historic parks in these circumstances would offer a triple dividend of conservation, regeneration and improved quality of life for a significant element of the UK's population.²⁶

So why is this important to this study on music and entertainment and the so-called 'cultivation of virtue' so described by Hazel Conway in her 1991 publication on people's parks, and why specifically from the 1830s onwards? To understand the impact of public parks and how we came to have them, the entertainment within them and their importance to successive generations, it is important to have a greater knowledge of their history, their impact and to reflect on their contribution in today's society and whether, in the twenty-first century, they should be deemed assets or liabilities to those who manage them. The research undertaken and detailed in the submissions covers this in great detail. This research is also an important reminder of the 'boom and bust' cycle that persisted into the twentieth century and beyond, both within local and central government funding regimes. The Victorians and Edwardians were radical in their thinking, but as research by current academics has indicated, short term fixes are now more prevalent.²⁷ One such academic is Peter Harnik who cites in *Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities* that:

It is politics that makes a great park system—politics based on the muscle of grassroots support, the brains of sophisticated leadership, and the nerves of elected politicians who know when to stand firm and when to compromise. This kind of politics—the kind that created the great early park systems in Boston, Baltimore, Buffalo, Cleveland, Minneapolis, and other places—cannot be replaced by standards. It is this kind of politics that U.S. cities must return to if they are to use parks or all their benefits: promoting weight loss and healthy living, adding beauty, strengthening the urban core, limiting suburban sprawl, protecting the environment, and even fighting global warming.²⁸

Harnik, in his conclusion states:

Only by working cooperatively with the many other constituencies in the city will advocates ever get to the point where a mayor's traditional directive to a park superintendent—"Do more with less"—is replaced with the liberating permission to "Do more with more!"²⁹

²⁶ Memorandum by the Heritage Lottery Fund (TCP 54), April 1999, available at

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmselect/cmenvtra/477/477mem58.htm>

²⁷ K.L. Jones, *History of Public Park Funding and Management (1820–2010)*, Historic England, Research Report Series no. 20/2016 available at <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/redirect/15442>

²⁸ P. Harnik. *Urban Green : Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities*. Island Press, 2010

²⁹ Ibid.

However, further research on the future funding of public parks is required as the public sector and local government are likely to be once again subject to more cuts in 2024 and beyond with ‘do more with more’ an unlikely outcome. This is covered later in this commentary and will form part of what direction my current research will take.

In 2024, the re-branded National Lottery Heritage Fund have no longer identified parks as a priority for funding, yet they have stated they will continue to fund them where appropriate, and subject to meeting their current Heritage Strategy.³⁰ Despite the ongoing challenges, since the advent of these parks regeneration initiatives funded by the National Lottery (including the UPP, and their successors, Parks for People, and Future Parks Accelerator³¹), over a billion pounds has been invested in public parks and communities have benefitted across the country despite government parks select committees coming and going as well as the many quangos campaigning for better parks and better funding.³² Yet, despite ongoing funding challenges, one of the greatest legacies of this period is the research that has been undertaken by local authorities, parks professionals, landscape architects, academics and social historians, often produced in the format of Conservation Management Plans. These plans have provided a significant archive and given academics, scholars, historians, local authorities and organisations such as Historic England, the Garden History Society and the Victorian Society, a greater understanding of our public parks, how they came about and their importance to many of our communities. They were also a major source for this research and have given a greater understanding of the music and entertainment that occurred within them – which became known by the Victorians and subsequent historians of leisure, as ‘rational recreation’.³³

The focus of research undertaken and questions to address

In 1999, Albert Park in Middlesbrough was awarded £4.4 million towards its restoration for which I was responsible for delivering and overseeing to completion. Opened in 1868 and donated to the people of Middlesbrough by mayor and industrialist H.W.F. Bolckow, it was the first public park to be opened in the town. The donation of Albert Park to the people of Middlesbrough was being considered as early as 1850 by the Town Council:

³⁰ Memorandum by the Heritage Lottery Fund (TCP 54), April 1999, available at

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmselect/cmenvtra/477/477mem58.htm>

³¹ Future Parks Accelerator. “A Sustainable Future For Urban Green Space.” Accessed September 17, 2024.

<https://www.futureparks.org.uk/>

³² The Parks Management Association. “Defra inquiry into urban green spaces.” Accessed September 17, 2024.

<https://www.parksmanagement.org.uk/news/defra-inquiry-into-urban-green-spaces/>

³³ Conservation Management Plans studied included Abbey Park, Leicester; Albert Park, Middlesbrough; Alexandra Park, Manchester; Avenham and Miller Park, Preston; Birkenhead Park, Wirral; Brockwell Park, London; Burslem Park, Stoke-on-Trent; Bute Park, Cardiff; Carlisle Park, Morpeth; Clifton Park, Rotherham; Corporation Park, Blackburn; Borough Gardens, Dorchester; Devonport Park, Plymouth; Exhibition and Leazes Park, Newcastle-upon-Tyne; Forbury Gardens, Reading; Greenhead Park, Huddersfield; Gunnersbury Park, London; Handsworth Park, Birmingham; Heaton Park, Manchester; Lightwoods Park, Smethwick; Lister Park, Bradford; Liverpool Parks; Palfrey Park, Walsall; Queen’s Park, Crewe; Roundhay Park, Leeds; Sheffield Parks; Stanley Park, Blackpool; Victoria Park, London; Walsall Arboretum; Wilton Lodge Park, Hawick; and Wolverhampton’s Parks.

We are sure that if the inhabitants of the town were appealed to in the matter, they would liberally come forward in its support. The want is felt by all classes in the town. No place is so badly provided for in the recreative department as ours. Sickly-looking youth and pallid manhood would receive a boon indeed by the establishment of some recreative institution or the enclosure of some ground where cramped limbs might be exercised...the lobes of the lungs are nowhere so severely tested as here and it is paramount opinion everywhere that we live in the smokiest, unhealthiest hole in the kingdom.³⁴

The decline of Albert Park during the latter part of the twentieth century, with its bandstand removed in the 1950s, and the loss of so many iconic features including gates, fountains, refreshment rooms, and the closure and dereliction of the park's lodges, was symptomatic of the deterioration of parks across the country. Its proposed restoration by 1999 and over the next few years would lead to this broader research and studies into the importance of music and entertainment in public parks.

My detailed research into the history of Albert Park was to give a greater understanding of the concept of 'rational recreation' or 'recreative institution' and was the initial impetus for this research. The introduction of the bandstand to the park however, allowed me to conduct more detailed and in depth research and was to give a greater understanding of entertainment and recreation in this park. According to the *Middlesbrough Weekly Exchange* of 10 August 1871:

A beautiful octagonal iron stand for the band stand is approaching completion and is an ornament to the centre of the Park, the light columns and elegant roof giving the structure quite an oriental aspect.³⁵

The bandstand, it appeared, was purchased from George Smith & Co, and the Sun Foundry of Glasgow. Despite this information, it was proposed by the design team at Middlesbrough that a more mundane bandstand should be re-erected in Albert Park as part of the overall restoration programme. This was revisited and further research was carried out into the origins of bandstands, resulting in understanding the impact of the Glasgow region on the importance of bandstand production as well as, the phenomenal influence of bandstands in parks across the country and beyond. It became clear from this initial research, that bandstands were not simply structures that appeared in parks by accident or without consideration, but were part of a considered movement by reformers and philanthropists in what became known as 'rational recreation', as occurred in Middlesbrough's Albert Park. Asa Briggs and other historians have examined in detail the

³⁴ N. Moorsom, *Albert Park, History, Heritage & Restoration*, Barnsley, Wharncliffe Books, 2002

³⁵ Ibid.

impact of the industrial revolution on communities and the growing conurbations such as London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds.³⁶

Two key areas of research were to emerge. Firstly, the impact of recreation and the role of public parks and what exactly did the early Victorian reformers mean by recreation? What was the history of leisure and how had it become shaped by changing Victorian society as towns and cities grew? Secondly, my research was to show that bandstands proliferated during this period, as was clear from the abundance of Victorian and Edwardian postcard scenes. But where did these structures come from, and how were they designed, constructed, marketed and significantly, how well were they used and was their influence significant as part of the crusade in social reform?

The earliest part of this research was to assess bandstands as a single entity. How many existed? By gathering a vast archive of postcards from a wide range of sources, including Historic England's Nigel Temple Collection³⁷, Heritage Engineering, a company specialising in cast iron restoration, the Scottish Ironwork Foundation³⁸, Historic Environment Scotland, and a small number of individuals who were interested in bandstand architecture³⁹, a vast archive was gathered. This indicated that over 1,500 bandstands were prevalent during the period from the 1860s to the beginning of the Second World War. This was supplemented by newspaper archives including the *Illustrated London News*, as well as local histories of parks collated by parks friends groups, local history societies, County Gardens Trusts and journals including the *Gardener's Chronicle*. It was clear that bandstands were located in public parks, town squares, town gardens, and were popular in the growing number of seaside resorts that were springing up across the country during the latter part of the Victorian era. What was also clear from this research was that whilst they were very popular, very little was known about these iconic structures. Little research or studies into the art and architecture of the bandstand had been undertaken, what influenced their designs, and how their designs evolved over time, considering changing tastes in vernacular during this era, and in particular how they integrated into the wider park landscapes that were appearing across the country.

What this research has also revealed is that the majority of bandstands were not included in the earliest park designs and were often later introductions, such as was the case in Derby Arboretum, Derby; Birkenhead Park, Birkenhead; Battersea Park, London; and Victoria Park, London. This was despite the popularity of the 'orchestras' in the early pleasure gardens in Vauxhall and Cremorne and many others. The 1851 catalogue for the Great Exhibition demonstrates this by their absence, as bandstands were still not commonplace enough for them to attract the attention of manufacturers. It was the advent of the 'iron age' and the use of cast iron that was to have the greatest impact on the art and

³⁶ A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities: Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Middlesbrough*, Penguin, 1990

³⁷ Historic England. "Nigel Temple Collection." Accessed September 17, 2024.

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/collection/TEM01>

³⁸ Scottish Ironwork Foundation. "Home". Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://ironworks.scran.ac.uk/>

³⁹ M. Bradbury, *Pavilions for Music – Bandstands*, unpublished, 2000

architecture of many park features but in particular, the bandstand. Not everyone loved its growing use, with leading art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) and landscape architect Thomas Mawson (1861-1933) both critical of such ornamentation. Yet it was clear that in the second half of the nineteenth century, Scottish cast-iron ornament proliferated beyond expectation and lasted until the First World War. Cast iron flourished roughly from the 1840s to 1914 and reached almost every type of structure and building in Britain: a vast array of street furniture, including such features as piers, pavilions, shelters and of course bandstands.⁴⁰

My research also underlines the importance of the many Scottish iron foundries that were established and historian Paul Dobraszczyk, writing in 2014, calls this proliferation of iron-made ornament as ‘ornament unbound’, ‘visual cultures of display’ and perhaps more tellingly as ‘social ornament.’ Scotland became the workshop of the world and played an important role in this, as did the networks of British engineers, architects, and designers who collaborated on projects worldwide with the archive of postcards indicating bandstands in South Africa, Brazil, Uruguay, Australia and India.⁴¹ Foundry catalogues also provided a rich source of research material available in a number of locations such as the library in Kirkintilloch which holds what is left of the Lion Foundry catalogue archives.⁴² Other sources included a small number of restoration specialists who still hold a number of these very old catalogues – for example *Macfarlane’s Castings – Abridged Illustrated Catalogue No. CXLII*.⁴³ Each of these sources was useful in analysing the evolution and changes in use of such materials as cast iron.

Across the country, when analysing the style and design of bandstands, it was obvious that many reflected local architecture and over time and beyond the Victorian era were becoming inspired by the growing Arts and Crafts movement. The results showed very simple structures with little decoration. This research demonstrates the changes in styles and the evolution to later designs. This is also clear from a simple analysis of historic picture postcards when comparing late Victorian to early and later Edwardian scenes.

Following the Arts and Crafts movement there was a return to much less complex designs with the advent of shell and temple styled bandstands. Examples of these still remain today as can be seen in Clifton Park, Rotherham and in the Arboretum, Walsall. The impact of the Second World War changed everything – including seaside resorts, the use of parks, with the loss of park features including railings, benches and bandstands, and changes in day-to-day leisure and recreational habits.

⁴⁰ P. Dobraszczyk, *Iron, Ornament and Architecture in Victorian Britain*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2014

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Archives Hub. “Lion Foundry.” Accessed September 17, 2024.

<https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/44277a0a-f97c-3a53-9048-e63f386db598>

⁴³ Illustrated Catalogue of Macfarlane's Castings. 6th ed Vol 2 ; Publisher: Walter Macfarlane & Co

This early research and study of the Victorian and Edwardian bandstand eventually resulted in a number of publications specifically on their history, *Bandstands* (2011); *Bandstands of Britain* (2014); and *British Bandstands* (2017). These initial publications ensured a broader understanding of the subject and have made a significant contribution to the wider knowledge of the architecture and design of bandstands and their proliferation, nationwide and eventually worldwide. What had not been fully understood or researched was how bandstands had contributed to leisure and entertainment during this period and their impact on the growing number of public parks. This resulted in the publication of *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure* (2018) commissioned and published by Historic England, and eventually overseen by Liverpool University Press. Further research on the comprehensive history of public parks and how the ‘cultivation of virtue’ as defined by parks historian, the late Hazel Conway was also required which would lead to a greater understanding of the role of bandstands and other forms of entertainment in public parks and seaside resorts.⁴⁴ As previously referenced, this was considerably expanded further in an updated version of this work in 2024.⁴⁵ What was clear from my research was that little work had been undertaken by previous parks or landscape historians, or historians of leisure into the role of music and entertainment in public parks. It will become clear from this commentary and this work that these historians of leisure virtually ignored this issue and those that focused on public parks much later, simply acknowledged the impact of music, entertainment and bandstands, but with no real understanding of its wider influence within society.

It should be noted that there has been considerable research on the evolution of public parks by Conway and others and this includes our earliest parks which were London’s royal parks, which were not open to wider public access until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in some cases. Much has been written on the royal parks over many years, usually as part of a wider narrative of their history⁴⁶ but in some cases as a comprehensive history of each individual one.⁴⁷ For instance, my own research has greatly expanded the knowledge of the royal parks with publications on Hyde Park, Regent’s Park and Richmond Park and includes description of activities and pursuits within them. A number of these early publications were re-visited and are referenced in the submitted works. However, early publications by Jacob Larwood⁴⁸ and J.J. Sexby⁴⁹ should also be referenced as part of this commentary due to their influence and importance and what they tell us about early forms of leisure in municipal parks.

⁴⁴ H. Conway, *People’s Parks - The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991

⁴⁵ H. Conway, P. Rabbitts, *People’s Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, London, John Hudson Publishing, 2024

⁴⁶ P. Rabbitts, *London’s Royal Parks*, Stroud, Shire Publications, 2014

⁴⁷ P. Rabbitts, *Hyde Park – The People’s Park*. Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2015, also P. Rabbitts, *Regent’s Park – From Tudor Hunting Ground to the Present*, Stroud, Amberley Publishing, 2013, and P. Rabbitts, *Richmond Park – From Medieval Pasture to Royal Park*, Stroud, Amberley Publishing, 2016

⁴⁸ J. Larwood, *The Story of the London’s Parks*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1881

⁴⁹ J.J. Sexby, *The Municipal Parks Gardens & Open Spaces of London – Their History and Associations*. London: Elliot Stock, 1905

Yet despite the early importance of these royal parks to London, it was the many later municipal parks that were ignored in terms of their history and importance to London and their contribution to wider leisure and recreation. Writing in 1905, In *The Municipal Parks and Gardens and Open Spaces of London*, Lieutenant J. J. Sexby, the London County Council's first superintendent of parks, highlighted the Corporation of the City of London's responsibility for 6,500 acres of parks and open spaces. One of their roles was to provide public parks in districts where such places of recreation did not already exist. Finsbury Park and Southwark Park opened in 1869 and became the nucleus of the municipal parks of London. Sexby praised the wisdom of this policy as being more 'than justified in the lapse of time, for these parks are now in the midst of a large population, and are invaluable as places of recreation'.⁵⁰ Other parks were to follow and these included Ravenscourt Park, Clissold Park, Dulwich Park, Myatt's Fields and Waterlow Park. It is these parks and open spaces that became available to and open for wider 'public resort'.⁵¹

By 1815 London was already the largest city in the world, but by 1860, the population had increased to 3,188,485 people, the majority who were migrants.⁵² The impact of such population growth on London as a city was dramatic. By the time Queen Victoria was on the throne, Disraeli had informed her that she now reigned over two nations, governed by different laws – the rich (the leisured classes) and the poor (the plebeian masses).⁵³ A thorough review of the literature, including social historians such as Asa Briggs⁵⁴ and Christopher Hibbert,⁵⁵ revealed that this phenomenon differed from place to place and between these distinct social groups. This was nowhere more apparent than in the participation, involvement and pursuit of leisure and amusements where working people were initially denied any effective leisure time whereas 'the leisured classes' could do as they wished. This commonly became defined as 'the problem of leisure'.⁵⁶ This was to form the other key area of this research – what was the impact of recreation and the role of public parks and what exactly did the early Victorian reformers mean by recreation and why have historians of leisure described this as such a problem?

⁵⁰ J.J. Sexby, *The Municipal Parks Gardens & Open Spaces of London – Their History and Associations*. London: Elliot Stock, 1905

⁵¹ H. Conway, P. Rabbitts, *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, London, John Hudson Publishing, 2024

⁵² Old Bailey Online. "Population history of London." Accessed September 17, 2024.

<https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/about/population-history-of-london>

⁵³ C. Hibbert, *The Illustrated London News Social History of Victorian Britain*. London: Book Club Associates, 1975

⁵⁴ A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities: Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Middlesbrough*, Penguin, 1990

⁵⁵ C. Hibbert, *The Illustrated London News Social History of Victorian Britain*. London: Book Club Associates, 1975

⁵⁶ Ibid

The ‘problem of leisure’

Parks historians such as Hazel Conway,⁵⁷ Hilary Taylor⁵⁸ and Harriet Jordan⁵⁹ identified that the beginning of the great municipal parks movement had begun to appear in British towns and cities since the 1840s and partly instigated by the Select Committee of Public Walks in 1833. The initial designs of these new parks and usage had been guided by such Victorian ideas as ‘rational recreation’ – defined by social historian Carole O’Reilly as ‘a blend of genteel strolling with educational possibilities offered by museums and art galleries, where park buildings permitted these facilities’.⁶⁰

What has been clearly apparent from these studies and my research, primarily through a thorough review of the academic literature, and noted very early on, was that the few historians who had studied leisure and recreation, had generally ignored the impact of public parks on society especially during the Victorian era and beyond. The limited studies of leisure that had been undertaken were by historians including Robert Malcolmson (1973)⁶¹, James Walvin (1978)⁶² and Peter Bailey (1987)⁶³ and covered wider leisure activities such as sport, but seemingly ignored the impact of such introductions as the early pre-Victorian pleasure gardens and later public parks. Although they occasionally acknowledged the need for public parks, they did not reference what actually went on in them. It was also observed that the number of historians who had investigated and researched leisure as a distinct subject matter was indeed very limited, Malcolmson, Walvin and Bailey being the most referenced by other historians and academics. A subsequent and further review of the literature also acknowledged a contemporary historian who focuses solely on music and entertainment during this era, Dave Russell, who published *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* who stated:

The view of music as an object of social utility and balm for society’s many evils remained extraordinarily common until at least 1914. Such a view was by no means a Victorian invention but it was in the second half of the nineteenth century that it reached its apotheosis... Music, however, was always a particularly popular component in the various schemes whereby reformers sought social and moral regeneration through ‘rational recreation’.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ H. Conway, *People’s Parks - The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991

⁵⁸ H.A. Taylor, ‘Urban Public Parks: Design and Meaning,’ *Garden History* 23 (2), 201–21, 1995

⁵⁹ H. Jordan, *Public Parks, 1885–1914*, *Garden History* 22(1) (Summer), 85–113, 1994

⁶⁰ C. O’Reilly, “‘We have gone Recreation Mad’”: *The Consumption of Leisure and Popular Entertainment in Municipal Public Parks in Early Twentieth Century Britain.* *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8(2) (November, 2013), 112–28

⁶¹ R.W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700–1850*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973

⁶² J. Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950*, London, Longman, 1978

⁶³ P. Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England – Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830–1885*, London: Methuen, 1987

⁶⁴ D. Russell, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914, A social history*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997

Russell, like other historians, hardly acknowledges the role of music and entertainment in public parks apart from a single reference to the responsibility of the London County Council's Parks and Open Spaces Committee which allowed its musical director, Carl Armbruster, £12,500 per annum to provide concerts in London parks.⁶⁵

So why do these noted historians ignore the impact of public parks and the music and entertainment that occurred within them? An earlier article by Gareth Stedman Jones may explain why so few of them have researched this area. He states:

Few historians are committed functionalists, but it is not uncommon for social historians to fall unconsciously into the functionalist models I have described. This is partly the result of the technical problems of writing history. The historian's problem is generally that he or she knows a great deal about one period, which blurs into a relative ignorance of what became before and what came afterwards.⁶⁶

From the review of the literature available, it was clear that many of these historians agreed on a number of issues with regards to the beginnings of leisure. For instance, Walvin argued 'that leisure was itself a product of industrial society and was therefore concerned primarily with the leisure pursuits of the first industrial nation'.⁶⁷ Malcolmson on the other had observed that popular recreations before the outset of industrialisation and the impact of recreations such as fairs and festivities, were often fired and enhanced by drunkenness.⁶⁸

To understand this 'problem of leisure' – its impact, wider context and transition from popular to rational recreation – and what the perceived impact was of public parks and open spaces, it was necessary to understand those views by the few historians of leisure who openly acknowledged this as an issue and this is covered in considerable detail within the submitted publications.

What is confirmed, without doubt, from the literature review and further research undertaken is that it was industry that changed the face of the country. From my research into public and newspaper archives, it was evident that the majority of the social and economic writers of this period had a low opinion of the moral standards of the common people. The 'manufacturing poor' were perceived as 'very depraved and wicked'.⁶⁹ The new reformers view was that any popular diversions provided should be controlled and restrained, and by doing so, the more

⁶⁵ D. Russell, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914, A social history*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997

⁶⁶ G. Stedman Jones, *Class Expression versus Social Control? A Critique of Recent Trends in the Social History of Leisure*. Oxford University Press, History Workshop, Autumn, 1977, No. 4 (Autumn, 1977, pp. 162-170

⁶⁷ J. Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950*, London, Longman, 1978

⁶⁸ R.W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700–1850*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973

⁶⁹ R. Drew, *A Sermon Preach'd to the Societies for Reformation of Manners*, London, 1735

would the national economy be strengthened and expanded; habits of leisure had to be brought in line with the requirements of efficient and orderly production.⁷⁰

It was however, the Select Committee on Public Walks of 1833 which by now had concluded from its investigations that during the previous fifty years:

from the increased value of Property and extension of Buildings, many inclosures of open spaces in the vicinity of towns have taken place, and little or no provision has been made for Public Walks or Open Spaces, fitted to afford means of exercise or amusement to the middle or humbler classes.⁷¹

It was this that eventually increased the impetus in the move from more traditional to rational recreation. What became clear through this research, particularly in the growth of people's parks, was that industrial society generated new recreations that were meant to be disciplined, controlled, orderly, regimented by rules and timing, and with orderliness among spectators. As those historians of leisure all concluded, from the mid-nineteenth century, these popular recreations were to become major industries. It was through these that we saw the emergence of sports, which became the national games of football, cricket and rugby, and it was these areas that were the principal focus of those historians of leisure.⁷²

The cultivation of virtue

In 2017-18, permission was obtained from the late Hazel Conway's family to update her seminal work, *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Victorian Parks*. Her archive was also made available and gave a greater insight into her research methodology, and the era that she had covered as well as an opportunity to assess what gaps existed within the wider research into public parks. The intention, as previously explained, was to expand on her work which covered parks up to the end of the Victorian era and cover the period beyond, up to the present day. It was then possible, in particular, to update the chapter titled *The Cultivation of Virtue* and add a significant volume of work to this covering further work on the value of music in public parks, based on my own research on this area. This included the role of the bandstand as a result of much more detailed research. As a consequence of this, the opportunity arose to fill in the gaps of knowledge on other forms of entertainment that were to appear and prevail in public parks – palm houses, aviaries and zoos, lidos, paddling pools and swimming pools. This had been excluded from Conway's original book and had not been researched in any detail. In the expanded version, several chapters were also added to cover the period from the twentieth century and beyond, the wider management of public parks, but finally a chapter entitled *Decline, Revival and Renewal – the Role of Parks in the 21st Century*. This was an important addition to the original book as it covered the impact of austerity and latterly the

⁷⁰ R.W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700–1850*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973

⁷¹ Report from the Select Committee on Public Walks, Parliamentary Papers 1833, XV

⁷² H. Conway, P. Rabbitts, *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, London, John Hudson Publishing, 2024

global pandemic of Covid-19 on the role, use and management of public parks which will form part of the summary of this commentary.

It also offered an opportunity to comment on more recent research undertaken by other academics in the last ten years. Much of this additional research was through primary sources, as previously referred to, in the format of Conservation Management Plans. This archive was made available through the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic England, landscape consultants, local authorities, the Gardens Trust and the Parks and Gardens archive at Hestercombe Gardens Trust in Somerset, where a growing archive of Conservation Management Plans is being collected. The archive collated as part of this research was passed to Hestercombe when new information was made available.⁷³

Pleasure Gardens to Public Parks

A detailed review of Conway's research indicated the role of popular amusements and referenced a number of social commentators including W.S. Jevons in 1833 who perceived such amusements as no trivial matter, but rather one that had a great influence on national manners and character.⁷⁴ Jevons is an important commentator for one particular reason as he recognised that there were many means by which recreation and culture could be brought to the masses but what he noted was the cultivation of pure music and its impact. Jevons wrote in 1883 'that music is the best means of popular recreation. It fulfils all the requirements.'⁷⁵

Significantly, what Jevons also recognised was the importance of public parks and that a town was deemed incomplete without one. Jevons wrote of a 'few wealthy men [who] have made the noble present of a park to the borough with which they are connected'⁷⁶ But Jevon's view was that a public park was considered incomplete without its winter garden and music pavilion, and naturally the music pavilion is incomplete without the music: 'It is well to have places where people may take the air; but it is better still to attract them every summer evening into the healthy, airy park by the strains of music.'⁷⁷ Yet what Jevons recognised in 1883 was hardly acknowledged by social historians nearly 100 years later.

However, this research indicates that music was distinctly lacking in Britain up until the late seventeenth century. Music was generally only available in royal circles, theatre, local taverns, inns and clubs. This was to change by the middle of the eighteenth century, with businessmen and their families, rather than the local aristocracy or gentry, who were now the principal consumers of music. What eventually changed was the role of pleasure gardens in defining leisure and recreation of the time.⁷⁸

⁷³ Parks and Gardens. "Explore the rich heritage of parks, gardens & designed landscapes across the UK." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.parksandgardens.org/>

⁷⁴ W.S. Jevons, *Methods of Social Reform and Other Papers*, London, London MacMillan and Co, 1883

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ J. Flanders, *Consuming Passions – Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain*, London, Harper Perennial, 2007

The pleasure gardens

Much has been researched and written on the history of the early pleasure gardens and their evolution by historians including Wroth,⁷⁹ Coke and Borg,⁸⁰ Curl⁸¹ and Conlin.⁸² However, from this research and a detailed review of the literature from these historians, as well as many images from this era available⁸³, it was clearly apparent that the greatest draw to the many pleasure gardens that sprang up across the country was music, which primarily was performed from a purpose built structure that was to have a significant influence on the introduction of bandstands across the many public parks from the 1880s onwards and most clearly demonstrated than in the greatest of all these pleasure gardens – Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens.⁸⁴

From my research and a review of the academic literature on the pleasure gardens, and fully demonstrated in both *Bandstands*⁸⁵ and *People's Parks*⁸⁶, it is clear that the legacy of the pleasure gardens is significant and impacted on the growth of bandstands across the capital and the rest of the country. What this research was also able to demonstrate was that over 150 bandstands were introduced in London's parks alone up until the beginning of the Second World War but also how social meetings of men and women, old and young, rich and poor could be harmoniously organised to share in communal entertainments and festivities – which was to become the essence of the Victorian parks movement and indeed, 'rational recreation'.⁸⁷

The Development of Public and Municipal Parks

With the closure of the pleasure gardens came the accelerated development of public and municipal parks. Parks historians including Hazel Conway,⁸⁸ Harriet Jordan⁸⁹ and Hilary Taylor⁹⁰ have researched this area in detail and this has been expanded upon in the updated version of Conway's book on '*People's Parks*'. In her article in *Garden History*,⁹¹ Taylor references the importance of the Select Committee on Public Walks of 1833.⁹² It reported on the availability of public open spaces in the major industrial towns but it also clearly identified

⁷⁹ W. Wroth, *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century*. London: Macmillan Books, 1896

⁸⁰ D. Coke, and A. Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens – A History*. London, Yale University Press, 2011

⁸¹ J.S. Curl, *Spas, Wells and Pleasure Gardens of London*. Whitstable, Historical Publications Ltd, 2010

⁸² J. Conlin, *The Pleasure Garden, from Vauxhall to Coney Island*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011

⁸³ Yale Center for British Art. "Home." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/>

⁸⁴ P. Rabbitts, *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure*, Swindon, Historic England, 2018

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ H. Conway, P. Rabbitts, *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, London, John Hudson Publishing, 2024

⁸⁷ P. Rabbitts, *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure*, Swindon, Historic England, 2018 and H. Conway, P. Rabbitts, *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, London, John Hudson Publishing, 2024

⁸⁸ H. Conway, *People's Parks - The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991

⁸⁹ H. Jordan, *Public Parks, 1885–1914*, *Garden History* 22(1) (Summer), 85–113, 1994

⁹⁰ H.A. Taylor, 'Urban Public Parks: Design and Meaning,' *Garden History* 23 (2), 201–21, 1995

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² The Select Committee on Public Walks, 1833

that the need for some provision of open space was socially and politically pressing. The ‘problems’, to which the provision of parks were expected to offer some relief, were easy to describe: overcrowding, poverty, squalor, ill-health, lack of morals and morale. There was also a real fear of the:

threat of barbaric behaviour believed to be inherent in an uneducated, newly urban, working class, brutalised first by generations of grubbing a living from the land and made worse by being brought into proximity of the towns, but not yet offered the opportunity to benefit from their civilising influence.⁹³

The leisured classes and reformers were clear on the need for ‘recreative institution’ as the city fathers had identified in Middlesbrough in 1850, when considering a park for its growing town. As in Middlesbrough, elsewhere, there was real concern to improve the lot of the working poor that was mixed with a degree of fear as well as self-interest. Ill-health was a significant argument for the introduction and inclusion of green spaces within towns and the creation of outdoor spaces. Author John Judge in his book *The Outdoor Citizen*, recognises the importance of outdoor spaces as mitigating ill health when he describes an outdoor city as a ‘city rich with thriving green spaces easily accessible by all residents’ and time spent outdoors in green spaces ‘can offer more than just fresh air; it can be calming, healing, and restorative.’⁹⁴ Karen Jones and John Wills in *The Invention of the Park*, reference the 1833 Select Committee on Public Walks but also acknowledge similar concerns in New York in the middle of the nineteenth century. ‘*Scribner’s Monthly* pointed to similar recreational deficiencies in mid-century New York: “There is actually no stroll possible!”’⁹⁵ Jones and Wills also state:

Social campaigners demanded the improvement of urban spaces by the provision of welfare assistance, sanitation, building codes and municipal museums, concert halls and libraries. The park comprised a significant part of their agenda. As an all-purpose medicine for staving off inertia, alienation and social discord, the park amounted to a vital prescription for healing the unsettled. A visit to the park offered the working classes a vital escape from the built environment by entry into a world of greenery, leisure and freedom. Reformers hoped that by retreating into the park urban workers would not only feel healthier – but also psychologically refreshed... To the nineteenth-century social reformer, the formulation of such a landscape served the higher interests of the city in both environmental and social terms.⁹⁶

Jones and Wills refer to the role of parks as ‘social tonics’ within their research, what I have termed ‘rational recreation’.⁹⁷ It was however, American landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, who proclaimed ‘our country has entered upon a stage of progress in which its welfare

⁹³ H.A. Taylor, ‘Urban Public Parks: Design and Meaning,’ *Garden History* 23 (2), 201–21, 1995

⁹⁴ J. Judge, *The Outdoor Citizen*, New York, 2019

⁹⁵ K.R. Jones & J. Wills, *The Invention of the Park*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

is to depend on the convenience, safety, order and economy of life in its great cities.’⁹⁸ It was to Joseph Paxton’s work at Birkenhead Park and J.C. Loudon’s design of Derby Arboretum, that Olmsted was to turn to in his inspiration for Central Park which was completed in 1858. Local authorities soon realised that the working masses would not visit these new parks simply for their own physical well-being, they realised they had to attract people to them. Horticultural displays, and facilities for all kinds of games and sports were provided to make the spaces as inviting as possible and ultimately, one of the most important attractions in the former pleasure gardens - music.⁹⁹ The task, then, was to design a park which required becoming behaviour which would fit the visitor not just for an afternoon’s polite stroll, but also encourage him to fulfil a role deemed appropriate and useful within the community – ‘rational recreation’ or indeed a ‘social tonic’. It is therefore not entirely surprising that one of the most striking themes in many of the public parks was the clear demonstration that virtuous effort leads to just rewards – as Conway described in 1991 and is significantly expanded upon in 2024 – as the cultivation of virtue.¹⁰⁰

My research however discovered that this was not always proven to be that straightforward. The great park designers of the day had to demonstrate mastery over a number of complexities when tackling the layout of areas for recreation. Tea rooms, bandstands, pavilions and seats, lakes with fishing, boating and occasionally swimming were all popular introductions, along with aviaries, palm houses and other distractions.¹⁰¹ London had already enjoyed the benefits of commercial pleasure gardens with both Vauxhall and Cremorne and many others, featuring dancing, fetes, spectacles and fireworks and these had attracted latterly poor publicity. For most park promoters, the kinds of entertainment they had in mind were much more restricted. What were regarded suspiciously as potentially unsocial patterns of behaviour were not to be tolerated.¹⁰² Yet, as this research has demonstrated, and expressed in the gazetteer of bandstands as a result of my research, they were to proliferate.

Bandstands in parks

The many types of buildings that therefore appeared in the early public parks very much related to the whole question of recreation and to the regulation of activities in parks. Analysis of many early paintings and other artwork of the early pleasure gardens has shown that the idea that musicians should be positioned on a raised platform was clearly well established in these eighteenth-century gardens, and also included the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Gardens, Kensington which opened in 1861. The RHS were incredibly well organised and established a music committee with its purpose to judge brass bands performing in both their bandstands. These bandstands were eventually bought by the London County Council and erected in the newly established parks of Southwark Park and Peckham Rye Park. *The South London Press*

⁹⁸ T. Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America*, Baltimore, 1975

⁹⁹ H. Jordan, *Public Parks, 1885–1914*, *Garden History* 22(1) (Summer), 85–113, 1994

¹⁰⁰ H. Conway, P. Rabbitts, *People’s Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, London, John Hudson Publishing, 2024

¹⁰¹ P. Rabbitts, *Great Parks, Great Designers*, Stroud, Amberley Publishing, 2017

¹⁰² H.A. Taylor, ‘Urban Public Parks: Design and Meaning,’ *Garden History* 23 (2), 201–21, 1995

commented on the latter as a ‘handsome structure, which comes with an excellent reputation for sound from one of the exhibitions at South Kensington.’¹⁰³

Local historical studies and newspaper articles, as well as Conservation Management Plans for parks that were researched and investigated, have shown that music had been popular in some of the earliest of parks well before the majority of bandstands were introduced, but the introduction of a bandstand gave a focus to this activity and, as has been noted, in a short space of time, they became incredibly popular. However, many of the earlier parks simply did not have bandstands. This included both Birkenhead Park and Derby Arboretum. When the arboretum opened in Derby in 1840, no permanent bandstand existed although music and dancing was permitted within large tents that were erected.¹⁰⁴ In Birkenhead Park which opened in 1847, a boathouse was constructed which was also designed for the accommodation of a band of musicians, although it was not initially well used. The influence of Paxton’s work at Birkenhead Park was important as it inspired the ultimate design of Central Park, New York with its designer Frederick Law Olmsted having visited both Birkenhead Park and Derby Arboretum. Olmsted recognised in his design for Central Park that ‘The effect of good music on the Park is to aid the mind in freeing itself from the irritating effect of the urban conditions.’¹⁰⁵ Olmsted went on to say:

In other words, the modern city should contain its own antidote in the form of rural parks, which should be sprinkled with garden houses, gazebos, pavilions and *concert groves*, where weary urbanites would be soothed by dulcet tunes.¹⁰⁶

My research also revealed that the term ‘bandstand’ in the earliest of accounts and local authority archives or media was, however, quite uncommon. The *Illustrated London News* frequently from its foundation in the 1840s refers to an ‘orchestra’, ‘platform’, ‘bandhouses’, ‘rotundas’, ‘pavilions’ or ‘kiosks’. One example refers to a fete in Mount Boone Park, Dartmouth, Devon, in 1852 which describes ‘a band ... placed in a rustic orchestra at each end’ and on Woodhouse Moor, Leeds, in 1856, ‘in consequence of the rather high wind which prevailed, the orchestra had been fixed in a hollow near the cricket ground’.¹⁰⁷

As the century advanced, it was the brass band movement which grew rapidly. By 1887, over 40,000 brass bands existed throughout the country, which were ideally suited to playing outdoors even in poor weather.¹⁰⁸ Brass bands flourished with many festivals held, often in the new public parks that were now being laid out. By the 1890s, there were 222 festivals throughout the country. With growing support this movement became one of the nation’s major leisure industries. Social historian, Stephen Etheridge has researched the brass band movement and in particular its role as a provider of rational recreation. He is of the view that industrialists

¹⁰³ *The South London Press*, 13 July 1889

¹⁰⁴ P. Rabbits, *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure*, Historic England, 2018

¹⁰⁵ S.F. Starr, *The Oberlin Book of Bandstands*. Washington: The Preservation Press, 1987

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ M. Bradbury, *Pavilions for Music – Bandstands*; unpublished, 2000

¹⁰⁸ P. Rabbits, *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure*, Swindon, Historic England, 2018

and local communities gave bands the financial support to establish brass bands, as a ‘means to pursue music as a rational recreation, seen by the middle class as a moral, ethical, physical and intellectually improving pastime.’¹⁰⁹ Etheridge in his research also cites historians of leisure such as Peter Bailey,¹¹⁰ Hugh Cunningham¹¹¹ and in particular, Peter Borsay who stated that the lower orders were:

labelled in various ways, for example: as the common people, the mobility, the plebs, the populace, the rabble, the masses, the lower orders, the labouring class, the working class, and the workers; and historians have felt able to identify a particular type of recreational life for this group.¹¹²

Although Etheridge briefly acknowledges the role of parks, outdoor music and that brass carries better in the open air than any other kind of music, my research has shown that the earliest musical performances in the new public parks concentrated on brass bands but that music played a significant role in providing rational recreation for the lower orders.

As demonstrated in *Bandstands*¹¹³ and the expanded version of *People’s Parks*¹¹⁴, I concluded that the introduction of bandstands illustrates how opportunities were taken in the municipal parks to promote education and to cultivate virtue. This research on bandstands has established that the introduction of these icons of public parks had a significant role in the wider ‘cultivation of virtue’ and led to a ‘better use’ of Sundays, and in particular, the ultimate growth of the brass band movement. Brass bands had no longer become a pastime but part of a pattern of life.¹¹⁵ These increasing numbers of brass bands were to fill the many new bandstands in parks for decades to come.¹¹⁶ With this proliferation of brass bands and the burgeoning parks movement, the number of bandstands grew rapidly across the country.

Decline, revival and re-use – assets or liabilities?

Yet times were about to change with the impact of wartime, and beyond. O’Reilly has researched this era in greater detail, publishing in 2019 *The Greening of the City: Urban Parks and Public Leisure, 1840-1939*. This followed her research published in the *International Journal of Regional and Local History* on leisure and entertainment in municipal parks.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ P. Rabbitts, *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure*, Swindon, Historic England, 2018

¹¹⁰ P. Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England – Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830–1885*, London: Methuen, 1987

¹¹¹ H. Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1980

¹¹² P. Borsay, *A history of leisure: The British experience since 1500*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006

¹¹³ P. Rabbitts, *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure*, Swindon, Historic England, 2018

¹¹⁴ H. Conway, P. Rabbitts, *People’s Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, London, John Hudson Publishing, 2024

¹¹⁵ C. Bainbridge, *Brass Triumphant*, London, Frederick Muller, 1980

¹¹⁶ P. Rabbitts, *Bandstands – Pavilions for Music, Entertainment and Leisure*, Swindon, Historic England, 2018

¹¹⁷ C. O’Reilly, “‘We have gone Recreation Mad’: The Consumption of Leisure and Popular Entertainment in Municipal Public Parks in Early Twentieth Century Britain.’ *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8(2) (November, 2013), 112–28, 2013

In her research, O'Reilly refers to the many changes and growth in the provision of leisure and now available to the public, from the end of the First World War and in particular facilities such as dance halls and cinemas. This was as a result of paid holidays, an increase in general affluence and a greater diversity in use of open spaces. O'Reilly describes it as 'a move away from the provision of sporting recreation towards more popular entertainment.'¹¹⁸ What she also recognises and confirmed by my research is that many public parks needed to re-invent themselves between the two world wars in particular. O'Reilly described it as 'a shift away from recreation to entertainment in public parks and a move away from concerns about citizenship and the emergence of and development of the consumer.'¹¹⁹ Parks were struggling to compete with the growth of a whole new industry which was wholly entertainment and leisure focused. O'Reilly calls this 'the advent of popular entertainment.'¹²⁰ Previous historians had identified leisure as a problem but were parks themselves now becoming a problem? Were they now no longer deemed as assets, but liabilities?

A major change was the introduction of the 1925 Public Health Act which enabled local councils to use public parks and pleasure grounds to be used for entertainment and open air concerts. Other legislation was also passed allowing councils to utilise public money to pay for music and wider entertainment in such surroundings as parks.¹²¹ The impact of this was considerable, as areas of public parks and grounds were allocated to sports clubs and societies. As a consequence, many of the original park layouts were altered unsympathetically with these many new introductions. This is evident when reviewing recent Conservation Management Plans which suggests that they were not as carefully integrated, designed or planned as the earlier parks had been. Newer open spaces introduced included King George V Playing Fields which were created as a national memorial to the king. Captain Sandys-Winsch's 1928 designs for Eaton Park in Norwich, whilst admirable, consisted of fourteen football pitches and over fifty tennis courts, but at least included a classical styled bandstand.

O'Reilly summarises that as a result of these changes and demands from a more affluent and informed user group, urban parks were to struggle as a consequence of this shift in demand. Public parks were now having to compete with a greater number of opportunities available. Many parks lost their 'distinctive character as a result'.¹²² One significant consequence was the decline of the bandstand and this was no more felt than in the many public parks in the country.

This research concluded that the bandstand's heyday was at the end of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. Bandstands literally disappeared by the end of the 1970s and this research would suggest this to be true. After the Second World War, demolition

¹¹⁸ C. O'Reilly, "'We have gone Recreation Mad': The Consumption of Leisure and Popular Entertainment in Municipal Public Parks in Early Twentieth Century Britain.' *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8(2) (November, 2013), 112–28, 2013

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ C. O'Reilly, "'We have gone Recreation Mad': The Consumption of Leisure and Popular Entertainment in Municipal Public Parks in Early Twentieth Century Britain.' *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8(2) (November, 2013), 112–28, 2013

¹²² C. O'Reilly, *The Greening of the City: Urban Parks and Public Leisure, 1840-1939*, Routledge, 2019

of bandstands continued and replacement was a rarity. Between 1945 and 1980, the gazetteer compiled through this research highlights that nearly 600 bandstands were lost. Of the ten bandstands erected in Sheffield's parks as early as 1889, only one remains, in the city's Weston Park. In nearby Leeds, of the twenty-one bandstands erected in the city parks, only two now remain.

In 2001, the Urban Parks Forum carried out a major survey of local authority-owned parks within the country, focusing on parks of historic interest. The *2001 Public Park Assessment* in particular found that:

the loss of many of the features traditionally associated with parks and gardens is extensive and acute. In seaside towns, indeed the majority of coastal bandstands were progressively eliminated by many local authorities and where they did remain, were ravaged by the climatic conditions of coastal winters.¹²³

Revival

What was becoming apparent by the end of the twentieth century was central government as well as local authorities were becoming increasingly concerned by the plight of public parks. As previously referenced within this commentary, this was further highlighted in a series of important reports including *Public Prospects: Historic urban parks under threat* published jointly by the Garden History Society and The Victorian Society¹²⁴; *Grounds for Concern* published by the GMB union¹²⁵; and a policy statement and symposium on *The Future of our Urban Parks* by the Landscape Institute. In 1995, Greenhalgh and Worpole published the influential *Park Life* report.¹²⁶ This was followed with *People, Parks and Cities*,¹²⁷ which was commissioned by the Department of the Environment to identify good practice to help halt the decline of urban parks. The Historic England Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England which was established in 1983 also saw an increase in number of historic parks added.

By the mid-1990s there was a major shift in the fortunes of public parks that included the launch of the Heritage Lottery Fund's Urban Parks Programme (UPP) in 1996, as referred to in the introduction. It was set up to spend £50 million over three years and then to end. By 2023, £1 billion had been invested in public parks. This restoration programme has ensured the survival of some of our greatest public parks and as a consequence, seen the restoration of over 120 historic bandstands. This research has fed into local authority park regeneration strategies, and influenced organisations such as Historic England, Historic Environment Scotland and the

¹²³ Urban Parks Forum, *The Public Park Assessment*, 2001

¹²⁴ Garden History Society & Victorian Society, *Public Prospects: Historic urban parks under threat*, 1993

¹²⁵ M. Bramah, *More Grounds for Concern: GMB & ALDO Report on the State of Public Parks, Gardens and Open Spaces*. London: GMB, 1997

¹²⁶ K. Worpole, and L. Greenhalgh, *Park Life – Urban Parks and Social Renewal*. Demos, 1995

¹²⁷ Dept of the Environment, *People, Parks and Cities, A Guide to Current Good Practice in Urban Parks*. London: Department of the Environment, 1996

small number of restoration specialists that operate in the country. This has included restoration and replacement of bandstands in Middlesbrough's Albert Park; Wilton Lodge Park, Hawick; Whitehall Recreation Ground, Rugby; Pump Room Gardens in Leamington Spa; Swanage sea front; Beckenham Recreation Ground, Bromley; Central Vale Park in Todmorden; Cassiobury Park, Watford,¹²⁸ along with international connections made with public park authorities in Portugal, Australia and Uruguay. Who knew that a small town in Uruguay called Fray Bentos had a bandstand in its town square that emanated from a Scottish foundry.¹²⁹

The Impact of this research

At the beginning of this commentary, it was established that the National Lottery Heritage Fund had been responsible for significant funding in the restoration of public parks since 1996 including many bandstands. This research undertaken over the last seven years specifically into the bandstand has also been considerable. Usage of bandstands continues to grow compared to the 1970s and 1980s, with a growing awareness of their importance to our social, cultural and economic wellbeing.¹³⁰ Organisations such as the Victorian Society, Historic England,¹³¹ Historic Environment Scotland, the National Lottery Heritage Fund,¹³² *Country Life* magazine,¹³³ the Gardens Trust, County Garden Trusts,¹³⁴ Green Flag Award, Arts Societies¹³⁵ and National Trust Associations have all acknowledged the impact and importance of this research. It is most welcome.¹³⁶ But there are challenges ahead as local authorities are once again financially challenged.

Yet despite the many challenges faced by local government, today, as a result of this research and ongoing studies into the role and usage of bandstands,¹³⁷ many continue to fulfil their traditional functions as venues for music and band concerts. However they now have to meet wider functions with higher costs to maintain post restoration. In more recent times,

¹²⁸ Lost Art. "Method Statements." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.lostart.co.uk/method-statements.html>

¹²⁹ Sandra Dick, "No longer an eyesore, Scotland's bandstands are back in fashion," *The Herald*, March 17, 2024, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/24184489.no-longer-eyesore-scotlands-bandstands-back-fashion/>

¹³⁰ Lucy Crossley, "Once the centre piece of Britain's open spaces now they're making a comeback: Victorian bandstands are restored to their former glory after an £800million investment programme," *Daily Mail*, May 2, 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3569561/Once-centre-piece-Britain-s-open-spaces-making-comeback-Victorian-bandstands-restored-former-glory-800million-investment-programme.html>

¹³¹ Historic England. "A brief introduction to bandstands." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://heritagecalling.com/2018/07/06/a-brief-introduction-to-bandstands/>

¹³² Paul Rabbitts, "The Story of People's Parks." Heritage Fund, September 10, 2015, <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/blogs/story-peoples-parks>

¹³³ Russell Higham, "How an insatiable appetite for brass-band music gave rise to the bandstand, and how we almost lost them all." *Country Life*, June 26, 2024, <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/architecture/how-an-insatiable-appetite-for-brass-band-music-gave-rise-to-the-bandstand-and-how-we-almost-lost-them-all-270447>

¹³⁴ London Parks and Gardens Trust. "Bandstands in London's parks." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://londongardenstrust.org/features/bandstands.htm>

¹³⁵ Paul Rabbitts, "Become an Instant Expert on the history of the great British park." *The Arts Society*, April 15, 2020, <https://theartsociety.org/arts-news-features/become-instant-expert-history-great-british-park>

¹³⁶ Sandy Murray, "Bandstands: The industry built on Victorian social engineering." *BBC News*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-49472083>

¹³⁷ www.pavilionsformusic.co.uk was established by the author.

particularly from the late 1960s onwards, there has been a wider appreciation of music available on bandstands. Several bands and artists who have appeared on bandstands have included The Who, Pink Floyd and Fleetwood Mac who have performed on Parliament Hill’s bandstand, London; Dire Straits appeared at a concert on Clapham Common bandstand, London; David Bowie’s appearance as part of a Free Festival on the bandstand in Beckenham, Bromley, London, in 1969 eventually led to the listing of this bandstand in 2023 which this research contributed towards; and the Bay City Rollers, the Rubettes, Mungo Jerry, Thin Lizzy and Atomic Rooster were only a few of the famous artists who have appeared in Harlow Town Park in the 1970s. AC/DC were unfortunately unavailable and missed their concert slot.¹³⁸

Derelict bandstands were once symbolic of the decline of a park.¹³⁹ Now they are representative of the renewal of many of our most popular parks and are central to many park restoration and regeneration initiatives,¹⁴⁰ once again owned and enjoyed by their local communities.¹⁴¹

So what is the future of the bandstand today and its importance to contributing to entertainment in many of our public parks in twenty-first century society? It is clear that these iconic features of parks and seaside promenades are popular. Bandstands have been described as the ‘least cynical of public spaces’.¹⁴² After many years of neglect within parks, they have once again been rediscovered with traditional as well as more contemporary music emanating from them. Parks historian Hazel Conway observed that:

Open air music is after all the most democratic form of entertainment. The same attractions apply today that drew people in the 1800s. It’s free, it’s in the open-air and it lifts people’s spirits to hear music.¹⁴³

So, are bandstands still relevant? My research and resulting publications have indicated that they undoubtedly and as a consequence, recently resulted in an article in *Country Life* which reported in June 2024:

A renewed interest and investment in our cities’ outdoor spaces, however, combined with refreshed zeal for anything that enhances mental and physical wellbeing, has led to a rejuvenation of Britain’s parks and gardens — including their bandstands. The

¹³⁸ www.pavilionsformusic.co.uk was established by the author.

¹³⁹ Chris Binding, “Bandstand set for repairs after plans approved.” *BBC News*, July 3, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4ngw4xn24po>

¹⁴⁰ Kathy Bailes, “Ellington Park restoration nears completion with playground ready for use following cafe, toilets and bandstand opening.” *Isle of Thanet News*, August 19, 2021, <https://theisleofthanetnews.com/2021/08/19/ellington-park-restoration-nears-completion-with-playground-ready-for-use-following-cafe-toilets-and-bandstand-opening/>

Craig Williams, “South Lanarkshire: Historic bandstand restored to former glory.” *The Herald*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/23459826.south-lanarkshire-historic-bandstand-restored-former-glory/>

¹⁴¹ Bromley Council. “Bowie Bandstand Appeal.” Accessed September 17, 2024.

<https://www.bromley.gov.uk/parks-open-spaces/bowie-bandstand-restoration-appeal>

¹⁴² P. Rabbitts, “Strike up the band” *BBC Music Magazine*, May 2014, 40-3, 2014

¹⁴³ H. Conway, *People’s Parks – The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991

National Lottery Heritage Fund has been instrumental in that revival by providing funds for park regeneration projects that, since its inception, have helped to restore more than 120 bandstands to Victorian levels of splendour.¹⁴⁴

Certainly music in parks has never been more popular, with many of the larger parks opening their gates to festival goers, concert revellers, Proms in the Park, and rock concerts, erecting significant structures often on a temporary basis to cater for the masses, although this is often controversial in many parks in London.¹⁴⁵ Andrew Smith from the University of Westminster has studied the recent impact of festivals in public parks or and what he terms:

the temporary privatisation of public space to generate financial returns. In park settings, these are enclosures within enclosures, adding to other fencing and undermining the idea that these are ‘open spaces’. While temporary enclosures may seem less fundamental than land sales, fenced off festivals epitomise ‘accumulation by dispossession’ in which ‘common resources are enclosed and transformed into exclusive places.’¹⁴⁶

Despite this creeping privatisation in many of our larger city parks,¹⁴⁷ the continued use of parks has been rediscovered as being a factor in health and well-being. For instance, the array of entertainment on bandstands today is impressive. They are becoming focal points of rejuvenated and busy parks often for a wide variety of musical tastes, theatrical performances, drama and even yoga. As O’Reilly described previously:

in attempting to cater for the twentieth-century appetite for recreation, Britain’s municipal public parks had sought to meet the challenges of the new century and to adapt themselves to a rapidly changing urban landscape.¹⁴⁸

O’Reilly is correct in her analysis, but as Smith has alluded to, creeping privatisation is a factor as local authorities and organisations like the Royal Parks continue to grapple with increasing visitor numbers and declining budgets.¹⁴⁹ However, it is also clear from my research that

¹⁴⁴ Russell Higham, “How an insatiable appetite for brass-band music gave rise to the bandstand, and how we almost lost them all.” *Country Life*, June 26, 2024, <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/architecture/how-an-insatiable-appetite-for-brass-band-music-gave-rise-to-the-bandstand-and-how-we-almost-lost-them-all-270447>

¹⁴⁵ A. Smith, *Beyond the pale: Fencing off parks for festivals*, Urban Studies, 2023

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, A., Osborn, G., and Vodicka, G., “Private events in a public park: Contested music festivals and socio-spatial justice in Finsbury Park, London.” Accessed September 17, 2024, <https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/item/v772y/private-events-in-a-public-park-contested-music-festivals-and-socio-spatial-justice-in-finsbury-park-london>

¹⁴⁸ C. O’Reilly, “‘We have gone Recreation Mad’: The Consumption of Leisure and Popular Entertainment in Municipal Public Parks in Early Twentieth Century Britain.” *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8(2) (November, 2013), 112–28, 2013

¹⁴⁹ Bridget Galton, “Finsbury Park is the wrong place for major concerts,” *Hackney Gazette*, July 3, 2023, <https://www.hackneygazette.co.uk/news/23629911.finsbury-park-wrong-place-major-concerts/>; APSE, “Over 80% of local councils expect cuts in their parks budgets.” March 15, 2023. Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/news/articles/2023/over-80-of-local-councils-expect-cuts-in-their-parks-budgets/>

bandstands within public spaces have had to adapt otherwise they would never have survived. Many local authorities and other organisations have acknowledged this once again.¹⁵⁰ Life has returned to many of these neglected performance platforms in countless of our public parks and continues to do so to this day.

Final Summary, Conclusion and the Future?

In the final chapter of *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, a number of thoughts about what the future holds for public parks and what we may have learnt from history are stated. There has been a proliferation of reports and studies from a number of academic institutions, social and landscape historians, public realm experts, and environmental psychologists over the last twenty years on the value of public parks and their subsequent decline, so dramatically observed by the loss of such features as bandstands and other elements of 'parkitecture'. These include the University of Leeds,¹⁵¹ Manchester University,¹⁵² Sheffield Hallam University,¹⁵³ University of Westminster,¹⁵⁴ and the University of Exeter.¹⁵⁵ What each study as well as this research acknowledges are the benefits of parks and green spaces to society and how their history has influenced the way we now think about them. This is reflected in the many academic publications over recent years that have included *The Regeneration of Public Parks* by Jan Woudstra and Ken Fieldhouse,¹⁵⁶ *Urban Open Spaces*, by Helen Woolley,¹⁵⁷ *Why Public Space Matters* by Setha Low,¹⁵⁸ *Public Parks – The Key to Livable Communities* by Alexander Garvin,¹⁵⁹ *A Walk in the Park – The Life and Times of a People's Institution* by Travis Elborough,¹⁶⁰ and *Why Cities Need Large Parks* by Richard Murray.¹⁶¹ My research aligns with the findings of these institutions and publications and is referenced and has shaped much of the research for *People's Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*. Yet despite this wealth of research, the recent decline of parks is concerning in spite of the increased profile parks has had since the global pandemic of Covid-19. There are however, changes afoot. Politicians, empowered with this body of research, have started to reassess the value of public parks and in particular, in tackling the

¹⁵⁰ P. Rabbits, "Strike up the band" *BBC Music Magazine*, May 2014, 40-3, 2014

¹⁵¹ Leeds University. "What makes a park feel safe or unsafe? Findings of new research into women and girls' views on safety in West Yorkshire's parks." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://futureofparks.leeds.ac.uk/>

¹⁵² University of Manchester. "Build parks to climate proof our cities." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/news/build-parks-to-climate-proof-our-cities/>

¹⁵³ Sheffield Hallam University. "New report highlights critical need for future investment in parks." Accessed September 17, 2017. <https://www.shu.ac.uk/news/all-articles/latest-news/parks-for-people#:~:text=The%20research%2C%20conducted%20by,funded%20Parks%20for%20People%20programme>

¹⁵⁴ University of Westminster. "Protecting public access to urban green spaces." Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/research/impact/protecting-public-access-to-urban-green-spaces>

¹⁵⁵ University of Exeter. "Parks and green spaces of England and Wales valued at £25.6 billion a year." Accessed September 17, 2024. https://news-archive.exeter.ac.uk/research/articles/title_910082_en.html

¹⁵⁶ J. Woudstra and K. Fieldhouse, *The Regeneration of Public Parks*, Spon, London, 2000

¹⁵⁷ H. Woolley, *Urban Open Spaces*, London and New York, Spon, 2003

¹⁵⁸ S. Low, *Why Public Space Matters*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023

¹⁵⁹ A. Garvin, *Public Parks – The Key to Livable Communities*, New York, London, 2011

¹⁶⁰ T. Elborough, *A Walk in the Park – The Life and Times of a People's Institution*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2016

¹⁶¹ R. Murray, *Why Cities Need Large Parks*, New York, Routledge, 2022

impacts of climate change and declining public health. But there is still a long way to go before these spaces are adequately funded and made sustainable for current and future generations. However, one academic, Katy Layton-Jones in her work for Historic England¹⁶² concluded in her research into parks funding that the local government model, sufficiently funded, was the most obvious to ensure the survival of our wealth of public parks. What my research into bandstands and people's parks has shown is that since the beginning of the great parks movement, through wartime to the latter part of the twentieth century, whilst our most important and historic parks have endured, we continue to invest in them, but do so in short-term cycles, prolonging a boom and bust scenario. It clearly does not work and cannot be sustainable. This requires further research to be undertaken.

The loss of bandstands along with other park architecture is symptomatic of this cycle. It is surely an opportune time to consider more radical alternatives to how we manage the 27,000 parks and open spaces across the nation. This could include removing the responsibility for them from local government altogether as their financial obligations are further stretched with likely increases in social welfare and health care obligations. In essence, local government simply can no longer afford to look after our nation's parks. Further analysis of how organisations such as the National Trust, National Parks and Wildlife Trusts who manage vast areas of land and open spaces may give some insight into an alternative model of management – Parks England perhaps? They are vital to our way of life and whilst no longer simply 'cultivating virtue', we have much to learn from their history.

Reflecting on their history, Liverpool City Council nearly 100 years ago recognised the value of these open spaces, writing in 1934, that 'whatever the views of our forefathers might have been as to expenditure on parks and open spaces, it is certain that today they remain an essential part of the health services of a modern urban area.'¹⁶³

Parks historian Harriet Jordan has studied public parks for decades. Her research concluded that parks simply 'made the people happier and therefore better citizens'.¹⁶⁴ This is a simplistic summation. O'Reilly acknowledges that the reality was considerably more complicated stating that parks were not only highly contested, but at time could be divisive and occasionally, contentious spaces. They regularly were seen as failing to deliver what was on offer and were overly expensive to maintain. Yet, they were also loved and valued by many, including those who visited, used them regularly as well as maintained them. She concludes 'it is in the influence that they exerted on the imagination of the general public that we find the true value and benefit of these open, green spaces'.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Matthew Appleby, "Historic England parks funding report "challenges political direction." *Horticulture Week*, <https://www.hortweek.com/historic-england-parks-funding-report-challenges-political-direction/parks-and-gardens/article/1412540>

¹⁶³ Liverpool City Council 1934, 4.

¹⁶⁴ H. Jordan, Public Parks, 1885–1914, *Garden History* 22(1) (Summer), 85–113, 1994

¹⁶⁵ C. O'Reilly, *The Greening of the City: Urban Parks and Public Leisure, 1840-1939*, Routledge, 2019

Jones and Wills questioned whether parks should be considered as ‘utopia’ although ‘the idea of the park as utopia initially confounds.’¹⁶⁶ According to them, utopia ‘bespeaks the perfection of civilization, a perfect state of governance and politics, rather than a world removed from society.’¹⁶⁷ Certainly utopian aspirations were evident in the engineering of the creation of Central Park, New York with Olmsted seeking to ‘cast nature as social uplift, his designs promising the renewal of core human values: dignity, peace and personal esteem.’¹⁶⁸ Similar aspirations were held by Sir Ebenezer Howard’s plans for the Garden City movement, with the ‘marrying of greenery, civility and public order.’¹⁶⁹ Certainly, the many great reformers of the nineteenth-century parks movement and their quest for ‘rational recreation’ and the ‘cultivation of virtue’ would have seen parks as ‘idealised spaces for leisure, contemplation and hope’ and ‘presented utopian landscapes in the making.’¹⁷⁰ Whether public parks today would be seen as utopias is questionable, with Jones and Wills referencing the manufactured fantasy realm of Disneyland as the most conscious attempt at ‘utopia made’¹⁷¹.

The anonymous commentator writing in *London Gardener* as the Perambulator, in 2020, stressed the importance of parks, stating, ‘Free access to good parks and gardens is as fundamental to physical and mental health as free access to health care’¹⁷². They also highlighted how the Covid-19 pandemic had shown the recent impact of austerity and was contemptuous of the many ‘parks experts’ who they blame for the ‘disastrous project to reduce councils to mere commissioning bodies, siphoning public money into the private sector and selling off public assets’.¹⁷³ Again, this raises the question as to whether local authority management is the most suitable option for the management of our public parks.¹⁷⁴ This may no longer be the case.

Academics, historians and environmentalists such as Holme (1934), Jordan (1994), Jones and Wills (2005), O’Reilly (2019), The Perambulator (2020) along with Hazel Conway and others have all acknowledged the value of parks and green spaces and recognise many of them as wonderful legacies of the Victorian era to the present day. However, over the last twenty years, academics, and politicians in central and local government and organisations such as Historic England, Natural England and the National Trust are still debating the value of these incredible assets. A recent study in the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* observed sedentary recreation (described as reading, lying down, or sitting) in parks in the City of Liverpool, New South Wales, Australia and concluded that parks should be designed to offer adequate amenities for leisure in addition to physical activity through the provision of adequate green

¹⁶⁶ K.R. Jones & J. Wills, *The Invention of the Park*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Frank Manuel and Fritzie Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1979

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² The Perambulator, *The London Gardener*, 2020.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ K.L. Jones, *History of Public Park Funding and Management (1820–2010)*, Historic England, Research Report Series no. 20/2016

spaces.¹⁷⁵ It may be the time to consider ‘sedentary recreation’ as a way forward in how we use parks or is it really that different to what O’Reilly defined as ‘a blend of genteel strolling with educational possibilities.’¹⁷⁶

Over the last thirty five years, my work has given me a significant insight into the history of these important public spaces and has allowed me to explore many aspects of their social history, design and complex relationships within many of them. The impact of leisure, entertainment and music within them has been a predominant theme throughout this research, with each publication highlighting the importance of this. This work has been valuable, especially when delivering the restoration of many of these spaces, and directly, so many bandstands have been reclaimed and once again re-used – from the Scottish Borders to the south coast of England, and each has benefitted from this research and this will continue into the future.

Yet this research comes with yet another warning of the failure to ignore its findings as well as of those from other academic institutions. This can be summarised as follows. The history of Albert Park, Middlesbrough has been referenced throughout this commentary and within the broader research area. As a reminder, it was donated to the people of Middlesbrough in 1868 as part of the move towards rational recreation. The bandstand was added later but after the Second World War, decline was to set in with its eventual removal. By the 1970s the park was in such poor condition, it was feared that restoration was becoming unlikely. Restored as a result of National Lottery Funding in 2000, the bandstand was returned based on its historic original design from a Scottish foundry, and the park was to flourish for the next twenty years. By 2024, the park is once again in decline, staff have been lost and the bandstand is deemed only in ‘adequate’ condition. It seems once again, that history is repeating itself as we enter yet another boom and bust cycle. This is not sustainable.

¹⁷⁵ S. Mazumbar, A. Eaton, S. Chong, B. Jalaudin, K. Wardle, D. Merom, *Green Grass in Urban Parks Are a Necessary Ingredient for Sedentary Recreation*, Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, Vol. 42, Issues 2, Summer 2024, pp. 24-40

¹⁷⁶ C. O’Reilly, “‘We have gone Recreation Mad’”: *The Consumption of Leisure and Popular Entertainment in Municipal Public Parks in Early Twentieth Century Britain.* International Journal of Regional and Local History, 8(2) (November, 2013), 112–28

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