

The Heritage Lottery Fund's Urban Parks Programme

by

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The achievements of the Urban Parks Programme, with the advisory panel chaired by Ronald Brunskill, have been enormous since its inception in 1996. This paper outlines the genesis of the project, its work so far and the challenges for the future.

In 1993, the Garden History Society and the Victorian Society produced a report, *Public Prospects: the Historic Urban Park under Threat*.¹ It is now an interesting period-piece, separated from the present by the enormous landmark of the Heritage Lottery Fund's Urban Parks Programme which was set up in 1996. The report's recommendations make particularly quaint reading: the one thing we never thought to ask for was £200 million in grant-aid. The 1990s was an extraordinary decade for urban parks, the landscape today utterly changed from that of 1990, and the Programme, in which Ron Brunskill played a vital part as chairman of the HLF's Urban Parks Panel, was the key event in transforming the landscape.²

Public Prospects was part of a gathering consensus about the crisis in which nineteenth-century public parks had found themselves by the end of the twentieth century (Fig. 1). The Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) had been trying to raise awareness of the need for investment in parks in documents such as its *Guide to Management Plans for Parks and Open Spaces* (1991).³ In *Grounds for Concern* (1993) the GMB Union had drawn attention to the loss of horticultural skills and training opportunities, largely as a result of the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering in 1988.⁴

The decade had begun with the publication of Hazel Conway's pioneering *People's Parks: the Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (1990).⁵ This was the first scholarly treatment of public parks as historic landscapes; addressing not only their artistic content but also their cultural, social and economic context, and it played a critical, if unforeseen, role in establishing public parks as legitimate recipients of heritage grant-aid (Fig. 2). The book also paved the way for English Heritage to begin redressing the imbalance against urban parks on the national *Register of parks and gardens of special historic interest*. But these were still cries in the wilderness. The tireless Alan Barber of ILAM went back and forth between the Department of

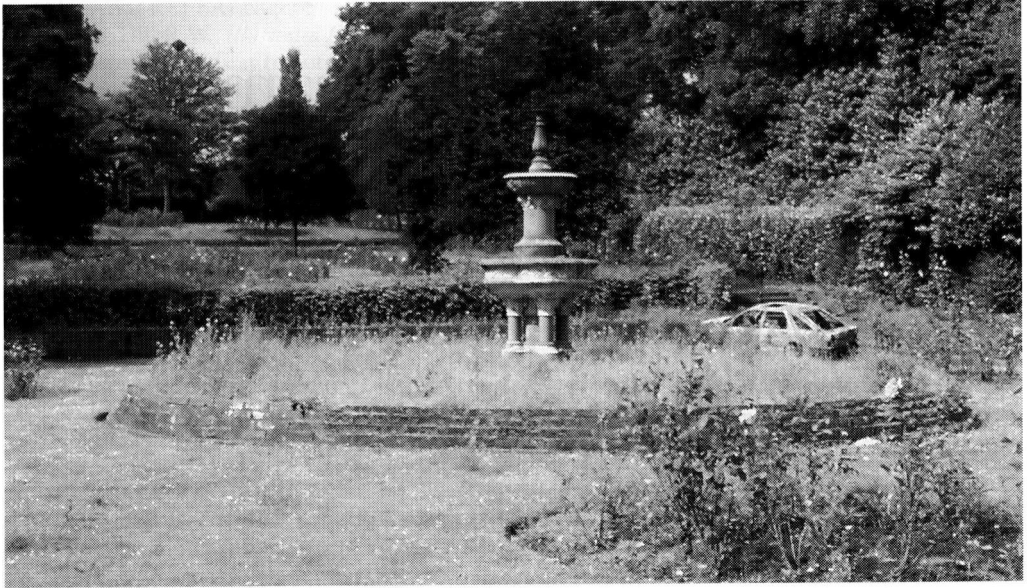


Fig. 1

Horton Park, Bradford in 1999: by the 1990s urban parks had become icons of urban decay

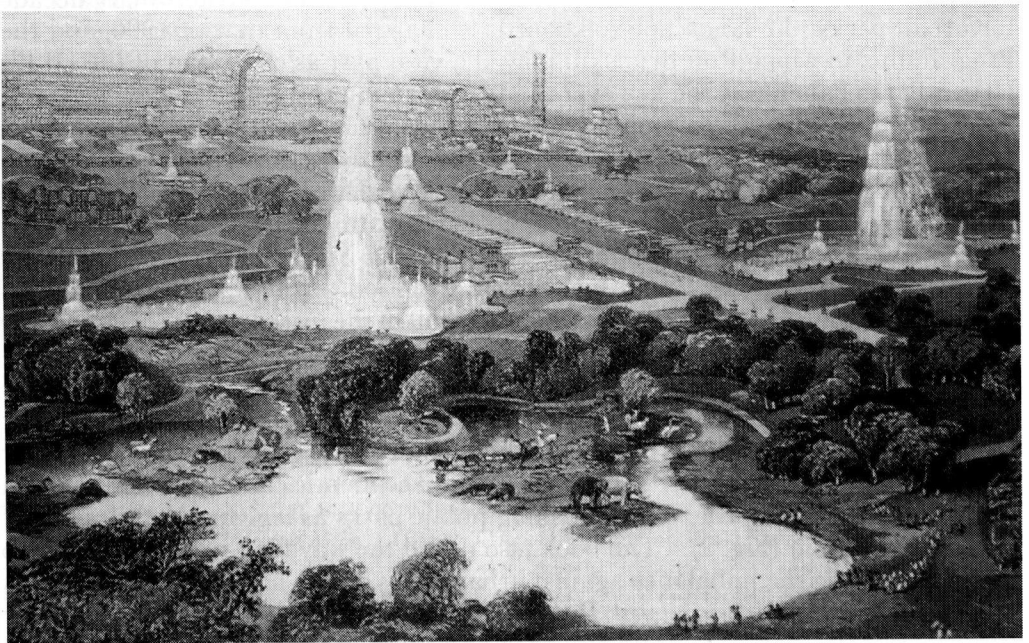


Fig. 2

Joseph Paxton's gardens of Crystal Palace at Sydenham, c. 1854, lithograph by J. D. Harding, the epitome of the new art of public gardening

National Heritage and the Department of the Environment, being told by each minister that public parks were the responsibility of the other. Then in 1995, the independent think-tank, Comedia, undertook a research programme on public parks, as part of an ongoing project on the public realm, and published in 1995 *Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal*.⁶ It commissioned twelve working-papers from individual experts, and conducted the first ever nationwide research on user numbers and cultural trends. It came up with some impressive statistics – some eight million visits a day to parks; 40% of the population regular park-users – but more importantly it identified good quality public parks as fundamental to urban life. This paid dividends with the new Labour government's interest in urban affairs after 1997. Comedia was then commissioned by the DoE to produce a guide to good practice, which came out as *People, Parks and Cities* in 1996: this was a series of snapshots from local authorities around the country.⁷ It is indicative of Government attitudes at the time that it was allowed to go out of print after only eighteen months.

In 1994 the National Heritage Memorial Fund was chosen as the distributor of lottery funds for the heritage sector and set up the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to administer the grants. It was the only UK-wide heritage organisation, but in trumping the lead agency in each country, it set up a dynamic tension with the heritage establishment. Of course the NHMF had always been the epitome of that establishment, with its choice spending on fine art – although it had grant-aided the restoration of Painshill in the 1980s. But with the sudden advent of an enormous amount of money and an urgent need to spend it, together with an influx of officers from outside, it rapidly developed an innovative and flexible approach to evaluating eligibility: nineteenth-century urban parks had previously scraped the merest morsels of grant-aid from English Heritage, in the form of management plans for People's Park Halifax and Sefton Park in Liverpool, two of the most 'historic' of parks.

The Chairman of the NHMF Lord Rothschild and the first chairman of its advisory panel on historic buildings and land, Dame Jennifer Jenkins, struck upon the idea of grants for urban parks. The first *Annual Report*, for 1994-5 set out its stall:

Nothing, however, is more important than the restoration of parks, public gardens and open spaces in towns and cities. ... Many parks have now been reduced to a state in which their contribution to the quality of urban life is minimal. Their potential, however, remains enormous. A report published earlier this year [*Park Life*] revealed that some 40% of the population uses parks regularly, and that many people do so every day. Contributing to the regeneration of urban parks therefore exemplifies our policy in two important respects. It uses lottery money to maximum public benefit, and it converts the legacy of the past into a vital asset for the future.⁸

In April 1996 £137,000 was offered towards the restoration of Victoria Park, Cardiff (Fig. 3), followed the next month by a £2.5m grant towards the repair of Tollcross Park in Glasgow.

The UPP was formally announced as a three-year programme at the beginning of 1996 with a budget of £50 million. It was never clear whether that was an annual

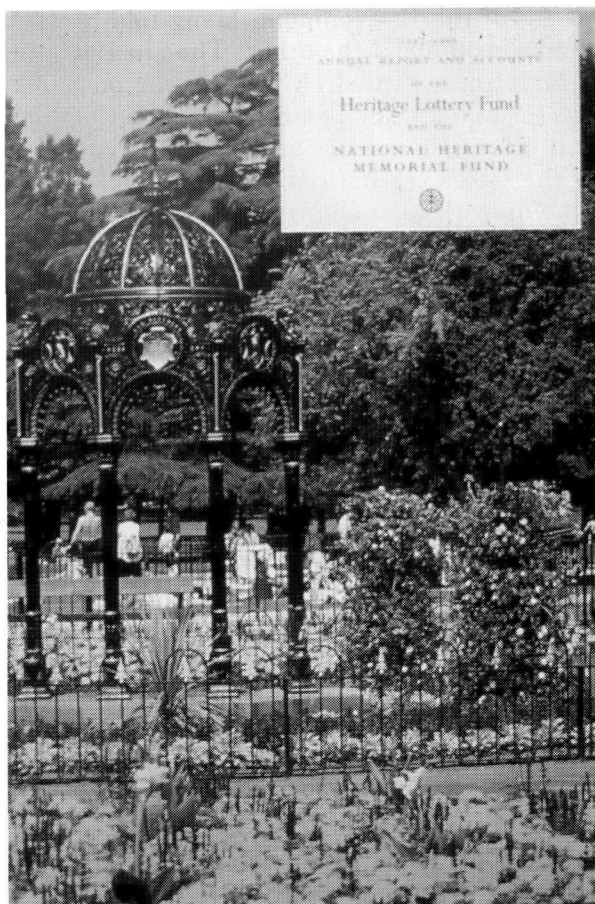


Fig. 3

Newly restored bedding at Victoria Park, Cardiff, adorning the cover of the Heritage Lottery Fund's *Annual Report* for 1995-6

or a total budget, although the demand soon became abundantly clear.

The *Annual Report* for 1995-6 laid down the terms in which the UPP was to flourish. It referred to the Secretary of State's Directions requiring the HLF to 'put forward specific themes to encourage applications from an area of heritage which we believe has a particular claim for support, or indeed to ensure a fairer geographical distribution of Lottery monies'. The UPP was 'designed to ensure that a significant proportion of Lottery funds is spent on strengthening those communities in urban areas and reviving their historic character'.⁹

The political importance of the Parks Programme was thus clear. Lottery spending was from the start far more keenly and critically watched by the media than agency spending had ever been, witness the furore over the HLF's grant for the Churchill papers, or the Arts Lottery grant to Covent Garden. There was an expectation and a demand that the people's money – which

the lottery represented far more than tax-revenue – should be spent on things that delivered public benefit. The astuteness of Lord Rothschild has been demonstrated time and again since the UPP's inception: it is democratic, populist and in tune with modern ideas of heritage and regularly receives the spotlight in plaudits for the HLF.

In an inspired appointment, Dr Stewart Harding was head-hunted in 1996 from the Countryside Commission, where he had administered storm-damage grants for the South-West region, to run the Programme. Stewart had the enormous advantage as an administrator of having actually worked in public parks and his deep commitment to them made him uniquely able to bridge the gap between park professionals and the heritage establishment. For anyone too deeply associated

with the heritage establishment, this would have been an impossible act. An advisory panel was set up with Ron Brunskill as chair and comprising Hazel Conway, Judy Hillman (who had worked so successfully on the Royal Parks Review with Dame Jennifer) and David Lambert, shortly afterwards joined by Alan Barber of ILAM and the landscape architect Richard Flenley of the highly respected and experienced firm, Land Use Consultants.

More importantly, a specialist parks team was established under Dr Harding to deal with the applications which soon arrived. He also used a group of consultants to help with the initial assessment. Dr Harding and his team developed policy and practice in this unexplored area. Best practice was imported from the experience of the Countryside Commission and English Heritage in storm-damage grants, in particular the use of grants for surveys and restoration plans, separate from grants for capital programmes. The use of small grants for that initial exercise has proved a cost-effective way of ensuring good quality applications for the main repairs. The use of experienced consultants helped to develop local expertise in an area in which expertise had bled away over the previous twenty years. In particular the UPP established, within the favourable framework set out in the *Annual Report*, and afforded by the Secretary of State's Directions and the encouragement of Lord Rothschild and Dame Jennifer, several pioneering initiatives. Two are worth special mention for their far-reaching influence on conservation philosophy.

First, that the national list was not the sole or main criterion for judging heritage merit. This was partly because of the inadequacy of those national lists (the English Heritage *Register* included at that time less than a hundred urban parks; the Scottish *Inventory* had none), but also partly because of the HLF's policy imperatives of addressing under-represented heritage areas, geographical spread and public benefit. Top-down lists were seen not to recognise adequately the value people put on their parks locally. A park might never make the national list but could still contribute uniquely to a town or city's heritage and environment. Recently, epitomised by English Heritage's 2000 report, *Power of Place*, we have seen the whole notion of top-down, ivory-tower assessment of historic importance questioned and undermined. From



Fig. 4

Eastville Park, Bristol: an example of a park which, while unlikely ever to be included on the national *Register*, still contributes significantly to the local heritage and environment

the start, the UPP put national lists to one side and instead gave the initiative to applicants to demonstrate heritage merit themselves, from their perspective (Fig. 4).

This ground-breaking approach had problems: there was certainly some initial resistance from within the HLF to the notion that scruffy parks were heritage at all, and the early days of the UPP were probably an act of faith on the part of the Trustees, despite Lord Rothschild's conviction. In this, the academic respectability conferred on these sites by Dr Conway's book and by the Garden History Society's lobbying was influential. And because the HLF was not able to solicit applications and thus organise a logical sequence of park schemes, having instead to take each application as it came, it was open to some scepticism from more conventional conservation bodies. Birkenhead Park (Fig. 5), for example, the only Grade I registered urban park, did not get an HLF grant until 2000, while substantial grants were going in the interim to parks which were generally considered 'minor'. But the HLF stuck to its guns, and the 'portfolio' has looked ever more respectable with each year that has passed.

The second initiative worth mentioning was based on seeing that the aim of the Programme, 'regeneration' of parks, could not be achieved solely by repair or even restoration. Regeneration was wider and more comprehensive than that and



Fig. 5

Birkenhead Park, designed by Joseph Paxton and Edward Kemp,
the only Grade I urban park on the *Register*

was territory into which grants for heritage landscapes, and heritage generally, had not ventured. Public parks depend on use, and attracting users back into parks was the litmus test for success. Repair of the historic fabric alone would not necessarily deliver that; moreover unless the underlying causes of the dereliction were addressed the investment was all too likely to be undone by lack of maintenance or by vandalism. So the UPP puts capital money not only into repair, but into new features such as toilets, cafes, new garden and play areas (Fig. 6). It also put money into new staff posts, from park-keepers and rangers to park-managers. And it required adherence to an agreed ten-year management plan for the upkeep of the repaired park. Then by allowing applicants to capitalise and count as partnership funding all increased maintenance-spending, it encouraged Councils to invest, because the value of the money was trebled by the 25/75% partnership arrangements. This flexibility has made the UPP especially attractive to professionals who knew that the heritage element, while critical to a park's character, was not its be-all and end-all.



Fig. 6

The new Moghul Gardens at Lister Park in Bradford: one of several HLF-funded new elements designed to help bring people back into urban parks

Courtesy of Alan Barber



Fig. 7

The new play area, grant-aided by the HLF, at Manor House Gardens, Lewisham

While of course this innovation could not have been achieved without the HLF's enormous resources, it also depended on the organisation's openness to new ways of thinking about heritage, and perhaps it would not have been possible if the lottery money had been put in the hands of those with deeply established practices, such as English Heritage.

Despite the facts of its spending – for example over £5 million on new play areas and equipment (Fig. 7) and the host of new features it has grant-aided – the HLF is dogged by misconception, probably inherent in its very name, and still gets caricatured as only being interested either in the top parks or only interested in putting things back, and by implication putting back the clock. There does have to be a clear heritage element, but it is hard to imagine a more flexible interpretation of the notion of historic interest. It is also true that historic parks, even when the term is interpreted from a local perspective only

represent some 9% of the total number of parks and open spaces nationally (some 2,500 out of a total of more than 27,000), although that is 32% of the total area.¹⁰

It is true too that the UPP has not funded the creation of new public parks and gardens. Although there is a clear popular and political demand for lottery funds for this purpose, it cannot fall to the HLF: the organisation is prevented from funding these projects by its remit. That undoubtedly falls to the New Opportunities Fund, which inherited the mantle of the Millennium Fund, which did fund such projects, most notably the new Mile End Park in the East End of London. NOF spending in this area to date has been immensely disappointing, with sports having seized the lion's share of open-space spending, but the organisation's potential remains, and its programmes of spending remain in the hands of the Secretary of State.

As for putting the clock back, the UPP's spending record, and its distinctiveness compared to the older heritage agencies, should firmly lay this ghost. Good landscape restoration plans do not put the clock back; they develop the best of what remains on the basis of sensitive historical analysis. If the clock is being put back, it is no more than twenty years, to when parks, the sum of often over a hundred years of incremental development and change, were still well-cared for by well-resourced local authorities. Ironically, despite the protests of landscape architects

and others, public consultation exercises show again and again the public's affection for historic features, and their over-arching desire for the basic provision of security and good maintenance.

In preparing its three-year Strategic Plan in 1998, the HLF proposed winding up the Urban Parks Programme. Although it was to remain a 'core scheme' the indicative allocation for the programme was a reduction from £30 million in 1998-9 to £11 million in 2001-2 and the draft stated that the Programme 'will be drawing to a close'.¹¹ The reaction was vociferous and unanimous, epitomised by the House of Commons Culture Select Committee report on the HLF which took evidence at the same time. It praised the 'experience and excellent track record of the Heritage Lottery Fund in this area':

Of all the HLF's many programmes and initiatives, that which has been most singularly praised in evidence is the Urban Parks Programme. ...From an original intention to commit £50 million to the Programme, the fund has made grants to over 200 parks to a value in excess of £100 million. In doing so, the Fund has ensured that the Lottery has had a marked impact in communities which might not otherwise have benefited. The Programme has acted as a spur to a wider revival of interest in the regenerative role of urban parks.¹²

The MPs concluded that 'This Committee considers it vital that the total commitment of National Lottery resources to urban green spaces is maintained or even enhanced in coming years' and that 'it would send the wrong signals in the Urban Parks Programme's separate identity within the Heritage Lottery Fund was not retained'.¹³ In the face of these and other protests the Programme was retained in the new Strategic Plan (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8

The restored bandstand at Mowbray Park, Sunderland, one of the first urban park projects to be completed

The UPP was also bolstered in 1998 by the new Secretary of State's *Directions*, which are in themselves a landmark in conservation grant-aid. These stated that the HLF must include in its aims in awarding grant-aid, promoting the public good, covering the complete range of national heritage, an equitable geographical spread, the potential in grants to reduce economic and social deprivation, promoting access for people from all sections of society, addressing the needs of children and young people, and furthering the aims of sustainability. Although they were not directions to the national agencies, the influence of the HLF as it developed its assessment-procedure to meet these objectives has had a far-reaching influence on thinking about conservation and its place in society across the board. And of course, the *Directions* could read almost like a charter for the Programme, which again and again could be demonstrated to press all these political buttons for the HLF.

Under-writing the capital investment is naturally an integral part of HLF grant-aid, and appeared problematic given the shocking dereliction of many urban parks, and of course their open, generally twenty-four-hour, public access. The correspondingly run-down state of many local authority management structures for parks also caused alarm. The UPP endeavoured to address this in individual applications by the means outlined above – funding new staff, encouraging new management structures, requiring management plans and public consultation – but also by separate stand-alone projects unconnected with specific sites.

It grant-aided a feasibility study for a new independent body to champion the needs of historic parks and gardens, a Landscape Heritage Trust. The study produced some compelling evidence of the absence of such a champion, of the economic potential of the sector and of the need for joined-up thinking in policy. Although the initial idea was based on the needs of urban parks, it embraced all types of historic park and garden and the bid was actually submitted by the Countryside Agency via its Countryside Trust. While the Agency has not progressed the idea, the exercise was invaluable in raising awareness within the sector and fed directly into the HLF's needs assessment exercise on urban parks.

This was nominally an internal exercise, with similar assessments being carried out in other HLF areas. The HLF commissioned ILAM to carry out the research with partnership funding from English Heritage and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). The first phase began to show the scale of the problem and the scale of what the 1999 Select Committee report into parks would call the 'information deficit', and the HLF consequently funded a second phase, commissioning additional work from the newly formed Urban Parks Forum, again with EH and DETR funding, with the Countryside Agency this time also subscribing. The research and its report was published on the HLF web-site in June 2001, and provides the first statistical evidence of the decline in urban parks. It revealed that 82% of the population does not have access to good quality parks. Compared with 1979 there is an annual deficit in maintenance spending of £126 million, and the accumulated underspend in the intervening twenty years is a staggering £1.3 billion. In the same period, over a quarter of basic visitor facilities such as toilets, cafes and shelters have been lost; over a quarter of all ornamental

gates have been removed, over half the bandstands and nearly 70% of conservatories in public parks have been demolished. In addition 32% of historic urban parks are declining from fair to poor condition and inclusion on the *Register* has no impact on a park's condition or trend: all this despite public parks receiving an estimated 1.5 billion visits a year, with historic parks receiving some 3-400 million.¹⁴ The HLF's sponsorship of this research has gone far beyond its own internal use and is set to have a major impact on public policy.

The third initiative that should be mentioned is its patronage and encouragement of the Urban Parks Forum. Set up initially by the University of York, after a one-off workshop organised by the Garden History Society, this began as an informal grouping of park managers working on HLF-sponsored restoration projects, coming together to discuss progress and disseminate good practice. Its seminars and conferences proved very popular, with the HLF taking a lead in its early days. In 2001, it secured major funding from the DETR, and is now firmly established and set to play an influential role not only with practitioners but also with Government.

Finally, the HLF grant-aided research by the Garden History Society into the economic contribution of historic parks and gardens. Although this was largely a review and scoping exercise, it lays the foundations for building a key part of the conservation case: not just cost-benefit analysis but the wider contribution which regeneration of parks can make to a local economy.¹⁵

Thus it is apparent that, through its Urban Parks Programme, the HLF became *de facto* the lead agency on urban parks if not on parks and gardens generally. The cash-value put on urban parks by the HLF forced decision-makers to consider the other kinds of value which parks represented – economic regeneration, social inclusion, sustainability, biodiversity, community health, crime-reduction, transport – and we are just beginning to see the percolation of parks policy into these other areas. It is unlikely that the House of Commons Environment Select Committee would have called an inquiry into town and country parks in 1999 if the UPP had not been set up and, in essence, demonstrated the importance of parks.¹⁶ Similarly the HLF was asked to give evidence to the same Committee's inquiry in 2000 on cemeteries, having grant-aided several under the Urban Parks Programme.¹⁷

All this demonstrates how a simple, reactive grant-programme grew in subtlety, effectiveness and influence. Its benefits to the HLF in terms of public relations is incalculable, but its benefit to parks reaches far beyond the individual parks which have so far benefited directly. Parks have risen up the local agenda: the district and borough-wide parks strategies encouraged by the HLF, and the principle of management plans for individual parks have had far-reaching benefit to parks. The political mileage in supporting parks has been recognised by countless local politicians. It has encouraged thousands of private individuals to form together and campaign for their parks. The HLF deserves great credit for holding its nerve as the Programme developed, and should be applauded for taking on this unforeseen and entirely admirable role. It is perhaps ironic that calls for a national agency for urban parks have been in part deflected by the fact that the HLF has been delivering

so effectively in this area.¹⁸

The efforts of the last decade have now begun to pay off. The importance of urban parks has ascended to the august level of a political truism, with ministers who once brushed aside pleas for help eager to put on record their view that 'our parks are, after all, one of our national glories' (Fig. 9).¹⁹

The report of the review of the historic environment carried out by English Heritage last year, *Power of Place*, gave prominence to urban parks as 'a vital part of the historic environment', over and above the private, eighteenth-century landscape: indeed rural sites can now be seen hanging on to the coat-tails of their urban cousins in policy terms.²⁰

The report of the Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban Renaissance* (1999), usefully identified the importance of open space, although not necessarily green, in the fabric of successful cities, while the foreword by the former mayor of Barcelona, Pasqual Maragall, contained the welcome affirmation that 'A commitment to develop networks of new plazas, parks and buildings was the cause of our success'.²¹ Even though the Report referred unforgivably to open space as the 'glue' between buildings, it firmly promoted green space networks and hierarchies and their strategic planning as central to urban design (Fig. 10).

Our Towns and Cities: the Future, the Government's Urban White Paper (December 2000) was of course heavily indebted to that report, but on parks its greater debt was to the Select Committee inquiry. After a disappointing formal response to the inquiry, the DETR produced three solid pages on parks and play areas.²² This too should be seen as a child of the Urban Parks Programme – apart from the HLF showing the only evidence of any significant 'public' spending on urban parks on behalf of the Government, it bears the imprint of the new evaluation of urban parks which has developed in the Programme's wake.

In early 2001 the White Paper's pledge to set up an Urban Parks and Green Space Taskforce, chaired by a minister, was honoured, and at the time of writing (late August 2001) the Taskforce is approaching half-way point in its work. It is

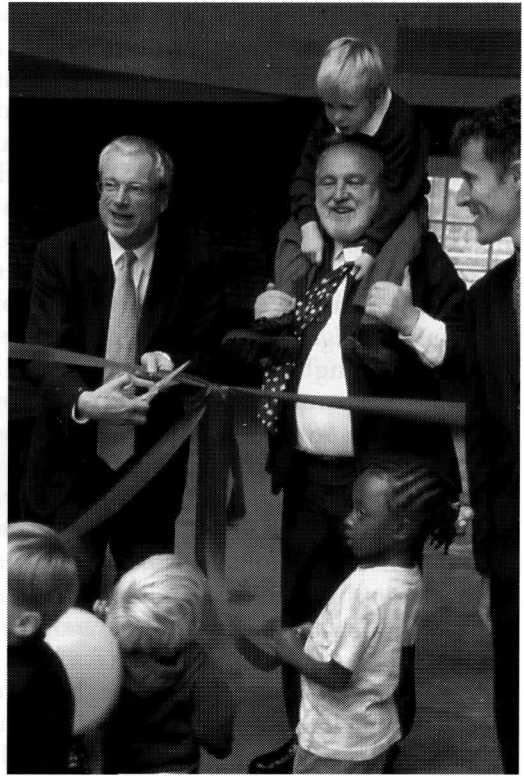


Fig. 9

Urban parks became a political photo-opportunity: Chris Smith and Frank Dobson at the opening of Coram's Field in September 2000



Fig. 10

The Urban Parks Programme has connected to wider recognition of the importance of parks in urban regeneration, as exemplified by Parc André Citroën in Paris

greatly to be hoped that the Taskforce will build on the unparalleled experience of the HLF, which is now so much wider than just heritage, in formulating its recommendations.

The challenge now is to recognise that the Heritage Lottery Fund cannot be the solution to all the problems of all urban parks: not even the New Opportunities Fund can be that, even if it does finally start to address them. Capital grants, however big, are only going to represent a blip in the history of these places, and what will really make a difference is the long-term commitment of the owners. The catalytic effect of those grants is very encouraging in many places, as a restoration programme has knock-on effects for management, and for other parks in an area. The Government is right when it insists that parks, and the state of parks, is a matter for local decision-making; but it is disingenuous when it implies that it has no role in that decision-making. It takes such a role in a host of other cultural areas, via its quangos, for sport, for arts, or for museums. The HLF has played a huge part in bringing parks to the attention of Government: the next step needs to be taken by ministers. Will they take it?

NOTES

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3. Barber, A., *A Guide to Management Plans for Parks and Open Spaces* (Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management, 1991).
4. GMB, *Grounds for Concern* (London, undated [1993]).
5. Conway, H., *People's Parks: the Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (Cambridge, 1990).
6. Comedia and Demos, *Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal* (London, 1995).
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