

The Friends of Kennington Park AGM 2022

Report of the Chair Marietta Crichton Stuart

20 years ago Kennington Park was a sad, shabby park, with a bad reputation and which people rarely used. A group of local people led by Mark Rogers and Rob Pateman met in St Agnes Church Hall determined to “save” the park, to work with Lambeth Council and the community and make the park the best it can be. This was the birth of the Friends of Kennington Park which is now celebrating its 20th birthday.

The two decades have witnessed a change in the park’s fortunes – the children’s playground was brought back into the heart of the park, the flower garden regenerated, the sunken beds re-planted and an orchard planted nearby. Behind the upgraded café, is the thriving Bee Urban. There are more seats, trees and bins; keep fit equipment and table tennis tables and the civilian war memorial.

The park, once unloved, is now much loved and much used, particularly since the Covid lockdown.

But the challenges for the park remain – the Council’s Park budget has been slashed and its reduced staff are kept busy tackling the increasing litter. This is where the Friends come into the mix; formerly they were the icing on the cake, they are now an important and ever increasing part of the essential ingredients.

I suspect that many park visitors think that the Friends manage the park, certainly Rita, our tireless Secretary, who 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, liaise with Lambeth on an almost day to day basis. We are all local people, volunteers, determined that the park doesn’t slip back to “the bad old days”.

But the Friends are now driving the plans for the park’s future, to make it better, so working for new toilets, an upgraded children’s playground, an area for teenagers, a restoration of the iconic skateboard bowl, as well as work on the drains and paths and improved signage. More of this later in the report on the Capital Development Programme.

The Covid lockdown had attracted a lot of new park users who are now regulars, but the Friends and the park had a lot of Post Covid catching up. We have been able to go to local events, increase our membership and to reach out into our local community and work with local organizations such as the Junior Park Run. An outcome of this has been the Kennington Park Festival, the first was held last August on Bank Holiday Monday and the second in early

July. These have been greatly assisted by partnership working with Berkeley Homes, Melanin Health and Wellness, Thriving North Lambeth and Active Communities.

Despite the very hot summer the park continues to bloom, it has retained its Green Flag (for the 12th year) and won a gold and silver gilt award from London in Bloom. Historic England also recognized the park as a Green Heritage Site. 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. Since January there have been 85 hours of volunteer gardening and recently 36 hours of watering and mulching.

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 Marnie and Nikki have been the social media gurus.

The past year has seen three physical changes in the park. Firstly, the Northern Line Extension (NLE) work at the north end of the park has been completed and the dog walking area was reinstated. Despite 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.

Secondly the History Hut which was officially opened in December by our MP Florence Eshalomi. Devised and designed by Marnie and FOKP volunteers and sponsored by the Friends, Lambeth Council and Surrey County Cricket, it tells some of the story of Kennington Common, the park and Kennington. We have had many appreciative comments and we know that it has been used by several local schools.

Thirdly the Astroturf area at the south end of the park which has been shut since last year. We are waiting an update from the Council as to when work on the repairs and upgrade will take place. We have also asked Lambeth about its strategy for the park extension.

For the future, apart from the planned Capital Development Programme changes, 2023 is the 175th anniversary of the "monster" Chartist rally held on what was Kennington Common. We had a very successful project in 2018, but, since then have been distracted by other projects, so ideas are sought for a practical and appropriate way to remember this important event in Kennington's history.

We are also pushing Lambeth Council for the park to finally become a Field in Trust, this should give some protection for the park for the future.

Trying to calculate the number of volunteer hours devoted to the park 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, now also a skateboard expert, for all her behind the scenes work especially on the Festival; Marnie on the creative side; Vilde and Matt on the finances; Nikki and Alison on playground; Mark on IT; Nichola on the design side and Ian for his work on our membership database. Nikki and Vilde are also organizers of our inaugural Dog Show on Sunday 11 September. 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.

A recent article in The Guardian described how parks are at risk and if it was not for Friends groups, they would struggle. FOKP is aware that many Councils are increasingly cash-strapped and hiring out green spaces for events, blocking them off from the regular users.

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 on current issues and future plans; Caroline Streeks on the Capital Development Programme; Theresa Hoare and Kevin Wallace on the day to day; Iain Boulton on green things and his tremendous bat walks and, last but definitely not least, Reece Turner for all his hard work in the park.

I can't give a Chair's report without mentioning one of the major challenges for the park and that is Litter, we can only ask that people either put rubbish in the bins or take it home, this means that Lambeth staff can spend more time on gardening and less time on litter picking.

The Friends need to be a pro-active group, our priorities continue to be signing up new members, finding champions for projects, recruiting helpers and people with skills to expand our reach into the local community. The more help and support we have, the more we can do to make Kennington Park the best it can be.

So can I end by wishing FOKP a happy 20th birthday and quoting from a former local resident Betty Severin who recently emailed "Just had my 100th birthday and have been put out to grass in Devon, but glad to know that Kennington Park is still the wonderful place I remember with wonderful people supporting it. Long may it happen."

Marietta Crichton Stuart

Chair, The Friends of Kennington Park

26 August 2022