

A Brief History of South Park

South Park opened in March 1904 on land that had previously been known first as Broom Farm and then Southfields Farm. It is the only farming land in Fulham that still remains as an open space. On its opening the park was described in the local newspaper as *"Possessing over 20 acres, cricket, tennis, plus other open air games were offered and there was a bandstand, refreshment pavilion, ladies and gentleman's lavatories and a shelter."*

During the First World War land in the park was given over to allotments and in the summer of 1915 it was one of the local training grounds for the three Fulham Brigades of the Royal Field Artillery raised by the Mayor of Fulham. For the Second World War the council's own labour force initially dug trenches in the park; subsequently full air-raid shelters were built - the entrance was located where the present cricket pavilion is situated - and some of the park was again converted to allotments.

After the war there were a series of ad hoc and generally unsympathetic alterations and in more recent years the park steadily deteriorated due to vandalism and inadequate maintenance. This was partly because Hammersmith & Fulham Council, like many other local authorities, abandoned its Parks Department and spread responsibility across several departments, with the result that there was no overall control or vision for the park. South Park became the Borough's 'Cinderella' park.

Intensive campaigning by local residents eventually produced an improvement maintenance standards and eventually some physical improvements, chiefly the restoration of the perimeter wall and the main approach through the Clancarty Road double gates, the complete refurbishment of four of the tennis courts and a clearance of the area between the tennis courts. These are, however, only small steps towards the major restoration that the park requires.

Although there have been numerous alterations, the fundamental structure of the park has never changed and its open nature is one of its strong attractions. It is an important sports park and contains the only public cricket pitch in the borough, which is much used in the summer. The park is a major destination for dog owners and is extremely popular with families with young children, especially the play area. Many people move to this part of Fulham because of the park and its facilities. It is also an important resource for the schools which surround the park.

The Campaigning

Individual attempts by local residents to arrest the deterioration and improve maintenance standards in the park met with little success. It was not until the Peterborough Road and Area Residents' Association (PRARA) came into being in 2002 that any progress began to be made. It quickly became apparent that an ad hoc approach to the park would not produce the full scale restoration that was by then needed.

PRARA developed a vision for the park - *to renovate and improve the park infrastructure using the original Victorian design as a guide and inspiration, so that the park is fully restored with all areas brought back into full use in a way that can be appreciated and enjoyed by the full range of users* - and undertook a prolonged and intensive campaign which called for the creation of a Master Plan for the park and a co-ordinated programme of works.

Some success was achieved in late 2004/2005 when some remedial work was undertaken and much of the graffiti was removed.

In the summer of 2006 PRARA, in conjunction with a local councillor, organised a survey of users which led to the formation of a Users' Group. The survey demonstrated the passion local people had for the park and their desire to see it better managed and maintained. Top of the want list were a cafe and toilets, the toilet block having been closed many years ago due to vandalism. Generally people's views on what the park needed coincided with those already identified by PRARA.

In 2008 funds were finally made available by Hammersmith & Fulham Council to pay for the development of a Master Plan which is currently under way. Integral to the brief to the consultants was the PRARA survey. The Users' Group has expanded into the Friends of South Park which formally came into being in January 2009.

The story of South Park

South Park is the only farming land in Fulham that still remains as an open space. The farm, known first as Broom Farm and then Southfields Farm, was part of the substantial Fulham estate of the Sullivan family. This was inherited by Miss Charlotte Sullivan, whose uncle was Lord Palmerston. She lived in Fulham's most important 'manor' house, Broom House and became a major benefactor to the area. She sold the farm to Fulham Borough Council in 1903 year for £35,000, at a price of £1,500 per acre. Depending on the conversion method used, the equivalent value to-day is anything from £2.5million to £25.5million. A major proportion of the money was provided by the London County Council.

Prior to its sale, the land (then known as "Southfields, Fulham") had been leased to James Veitch & Sons, Limited for 33 years, for use a nursery. The Borough Archive contains the original correspondence between Charlotte Sullivan herself and the Council, concerning the acquisition of this land. She refused to surrender it until the James Veitch lease expired and pointed out that the Council had ignored her earlier offer of alternative land with more prominent access from the Wandsworth Bridge Road! In order to sell the land for a park she rejected an approach from a builder. She imposed various conditions on the sale, one of which is that the Council should erect no dwelling houses or buildings except as necessary or appropriate for use as a Recreation Ground or Park.

South Park opened in March 1904 when it was described in the local newspaper as *"Possessing over 20 acres, cricket, tennis, plus other open air games were offered and there was a bandstand, refreshment pavilion, ladies and gentleman's lavatories and a shelter."* The report also said that a gymnasium ($\frac{3}{4}$ acre in extent) fitted with complete apparatus was at the Hugon Road corner. There is no evidence of any structure in this part of the park and it is believed that the gymnasium was an open area which might not have been uncommon at that time. This area is now an enclosed hard court games zone.

South Park's first park-keeper was John Eckett who lived in the gardener's lodge whilst Miss Gertrude Eckett is noted as being at the refreshment room. This was in an extension to the North Lodge at the corner of Clancarty Road and Peterborough Road. The lodge is currently derelict, as is the refreshment room although this, with a conservatory extension, was used as a nursery school for a number of years.

Until the 1980's James Veitch's greenhouses remained a feature in this corner of the park. They were used partly to grow plants for use in borough parks but also included a traditional conservatory with hothouse plants and a water feature. Now demolished, all that remains is a brick wall parallel to Clancarty Road at the end of the rose garden. There was an aviary in front of the greenhouses.

When the greenhouses were demolished a replacement plastic version was built in the centre of the park, between the tennis courts, and a new smaller aviary replaced the bandstand. Both have now been removed and this area of the park is currently an open space pending decisions on its future use. Early plans show a small pond at the eastern end of this central area but at some point this was filled in and, it appears, additional tennis courts constructed.

The South Lodge, near the Hugon Road entrance gates, is still used as a dwelling and is occupied by a council employee, although not one who has anything to do with park maintenance. The area to the east of this lodge has had a chequered history. For many years it was a paddling pool and play area for young children and later an adventure playground for older children was created in the area alongside the wall that separates the park from what is now South Park Mews. The mews was formerly a garage for London Taxi Cabs but when residential use began the residents complained about noise and disturbance. This led to the adventure area being dismantled and, partly because of concerns over safety, the paddling pool was emptied and the children's play area moved to its present location on the west side of the park. The south east corner was then impractically remodelled and is currently the least attractive part of the park.

When Miss Sullivan sold the land, she stipulated that the Peterborough Road side should be enclosed by a solid brick wall to ensure that the park was kept separate from the grounds of her house. At some stage after her death, and presumably around the time that the south end of Peterborough Road was developed for residential and industrial use, a single gate entrance was created in the centre of the wall.

During the First World War land in the park was given over to allotments and in the summer of 1915 it was one of the local training grounds for the three Fulham Brigades of the Royal Field Artillery raised by the Mayor of Fulham. For the Second World War the council's own labour force initially dug trenches in the park; subsequently full air-raid shelters were built - the entrance was located where the present cricket pavilion is situated - and some of the park was again converted to allotments.

Judging by its architectural style the cricket pavilion - now mainly used as a nursery - was constructed either in the late 1940s or during the 1950s; similarly the changing room and toilet blocks and the pavilion next to the tennis courts. None of these buildings respected the heritage of the park, which is Victorian in style although technically Edwardian by opening date. Subsequent minor works have also been ad hoc in nature and mostly not in keeping.

The park started deteriorating in the 1970s first with progressive decreases in maintenance, both horticulturally and structurally, and then from vandalism. The worst example of this was to the terracotta balustrade which surrounded the raised area adjacent to the North Lodge. Only one section remains, in front of the original refreshment pavilion. The Peterborough Road brick wall also suffered vandalism and became dangerous in places due to a complete lack of maintenance.

Individual attempts by local residents to arrest the deterioration and improve maintenance standards met with little success. It was not until the Peterborough Road and Area Residents' Association (PRARA) came into being in 2002 that any progress began to be made. It quickly became apparent that an ad hoc approach to the park would not produce the full scale restoration that was now needed. PRARA undertook a prolonged and intensive campaign which called for the creation of a Master Plan for the park and a coordinated program of works.

South Park celebrated its Centenary in 2004 with a small ceremony at which the Mayor of Hammersmith & Fulham presented the park with some memorial benches.

Mainly following the change of administration at Hammersmith & Fulham Council in 2006, relatively substantial amounts of money have been made available to deal with some of the more urgent problems and blights. Raised beds that blocked the main Clancarty Road entrance have been removed and replaced by York stone slabs. The remains of the vandalised terra-cotta have been removed and the raised area temporarily banked and grassed over for safety. The Peterborough Road wall - which is listed - is being restored, and of the remainder of the perimeter wall, the iron gates and their ornamental pillars and the railings have all been substantially renovated.

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Anthony Williams, April 2009