

The Lee Valley Regional Park: a historical perspective

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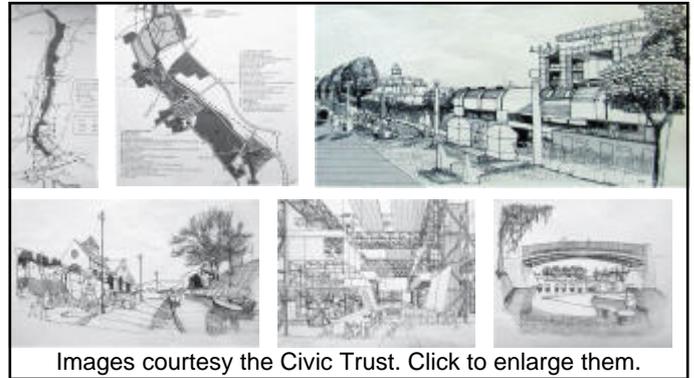
The Lee Valley Regional Park is a wedge of open space stretching from Stratford in East London to the county town of Hertford. It is designated, uniquely, as a Regional Park for the enjoyment of the citizens of Greater London, Essex and Hertfordshire. By far the greater part of Hackney's open space lies within the Park, including Springfield Park, Millfields, Hackney marshes and the extensive open spaces at Eastway which have now been subsumed into the site for the 2012 Olympic Games.

The Regional Park was first proposed in Professor Abercrombie's Greater London Plan published in 1945, and took legal form through the Lee Valley Regional Park Act of 1967. Despite its relatively short existence, the Park's history has passed through several distinct phases, which this article will seek to explore, which have resonances with the wider *Zeitgeist*. It will also explain the pivotal role of Hackney council, and its former leader Lou Sherman, in bringing the Park into being.¹

Phase 1 – 1944–5: Abercrombie and the age of idealism

The suburbs of London pressed rapidly outwards in the 1930s. As outer London suburbs such as Enfield and Chingford were becoming rapidly developed with semi-detached housing, the desirability of creating a Green Belt to set some limit on this growth - and to preserve a connection between Londoners and the surrounding countryside - was widely discussed.

Against this background, a taskforce, chaired by Professor Abercrombie and working through the dark early days of the Second World War, was charged by the Government with creating a blueprint – a Greater London Plan – for a better future city, so that the hollow promises of the 'Homes Fit for Heroes' campaign that followed the previous war would not be repeated. The remit was wide, ranging from slum clearance and new towns to communications and open spaces. Abercrombie reported as the war approached its end. The spirit of the times stands clear at the conclusion of his personal foreword – 'courage is needed to seize the moment when it arrives and to make a resolute start'.



Abercrombie laid great emphasis on the importance of the Green Belt and the necessity for proper planning powers to make it secure against development. But to this widely anticipated proposal, Abercrombie added the wholly novel proposal of a giant green wedge along the Lee Valley to link the countryside of Essex and Hertfordshire to the slums of the East End. Abercrombie considered that 'the Lee Valley gives the opportunity for a great piece of constructive, preservative and regenerative planning'. He continued:

A series of great reservoirs threads up the valley, extending from Walthamstow to Enfield and though man made they are acquiring a charm of their own as trees grow round them and on their little islands – they are becoming nature reserves for large numbers of birds and the resort of privileged fisherman. These areas are a great open-air lung to the crowded East End – their preservation is essential...Every piece of open land should be welded into a great regional reservation – no open land, whatever its present use – should be built on.

The Abercrombie Report stands close in time to the Beveridge Report, published in 1942, which served as the basis for the Welfare State reforms of the Attlee Government; and the Butler Education Act of 1944, which was designed to open up secondary education to women and the working class and act as a fount of upward social mobility. Of these times, A. J. P. Taylor wrote:

The governing classes were on their best behaviour, from conviction as well as calculation. It was difficult to realise in a time of national inspiration and unity that this inspiration and unity would ever fade. The British people had risen without fuss, to unparalleled heights of sacrifice and resolution. They deserved a reward.²

Much of this heady programme of reform was realised following the landslide Labour victory in 1945. Beveridge's plans were largely implemented, including the National Health Service, founded in 1948. As for Abercrombie, although not of all his plans were implemented, the Green Belt was protected by the planning powers he advocated, by virtue of the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947. The Lee Valley proposals, however, remained

dormant during the 1950s, during which time many encroachments were made upon open space of the valley, particularly by industrial development. This situation might well have continued but for the wily and far-sighted initiative of Lou Sherman, one of the giants of post-war Hackney history. His vision and foresight lie at the centre of the next two phases of the Park's history.

Phase 2 – 1961–4: The Civic Trust and the age of futurism

It was in 1961 that Lou Sherman, then mayor of Hackney, working hand-in-glove with the town clerk, L. G. (Len) Huddy, sought to translate the concept of the Lee Valley park into practical politics. The history is concisely recounted in a handbook of Hackney issued by the council in 1973:

[Abercrombie's] idea lay dormant until 1961 when interest was revived. The then Mayor of Hackney, Alderman Lou Sherman, O.B.E.³, J.P., invited representatives of several authorities to join him in a trip along the River Lee and to consider what could be done for the area. Interest mounted and the Civic Trust was commissioned to broadly appraise the potential of the River and its adjoining lands as a recreational park. In 1964, their report, 'The Lee Valley Regional Park' was accepted by the local authorities and under the chairmanship of H.R.H, the Duke of Edinburgh, the scheme was launched.

This bare account makes the process of securing acceptance of the Park seem far more straightforward than it was. Lou Sherman saw clearly that a regional park was desirable, but implementation would rely on finding a means of spreading the cost of paying for it, there being relatively little that a poor borough such as Hackney could do on its own. A boat was hired in August 1961 to reveal both the state of the river and its potential for development to civic dignitaries from nearby riparian boroughs. Having excited interest in this way, Sherman and his town clerk thereafter proceeded gingerly. A letter went from Huddy on 30 November 1961 to the town clerks of West Ham, Leyton, Walthamstow and Tottenham regarding the 'possibility of a scheme of improvement for the Hackney Marshes' and the 'preparation of a long term scheme for the whole of the area which remains available for use as open spaces'. Recognising the sensitivity of local councils to encroachment upon their legal powers, Huddy's letter recognised the primacy of existing development plan proposals of the different authorities adding that 'Alderman Sherman believes that within these limits a scheme of improvement should be possible'. Huddy was also in the meantime sounding out the county councils of Middlesex and Essex about their becoming involved.

By 1963 these councils (of which Middlesex was shortly to become extinct) had indeed come on board, as had the councils of Enfield and Edmonton.

The accession of these authorities was an important step in widening the project beyond what might have been seen as a cabal of inner London Labour councils. In April 1963 representatives from all these authorities were invited by Huddy to a meeting at Hackney Town Hall to consider the next steps, the proposals now being for a scheme for a 12 mile stretch of the valley extending from Hackney to Waltham Abbey. Huddy circulated a paper proposing the commissioning of a report which 'could possibly be carried out by engaging a firm of consultants or even endeavouring to interest an influential body like the Civic Trust'. An approach to the Civic Trust was approved. The Trust agreed to the preparation of a report covering a still larger area – from Roydon in Essex to the River Thames – at a cost of £2000, to be shared between the LCC (now also on board), Middlesex, Essex and the riparian boroughs. By the time the Civic Trust study had got under way, Hertfordshire County Council and the local authorities at Chingford, Cheshunt, Hoddesdon, Epping and Ware had also come on board. Lou Sherman's project of broadening the base of interest and spreading the cost had been brilliantly accomplished.

The Civic Trust's proposed park area and transport links



The Civic Trust report was prepared in 1964, at a time when there was an expectation among sections of what would now be called the 'chattering classes' that the forces of science and technology could be harnessed both to galvanise the British economy and to create a future leisured era. The normally conservation-minded Civic Trust – in an episode which it would perhaps rather forget – put itself briefly at the forefront of this futurist credo. The analysis that led to the Civic Trust's report *A Lea Valley Regional Park*⁴ also generated a companion think-piece in the *Architects' Journal* called 'The Fourth Wave', later published by the Civic Trust as *The Challenge of Leisure*.

The basic assumptions were stated in an address by H.R.H. Duke of Edinburgh to the National Paying Fields Association, quoted in the Trust's report:

We are on the threshold of the age of leisure ... The queues for playing fields are getting longer; the pressure on sports and recreation clubs of all sorts is increasing. Swimming clubs and sailing clubs are getting crowded ... we have to concentrate on providing facilities of the right sort and in the right place and properly organised... I think that ratepayers will begin to look to the Local Authorities to provide these facilities in the same way that they look to them to provide water, sewerage and street lighting.

The Trust assumed that demand for leisure would grow at an accelerating rate. The most purple statements of expectations are in *The Challenge of Leisure*, which forecast a trebling - at the minimum - of 'the demand for active leisure' by 2000. This was a worthy challenge for the planning system:

Already the weekend multitudes are congesting our roads, fouling our downs and commons with litter and soiling our lay-bys; their chalets and caravans threaten all parts of our coast, their cars and motorboats echo in quiet valleys and lakes. Yet the very leisure that brings this onslaught could permit the widening of life, of human pleasure and achievement, which the Greeks understood and which 'generous-hearted men have dreamed of for generations'. Can we enhance the lives of our people without ruining the island they live upon? This is the new acute challenge to architects and planners.



The detailed land uses proposed for the Hackney area of the park

The Trust's specific proposals for the Lee Valley were described as a 'broad conception', not a detailed scheme. In brief, the expectation was that the Valley would be packed with facilities to meet the demand for active leisure. At Stratford (on what is now the main Olympic site) the plan was to realise Joan Littlewood's dream of a 'Fun Palace'; at Old Ford Lock a boating club and a vehicle test circuit; and at Eastway a multi-sports centre with facilities, inter alia, for soccer, rugby, hockey, lacrosse, cricket, tennis, bowls and lawn games, together with a golf practice range and a motor sports centre.

Moving northwards from Eastway, beside Hackney marshes, the Civic Trust proposed that:

Alongside the tree-lined river front⁵ would run a paved promenade with seats, cafes, pubs and restaurants capturing the spirit of the sea-front ...Along the river, water-buses with gay awnings would play. Behind the promenade, the great sward of playing fields would be softened by the planting of trees and hedgerows to give a sense of intimacy and enclosure which is now lacking.

And moving on to 'Lea Bridge Gardens', a new riverside pleasure garden was proposed, incorporating a permanent circus and fairground, a large circular restaurant and dance hall; and northwards an Arts Centre with pavilions for music, drama, cinema and painting. 'The whole complex could rival the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen'. Across the road, the old pump houses would form a museum of industry, whilst Millfields would house a children's farm and rose garden. Going further north,

there is more of the same including a 'Serpentine Lake' upon Walthamstow Marshes, and so on up to Stanstead Abbots and Ware in distant Hertfordshire.

This was a conscious modernisation of the concept of the pleasure garden of Vauxhall or Ranelagh, with the distinction that the leisure facilities for the privileged few would now be at the disposal of the prosperous many, with ever more time to spend on enjoyments. The conception in that sense was generous and it was also unmistakably modern. As Leslie Lane, Director of the Civic Trust, put it in an address to the Royal Society:

In the Lea Valley Park...there is an opportunity...to give infinite pleasure by devising all manner of novel forms of 'going for rides' and at the same time develop, experimentally novel forms of transport.⁶

As for implementation, the report considered it

abundantly clear [that] a unified agency of some kind is essential. Local Government Authorities in the area are numerous; a pooling of their resources will be needed.

The suggestion was made to create 'some kind of organisation sponsored by the local authorities, taking perhaps a form like the new town corporations'.

Lou Sherman enthusiastically endorsed these proposals,⁷ which represented a major step towards his dream. There was now a clear, modern and relevant concept of a Lee Valley park and a broad base of support. However, it was a long step to turn the broad conception outlined by the Civic Trust into a workable scheme, and much work for Sherman and his energetic town clerk still to do.

Phase 3 – 1964–77(?): The Park Authority Act and the era of public implementation

As things turned out, it was only three years from the Civic Trust report to the creation of the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, and just two more years to the publication in 1969 of a master plan – a detailed plan of proposals for the entire park. The overriding feature of this period was the sublime confidence of all concerned that there was an effective, top-downwards public sector solution to the 'challenge of leisure'; and also the will and the wherewithal (up to a point) to make things happen. The directions were set at a time when the public sector - for instance - still took the lead in providing new housing, and presided over a vast expansion of university education. It was a period when it was still considered axiomatic – even by the Duke of Edinburgh – that public authorities were the obvious bodies to provide all manner of public goods. It was the Indian summer of the post-war political 'Butskellite' consensus for public welfare – later to be rudely shattered by Mrs Thatcher.

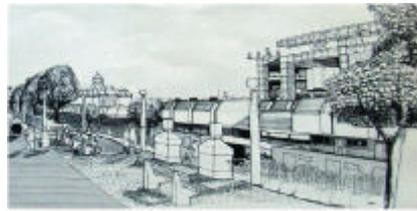
But back to 1964. Len Huddy convened a conference at Hackney Town Hall to receive a work-in-progress report from the Civic Trust, and then a further two-day conference - at the 'Triples' engine house owned by the Metropolitan Water Board at Lea Bridge, now sadly demolished - to welcome its publication. This latter conference was to be a grand affair with an opening address by the Duke of Edinburgh, with those present including the Minister of Local Government, the Lord Lieutenant of Essex, and representatives of numerous statutory undertakers as well as the interested local authorities. The second day of the conference was reserved for a business meeting of the local authorities after the flummery was over.

The Duke opened by revealing that he often overflew the valley by helicopter, famously opining that 'the place on the whole is a pretty average mess'. In commending the Civic Trust proposals, he emphasised that putting the Lee Valley scheme into effect depended on local authorities working together through an organisation 'with the necessary executive authority' - exactly what Lou Sherman hoped to hear. There followed a speech by Leslie Lane, Director of the Civic Trust, putting the cost of the scheme at £30 million, which could be spread over 10 years, not much more than the recently opened M1 motorway! The event attracted much favourable press interest.

By this time, external events had provided a lucky break for Sherman and Huddy. The London Government Act 1963 created the Greater London Council as a strategic authority for Greater London, taking in the whole of the Lee Valley out as far as the Green Belt. The Council was created as a shadow authority in 1964, taking full powers in April 1965. New, dynamic, Labour-controlled and utterly confident of its strategic mission, the GLC was ideally placed to pick up the Lee Valley park baton. A further conference was called in February 1965, and a motion was moved by Bill Fiske - first chairman of the GLC - and seconded by Hackney's Alderman Sherman, to promote a private Parliamentary bill for the creation of a park authority. It was also proposed to create a provisional joint committee, under the auspices of the GLC, to lay the ground so that the new park authority would hit the ground running in due course.

Reading between the lines, it is clear that all was not entirely sweetness and light at this conference. Funding for the authority would be provided by a precept of up to a penny rate in the counties of Greater London, Essex and Herts. Membership of the authority was proposed to be evenly divided between the GLC and the London riparian authorities on the one hand; and Herts and Essex and the rural riparian authorities on the other - notwithstanding

that the bulk of funding would come from the GLC. A proposal to double the voting representation of London councils (which would also have raised the voting weight of Labour-controlled constituent authorities) was, following debate, not proceeded with. Further, an Essex representative, Alderman Millard, considered that the proposed penny rate would be 'disproportionately high', stating that 'the proportion of Essex people who would use the regional park are relatively small and the county council could not accept a firm financial commitment'. After being assured that the proposed penny rate represented a maximum rate of expenditure that 'was unlikely to be reached for some years', Alderman Millard agreed not to press an amendment to the motion, on the understanding that his concerns would be considered by the provisional joint committee.



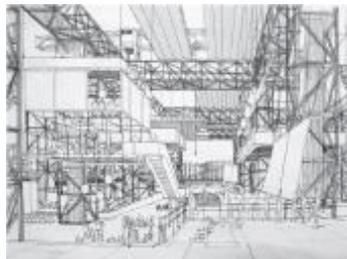
A vision for Mill Mead: the pumping station is in the distance and the proposed 'Fun Palace' to the right

The penny rate was the 'elephant in the room', and was intensely concerning to Lou Sherman. The ambitious proposals could only be achieved by spreading the load between ratepayers ranging from Kingston and Richmond in west London to Harwich and Clacton in Essex - many of whom would never hear of the park, let alone use it. Sherman knew that his dream could only be achieved if sceptics like Alderman Millard could be kept onside whilst institutional momentum towards enabling legislation was maintained.

As 1965 progressed, the provisional committee busied itself in preparing legislation; working up detailed proposals; and negotiating to buy up strategic landholdings to be vested in the new park authority. A report from officers to the committee in November 1965 set out proposals for the Hackney area that leave the reader astonished at what was considered to be achievable - and affordable. By way of example, the triangular area at Eastway that is now known as Wick Woodland was proposed for a Japanese garden, an English 18th century garden, a landing stage, restaurant and car park. There were to be major sports centres at Eastway and Leabridge, motor cycling scrambling at Bully Fen and much else besides. The Lee Valley project had by then become, as it has remained, an officer-led phenomenon, with elected councils liable to be swept along by the juggernaut they had been persuaded to create.

Lou Sherman's name appears little in the minutes of the proceedings of the provisional joint committee, but he remained a sage figure, guiding the

committee behind the scenes. One scheme proposed by officers, egged on by the British Motorcycle Federation, was for a motor cycle scrambling facility at Bully Fen near Eastway. The site was just inside Hackney, but objections came in from nearby Newham and Waltham Forest, the latter proposing that 'motor cycles could more easily reach a rural site for a scramble than cycles'. The minutes record that Lou Sherman considered that it would be 'unfortunate' for the park authority to accept so early in its life a scheme opposed by two constituent councils, and proposed that officers take those proposals no further. The site subsequently became a cycle/BMX track (before being subsumed into the Olympic Games site) and the vital element of harmony was maintained.



*Inside the
'Fun Palace'*

There was also much discussion at this time of Joan Littlewood's proposal for a 'Fun Palace', variously proposed to be sited at Millmeads in Newham, Bully Fen in Hackney or Lea Bridge in Waltham Forest. This would be a 150 feet high structure taking the form of an open framework of steel lattice girders and towers, within which would be slung complete auditoria, studios, workshops and restaurants. A report to the provisional joint committee noted that:

The form and nature of such enclosures, together with their position, would be varied by mechanical means including an overhead gantry crane ... Variation of access and public movement would be achievable by variable travelators, ramps, walkways, stairs and variable escalators.

It would seem that the futuristic conception of the Civic Trust was being harnessed to the bureaucratic ambition of a young and confident public authority.

Meanwhile, the Essex representative, in a manner reminiscent of Peter Simple's fictional character Alderman Foodbotham, continued to press on the provisional joint committee the unwisdom of vast financial commitments. He insisted that it be placed on record that Essex County Council wished that the power to draw a precept of a penny rate 'be qualified by the need to obtain its consent so far as a precept on Essex of more than one third of a penny rate was concerned'. An equally parsimonious attitude was exhibited by the corporation of the London Borough of Ealing, which entered a formal objection to the Lee Valley Regional Park Bill as it came before Parliament in 1966. The objection stated that

The Corporation consider that it is unlikely that the inhabitants of the London Borough of Ealing will derive any benefit from the park commensurate with an annual payment of a rate of one penny in the pound, which amounts to £92,500 [in the region of £2 million at present values] for the borough.

An amendment to the Bill was sought to avoid the imposition of this burden on the borough. The objection went to the heart of Lou Sherman's concept of spreading the load, and the corporation was prevailed upon to withdraw its objection. Other objections to the Bill were also overcome, and the Lee Valley Regional Park Act received royal assent in December 1966, with the new authority coming into being on 1 January 1967. Hackney's first representative on the Authority was Martin Ottalanguai, a future leader of the Council.

The general power and duty of the new authority was expressed thus:

To develop, improve, preserve and manage or to arrange for the development, improvement, preservation and management of the Park as a place for the enjoyment of leisure, recreation, sport, games or amusements or any similar activity, for the preservation of nature reserves and for the provision and enjoyment of entertainments of any kind.

Notwithstanding the oft-repeated reservations of Essex, the new authority had the power to draw a rate of up to one penny from the Counties of Essex, Hertfordshire and Greater London (the latter raising the money by a precept on the London boroughs) and the expectation was that the transformative plans for the Lee Valley would be complete within 12 to 15 years.⁸ To the modern reader, this represented an astonishing rate of progress in securing assent for what would now be seen as a vast public expenditure project.

The park authority was not bestowed with power to grant itself planning permission; this remained with the local authorities. However, the authority was required by section 14(1) of the Act to produce within two years 'a plan showing proposals for the future development of the park' which local authorities were required to include in their own development plans by virtue of section 14(2). The park authority also had to be consulted upon planning proposals brought by third parties within the area of the park, and local authorities had to 'take into account' the authority's views in dealing with such applications. The planning provisions were workable provided that park authority and local authorities were in harmony, but caused serious potential for mischance – as later developments showed – if they started to pull in different directions. The first chief executive, and the dominating figure of the authority in its early years, was a solicitor named Leonard Johnes, who hastened to draw up the park authority's required

plan of proposals. The master plan was published in 1969 and represents a reworking of the Civic Trust vision;⁹ the 'broad conception' of the Civic Trust having been updated to become a working blueprint of an actual authority, with important financial and legal powers.

The master plan retained the unmistakably modernist slant of the Civic Trust blueprint, but shorn of many of its more outlandish – but also its most creative – elements. At the heart of the plan was a proposal for a series of 'major recreational centres' to be linked by a four lane, dual-carriageway 'park road'. The park road was itself proposed as a major recreational attraction. A feasibility study commissioned from engineers Sir William Halcrow and Partners noted that

'for the average Londoner, a 'pleasant drive' is hard to find with a long struggle on congested roads at the beginning and end of his journey.'

A dedicated road through the open space of the park was a solution to this problem, and it was suggested that the road could contain elevated stretches so that leisure motorists could look over the high embankments on to the park's reservoirs⁹. The plan stated that 'after careful consideration' it had been decided not to have provision for a separate cycle track, although cyclists would be free to use the park road and contiguous tracks.

In Hackney, the major development proposal was at Eastway, incorporating much of the current Olympic site. Proposals included a cycle centre, playing fields and youth club; an entertainments centre containing 'for example' restaurants, bars, exhibition galleries, a cinema or 'cinerama', dance floors and film recording studios; a park information centre with a museum and library of sport; and a garden and horticultural centre at the South West corner of Hackney marsh, with 'perhaps Chinese, Persian and Mogul Gardens, an aviary and aquarium, woodlands and walks along water courses'. This somewhat extravagant vision most nearly replicated the Civic Trust's vision. Proposals for other recreational centres were more prosaic but also more workable – that at Lea Bridge included a sports and social centre, riding establishment, simulated ski slope, pitch and putt course, rock climbing wall and adventure playground.

The master plan had the clear and cardinal virtue that it presented a programme for action on the part of an authority with an unswerving determination to get things done and belief in its powers to effect improvement. The first years of the authority were the years of greatest momentum, which saw the construction of major recreation centres at Picketts Lock and Broxbourne; and within the lower stretch of the river, the horse riding and pitch-and-putt facilities at Lea Bridge; the marina at Spring Hill; and the cycle

track and sports centre at Eastway. This was a great deal less than the master plan had portended, but it did represent the significant degree of momentum required if the park was to emerge as a recognisable entity within an acceptable scale of time.



Old Ford Lock 'where enthusiasts could tinker with their boats, cycles and cars'

On the debit side, the master plan took an unduly 'developmental' perspective – the park authority's role being seen to acquire land and develop facilities with little or no thought of partnership with local authorities or voluntary bodies. The master plan lacked developed ideas for the improvement of the spaces between the major recreational centres it proposed. It also lacked any convincing ecological proposals; one of its proposed nature reserves, for instance, was shown in an area devoid of any ornithological or natural interest. There also seemed to be a view, possibly derived from the Civic Trust analysis, that the future lay exclusively with the pursuit of 'active leisure'. This was nicely caught in a Sunday Times article from June 1971:

We shall do more with our leisure in the future if the Park Authority has read the signs right. The Sunday afternoon walk will give way to experiments in canoeing or archery or even riding. Class differences in the way people spend their spare time will disappear. They will have to. There will be no room for separate development.

It was arguable, indeed, that Abercrombie's vision of a 'great regional reservation' had been turned on its head.

Whilst all of these debits were essentially matters of choice for the authority, there were other problems which were more intractable. On the financial side, although the objections of Essex Council to the penny rate had been overborne, the park authority (with heavy representation from rural, and predominantly Conservative, authorities) very quickly recognised that a precept of around one third of the legal maximum represented the limits of the politically acceptable, thereby greatly slowing the momentum of development. Another problem (which was inherent in Lou Sherman's proposal for spreading the financial load) was that a regional park was required in principle to provide regional leisure facilities. There was to be an enduring tension (which persists to this day) between the requirement to provide regional justification for the park's proposals and the ineluctable fact that the local communities would be most affected by them.

Phase 4 – 1978(?) to 1985(?) – the era of conflict

It is hard to identify a precise moment when the park authority moved from its trajectory of smooth momentum to involuntary stasis. What is clear from contemporary press coverage is that during the 1970s the authority rapidly dissipated the goodwill so carefully built up under the guidance of Lou Sherman. By way of example, an article in the *Hertfordshire Mercury* from 1973 reported on plans to create a 'Children's Paradise' at Dobbs Weir, north of Broxbourne. This would feature, inter alia, a fairy castle, Niagara-type falls, a mock up of a New Orleans steamer and a California miners' settlement. In response to the complaint that the local council had not been consulted, Mr Johnes was reported as commenting 'Any discussion which may be taking place is private at the moment. The Authority will comment later.' This typified the approach of the authority, which took pride in acting at the vanguard of public demand rather than being bogged down in old-fashioned consultation.

There were two persistent thorns in the park authority's flesh. The Lee Valley Anglers' Association had been hostile to the Park *ab initio* (and had been a formal objector to the Parliamentary Bill). Press coverage refers to the anglers' objection to the park's selling off concessions to private consortia. Defending the park authority's actions, its chairman, Arthur Wicks, was revealingly quoted as saying that anglers were objecting to the authority's 'intrusion into a private world they had enjoyed for countless years'. In Tottenham marshes, the park authority had planned a 65 thousand-seat stadium to be shared between Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur, but was forced to abandon this idea when both clubs disavowed any interest in it. The Tottenham Community Project, led by Bob Hart, persistently criticised the Authority for the lack of any satisfactory plans for the improvement of this area, which had been much used by local people in the past.

From 1978, as the country hunkered down towards the 'winter of discontent' a series of developments launched the park into the era of conflict.

First, the park authority failed to carry a planning application to develop a squash centre at the old Great Universal Stores sports ground at Spring Hill in Clapton, following a campaign by local people objecting to building up this open space. The park authority later 'gave up' on the development of this site, leasing it to Hackney council which in turn sub-leased it to a club called Hackney Rugby Club but apparently having limited connection with Hackney.

More significantly from the authority's perspective, in the following year Broxbourne council considered its proposal to create a 2000-metre rowing course by joining together a series of pits created by disused

gravel workings between Cheshunt and Broxbourne. During the 1970s the authority had been actively buying up land to facilitate this proposal. As the park authority noted in its 1976–77 annual report:

In the meantime, the area offers walkers and naturalists some very pleasant territory. Bowyer's Water, at Cheshunt, is a 45-acre gravel pit lake leased by the Authority; a long established angling club fishes from its shores.

Such interim – and essentially local – uses would make way in due course for a new regional, or in this case national, facility. The park authority's proposals were open to objection partly on the ground that a national rowing centre had been opened at Nottingham, reducing the justification for the authority's initiative. Equally, conservationists, walkers and birdwatchers - practitioners of outmoded 'passive' leisure - were less willing to make way for the hard-edged new facilities proposed by the park authority. In 1979, Broxbourne council gave a consent to the rowing centre that was so hedged with conditions that the park authority deferred *sine die* (and has not subsequently revived) its proposals. In the wake of this decision a group called the Lee Valley Conservation Group, which was formed from a series of conservation groups including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, issued a pamphlet in 1980 which pressed for the proper management of the Cheshunt/ Fishers Green area in the light of its exceptional ornithological interest.

Second, the Lee Valley Association (LVA) was formed, initially by Bob Hart and myself. As a Hackney resident I had noted how little had been done to achieve Abercrombie's proposal for a 'great regional reservation' and – posing as a teacher – I enquired of the park authority whether there was a press cuttings file which I could consult for a schools project.¹⁰ This file (since apparently lost) showed that along the length of the park there were numerous individuals, organisations and councils all aggrieved by the park authority's arrogant approach, but unaware of each other's activities. This file provided a ready-made database to establish an environmental pressure group. The LVA held its first public meeting at Tottenham in 1979, resolving to form a series of sub-groups in different parts of the park. We were able to persuade Lou Sherman (who could see as clearly as any that the park authority had lost its way) to be the LVA's president, whilst Colonel H. R. R. Prior – a former park authority member who had represented Ware District Council - became its first chairman. We were also permitted to affiliate to the Civic Trust. The LVA during its short life encountered formidable problems of coordination and strategy, but it undoubtedly created a counterweight to the park authority, which had hitherto claimed a monopoly of discourse as to how the destiny of a regional park should be determined.

Third – and perhaps more shattering than the Broxbourne debacle - was the establishment of the Save the Marshes campaign, which fought and eventually defeated the park authority's proposals to extract gravel from the Walthamstow marshes and create a sailing centre in its wake. Most of the major figures in Save the Marshes, including its chairman, Mike Knowles, and its secretary, Jane Nash, lived in Clapton. The campaign proclaimed simply that 'the marshes have been stolen systematically from the people'¹¹ and brought to bear community-based campaigning methods for which the park authority was quite unprepared. This campaign held a series of packed public meetings (including one particularly memorable event at Chats Palace addressed by David Bellamy), and documented a persuasive case that the marshes – so close to the centre of London - were of exceptional ecological interest, something that was apparently unknown to and unsuspected by the park authority. In February 1980 the minerals sub-committee of the GLC refused permission for gravel extraction from the marshes, a decision recommended by the two neighbouring boroughs of Hackney and Waltham Forest.¹² The marshes were subsequently designated as a site of special scientific interest. This had been the park authority's flagship development proposal after the failure of the Broxbourne rowing proposal. Insult followed injury when, in the same year, a proposal for a motor-cycle scrambling facility at Tottenham marshes, supported by the park authority, was also rejected. These setbacks called into question whether the park authority's plans for the park were now achievable.

The LVA lacked the organisational focus of the Save the Marshes campaign, but provided a persistent critique of the park authority and found support among some of the authority's own members, although some of the Conservative 'country' members, perhaps encouraged by officers, persisted in regarding the LVA's activists as unruly oiks. The LVA's pamphlets *The Lee Valley: Time for a re-think* and *Freedom to Wander* provided the most comprehensive critique of the park authority's policies. The LVA identified the master plan as a key problem. The master plan claimed statutory authority as the blueprint for the development of the park, but experience showed that the plans were neither affordable nor desirable. Meanwhile, in a neat sleight of hand, the authority claimed it was keeping its master plan under review – something that it was required by the Park Act to do – so that any new plans it came up with had the same imprimatur of authority as the original master plan itself. Mr Johnes had no time for the critics of the park authority, stating in an article that:

The emergence of groups of interested people critical of some of the Authority's ideas has shown that many people do not fully understand the original intention of Parliament that the development of the

Park should be on a 'regional' basis in the general interests of the south- East of England more than providing another method of satisfying local need.¹³

The park authority challenged the LVA, if it disliked the master plan, to produce a better blueprint of its own. The LVA's response was to call for the park authority itself to conduct a fundamental rethink of its plans:

We think that...the Park Authority should use its resources now to conduct a separate review, both because its legislative duty is to do so and, more importantly, because the Park Authority must work to plans which are affordable and realistic in the 1980s – and not pretend to follow plans for major centres; park roads and so on which in their present form stand little chance of securing public support and less chance of ever getting paid for.¹⁴

In 1980 Mr Johnes retired as director of the park authority and was replaced by Tom Limna, a more emollient figure. Mr Limna was present in 1981 when the LVA staged a cruise up the river, for local authority dignitaries, in the park authority's own vessel the 'Pride of Lee', to mark the 20th anniversary of Lou Sherman's cruise; a reception was laid on at the Spring Hill Rowing Club with copious quantities of Lee Valley elderflower champagne.

The park authority announced in the same year that it would indeed conduct a fundamental review of its master plan, although Mr Limna earnestly assured me that this would have happened irrespective of the efforts of LVA which had actually made this decision more difficult – a proposition that will probably never be either established or refuted. We will return to this review in the final section.

There were other significant conflictual problems for the park authority at this time, including a serious falling-out with the GLC after Ken Livingstone's election to its leadership in 1981. Livingstone and Tony Banks took public issue with the park authority's authoritarian style; and the conservative majority in the authority extracted vengeance by breaking with convention that the GLC nominate its chairman, installing Conservatives as both chair and vice-chair of the authority. Whilst the park could (and did) continue to exercise its power to draw a precept from the GLC, it was scarcely desirable that the authority should endure such an icy relationship with its largest stakeholder. It also suffered skirmishes with several constituent authorities about the order of precedence between its master plan and the local authorities' own development plans. A major setback occurred in 1980, when the Secretary of State agreed to Haringey council's proposal that the Harris Lebus sports ground at Tottenham Hale be taken out of the park and used for industrial purposes.

In short, it would seem that the park authority's political capital had been all but exhausted in a few short years, and the future path for the development of the park was extremely unclear.

Phase 5 – 1986(?) to the present: the era of pragmatism

After lengthy consultation, the revised park plan was adopted by the authority in 1986. In summarising its future strategy the authority stated that it was 'concerned to provide a balanced programme of formal and informal leisure development'. It noted that the authority 'has a clear duty to provide sporting facilities' and that consultation had 'demonstrated both the need and opportunity for sports facilities in certain parts of the Park'. At the same time it stated that 'The Park offers major opportunities for landscape regeneration, and proposals for environmental improvements form a major part of the new park Plan ... many [of which] will ... [increase] the attractiveness of the Park for informal public access.'

The park road, of which less than a mile had been built, was jettisoned on the basis that 'The concept might have been valid in 1969, but it is now acknowledged to be inappropriate.' In its place there were plans for improvements to the Lee Navigation towpath (mostly implemented) and for a valley-long 'park path' (much still unrealised). Major environmental improvements took place, particularly in the lovely area of disused gravel pits at Fishers Green to the north of Waltham Abbey. The park authority became less secretive, and began to publicise its meetings and agendas. It also recruited a team of (mostly bearded) park rangers, who organised public walks and interpretation events, as the LVA had pressed it to do.

In Hackney, the park authority (after much cajoling from the LVA and other conservation groups) agreed to acquire the disused Middlesex filter beds to create a nature reserve, which was (and remains) a retreat that is both beautiful and ecologically valuable. Subsequently it has created a companion nature reserve across the river in the Essex beds, where it has also opened an interpretation centre called The Waterworks. The natural environment has clearly become part of the park's agenda.

At the same time the 'developmentalist' urge was not, and could not be, laid aside if the park authority was to justify its regional financial base. Indeed, the abolition of the GLC exposed the park to direct – and uncomfortable – interface with distant London boroughs such as Bromley, who questioned why they had to pay money to fund facilities in northeast London. The new plan therefore proposed regional sporting facilities such as a motorcycle centre at Rammey Marsh in Enfield, a water sports centre at

the giant King George V Reservoir and (unspecified) 'intensive leisure' use at Tottenham marsh. All in all the approach was scrupulously balanced. This was also true of a further updated park plan adopted by the park authority in 2000.

In brief, the heroic (but bull-headed) era of the 70s and the conflictual era of the 80s were to give way to a more balanced, pragmatic period. However there were a number of flies in this ointment.

First, the days when the park could even contemplate drawing its 'penny rate' had long since gone. The older leisure facilities such as Picketts Lock were losing money; and the new environmental initiatives were largely non revenue-generating. This meant that if the park authority were to build any of its recreational facilities it would be dependent increasingly upon other, better-endowed public bodies paying for them. A prototype for this kind of development was the Ice Centre at Lea Bridge, opened in 1984 and constructed with major financial support from the Sports Council. The price to be paid was that the centre was (and still is) closed to the public for several hours each day and reserved for training purposes.

Second, the park authority was aiming at a moving target. Its leisure centre at Picketts Lock, with a wave machine and other exciting attractions, had been ahead of its time when opened in 1973, but was now replicated by more modern centres provided by local authorities. Over the last 20 years the park authority has suffered the somewhat humiliating closure of many of its front-line facilities, including the original Picketts Lock centre, demolished in 2004. In September 2008 the Broxbourne leisure centre also closed, having been deemed too expensive to keep up to modern standards.

Third, there remained the problem of securing public acceptance and planning approval for whatever proposals the park authority came up with. For example, in 1990 it issued a document on a 'leisure development opportunity' at Lea Bridge Road on land owned by the authority to the east of the Ice Centre. The document referred to a deficiency identified by the Sports Council in the provision of indoor sports facilities – particularly tennis – as well as 'the recent upsurge and interest in 10-pin bowling, indoor cricket, indoor bowls...and many others'. The authority stated that it 'wished to see intensive leisure development on this land and invited developers to submit their proposals'. These proposals were poorly received, and were not proceeded with.



'Boating at the north of Lea Bridge Gardens'

This then has become the era of pragmatism, in which the park authority has embraced the broadest possible palette for its development proposals going forward, and has increasingly embraced a partnership approach, which in practice means adopting proposals that others are willing to pay for. At Picketts Lock, it seemed at one stage that the park authority had hit the jackpot with a proposal for a national athletics stadium, incorporating a 43 thousand-seat stadium as well as indoor and warmup tracks, the whole to be the venue for the 2005 World Athletics Championship. The bulk of the projected £100 million cost was to be met by the Sports Council, now re-named Sport England. In 2001 it was announced that the project had been abandoned by the Government on cost grounds. In its place came a more modest scheme, the Lee Valley Athletics Centre, built at a cost of £16 million, mostly provided by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's capital modernisation fund, and by Sport England, with major support via the National Lottery. This is a valuable facility, but its shape and size have been determined by what others have been prepared to pay for.

Into this new mix the London Olympic Games has provided a potent new ingredient. The park authority has been largely by-passed in the process of creating the Olympic project, but it owns a substantial part of the Olympic site. In a draft document setting out *A Vision for 2017*¹⁵ the authority states that its intention is 'to play a central role in the legacy of the Park'; to 'explore and promote design solutions and business plans in partnership with the Olympic Development Authority'; and to 'help deliver a high quality urban park at the heart of the Lower Lee Valley and extend the Lee Valley Regional Park to the Thames'. The park is also to be the site of the Olympics white water canoe slalom event at Broxbourne, described 'as the only brand new venue being built outside the Olympic Park'.

This draft statement of its vision states that 'By 2017 the Lee Valley Regional Park will be a world class destination combining the best of open space, conservation and sporting excellence' - a statement that shows some dangers of replicating the hubris that caused the park authority so much difficulty in earlier days. It also aims to 'deliver sports and leisure opportunities at all levels to support the Government's agenda of a more active lifestyle' - a vision which conjures up the spectre of 'active leisure' by Government diktat, an intriguing updating of the futurist credo of the 1960s.

It may well be the case that the park authority's wheel has come full circle, and that the lessons of the past will need to be learned anew. Lou Sherman's

creation may yet go through further interesting stages of development.

Notes

1 The main documentary source for this article has been the files preserved by the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority which extensively document the prehistory of the Authority, and includes the minutes of the proceedings of the rovisional joint committee established by the GLC as a precursor to the Authority. I have been greatly aided in my interpretation of these documents by many discussions with the late Sir Lou Sherman. I have also consulted my own archives of the Lee Valley Association which are to be deposited with Hackney Archives Department in the future.

2. *English History 1914-1945* (1965).

3. Lou Sherman was subsequently knighted.

4. But note that the spelling 'Lee' is also used, especially in legislation, including that establishing the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority.

5. In fact, it is clear that the Civic Trust was referring to the Lee Navigation, which runs on the west side of Hackney marshes; not the River Lee itself which runs on the east side and is not navigable.

6. *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, July 1965.

7. This comment is based upon personal conversations and also an article by Lou Sherman, 'The Lee Valley Regional Park', in *Essays in Local Government Enterprise* (ed. Ellis Hillman, 1967).

8. This timescale for completion was provided in the Park Authority's Master Plan, published in 1969.

9. This suggestion was in the preliminary engineering study; the master plan limited itself to the proposition that the park road should be 'aligned to high ground' in some of its northern stretches.

10. Mr Johnes later told me that this file would have been withheld if the true reason for my interest had been known.

11. *Walthamstow Marshes: Our Countryside Under Threat* (Save the Marshes Campaign, 1981).

12. This refusal was later upheld on appeal to the Secretary of State.

13. *Water Space*, the journal of the Water Space Amenity Commission, Spring 1980.

14. *The Lee Valley: Time for a Re-think*.

15. The 'vision document' was published as a working draft, and at the time of writing is on the park authority's website at

http://www.leevalleypark.org.uk/en/content/cms/about_us/about_the_authority/publications/publications.aspx