

## **Chair's Annual Report – AGM 2023**

Having celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Friends of Kennington Park last year, in 2023 the Friends have now come of age.

21 years on the challenges have changed. The children's playground was looking tired, the skatebowl was in urgent need of repair, the Council's park budget has been slashed, staffing levels are greatly reduced whilst litter and vandalism seem to have increased.

A year ago I spoke about the Friends driving the Capital Programme plans for the park's future. There has been a significant success with the brand-new children's playground opened at the start of the school holidays. To coincide with the hot weather the park now has four drinking water fountains. Whilst we are already consulting on ideas for a proposed youth zone near the table tennis, there has, unfortunately, been little progress on refurbishing the iconic skatebowl. This is proving to be a technically challenging and costly project which is currently on hold whilst further monies are sourced. At the top of the list of complaints about the park is the state of the toilets. I was hoping that we could have pointed to another success; that of a new modern toilet block on the footprint of the children's toilet block. However, Lambeth's Planning department and Conservation Officer are unwilling to give the green light to replace the current red brick toilet blocks on the basis that their heritage value is more important than a modern, purpose built facility. The toilet blocks are outdated, frequently vandalised and, as a consequence, rarely used. Their suggested refurbishment would be extremely costly and would not overcome their limitations. Supported by Lambeth Parks, we are not deterred and will continue to campaign to get 21<sup>st</sup> century toilets for the park. Amended plans for a new block and the demolition of the old blocks will be re-submitted and we would welcome your support in convincing the Planning Department of the need for new loos in the park .

For the sporty members, work on the Astroturf at the south end of the park has, at last started, and it should open again in early October.

I suspect that many people think that the Friends run the park, certainly Rita, our tireless Secretary, looks after the FOKP email deals with numerous enquiries on everything from toilets, to litter, events, dogs, rats, vandalism, BBQs, e-scooters and bikes, football games and history enquiries. The Friends, in turn, are in frequent contact with Lambeth. We are all local people, volunteers, determined that the park doesn't slip back to "the bad old days".

Post Covid, we've been able to go to local events, increase our membership, reach out into our local community and work with our park neighbours, Trees for Cities, Bee Urban and, more recently, students at the Park College on Kennington Park Place, as well as working with local organizations such as the Junior Park Run. The sight of up to 50 young children (and some parents) running 2 laps around the park each Sunday morning is brilliant.

An example of our community working was the third Kennington Park Festival which was held on 16 July. A free fun day for all the family including music, dance, samba, workshops, punch & judy, face painting, games and food – the flower crowns and free fruit were great hits. FOKP was greatly assisted by partnership working with Berkeley Homes, King's Health Partners, Melanin Health and Wellness, Marsh & Parsons, Thriving North Lambeth, Southwark College and Iconic Media. Festival participants included Rambert, Boury Academy, the Brixton Chamber Orchestra, Bee Urban, Trees for Cities, the Durning Library, Southwark College and the City & Guilds College.

This year was the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chartist rally on Kennington Common, we celebrated it with an audio trail which you can access via posters with QR codes in the park or via our website. It was written by a member, narrated by another with others involved in the design and promotion. Other events have included tree walks, history walks, the RSPB Garden Bird Watch and a Dawn Chorus Walk – the park looks quite different at 5am and the young foxes were a little surprised to see us!

Despite the rain and heat this summer the park continues to bloom – unfortunately so does the bindweed. It has retained its Green Flag (for the 13<sup>th</sup> year) and won two gold awards from London in Bloom. Much of this is down to

our very successful volunteer gardening scheme made possible by a generous anonymous donation and expertly led by Ruth Morgan. Between February and July this year there have been over 200 hours of volunteer gardening, a Lambeth gardener has been scheduled to work in the park three days a week.

Over the past year we have kept in touch with the membership through Marnie's regular Mailchimp newsletters and, for the wider community, with posters promoting events and Jo and Mark have been our social media gurus.

The Northern Line Extension work at the north end of the park was finally completed last year and the dog walking area reinstated. Despite Gordon and I spending many hours in meetings with the NLE people over several years trying to achieve an upgraded and improved dog area, I'm afraid what we currently have is not satisfactory and FoKP are on the case about the lack of bins and benches, the soggy patches and the state of the trees. It is something for Lambeth Parks and Planning to strongly pursue with London Underground and we will continue to push them.

Trying to calculate the number of volunteer hours devoted to park business would be a massive task, but much of what the Friends do has been down to the hard work of a small, dedicated group of committee members. Thanks to Rita for all her behind the scenes work especially on the Festival; Marnie on the creative side; Sonia who stepped into the breach whilst our Treasurer Vilde is on maternity leave in Norway; Nikki and Alison on the playground plans; Mark on IT; Ian for his work on our membership database. Nikki and Vilde were to be the organizers of our inaugural Dog Show last year which, sadly, had been cancelled at short notice following the death of the Queen. Alison organized a second successful Easter Egg hunt. A big shout out to Ruth Morgan who leads the gardening sessions and to Anne and Julie who keep the war memorial planters tidy and colourful.

We continue to work in a successful partnership with Lambeth Council – Kevin Crook who is doing his best to ensure Kennington Park gets the necessary funds; Ian Ross who, sadly, has moved on to pastures green, Caroline Streeks our Capital Programme Project Manager; Theresa Hoare and Kevin Wallace on the day to day; Iain Boulton on environmental matters; the park staff who valiantly work to

keep on top of the litter and, last, but definitely not least, Reece for his hard work in the park.

In February the park hosted Burberry's London Fashion Week show – reactions were mixed – but the outcome was that no other commercial events have been held in the park this year. Commercial Events in parks are a balancing act, they do bring in much needed revenue, but can cause damage. The Friends are mindful of both the differing sides of the argument and the need for investment in the park.

Future plans include more FoKP events, possibly some tree hugging, bat walks, an outdoor art event and, if we can find some organizers, a dog show. We will continue to push forward the Capital Programme projects and to look at ways of tackling the litter and sorting out the dog area. Some hedge planting on the extension is planned for the autumn, supported by funding from the Council for the Protection of Rural England London.

The Friends need to be a pro-active group, our priorities continue to be improving the park and its facilities, seeking funding opportunities, liaising with Lambeth, gaining new members, finding champions for projects, recruiting helpers and people with skills to expand our reach into the local community. If you are interested in helping out, please get in touch or come to our events.

Many thanks for your support, help and coming to our AGM, we all love Kennington Park and are pledged to make the park the best it can be.

Marietta Crichton Stuart

FoKP Chair

5 September 2023