

# London Parks & Gardens

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTORY

*London, thou art the Flour of cities all.*

—WILLIAM DUNBAR, 1465–1530.



LONDON has a peculiar fascination of its own, and to a vast number of English-speaking people all over the world it appeals with irresistible force. So much has been said and written about it that the theme might seem to be worn out, yet there are still fresh aspects to present, still hidden charms to discover, still deep problems to solve. The huge, unwieldy mass, which cannot be managed or legislated for as other towns, but has to be treated as a county, enfolds within its area all the phases of human life. It embraces every gradation from wealth to poverty, from the millionaire to the pauper alien. The collection of buildings which together make London are a most singular assortment of innumerable variations between beauty and ugliness, between palaces and works of art and hovels of sordid and unlovely squalor.

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An Englishman must be almost without soul who can stand for the first time unmoved within the precincts of Westminster Abbey or look without satisfaction at the faultless proportions of St. Paul's. The sense of possession, the pride of inheritance, are the uppermost feelings in his mind. But he who loves not only London itself with a patriotic veneration, but also his fellow-men, will not rest with the inspection of the beautiful. He will journey eastward into the heart of the mighty city, and see its seething millions at work, its dismal poverty, its relentless hardness. The responsibility of heirship comes over him, the sadness, the pathos, the evil of it all depresses him, the hopelessness of the contrast overpowers him; but apart from all ideas of social reform, from legislative action or philanthropic theories, there is one thin line of colour running through the gloomy picture. The parks and gardens of London form bright spots in the landscape. They are beyond the pale of controversy; they appeal to all sections of the community, to the workers as well as to the idlers, to the rich as well as to the poor, to the thoughtful as well as to the careless. From the utilitarian point of view they are essential. They bring new supplies of oxygen, and allow the freer circulation of health-giving fresh air. They are not less useful as places of exercise and recreation. They waft a breath of nature where it is most needed, and the part they play in brightening the lives of countless thousands cannot be over-estimated.

The parks and gardens of London have a past full of historical associations, and at the present time their full importance is slowly being realised. Much has been done to improve and beautify them, but much

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remains to be achieved in that direction before their capabilities will have been thoroughly developed. The opportunity is great, and if only the best use can be made of it London Parks could be the most beautiful as well as the most useful in the world. It is impossible to praise or criticise them collectively, as they have different origins, are administered by separate bodies, and have distinct functions to perform. It cannot be denied that the laying out in some and the planting in other cases could be improved. Plans could be carried out with more taste than is sometimes shown, and new ideas be encouraged, but on the whole there is so much that is excellent and well done that there is a great deal to be proud of.

The various open spaces in London can easily be grouped into classes. First there are the Royal Parks, with a history and management of their own; then there are all the Parks either created or kept up by the London County Council, and most of the commons and other large open spaces are in their jurisdiction also, though a few parks and recreation grounds are under the borough councils. Municipal bodies for the most part take charge of all the disused burial grounds converted into gardens, though some are maintained by the parish or the rector. Then there is another class of garden which must be included, namely, all the squares of London, as, although few are open to the public, they form no insignificant proportion of the unbuilt area.

All through London there are survivals of old gardens, which are still either quiet and concealed, or thrown open to the public. Such are the grounds of the Charterhouse, of Chelsea Hospital, or of the Foundling

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Hospital, and of other old-world haunts of peace. The rarest thing in London are the private gardens, yet they too go to make up the aggregate lungs of the city. Out of a total of upwards of 75,000 acres there are in round numbers some 6000 acres of parks, commons, squares, and open spaces in London: of these a little over 4000 acres are in the hands of the London County Council. Besides this it administers nearly 900 acres outside the county. The City of London owns large forest tracts, commons, and parks beyond the limit of the County of London—Epping, Burnham Beeches, Highgate Wood, and parks in West Ham, Kilburn, &c.—altogether nearly 6500 acres.

London is such a wide word, it is difficult to set a limit, and to decide what open spaces actually belong to London. As the town stretches away into the country, it is impossible to see the boundaries of London. The line must be drawn near where the chimney-pots become incessant, and the stems of the trees become black. But the degree of blackness, dirt, and density is impossible to decide; so a prosaic, matter-of-fact, but necessary rule has been adhered to in the following pages, of keeping as strictly as possible to the actual defined limits of the County of London. Therefore all the parks owned by the City Corporation or London County Council outside this limit have not been dealt with, and such places as Chiswick, Kew, Richmond, or Gunnersbury have been omitted.

To get to some of these places involves a considerable journey. Many of the outlying parks have to be reached by train, or by a very long drive, or tram ride. From Hyde Park Corner, for instance, to Bostall Wood or Avery Hill is a long expedition. To the fortunate

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few who possess motor cars the distances are trifling, but the vast majority of people must exercise considerable ingenuity, and possess a good bump of locality, if they wish to visit all London's open spaces. A knowledge of the distant places, the names of which are inscribed in large letters on every omnibus, is necessary. The Royal Oak, Elephant and Castle, or Angel, are but starting-places for the more distant routes, although they form the goal of green, red, or blue 'busses. The electric trams of South London have made the approach to Dulwich, Peckham, Greenwich, and many other parks much more simple, and motor 'busses rattle along close to even the distant Golder's Hill or Highbury Fields. With a railway time-table, a good eye for colour in selecting the right omnibus, and a knowledge of the points of the compass, every green patch in London can be reached with ease, even by those whose purses are not long enough to let them indulge in motors, or whose nerves are not steady enough to let them venture on bicycles.

Each park forms the central point of some large district, and they are not dependent on the casual visitor for appreciation. Every single green spot, on a fine Saturday throughout the year, is peopled with a crowd from the neighbourhood, and on every day in the year, winter as well as summer, almost every open space has a ceaseless throng of comers and goers.

What is the cost of maintenance of these parks is a question that will naturally occur; and the answer in many cases is easy to find, as the statistics of both the London County Council Parks, published in their hand-book, and those of the Royal Parks, which are submitted to Parliament every year, are accessible. The following extracts may, however, be useful. In looking at the

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two sets of figures, of course the acreage must be borne in mind, and the great expense of police in the Royal Parks, amounting to £8782 for Hyde Park alone, must be deducted before any fair comparison can be made, even when results are not considered.

	1907-8.						1906-7.
	Acres.	Wages and Salaries.	Police, Park-keepers.	New Works and Alterations.	Maintenance.	Total.	Total.
1. Greenwich	185	£ 225	£ 1,090	£ 175	£ 3,737	£ 5,319	£ 4,554
2. { Hyde Park St. James's Green Park }	509½	724	12,153	4,965	50,886	69,269	48,835
3. Kensington Gardens	274	138	1,590	50	5,831	7,730	7,804
4. { Regent's Park and Primrose Hill }	472½	290	2,171	300	11,417	14,542	13,329

*Taken from the Estimates for 1907-8.*

	Acres.	Net Aggregate Capital Expenditure.	Average Cost of Maintenance.	Number of Staff.
Battersea . . . . .	199	£ 21,042	£ 10,897	92
Brockwell . . . . .	127¼	114,322	4,493	34
Dulwich . . . . .	72	45,510	3,330	28
Finsbury . . . . .	115	137,934	7,649	52
Victoria . . . . .	217	38,430	12,099	107
Waterlow . . . . .	26	11,178	2,658	24

*Taken from L.C.C. Handbook No. 1009, 1906.*

London has always been a city of gardens, and although much boast is made of the newly-acquired open spaces, a wail for those destroyed would have equal justification. It is very terrible that everything in life

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has to be learnt by slow and hard lessons, dearly purchased under the iron rod of experience. It is not till the want of a green spot is brought painfully home to people by its loss, that the thought of saving the last remaining speck of greenery is borne in upon them with sufficient force to transform the wish into action. For generations garden after garden has passed into building land. No one has a right to grudge the wealth or prosperity that has accrued in consequence, but the wish that the benevolence and foresight of past days had taken a different bent, and that a more systematic retention of some of the town gardens had received attention, cannot be banished.

When Roman civilisation had been swept away in Britain, and with it all vestiges of the earliest gardens, there are no vestiges of horticulture until Christianity had taken hold of the country, and religious houses were rising up in various parts of the kingdom. The cradle of modern gardening may be said to have been within the peaceful walls of these monastic foundations. In no part of the country were they more numerous than in and around London, and it is probable that every establishment had its garden for the supply of vegetables, and more particularly medicinal herbs. Attached to most of them, there was also a special garden for the production of flowers for decoration on church festivals. It is probable that the earliest London gardens were of this monastic character, and as long as the buildings were maintained the gardens were in existence. The Grey, the Black, the White, and the Austin Friars all had gardens within their enclosures; and the Hospitaller Orders—the Templars and Knights of St. John—had large gardens within their precincts. The Temple

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Garden is still one of the charms of London, but only the old gateway of the Priory of St. John in Clerkenwell remains, and the garden, with all its historical associations, has long since vanished. It was in a small upper room, “next the garden in the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in England, without the bars of West Smythfield,” that Henry VII., in the first year of his reign, gave the Great Seal to John Morton, Bishop of Ely, and appointed him Chancellor, and he “carried the seal with him” to his house, Ely Place, hard by.<sup>1</sup> These small references show the picturesque side of such events, the gardens constantly being the background of the scenes.

It is only one more of the regrettable results of the barbarous way in which the Reformation was carried out in England, that the gardens shared the fate of the stately buildings round whose sheltering walls they flourished. It is not easy to picture the desolation of those days: the unkept, uncared-for garden, trodden under foot, makes the forlorn aspect of the despoiled monasteries more pathetic.

London was a city of palaces in Plantagenet times, and the great nobles had their gardens near or surrounding their castles. Bayard’s Castle, facing the river for centuries, had its gardens, and there were spacious gardens within the precincts of the Tower when it was the chief royal residence in London, and outside the walls of the City fine dwellings and large gardens were clustered together. Among the most famous in the thirteenth century was the Earl of Lincoln’s, purchased from the Dominicans, when they outgrew their demesne in Holborn, and migrated to the riverside, where their

<sup>1</sup> Close Roll, Henry VII.



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memory ever lives under their popular name of the Black Friars. Minute accounts of the expenses of this garden are preserved in the Manor Roll, and a very fairly accurate picture of what it was can be pieced together. The chief flowers in it were roses, and the choicest to be found at that date, the sweet-scented double red “*rosa gallica*,” would be in profusion. It might be that, in the shady corners of the garden, periwinkle trailed upon the ground, and violets perfumed the air. White Madonna lilies reared their stately heads among the clove pinks, lavender, and thyme. Peonies, columbines, hollyhocks, honeysuckle, corncockles, and iris, white, purple, and yellow, made no mean show. The orchard could boast of many kinds of pears and apples, cherries and nuts. A piece of water described as “the greater ditch”<sup>1</sup> formed the fish stew where pike were kept and artificially fed. Besides all this, there was a considerable vineyard. It was thought a favourable spot for vines, and the Bishop of Ely’s vineyard, the site of which is still remembered by Vine Street, was hard by. A good deal of imagination is now required to conjure up a picture of a vintage in Holborn. Amid the crowd of cabs, carts, carriages, and omnibuses rolling all day over the Viaduct from Oxford Street to the heart of the City, it needs as fertile a brain as that of the poet who pictured the vision of poor Susan as she listens to the song of the bird in Wood Street to call up such a scene. The gardens sloping down to the “bourne” were carefully enclosed—the Earl of Lincoln’s by strong wooden palings, that of Ely Place by a thorn hedge with wooden gates fitted with keys and locks.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> MSS. Manor Roll in the Record Office.

<sup>2</sup> MSS. Manor Roll, Archives of Ely Cathedral.

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inner gardens, that were specially reserved for the Bishop, the great garden and the “grassyard,” were separated by railings and locked doors from the vineyard. The “grassyard” was mown, and a tithe of the proceeds from the sale of the grass paid to the Rector of St. Andrew’s, Holborn. The wine produced was more of the character of vinegar, and was also sold; as much as thirty gallons of this “verjuice” was produced in one year. Extra hands were hired to weed and dress the vineyard, and apparently the vineyard entailed a good deal of trouble, and for many years it was let. Think of a warm day in early autumn, clusters of grapes hanging from the twisted vines, men and women in gay colours carrying baskets of ripe fruit to the vats where they were trodden, and the crimson juice squeezed out; the mellow rays of the sinking sun light up the high walls and many towers of the City, and the distant pile of Westminster is half hidden by the mists rising from the river, while there, too, the vintage is in full swing, and the song<sup>1</sup> of the grape-gatherers breaks the stillness of the October evening. Away to the north the landscape is bounded by the wooded heights of Hampstead and Highgate. Most of the country round London then was forest land, and in spite of the changes of centuries a few acres of the original forest remain in Highgate Woods to this day, now owned by the Corporation of London. Between the hills and the city on the north-east lay the marshy ground known as Moorfields, for some 800 years the favourite resort of Londoners wishing to take the air. Gradually this open space has been built over, although a few green patches, such as Finsbury Square, the Artillery Ground, or the more

<sup>1</sup> See Alexander Necham, *De Naturis Rerum*, twelfth century.