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# HOW QUEEN'S PARK CAME INTO BEING

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*By Janet Cummins, with thanks to the Record Officers of the Corporation of London and the Church Commissioners for their help. The report of the official opening was researched at the Grange Museum and written by Mike Cantor.*

ON 22nd February 1884 the Daily Chronicle and the Morning Post both reported the formation of the North West London Park League "for the purpose of securing as a people's park the site at Kilburn" of the Royal Agricultural Show in 1879 and the deputation that the League sent to the House of Commons asking that the Ecclesiastical Commissioners be restrained from selling the land for building until the question of the renewal of grain dues to the City of London was settled or until the new municipality for the whole of London was established. "The health of the people", the League declared, "ought to be the first consideration of civilised government, but health is impossible without adequate breathing room." They felt that the decrease in London's death rate was in great measure owing to the parks in the capital. George Higgs, Honorary Secretary of the League and its tireless leader, reported that the population within a one mile circle of the site was now 250,000 and that the whole 94 acres of the showground could be purchased for 117,500. The Corporation of London had promised aid provided they were granted a continuance of the grain duty. They were also promoting an Open Spaces Preservation Bill.

When a deputation from the League called on the Estates Committee of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in August 1884 they were reminded that the first suggestion of a park had come from the Commissioners themselves who, though sympathetic to the aims of the League, were powerless to provide the land freely. However, they agreed to delay negotiating building permission for a further six months.

George Higgs continued to urge the case for the Park, offering that the

North West London Park League should rent the land, pointing out the excellent opportunity afforded for the Church "to show its sincere sympathy with the people" and reminding the Commissioners of the increase in revenue the Church had enjoyed from recent building in the area. In December he complained that preparations for building works were being made on the West side of Salusbury Road which he felt to be in contravention of the Commissioners' undertaking not to let the land for building and was told that this strip of land had been let in 1880.

Some eleven months had passed since the founding of the North West London Park League when Cluttons, the estate agents for the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, recommended that the central acres be dedicated for the Park, noting that better rents would be collected from surrounding properties.

At its meeting the next day, 22nd January 1885, the Estates Committee resolved "That an offer be made by the Commissioners to appropriate to the use of the Public the central portion (to comprise 30 acres) of the Agricultural Show Site at Kilburn and that Cluttons be instructed to lay out the remaining portion of the Estate in such a manner as to take the fullest advantage of the improvement to be derived by obtaining frontages on the lands surrounding the proposed park." The offer was to include the Gravel Pit Wood, Highgate, and to be made through the Lord Mayor to the Corporation of London. It was conditional on the Corporation obtaining Parliamentary sanction for the Commissioners to appropriate the lands in question to the perpetual use and enjoyment of the inhabitants of the metropolis and on their undertaking to layout and

maintain the two sites as parks in perpetuity.

On receiving a copy of Lord Stanhope's letter to the Lord Mayor, George Higgs wrote to the Commissioners "My joy on receiving your letter last night ...was so great that I passed a sleepless night, but my mind has indeed now been relieved by this most Christian like offer, for nothing can, I should think, prevent its being accepted." He concluded with the hope that the Corporation would buy the rest of the site for the Park; he was particularly keen to "save the Salisbury Road frontage".

The Ecclesiastical Commissioners were congratulated by the Willesden Local Board and by the Vestry Clerk for Paddington for their generous gift. The Indicator took up the proposal that the rest of the site should be part of the park and called on the public to express their desire for this.

On 7th May 1885, the Coal, Corn Finance Committee, to which the offer had been referred for consideration, reported to Common Council that its special Sub Committee had visited both places. Although satisfied

with the possibility of maintaining Gravel Pit Wood as an Open Space, the Committee felt unable similarly to recommend adoption of the Kilburn site; so bare and ill kempt an area was unadaptable without great expense, amounting probably to over £10,000. The Ecclesiastical Commissioners however would not agree to a division of the offer, leaving the Coal, Corn Finance Committee until 31st December 1885 to find an alternative source of finance.

On 9th May The Times published a letter from George Higgs pointing out that "a recreation ground has for a long time past been felt to be an absolute necessity for the moral and physical welfare of the inhabitants". He felt that the plea of expense was unworthy of the wealthy Corporation of London.

Considerable interest had been aroused by the case and local as well as national institutions such as the Willesden Local Board, the Vestry Clerk of Paddington and the Commons Preservation Society congratulated the Commissioners on their offer and urged the Corporation

of London to accept. The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association asked to rent the land at a peppercorn rent if the City were unable to provide the Park.

On 4th June 1885 a Public Meeting arranged by the North West London Park League called for a mass meeting on the site on 6th June. Dr Danford Thomas presided at the mass meeting which, in spite of inclement weather, was attended by 800 or 900 people. The speakers called attention to the large procession of children whose very presence was an eloquent testimony of the need for the Park. At the same time the Corporation was considering the utilisation of the residuary bequest of the late William Ward, a citizen of London who had by his will, dated 3rd June 1881, left to the City £20,000 towards the establishment of a high school for girls (the City of London School for Girls), the residue "to be applied and expended...in the erection and maintaining of some institution or the creation of some fund for the benefit of the Poorer Classes". The original plan, mooted in 1883,

had been to use the residue in the acquisition of suitable sites (parts of Bleeding Hart Yard and Great Saffron Hill were possible choices) and there erect artisans' dwellings, christened Ward's Dwellings. Indeed a meeting of Common Council on 31st January 1884 agreed that the scheme should be submitted for approval to the High Court of Justice. However, there were legal difficulties which made this plan impossible. The City Solicitor, Henry Homewood Crawford then suggested basic alterations to the scheme. Bearing in mind the recent offer of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, he proposed the residuary bequest be applied to the creation and maintenance of Open Spaces. A report to Common Council on 29th October 1885 recommended that the residue of William Ward's bequest be formally transferred into a fund and its income applied to the maintenance of parks at Kilburn and Highgate, or either of them. Application to Chancery in the wake of Common Council's favourable decision on this proved successful, although the "Ward's People's Recreation Ground Fund" as constituted was limited in scope to the maintenance of Kilburn Recreation Ground. Financial problems partly resolved, the Corporation accepted the Ecclesiastical Commissioners' offer and the areas were finally acquired by the Corporation as Open Spaces by the Highgate and Kilburn Open Spaces Act 1886.

The Commissioners undertook to provide two approach roads, Chevening and Mortimer (now Harvist) at a cost of £16,000 and the work of laying out the park was done under the supervision of Major McKenzie, the Corporation's Superintendent of Epping Forest for 3,000.

George Higgs maintained his campaign for the acquisition of a further 20 to 30 acres of the land to be joined to the Park with deputations to the Commissioners and letters to the Press. The Commissioners agreed to refrain from disposing of 30 acres of adjoining land until Lady Day 1887 and they were prepared to advance the purchase money at £3.12s.6d. per cent, the repayment of principal and interest being accepted by half yearly payments for a term of

50 years (the same terms as granted for the purchase of Churchyard Bottom Wood, Highgate). No one took up the offer and no extension beyond Lady Day was granted.

Queen's Park was officially opened on 5th November 1887. The local papers at the time explained that 30 acres of ground had been given up by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for the "free use and enjoyment of the public".

At 3 o'clock on that 5th November several thousands were present together with a number of policemen brought there by rumours of a probably invasion of Kilburn by the "cream of London ruffianism". In the event the ruffians obviously found something else to do on that day and did not turn up. The opening ceremony was carried out by the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Reginald Hanson, who was a local resident as he said several times during his speech. Sir Reginald was accompanied by the Sheriffs of London and Middlesex, the Sword Bearer and the Mace Bearer. Members of the City of London, Coal, Corn and Finance Committee had come on a special train run from Broad Street to Kensal Green. The Victoria Rifles Volunteers formed a guard of honour and provided a band.

The papers reported that the Corporation had spent £3,000 of its own money in laying out, planting and completing the drainage of the park and a Mr William Ward, a citizen of London, had left a sum of money "for the benefit of the poorer classes" which would be used for the maintenance of the Park.

The Lord Mayor, who had arrived with his retinue in the state carriages, spoke of the changes he had seen over the last twenty years and he went on to say "that he trusted and believed that as time went on there would be a considerable improvement in that open space, now so vastly improved from what it was eight or nine years ago, when a good many of those present visited the exhibition there, and a great part of the ground was a swamp" (laughter). (At least some things in the Park haven't changed even if there are not so many "poorer classes" round the Park.)

The opening ceremony was completed by a tree planting ceremony and for some 45 minutes the crowds mingled and the band played. Then everyone went home and (no doubt) the Park was closed for the night.

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# THE ROYAL INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL EXHIBITION OF JULY 1879

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**B**EFORE Queen's Park was made into a Park and named after Queen Victoria, (the area was called Kilburn. The land now bounded by the Queen's Park Area Residents Association was largely undeveloped land and in 1879 the site was chosen by the Royal Agricultural Society for their annual exhibition. This was to be their most ambitious show ever, with entries invited from all over the world. It was to be held during the first week in July and it took 400 men and 200 horses 12 days to set it up.

Thousands of pounds were being offered in prize money and more than 120 judges were needed to judge the various categories: horses (it is

noticeable in the newspaper reports how many were owned by aristocrats), (cattle, sheep, shearing, wool, butter, cheeses, hams and bacon, cider and perry, hops, bees and honey, railway meat wagon design, inventions of farm implements, plans of farm buildings (no prize was awarded in this category as none of the entries were considered good enough), plans for sewage farms and plans for market gardens. Attracted by these prizes, nearly 3,000 animals were entered, with many foreign breeds. There was a Royal Box which was part of an arena with a Grandstand seating 3,000 people. The winning cattle and horses were paraded here every day

*Researched by Margaret Chambers at the Grange Museum*

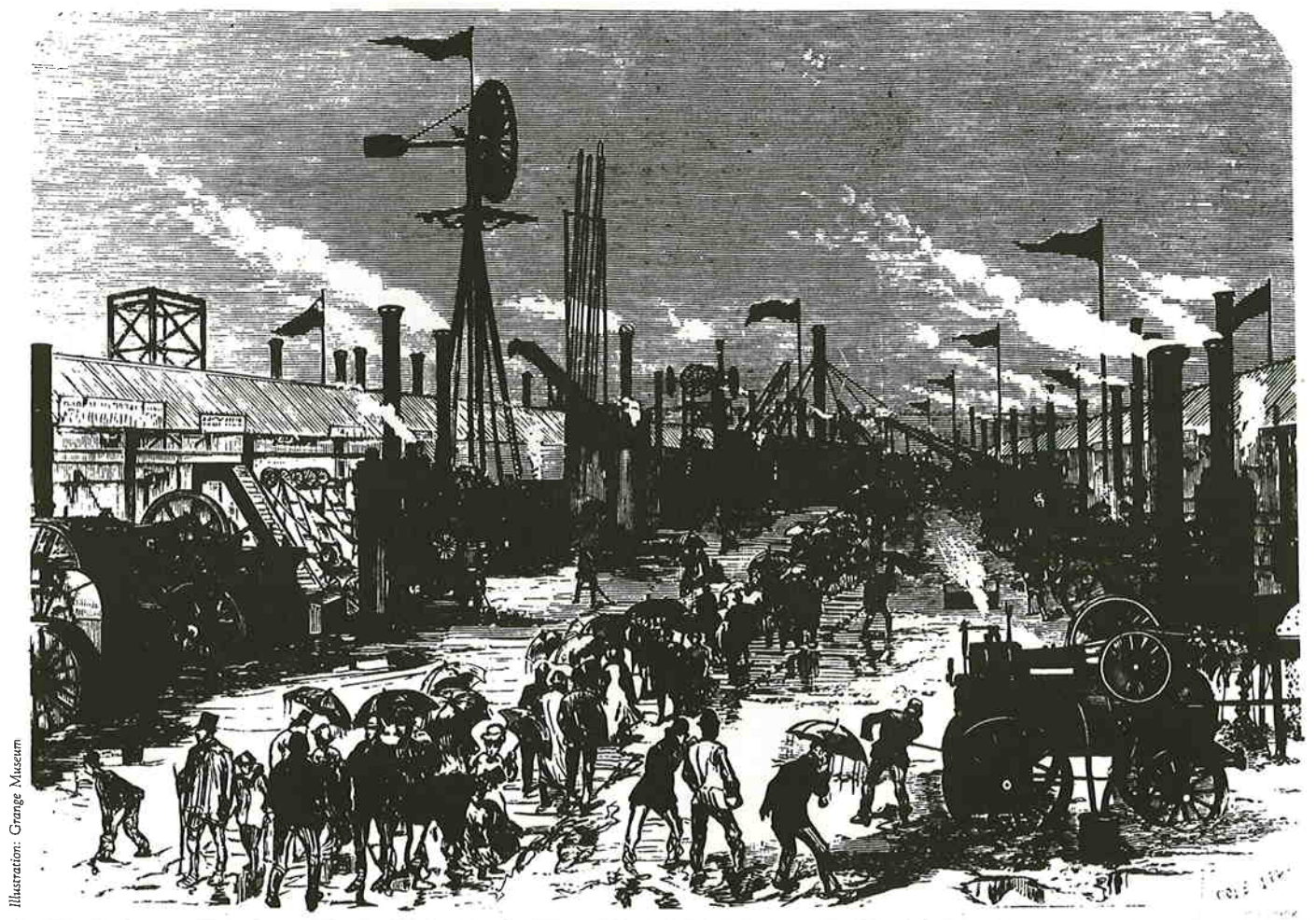


Illustration: Grange Museum

and this was one of the main attractions.

Another was the international dairy tent showing all kinds of dairy (operations, including a new electric cheese cutter designed by Messrs Webb which could cut a 15 cwt (1,680 lb) Canadian cheese into 1 lb blocks in less than 5 minutes.

There was a staggering amount of agricultural equipment about 24,000 sq. ft. of shed space was allocated to equipment and there was a great deal (outside the sheds in operation. The Daily Chronicle particularly drew attention to the new style high wheels to prevent tractors sinking into soft ground. There was a bee keeping tent, a steam passenger tramway, a display of historical farm implements and 2,000 sq. ft. of shed space allocated to seeds.

The whole event was opened on a glorious sunny day by the Prince and Princess of Wales, accompanied by a host of dignitaries including large numbers of princes, princesses, lords, counts and earls and the Mayors and Mayoresses of London and Dublin.

And that, one could say, is the good news.

The bad news at the greatest ever Agricultural Exhibition, was MUD. Acres of churned up, swampy, impassable, inches deep mud. A combination (of terrible weather, low lying, poor draining clay soil (residents of Queen's park have seen the park flood several times over the years till the final drainage scheme proved successful) and the churning up the (ground received as tents and sheds were erected and machinery dragged into place by horses, culminated in ground that was already preventing people access to some exhibits on the first day. And after the first day it rained. It rained nearly every day, nearly all day, for the full duration of the exhibition, only stopping on the fifth day when Queen Victoria raised morale by visiting the show. She was driven in great pomp, cheered by crowds, from the specially opened Queen's Park Station along Salisbury Road to the Exhibition, accompanied by several of her family. Workmen had been up all night laying a brick and ballast drive and for the first time there was a reasonable road for visitors to walk

on. Nearly half the people who visited the show went on the same day as Queen Victoria.

The rain and mud had a devastating effect. Numbers visiting the show dropped steadily, and those who went had to struggle on treacherously slippery wooden walkways or paddle through inches of mud to visit many of the exhibits. The bee keeping tent was seriously damaged and the animals were kept in such horrendous conditions that some even died.

One witness said in *The Times* that the mud was worse than the mud field at the Battle of Balaklava. Another journalist called it "villainous sludge". In the literary language of 19th century journalism, another magazine said "If Bunyan's Christian from *Pilgrim's Progress* had to (pass through this 'Slough of Despond', we doubt if he would have been out of it to this day. The foremost implement and machine firms in the world, who at so vast an

outlay of ingenuity and effort, of time and of money, contributed to the providing of the finest exposition of cultivating appliances ever set out, ought to have had more forethought exercised on their behalf than was given to them".

Only a month of hot weather or proper roadways could have prevented the dreadful ground conditions.

118,000 visited the show during the week it was open, which sounds a great many but was far short of what was needed to cover the costs of the Exhibition and very disappointing for the exhibitors. But no doubt, a great deal of business was done, a great deal of knowledge exchanged and a great deal of glamour brought into the lives of people visiting the show, who would have had a fair chance of seeing some of the aristocrats of the day.

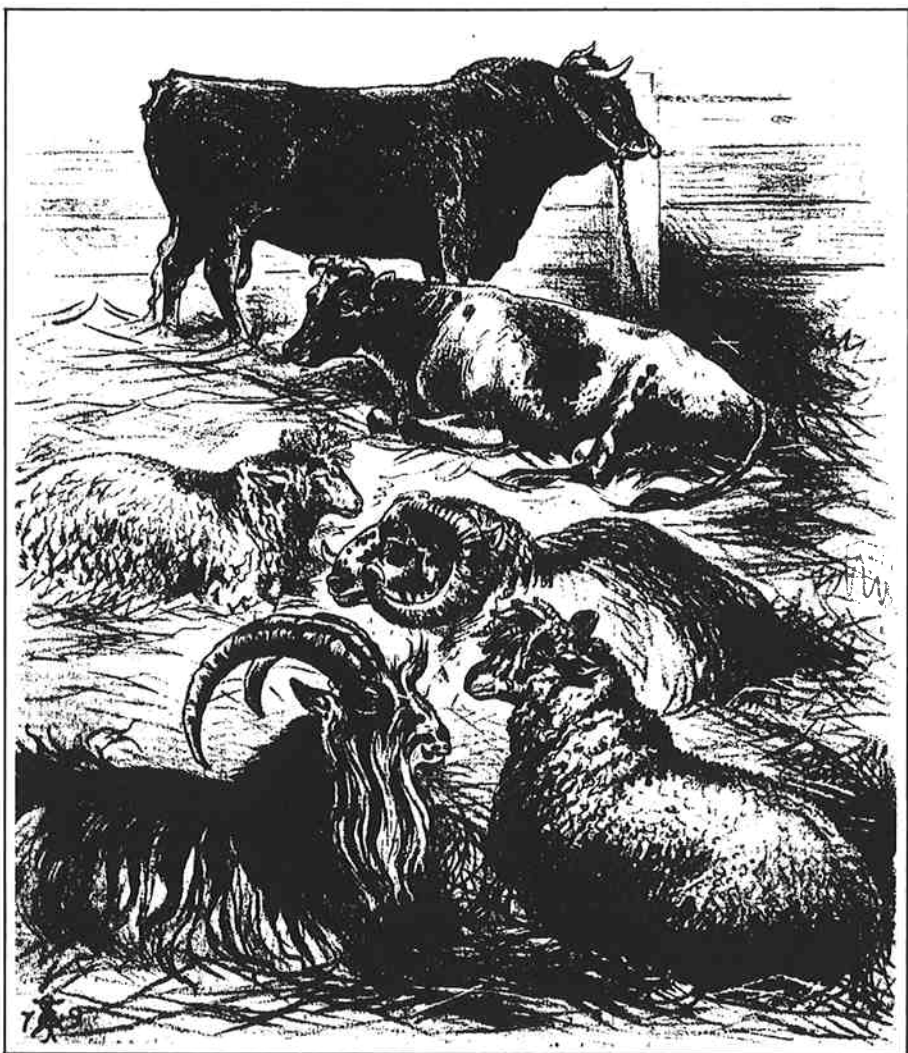


Illustration: Grange Museum