Park History

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The Park is essentially a fine example of an urban well loved community Victorian Park. The overall aim of the Corporation of London is to conserve and maintain the Park in keeping with this ethos, whilst reflecting modern usage requirements. 1879 The area that is now Queen’s Park was part of the site of the 1879 Royal Kilburn Agricultural Show, which had been attended by Queen Victoria. The land was owned by the Ecclesiastical Commission, who were persuaded to donate some land to the CoL, this being Gravel Pit Wood at Highgate and thirty-three acres of open land west of Chiltern both to be taken at the same time. 1886 The City acquired the land in 1886. Money was made available for the development of a public park from the residuary of a bequest of William Ward, who had left a sum of money in his will towards the establishment of a high school for girls in the CoL. The residuary of the bequest “to be applied and expended in the erection and maintaining of some institution and the creation of some fund for the benefit of the poorer classes.” The Common Council of the time after much deliberation agreed to transfer this bequest into a fund with its income to be applied to the maintenance of Queen’s Park and Highgate Wood. The City also made money available from funds derived from a proportion of duties on grain coming into the Port of London. 1887 The Lord Mayor of London, Sir Reginal Hanson, officially opened Queen’s Park on The 5th November 1887. The local papers explained that the Ecclesiastical Commissioners had given up the 30-acre site for the “free use and enjoyment of the public.” It was originally called Kilburn Recreation Ground, but an application was made to Queen Victoria who then gave her permission for the name to be changed to Queen’s Park in honour of her Golden Jubilee. Major Alexander McKenzie, the second Superintendent of Epping Forest, laid out the site. The design that he employed on the gently north-south sloping site was comparatively featureless and within the constraints of the £3,000 budget. It thought that Major Alexander McKenzie was also responsible for the laying out of the grounds surrounding Alexandra Palace. 1891 The design was basically a ‘figure-of-eight’ design formed by pathways surrounded by areas of mown grass with clumps of trees and shrubs. There were six areas that were to be laid out for formal bedding displays and there was also a gymnasium. A bandstand was built in 1891. This was much favoured by the well loved community Victorian Parks. In 1992 the bandstand was restored to its original design. To the south-east corner of the Park there is a structure used as a seating area known as the Lych Gate. This was built in 1936 and was used as an entrance until it was blocked up in 1960. 1900 From the beginning of the 1900s the Park grew most of its plant material in its own glasshouse, a second of which was built in 1924. The park also provided plants for St Paul’s Cathedral. The greenhouses were demolished in 1970. 1937 In 1937, tennis courts were built towards the centre of the Park and these still remain today. Floodings The Park has had a long history of flooding and on many occasions drains have been installed with limited success. The local authority was approached and permission to install a drainage system that flowed into the authorities’ main drain in Harvist Road was approved. Work was completed in spring 2002. One of the reasons for flooding may be that the Park has up to five springs within the ground, all being minor tributaries of the river Westbourne, which runs from Hampstead to the Thames. Café in the Park There has nearly always been a building providing refreshments in the Park. The first, built in 1890, was a rustic style chalet, a replacement for this being built in 1960. This building was refurbished and the cafe re-opened in the summer of 2004. Second World War During the Second World War the Park was used for air-raid shelters and army huts. The southern area of the Park had a barrage balloon anchored to it (and possibly an anti aircraft gun) and this area of the Park was used for allotments as part of the Government’s “dig for victory” campaign. It is thought that the original complete ‘figure-of-eight’ footpath layout disappeared at this time. Many of the shrubberies were removed in the 1960s due to the maintenance regime at the time. A small amount of shrubbery remained in the south section of the Park. A nine-hole Pitch and Putt course was constructed in 1966 and covers some seven acres of the Park. 1970 In the 1970s the Park lost over 180 elms to Dutch Elm Disease. In the great storm of the October 1987 the park lost only three mature trees but many were damaged. In 1990, a Pets Corner was constructed consisting of various enclosed small buildings with goats, rabbits, chickens and other fowl. Alexander McKenzie’s original design of a complete ‘figure-of-eight’ footpath was reinstated in 1999 with the added attraction of a Woodland Walk and education resource. The original design of a gymnasium has been added to, now forming a modern children’s play area with a paddling pool. In 2001, a trim trail course was erected around the Park.