

The Birthplace of Brit

A short one hundred and fifty years ago Kennington Common, later to be renamed Kennington Park, was host to a historic gathering which can now be seen as the birth of modern British democracy. In reaction to this gathering, the great Chartist rally of the 10th of April 1848, the common was forcibly enclosed and the Victorian Park was built to occupy the site.

History is not objective truth. It is a selection of some facts from a mass of evidence to construct a particular view which, inevitably, reflects the ideas of the historian. The history most of us learned in school left out the stories of most of the people who lived and made that history. If the design and artifacts of the Royal Park mean anything they are a symbolic obliteration of such a people's history: an enforced amnesia of what the real importance of this space is all about. A history of life, popular discourse and collective struggle for justice is replaced with a few antique objects and some noble trees.

The significance of Kennington Park goes back to its origins as a common. What is important about this site is not the physical aspects of its layout but the traditions of its usage, a usage which arises from its unique position in South London. It is here that the road from Buckingham Palace to Dover crosses the older road from the City of London to Portsmouth. It was the last common before the centres of power to the North of the river, particularly parliament. It was first recorded as a common on Rocque's 1746 map of London, but it must have been crucial as a public meeting place long before that. The Southbound highways date from pre-Roman times when a fork in a major road was considered to have magical significance.

Executions

The importance of its position made it a site of power struggles from an early time. From the 17th century, if not before, the South Western corner of the common was selected as the South London site of public execution. In the 18th century the country was still dominated by an aristocracy; but the term gangster would be more appropriate. But by the 17th century the unifying monarchical state had transformed this naked violence into ordered spectacles of horror—public executions.

The first execution recorded is of Sarah Elston, who was burnt alive for murdering her husband in 1678.

"On the day of execution Sarah Elston all dressed in white, with a vast multitude of people attending her. And after very solemn prayers offered on the said occasion, the fire was kindled, and giving two or three lamentable shrieks, she was deprived of both voice and life, and so burnt to ashes."¹

The most infamous of those terrible spectacles was the execution for treason of nine members of the Manchester Regiment, Jacobites, who were hung, drawn and quartered on Wednesday July the 30th, 1746. Now that Scottish devolution has finally been achieved—with somewhat less bloodshed—we might dedicate the fountain, which stands on the site, to their memory. (The fountain is outside the park perimeter railings to the South West, opposite the Oval Tube Station).

It continued as a place of execution until the early years of the 19th century. The last person to be executed was a fraudster from Camberwell Green, by the name of Badger.

The history books have portrayed executions as popular entertainments; but it only takes a little sensitivity and imagination to realise the trauma that any witness, not already emotionally calloused would feel.

Children were hauled screaming onto the gallows, to be 'wetted' by the sweat of the corpse, as this was supposed to be a cure for scrofulous diseases. It is true that many took the day off work and a 'carnival' atmosphere prevailed along the route that the condemned travelled, but this was a way of resisting the morbid terror that the state was hoping to induce.

The dawn of the 19th century brought about many changes. The rising capitalist class was challenging aristocratic power and the composition of the ruling classes changed. At the same time the population was gradually becoming concentrated in cities. The density of the urban population, with its intense social life, gave rise to new political potentials. Consequently, the state required new forms of

oppression. The Peterloo massacre of 1819, in which 11 were killed and 600 badly injured, taught the ruling class that overt violence could create martyrs and inflame revolt. Their strategy was to sap the vital energies of the new urban population by denying them cultural autonomy. This would be done by 'civilising' them by training them 'to behave', making them outsiders in their own nation.

As in the new colonies, violent conquest was followed by cultural repression. The enclosure of Kennington Common marks a point at which class oppression changed gear; replacing external violence with more cultural and psychological mechanisms of social control.

The Common on the site of the current park had been a meeting place since the early 18th century, if not earlier. It belonged to people communally and it was the South London Speaker's Corner. It seems as if there was a mound at this time, perhaps an ancient Tumulus, from which the orators could stir their thoughts. What were the issues of the day that were broadcast from this site?

Earlier Times: Methodism

Large crowds were attracted to many brilliant orators. The most famous of these may have been John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who addressed as many as 50,000 people on Kennington common around 1739. This was a church with a stern morality which also stood firm against slavery. Inevitably, anti-establishment and without hierarchy, almost anyone could become a preacher. Methodist preachers could interpret scripture in ways which linked Plebeian magical beliefs with primitive Christian egalitarianism.

Robert Wedderburn was one such preacher who operated in this area. He was born to Rosanna, an African born house slave in Kingston, Jamaica, who was sold by her owner, Robert's father, before he was born. He arrived in England aged 17 in 1778, and was in the Gordon Riots of 1780. In 1786 he fell under the thrall of a Methodist street preacher and experienced an instantaneous conversion. Intoxicated on the power of grace and inspired by Wesley's stance against slavery, he soon obtained a dissenting preacher's license. At the same time he stayed firmly a part of the 'underclass' and its vulgar culture.

By 1813 he had become a follower of Thomas Spence, who linked opposition to slavery with opposition to the enclosures of the commons in England. This talismanic interpretation of scripture led to millenarianism, free thought and political radicalism. Spence was a prolific publisher and distributor of handbills, broadsheets, songs, tracts, pamphlets and periodicals. He also issued token coinage to publicise his views.

Radicalism

This was a period of intense popular political discourse and self-education amongst the new urban classes. Radical debating organisations became active but were then made illegal and had to operate covertly or on a smaller scale. One of the most famous was the London Corresponding Society, formed in January 1792 by Thomas Hardy, a shoemaker.

Free 'n' eases were one form of social gathering in which radical toasting contests and political sing-songs would alternate with heated debates. The Green Man and Horns, on the corner of Kennington Road and Kennington Park road, was a likely venue. It was later to become known simply as The Horns. More on this later...

The most popular text that arose from these radical undercurrents was written by Thomas Paine, a good friend of William Blake. Blake lived near the Common so Paine would have been familiar with the area. His book 'Rights of Man': "Met with a response that was unique in English publishing history ...Like an underground manifesto, it was passed from hand to hand, even when it became a crime to be found with Rights of Man in one's possession...extracts were printed in pamphlet form."²

Tom Paine believed that: "Conquest and tyranny, at some early period, dispossessed man of his rights, and he is now recovering them...Whatever the apparent causes of any riot might be, the real one is always want of happiness. It shows that something is wrong in the system of government that injures the felicity by which society is to be preserved."³

Chartism: The World's first national labour movement

From these feverish debates came an agreement on the need

for Republicanism and universal suffrage—for an all inclusive democracy. In 1832 a voting Reform Act gave the middle class the vote but left the working class, who had agitated in favour of the bill, still entirely disenfranchised. The basic political demands, which had been the elements of radical discourse for some time, were drawn up as a six point 'Charter.' Presented as a new Magna Carta, by 1838 it was supported by almost every working class group across Britain and rapidly became the World's first national labour movement.

The people who supported it were Chartists. Not a small active party with a large passive membership but a movement which deeply affected every aspect of people's lives. It was an inclusive organisation with popular leaders who were Catholic, Protestant and Freethinkers, and who included Irish, West Indian and Asian people in the membership. There were also women's groups. Chartist meetings had a carnival like atmosphere, probably something like a contemporary free festival. There was a Chartist culture which had its own christening and funeral rituals and its own music. It was a counter cultural experience that changed people's perception of themselves—they became conscious of a unifying class identity.

The main political strategies of Chartism became the petition and the monster rally. The petition was big enough to have the force of an unofficial referendum. The monster rallies were a show of strength which also gave the participants a direct sense of community. By 1848 Chartism had built up a head of steam. The petition for the Charter had grown huge, by then it had between three and six million signatures. A carriage, bedecked with garlands, was needed to transport it. Parliament was to be presented with this petition, for the third time, after a monster rally on Kennington Common on the 10th of April 1848.

Icon of Modernity

This moment in the struggle for democracy was recorded in a historic photograph. William Kilburn, an early photographer, took Daguerreotype plates of the rally from a vantage point from the top of The Horns. These were the first ever photographic representation of a large crowd. Considering the cultural importance that photography was to assume in the next 100 years it is perhaps not surprising that the negatives of this iconic image are held in the Royal Archives at Windsor castle, which retains a strict copyright control.

The fact that the events of the 10th of April 1848 did not herald a British Revolution or immediate voting reforms has been held up by official historians as the 'failure' of Chartism. But the success of Chartism should not be measured in such terms, but rather in the profound qualitative effects it had on the millions who took part. This is something historians have found difficult to register. There was a real democratic culture and sense of social justice behind the Charter which remains unrealised to this day.

The stand-off on Kennington Common that day had shaken the arrogant complacency of the British ruling class. From then on a unique alliance, between the waning aristocracy and the burgeoning capitalist 'middle' class, was forged. This newly united ruling block determined to crush or commercialise urban popular culture. From then on there was an uneven but constant pressure to undermine and destroy the unity, vigour and autonomy of the new urban lower class.

Enclosure of the common

The first step was to symbolically annihilate the common land that had become such a focus of the Chartist struggle. The Commons have symbolic roots going back to before the Norman conquest. They stand for the right of every human to have access to the fruits of our Earth: In stark contrast to the predatory individualism promoted by the 'enlightened' imperialist. This individualism was calloused to any sense of communality, unfeeling of the humanity and intelligence of the crowd, and incapable of a non-exploitative relation to the Earth. This lack of feeling was a necessary precondition of a class of men who were destined to lead the conquest and exploitation of people across the globe.

The spirit of the commons was the antithesis of this dominating cult of individualism and private ownership. It was the spirit that had inspired the Diggers in April of 1649.

"For though you and your ancestors got your Propriety by murder and theft, and you keep it by the same power from

ish Democracy

Stefan Szczelkun

us, that have an equal right to the Land with you, by the righteous Law of Creation, yet we shall have no occasion of quarrelling (as you do) about that disturbing devil, called Particular Propriety: For the Earth, with all her Fruits of Corn, cattle, and such like, was made to be a common Store-house of Livelihood to all Mankinds, friend, and foe, without exception.”⁴

The ruling class united in the face of this new threat to their power and the individual diversity of the working classes was erased and replaced with a bland and ugly concept of ‘the masses.’ The image of the masses as an irrational and potentially savage mob can be traced through Carlyle and Dickens to Hollywood—it is a manufactured falsehood.

Soon after the rally a committee of local worthies was set up and soon found support from the Prince of Wales. By 1852 they had already got the requisite bill through Parliament and Kennington Common was ‘enclosed’—its status as an ancient common was reduced to that of a Royal Park. The planting and construction of the park which forms the familiar pattern we know today was largely completed by 1854. This was a symbolic and real colonisation of working class political space.

The Common was occupied, fenced and closely guarded. Not only was the perimeter fenced but so was the grass and the shrubberies. The remaining paths were patrolled by guards administered by H. M. Royal Commissioners. It stayed under the direct control of the Royals until it was taken over by the Metropolitan Board of Works (later to become the London County Council) in 1887.

During the early period of occupation the use of the park was limited to an annual meeting of The Temperance Societies of South London starting in the summer of 1861. It was also used for local schools’ sports. It is not clear what other sorts of public meetings may have been allowed. Park Superintendents filed six monthly reports from 1893 to 1911 but they may have omitted to report on meetings which were spontaneous or political. Certainly we know the park was used during the General Strike of 1926.

This was just the beginning of a period in which the new urban working class culture was attacked, undermined or commercialised in all its forms. The Unions and socialist parties either considered culture a distraction or encouraged their members to follow the middle class programme of ‘rational recreation.’

Musichall

In the late 19th century this area of South London was a theatre land, with vibrant theatres, assembly rooms, dancehalls and musichalls. In 1889 the London County Council (LCC), later to become the GLC, provided the park with an elegant bandstand and between 1900 and 1950 there were concerts of military bands for a paying seated audience on Sundays, Wednesdays and Bank Holidays. These ‘rational recreations’ were seen to offer a civilising alternative to the ‘vulgar’ musichall culture which hemmed in on all sides.

But the theatres gradually declined because of the gentrification in the area and because of the growing popularity of the new cinemas. The beautiful Kennington Theatre, facing the northwest corner of the park opened in 1898 as the Princess of Wales Theatre. It was one of the most sumptuous in London. In 1921 it was showing ‘cine-variety.’ It closed in 1934, failing to get its licence renewed for the 1935 season—perhaps a victim of the depression. It was finally demolished in the 1950s to make way for Kennington Park House, a block of flats built by the LCC, now run by a Tenants Co-op.

Everywhere it was the same: Working class pastimes were replaced with commercialised forms, ‘rational recreations’ or erased altogether, leaving acres of public housing which had been culturally sterilised. The active, autonomous anarchic culture of the crowd was replaced with an increasingly passive, commodified and privatised ‘popular’ culture of the ‘masses’.

World Wars

The Horns had been a favourite haunt of Charlie Chaplin’s profligate father. At one time the young Charlie lived in poor lodgings overlooking the north of the park in Kennington Park Place. The park may have been where he and his friends would imitate their musichall heroes and practice their silly walks. In his autobiography he tells us that he met his first girlfriend in the park.

The Horns, a key social centre whose life would have flowed naturally into the park and energised it, was partly destroyed by a bomb in World War II. The remains were demolished in the 1960s and replaced with the formidable dark concrete of the Social Security block designed by Colonel Siefert, architect-in-the-pocket of many notorious 60s developers. Since the original tavern was destroyed, the bawdy spirit of the Horns seems to have migrated north to the White Bear with its theatre club and bohemian/crusty reputation.

In the Second World War the park was the site of communal shallow trench-style air-raid shelters. On the 15th October 1941 these suffered a direct hit and at least 46 bodies were recovered. The chaos of war along with the need to keep up morale meant that no official toll of those dead and missing was taken. From the flimsy evidence in the Lambeth Archives it seems as if the remains of between seven and seventeen or more bodies may have been left unrecovered when the site was levelled around the 19th of October. Many people must have been blown to pieces and the south field of the park is their unmarked grave to this day.

Lambeth Council

The park had passed from the LCC (by then the GLC) to Lambeth Council in 1971. This was the Conservative led Council which launched John Major on his career. In January 1977 the squatters in St. Agnes Place, situated between the old park and the newer extension, precipitated the fall of the Conservative Council in the most dramatic fashion.

Councillor Stimpson, called in a demolition firm to knock down the squatters houses, whilst the squatters were living in them. But he ignored necessary legal procedures and a few of the squatters were able to get a last minute High Court injunction and call a sudden halt to the demolition. The squatters in the area, who were quite numerous at this time, were elated by this victory and spontaneously set off down Brixton Road to march on Lambeth Town hall. Arriving at the Town Hall they knocked on the front door and, to their amazement, someone let them in. Angry squatters then teemed through the hallowed halls of the Council, occupied offices and called vociferously for Stimpson’s resignation. Stimpson’s blundering led to the fall of the Conservative Council and the start of ‘Red Ted’ Knight.

The new Socialist Council started the annual fire-works displays in the Park the following year. By 1984 the park was again being used for political gatherings. The demonstrators on the Anti-Apartheid Rally of that year used the park as an assembly point. In subsequent years the park has hosted many important political gatherings including: Gay Pride (Starting 1986), National Union of Students (1986), Irish Solidarity Movement (1986), Vietnamese Community Event (1989), Anti-Poll Tax march (1990), Kurdistan Rally (1991), Integration Alliance (1993), TUC (1993), Nigerian Rallies (1993), Campaign Against Militarism (1993) and Reclaim the Streets (1997). These events often reflect key moments in the political history of the time and are an important part of the democratic process.

What’s happening now

In 1996 Lambeth Council set up a Park Management Advisory Committee (MAC). At the inaugural meeting a local estate agent, lawyer and priest took up the key posts and plans for a ‘Victorian

Restoration’ of the park were quickly put into motion. The powers of Lambeth Council to give permission for use of the park is to be limited—all future applications are to be monitored by the MAC. This conservative committee of local residents may have an influence on the park which does not take account of its wider significance and use in the democratic politics of this country.

Claire Asquith, a student of landscape design, was commissioned to produce a public exhibition to promote the restoration programme. This began by dismissing the Common as a place which was “notorious” and whose ditches were “the cemeteries of all dead puppies and kittens of the vicinity” and into which “raw sewage was discharged from adjacent cottages.” She omits to point out that there were many open sewers in London at this time.

She writes of the erection of St. Marks church in 1824, on enclosed common land, as “the salvation of the common.” But the building of the church was the first step in the occupation of the site by the ruling classes. It was the Vicar of St. Marks, the Reverend Charlton Lane, who led the committee for the enclosure of the common. A recent paper from the Church, oddly reminiscent of a tract by Robert Wedderburn, tells us that at that time it “unfortunately became a church for the rich, who alone could afford the price of a pew.”

The Victorian monuments that survive in the park do not seem to symbolise or commemorate anything—other than Victoriana. They do not deserve or receive any great respect and have been progressively wrecked and vandalised. The War memorial, however, dating from 1924, has an important function, it is regularly honoured with wreathes and poppies and rarely defaced.

An application has been made for Lottery funding for a major facelift. Anyone wishing to see the plans should contact the Regeneration Department, Lambeth Council.

Friday the 10th of April 1998, the 150th anniversary of the birth of modern British democracy, the anniversary of the most important date of the Chartist movement, the first national labour movement in the World. An important site for anyone who values democracy—at the time of writing there isn’t even a commemorative stone. Kennington Park still needs to be put on the map as a site of International significance.

Notes

1. H.H. Montgomery, *The History of Kennington*, 1889, p.32
2. Howard Fast, *Thomas Paine*, 1948.
3. *Rights of man* Vol 2, 1792.
4. Gerrard Winstanley, *Declaration from the Poor oppressed People of England to Lords of Manors*. 1649.