

Victoria Park

Background

In the early 19th century, social reformers pointed out the link between the sanitary conditions of working-class Londoners in areas like the east end and the rising number of infections like cholera and typhoid disease. The newly-appointed Registrar-General made his first report in 1839 and revealed that the mortality rate in east London was far higher than elsewhere in the capital. And doctors also warned that disease wouldn't stay in one place, and frightened the Victorian middle-classes with a vision of infection spreading from the poorer districts into the more comfortable areas of the city.

The general view at the time was that infection was carried in the air and that plenty of ventilation and fresh air would be the best way to counter to airborne infection. But, quite evidently, there was very little access to fresh air amongst the east end slums. And so a campaign began to provide some kind of public open space for the east enders living in the most crowded areas like Shadwell, Limehouse and Wapping.

The large open space from Limehouse up as far as the Mile End Road was identified as the site for a public park, and funds were allocated by the government from the sale of the late Duke of York's property near the Strand. He had died heavily in debt and most of his estate was forfeited to the Treasury. The space was right on the doorsteps of the Limehouse slums. However there were problems with this proposal: the land was quite expensive and included the village of Bromley-by-Bow and a few factories. There would be considerable amounts of compensation involved. The alternative was a smaller area to the north of the Mile End Road, that was cheaper and had less obstacles. There were only a couple of fruit tree nurseries and a proposed Sephardic Jewish cemetery, which would be offered a substitute further north (still there today in Lauriston Road).

The new site for the park wasn't as close to its intended beneficiaries as was the southern site, however, and its flat landscape was less promising for landscaping purposes. It also had little or no water available and the soil was poor. Apart from the cheaper cost, it was favoured by government because the area was used as a rallying point for demonstrations and protests, and towards the east the district was notorious as a hide-out for criminals on the run. This would solve two problems at once. Not surprisingly, the northern site was the one chosen.

The Park is planned

The architect James Pennethorne was appointed as surveyor and designer of the proposed Victoria Park. He had been a favoured pupil of John Nash, the Prince Regent's favourite architect and the man behind Regent Street and Regent's Park amongst other projects. (Pennethorne was, so the gossip went, Nash's illegitimate son.) The plan was to build desirable terraces around the edge of the park, the income from which would help finance the project and pay for its continuing maintenance thereafter. This wasn't successful however: not enough rich people could be persuaded to move eastwards, and only a few of the planned grand houses were built, for example at St Agnes Gate.



Boating Lake with the Family launch



Deer enclosure (removed in 1990s)



Distribution of surplus plants



Queen Victoria visits in 1873 - John Brown riding behind



The Gatehouse at Bonner Gate
(destroyed by bombing in WW2)



Speaker at public meeting

His plan was for the western side of the park to be a formal space of trees, flower-beds, lawns, and a carriage drive that might please the hoped-for wealthier residents, while the eastern side would be mostly open grassland where the working class families could walk and play games without offending those using the western half. The park would be approached from the City side to Bonner Hall Gate, the main gate, across the Regent's Canal by an impressive bridge from a trio of grand roads with expensive villas lining them. The government weren't happy: never before had they spent so much money on a public improvement, one that previously would have been funded by a philanthropic landowner or charitable patron. What would the working classes want next?

An extraordinary 32,000 trees were planted, representing many species.

The Park opens

After work started on the Park, the locals clamoured to use it as soon as possible. It was soon dubbed 'the People's Park'. There was one major problem: it was not near the slum districts of Limehouse and Wapping, and worse, there was no direct walking route there, never mind public transport. It relied on banking heiress, Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts to fund the building of a road from Docklands up to the Park, which was named Burdett Road in her honour. Pennethorne designed small Tudor-Gothic lodges for the Park entrances, and a larger Superintendent's House in the same style at the Bonner Hall Gate (destroyed in World War 2). Additionally there were introduced features like the Boating Lake, Grotto, Waterfall, Pagoda, and Moroccan Arcade in the western Park, and a Bowling Green, the Burdett-Coutts Fountain, Glass hot-house, bandstand and a bathing lake on the eastern side. Pubs soon opened near the gates to the eastern half. Planned features that didn't materialise were a maze and a proposed miniature steam railway.

The park authorities were offered various features like statues and memorials but turned them down - except for two. One were the pair of alcoves from old London Bridge, demolished in xxxx and rescued from a builder's yard. The other, was the magnificent Burdett-Coutts Drinking Fountain. In today's money it would cost £1 million or more. Working class Londoners didn't often have access to clean water for drinking and this was a real treat. Water poured from the stone ewers and drinkers could collect it in silver goblets attached to chains. It was designed by Henry Darbishire, Burdett-Coutts' favourite architect and also the architect of the Peabody estates.

It officially opened in 1845 as a Royal Park, but without any ceremony, and it was immediately popular with the locals. In fact people had been using it before opening day. On Good Friday in its first year, 25,000 people visited the park. Especially, popular was the Men's Bathing Lake. You have to remember that few working class people lived in houses with washing facilities, and the Park became an early morning visit for men on the way to work. The bathing lake was used by the men who previously bathed in the Regent's Canal. Pennethorne was in favour of a bathing lake because he feared that the sight of the naked men who bathed in the Canal would turn away likely residents of his proposed park villas. The lake became so heavily used that it had to be enlarged several times and then replaced completely with a new one. Eventually, women got their own bathing lake, and finally in 1933 the London County Council built the very popular open-air Lido, now demolished.

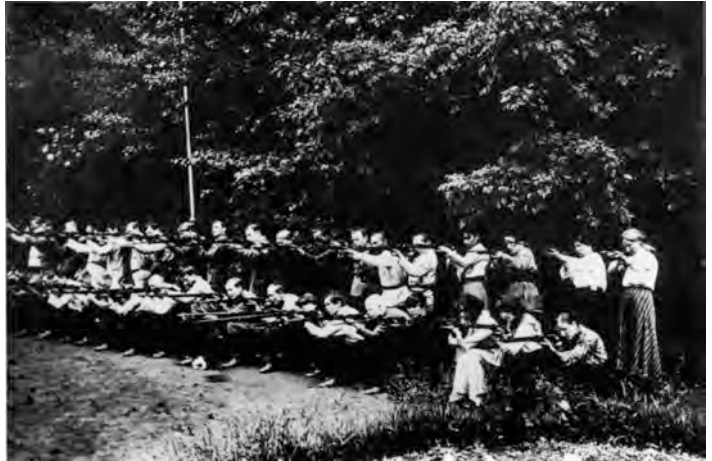
1873: Queen Victoria visits Park via St Agnes Gate, accompanied by Mr John Brown



Model Steam Boat Club



Open Air Theatre (demolished 1989)



Rifle Club in 1913 - note men and women members



The popular Lido (closed 1989).
Note the boys climbing in over



One of two London Bridge Alcoves

Moorish Arcade shelter
(demolished 1956)



In the 1870s 200,000 bedding plants were being raised in the park nursery each year with the surplus given away to locals.

Pursuits in the Park

The park soon became hosts to all kinds of pursuits: a Model Steam Boat Club (the oldest in the world), Victoria Park Harriers running club, (both still running) and a Rifle Club and Archery Club (which thankfully aren't). In the following years a refreshment stall, open air theatre and cafeteria, small zoo and deer enclosure, sandpit and children's playground, and skating pond came later to the eastern side.

Although the park was seen as an outlet for healthy athletic diversion for working men (not women of course!) there was initially a curiously ambivalent attitude to sports. Cricket and rounders were allowed from the start, (W G Grace played matches there with the MCC) while football was banned until 1888, and even then was discouraged in favour of re-locating to Hackney Marshes. It was seen as a 'rough' sport, attracting the 'wrong sort' and likely to upset the wealthier patrons. An outdoor gymnasium was provided with instructions on how to use the novel equipment, like parallel bars and vaulting-horse, introduced from the continent, although oddly skipping was prohibited on payment of a fine. Early health and safety fears? A petition for proper tennis courts for women players was turned down, possibly because of male prejudice against women playing any sport. Eventually by 1900 there were 37 courts, although today there are only 4. Cycling and athletic tracks were added, too.

The large open grassed area in the eastern park, alongside Grove Road became a meeting place, a kind of east end Speaker's Corner, with an array of competing orators and preachers to be heard on a Sunday. Speakers like William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, trade union leaders Ben Tillett and John Burns, and suffragette leaders Emmeline Pankhurst and daughter Sylvia were frequently to be seen, along with Salvation Army bands and evangelists. It became known as the Forum, and it was said of the speakers there that you were either "for 'em or agin 'em".

Nearby the North London Railway opened Victoria Park station to cope with the crowds of visitors. The station was closed in 1943.

In World War II the park was used as an anti-aircraft gun site, for bomb disposal practice, siting of barrage balloons, and housed German and Italian prisoners of war. The remains of this period not fully removed until mid-1950s.

The Park up to date

As early as 1866 a Victoria Park Preservation Society formed and the Park has faced ups and downs and threats over the years between. In 1985 the Greater London Council was abolished and responsibility for the Park was divided between Hackney and Tower Hamlets councils, the old boundary between the two authorities passing through the middle of the Park from east to west. In 1990, cash-strapped Hackney council ceded their portion over to Tower Hamlets and the borough boundaries were adjusted accordingly. Since then the Park has had a couple of refurbishments and restorations, funded by the EU Social Fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund, which helped bring back the Pagoda, a restored Burdett-Coutts drinking fountain (alas without drink!), the Old English garden and a newly-working fountain for the lake, which now has rowing boats and pedalos for hire, as it did over a hundred years ago.

The deer park and children's zoo have gone - the deer herd gradually reducing until there were left a couple of lonely deer housed in an out of the way enclosure. Today there are around the park panels detailing the species of wildlife, trees and plants to be seen.

Events including the 1978 Rock against Racism concert when an estimated 80,000 or more listened to bands like the Clash and Tom Robinson. There is a Sunday market held on the Night Walk.



Meet just inside the Park entrance by the Royal Inn on the Park

Getting there

- 277 towards Crossharbour - alight at stop V, Victoria Park, in Lauriston Road
- 425 towards Ilford/Stratford - alight at stop V, Victoria Park, Lauriston Road
- London Fields Overground, walk to Mare Street and then 277 towards Crossharbour - alight at stop V, Victoria Park

There are pubs, cafes, restaurants and coffee shops in Lauriston Road, and two refreshment places in the park itself - the Pavillion in the West park and the Hub <https://thehubvictoriapark.net> in the East Park

At the time of writing, all of the public toilets are closed due to the risk of infection.