



Pastimes

The history of sport and leisure
in Kennington Park



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Published by The Friends of Kennington Park

sponsored by Surrey County Cricket Club



A recreational hub

On Whit Monday in May 1893, the London County Council (LCC) took a census of all the people entering the parks under its control. That day, 40,001 people visited Kennington Park - making it the second most extensively used of all the LCC's parks.

This astonishing figure shows that the opportunities for sport, recreation and access to open space in Kennington Park were just as precious to local people then as they are now.

This booklet looks at the different facilities the park has offered over the years – from outdoor gymnasiums and swimming pool to promenading and puppet shows.

Promenading in Kennington Park, 1910



SPORT AND LEISURE FACILITIES IN KENNINGTON PARK PRE 1854 TO PRESENT DAY

Pre 1854: leisurely pursuits,
cricket & coits on the common

1854 onwards: promenading
around formal planting, later
football & leisurely pursuits

Present: picnics,
relaxation, and
informal recreation



Kennington Common: the home of cricket?

Kennington was associated with cricket long before the Oval was built and Surrey County Cricket Club moved in. The earliest recorded cricket match on Kennington Common took place on 18th June 1724 when London Cricket Club took on Dartford.

Although Kennington Common can't claim to be the scene of the first recorded cricket match in south London (Clapham Common hosted a series of matches from 1700), it may have one claim to a cricketing first. The match played on 12th July 1731 was the first one known to have been played in an enclosed ground. An advert for the match states that 'the ground will be roped round and all persons are desired to keep without side of the same.' This practice soon became common place and eventually, part of the rules of the game.

Beyond the Oval

The Oval ground opened in 1845 and became the focus for cricket locally although matches still took place on the Common. In 1952 local residents celebrated the centenary* of the creation of the park with a special match. It was played on the South field (outside the café) with all the players and officials wearing Victorian costume.

Today, the park's long association with cricket continues as the park extension is home to Kennington United Cricket Club, which has several teams who play in different leagues and tournaments. The club also organises cricket training for local youngsters.

*The centenary celebrations marked the hundredth anniversary of the passing of the 1852 Act of Parliament that created Kennington Park, rather than the park's actual opening in 1854.



The Oval (bottom) and the home of KUCC on the extension



KUCC cricket lessons on the extension 2005

A good work out –Victorian style

After the park opened the only opportunity for exercise was a good walk around the broad pathways. Local people became concerned that children had nowhere safe to play or exercise and in 1861 an outdoor gymnasium opened on the site now occupied by the children's playground. It featured hanging ropes, parallel bars, swing and a giant stride. This was like a big maypole with ropes attached to a swivelling top, enabling the users to hold on to the ropes and take giant strides around the pole.

From the start, large numbers of men monopolised the ropes preventing small boys from having a turn. A policeman was soon taken on specifically to look after the gym but the South London Chronicle reported complaints that the constable wouldn't let anyone use the equipment unless they gave him beer money first.



The gymnasium was similar to this one in Primrose Hill (Illustrated London News 1848), featuring a 'giant stride'.



The children's gym

In 1890 separate equipment for children was set up in the gymnasium and special times were set aside when only children could use it. Despite this, the Park Manager reported in 1901 that 'hundreds of little children never get the chance of a swing.' In 1902 a second gym with swings, sandpit and a giant stride opened on the site now occupied by the fitness trail. Originally intended as a children's gym, it was decided to make it exclusively for girls, with boys continuing to use the old one.

It is unclear when the first gym was removed but the girls' gym survived until the late 1960s, when it was moved to the play area created near the lido (see 'Playtime'). It's interesting that both gym sites are now occupied by equipment that encourages people to be active.

In full flight on the fitness trail



Football crazy

Despite the number of people who use the park for football today, there was little room for it during the park's first seventy five years. Because of the heavy use of the park, the North and South fields took it in turns to be open to the public so that the grass could recover; this in turn limited the space available for football.

In 1920, a committee reported that 'there is no London district which is so much in need of open spaces as the south eastern part of London which is served by Kennington Park, and no other park is so much used by London children. At present it is impossible to allow either cricket or football or other organised games owing to the shortage of space.'



The Big Match: football on the extension



‘The Ashes’

In 1921 five acres of land to the south east of the park were bought for £38,500, and the houses there demolished. They were replaced, at a cost of £20,000, with an open air swimming pool, a paddling pool, an Old English garden and a large dry playground suitable for ball games. Known locally as ‘The Ashes’ because of the asphalt playing surface, the pitch was popular with footballers from the outset.

Things got even better when floodlights for The Ashes were authorised in 1938. It’s not clear whether the lights were installed before or after World War II – but council minutes in 1952 show that the quality of the lighting was improved to ‘stimulate matches within the London FA.’

Today, The Ashes are covered with Astro Turf and are heavily used by football and hockey teams from across south London. Two further football pitches were created when 18 acres to the east of the park were laid out to form the park extension from 1963. These have recently been refurbished and are free to use with no booking required. Despite these provisions, there is always a demand for more space for football. Both fields are used for informal kickabouts but Lambeth Parks Department try to limit organised teams using the fields exclusively for football as it prevents other people using the space. Today the fields host Tai Chi, Frisbee, jugglers, sunbathers, readers and picnickers.



The Lido, The Ashes and paddling pool (1961)



Kennington Park Lido (1965)



Goal bound: hockey on the Astro turf



An impromptu game of badminton on the South field

A dip in the park

The other key part of the 1931 development was Kennington Park Lido. Opened in July 1931, it was more elaborate than some of the earlier London County Council lidos. Like its twin lido at London Fields, which was built the same year, it offered a swimming pool, paddling pool, sunbathing areas, continuous filtration, an aerator fountain and changing facilities. The pool cost £10,000 and measured 165 x 66 feet with a maximum depth of 7ft 6ins.

In its heyday, the lido at London Fields attracted over 1,800 people a day. There is no reason to believe the lido at Kennington was any less popular. As one swimmer remembers 'a whole day would be spent at the park culminating with a dip in undeniably the coldest water it has ever been anyone's misfortune to swim in. Nonetheless kids from all around went back day after day during the summer months. I remember the flat concrete area surrounding the pool becoming too hot to stand on.'

But it wasn't always as idyllic as it sounds. The same swimmer recalls 'the familiar sound of an ambulance coming to collect the latest victim of broken glass always found covering the bottom of the adjacent paddling pool.'



Cooling off in the paddling pool, 1936

Running dry

Despite its popularity Kennington Park Lido didn't open for the 1988 season for financial reasons. Lambeth council demolished the buildings in 1990 as part of a plan to build a new pool on the same site. The pool's main tank was relined but the second phase of the plan, costing £700,000, never materialised as Lambeth council said the number of people using the pool didn't justify the expense of restoring and managing it.

After years of quiet deterioration behind corrugated fencing, the pool was filled in 1995 and covered with tennis and netball courts, changing rooms and toilets. The only trace of the lido is the oval shaped area of grass between the tennis courts and Camberwell New Road where the edge of the paddling pool can be seen.

Balls and boards

The demolition of the lido had a domino effect on the sports facilities in the park, with old facilities being replaced with new ones and the old sites being reused for something else.

It's unclear when the gymnasium near the café was removed but it was replaced by two tennis courts. From 1924, the courts were also used for netball during school hours, with changing facilities for netball players situated on the upper floor of Prince Consort's Lodge. Sometime between 1950 and 1963 netball was given its own court in the north east corner of the park.

When the lido was demolished, the space was used for three dedicated tennis courts and two multi-use courts. The courts by the café fell into disrepair and were used for volleyball before being covered over by the children's playground when it was moved from Camberwell New Road in 2006. At the same time, the site of the old playground was turned into a court area for various ball games and can be used free of charge and without booking.

Tennis and netball on the site of the old lido



Basket case: the new free access ball court





Wheely wild – the ever popular skateboard



The netball court in the north east corner of the park was replaced by a skateboard bowl in 1978. It was condemned as dangerous soon after it opened because its raised construction meant it was easy for people to fall through the safety rail. It was closed soon afterwards but die-hards ignored the closure. Today it is as popular as ever, attracting skateboarders of all ages from across south London and is a living canvas for the boarding community's graffiti artists.

Leisurely pursuits

*Quoits on Kennington Common
Common 1782*

Not everyone who came to Kennington Park did so to take part in sports. Then, as now, the park had to cater for everyone's needs.

Some engravings show people having picnics on Kennington Common although this seems unlikely. In 1849 the Builder magazine reported that 'the stunted herbage is





*eating out on
Kennington
Common
1842*

trodden and soiled by a troop of cows belonging to a neighbouring milkman. A kind of pond near one corner; and a deep ditch opposite South Place [now Kennington Park Place], are the cemeteries of all the dead puppies and kittens of the vicinity. Their decaying carcases may be seen floating on the surface of their watery graves, in all the green and purple tints of putrefication.' It is ironic that this area has since become the part where dogs and their owners enjoy exercising and socialising. The park has a thriving dog walking community and is fortunate in having such a large area dedicated to their use.

A pleasant place to sit

The common was turned into a park in 1854 and great care was taken to lay out the ornamental flower beds and maintain the park – but only fourteen seats were provided. Following complaints this number increased to thirty one. Benches were placed along the main walks and, from 1866 onwards, hired chairs were 'placed each season on the straight walk north and south of the Lodge.' By 1894, there were at least eighty three benches in the park.



*A walk in the park along the perimeter fence,
towards Prince Consort Lodge, c.1908*



*Chilling out: new benches were
installed in 2006*



Peace and quiet: the Flower Garden 1932



Water feature: the lily pond 1932

They were the traditional Victorian style benches with cast iron supports and may well have been removed during World War II to contribute to the war effort. The benches that replaced them were mainly of wood and many had no back supports. Some of these remain today although twenty new iron benches were installed in 2006.

By far one of the most popular places to spend some time was the Old English Garden (now called the Flower Garden) which was laid out from 1929 and officially opened in 1931. The garden's full story will be covered more fully in a forthcoming booklet on the park's horticultural history.

Playtime

The park has always been a magnet for local children with the two main fields opened alternately to help the grass recover from heavy use. But apart from the gymnasiums there were no designated play areas. With the post-war housing developments, the need for more facilities and more space for play became urgent.

In 1951 the Parks Committee identified 'an area of about eighteen acres adjoining Kennington Park, for an ultimate extension of the park to help alleviate the acute deficiency of open space in this neighbourhood.' The space was to include a 'grass area mainly for mothers and children (now the 1 o'clock club), two football pitches and free-play area.'



Play away: the playground 1962



The Adventure Playground (on the site now occupied by the Kennington Play Project) was modelled on the first such playground built in London (in nearby Lollard Street) and opened in 1958. In 1960 construction started on a new playroom and children's toilets and the children's gymnasium equipment was moved to the site.

Part of the playroom was demolished in 1995 and rebuilt to accommodate the changing rooms and toilets needed for the new Astro Turf sports facilities. At the same time the old equipment in the playground was replaced with more modern items for both very small and larger children and the whole area relandscaped. The playground moved again in 2006 when the existing equipment was placed on its current site near the café.



Action stations at the Kennington Play Project



Lambeth's play strategy for 2007-2017, recognises that a park is a key resource for play in the area and that the Council should provide a safe, quality play experience throughout the park as a whole. With this in mind, plans for a new, more challenging playground and a nature trail are currently being pursued by the Friends in conjunction with Lambeth.

The final part of the park extension saw the arrival of the Charlie Chaplin Adventure Playground in 1982. Now run by a voluntary committee, the playground provides play opportunities for primarily disabled children, their siblings, friends and local children.

On stage in Kennington Park

The park was used for outdoor concerts from the 1890's onwards. Every Monday in the summer the Metropolitan Police band gave a concert while on Wednesday's it was the turn of the band of the 19th Surrey Rifles. As there was no proper bandstand they played from an ugly wooden structure that gave no shelter or acoustic and took up some of the grass needed for playing. In 1899 a bandstand of timber and slate roof built was opened.

Water music: the Tinworth Fountain and bandstand 1906



The band played on

The concerts in the park were incredibly popular. In 1901 over 30,000 halfpennies were taken for seats, with 2,021 tickets being sold for one performance alone. By 1905 the average attendance was 2,600 – so large in fact, that the bandstand had to be extended. Lighting was also installed.

From 1928, performances were given from May to September on Sundays, Wednesdays and Bank Holidays. And from summer 1944, concert parties were held each Thursday evening as part of the 'Holidays at Home' initiative to help lift the gloom of war in the summer time. Amateur boxing contests and children's shows also took place on the bandstand and continued after the war.



Easy listening (1966) and a puppet show (1964)



The bandstand had been removed by 1963 but had ceased to be used from the 1950s when a concrete rectangular concert platform had been built alongside it. This new stage saw performances from puppet shows, clowns and concert parties. This in turn was itself replaced in 1966 by a wooden stage structure which hosted the same sort of performance as its predecessors before being destroyed by fire in 1994. The stage area and the 'stage door' can still be seen to the west of the basketball court.

Fairs and fireworks

The park has played host to circuses, fun fairs and fireworks displays for many years.

Benson's fun fair became a regular event in the park's calendar, initially being sited amongst the trees on the triangular stretch of grass between the tennis courts and Kennington Park Road. However, as both the fair and the trees grew in size, it became an unsuitable site and the fair moved to the park extension before settling in its familiar position on the South field.

Every November 5th, the sky above the park became awash with colour from fireworks let off from the North field. At one point there was a bonfire too but this was eventually left out of the celebrations, presumably because of concerns for the grass and public safety. Undeterred, crowds of spectators would gather on the Midnight Path for a close up view and ooh and aah throughout the display.

The larger and more powerful fireworks that people came to expect from public displays spelt the end for the annual event in the park as the council felt it wasn't big enough to accommodate the new pyrotechnics safely. The last public display in the park took place in November 2001.

It's this mix of organised and informal activity that has characterised sport and recreation in Kennington Park over the years – and which will ensure that local people continue to keep fit, have fun and relax in the park.



Sources

Clare Askwith – Kennington Park, PhD Thesis 1995

Wikipedia

Lambeth's Open Spaces M Draper

Image sources

The following images were reproduced with the kind permission of Lambeth Archives:

Aerial view of Lido and Ashes playing field

[Ref: SP/13/593/KEN.P2]

18th century engraving of Kennington Common

[Ref: LP13/593/KEN.C.3]

Flower Garden [Ref: SP/13/593/KEN.P1 in 07582]

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Victorian gym in Primrose Hill [Ref: SC/P2/5P/0V/0245]

Lido pool [Ref: 14186]

Children's playground [Ref: 9804]

Bandstand and Tinworth fountain [Ref: 86/197]

Brass band concert [Ref: 14415/1]

Puppet show [Ref: 11948/2]

Other photos courtesy of:

Suzanne Jansen, Surrey County Cricket Club, KUCC, ACS media.

Illustration of Victorian strongman by Ant Parker

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Surrey County Cricket Club for their generous sponsorship of this booklet.

Thanks also to City of London, London

Metropolitan Archives and Lambeth Archives for

waiving the fee for the use of their photographs and illustrations, the staff at Metropolitan Archives, the Architectural Association library and, in particular, to Anne Ward at Lambeth Archives for her patience and assistance.

Suzanne Jansen for her fantastic photographs and Ant Parker for his charming illustration.

Diane May for her impeccable design and skills and patience.



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