

THE LEE VALLEY: time for a re-think

Written by Laurie Elks

Produced by the Lee Valley Association, 1980



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The Lea Valley Federation (re-formed in 2009) is a coalition of environmental and community groups and individuals campaigning to protect the Lee Valley Park as a “green lung” for London.
www.leavalleyfederation.org

INTRODUCTION

On the North-East of London there remains by chance a stretch of open and undeveloped land reaching from the countryside in Hertfordshire to the heart of the East End. The Lee valley remained undeveloped not by design but because its geology presented problems of foundation and drainage to those who would otherwise have covered it with building in the last century as they built up the suburbs reaching along either side of the valley.

Since 1967, the valley has been protected by an Act of Parliament which invented a unique planning concept, a Regional Park, and a unique Regional Park Authority to run it. The Park is 23 miles long and in many places only a few hundred yards wide and it transcends the boundaries of many local authorities in Greater London, Hertfordshire and Essex. The Authority is charged with the duty:

“ to develop, improve, preserve and manage ... the park as a place for the occupation 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. “

Since its foundation, much has been achieved by the Park Authority. Major leisure centres have been opened at Picketts Lock in Edmonton and at Broxbourne and numerous other facilities have been provided: for football, cycling, horse-riding, boating, golf and sailing. The Park Authority has laid out gardens and/or picnic areas at Waltham Abbey, Broxbourne and Rye House and bought and developed as places for public enjoyment and education, two farms adjacent to the Lee Valley in Hertfordshire. Further facilities proposed by the Park, in the course of the last year, include water skiing and rowing centre, a motor cycle scramble park, a sailing and water sports centre in East London, a funfair at Broxbourne and an international Ice Rink.

Despite these achievements, the Park Authority is in a state of profound crisis. Its programme of development has come to a virtual halt, its relations with the constituent local authorities have become more distant than ever before and a wide body of opinion supports the view that it is time that the entire strategy of the Park Authority needs to be completely re-thought. This pamphlet attempts to exclaim briefly why, notwithstanding what has been achieved, such a re-think is necessary.



CHAPTER ONE

1. Birth of the Lee Valley Park

The idea of a Lee Valley Park was first floated by Herbert Morrison in the "homes fit for heroes" era in 1919 but it was promptly forgotten and was not given serious currency until taken up by Professor Abercrombie in his Greater London Plan of 1944. Abercrombie invented not only the concept of the Green Belt but also the "Green Lung" designed to join the green belt with the heart of the city. A number of London's minor river valleys including the Colne, and Roding and the Brent lent themselves to this idea but the Lee was recognised by Abercrombie as the "jewel" among these and he fervently proposed that the valley be preserved as a great, regional reservation never to be wantonly built upon.

After the Greater London Plan, the idea of the green belt was swiftly adopted in legislation and in practice but once again, the Lee Valley project was forgotten until it was revived by (Sir) Lou Sherman in 1961, who as the then Mayor of Hackney, persuaded his fellow civic dignitaries to join him on a famous boat trip down the river and inaugurated the serious discussions between the local authorities whose powers would have to be curtailed if a proper planning authority for the River Lee were ever to be created. As a result of those discussions, the Civic Trust was invited to report on the prospects and potential for the Lee Valley and the idea had at last politically "arrived".

2. Civic Trust Report

The opening chapter of the Civic Trust Report, "A Lea Valley Regional Park" was entitled "The New Leisure" and much of its analysis on the shorter working week and the increase in leisure, is repeated today by people considering the likely character of the coming microchip age. However, the report was written in 1964 when futurologists talked of a helicopter in every back garden and mass transit by monorail. The government was preparing a National Plan for 5% annual economic growth (3% being considered a national disgrace) and the Civic Trust explicitly shared these assumptions.

The Civic Trust's proposals for the new leisure inevitably matched this airy economic vision. Its most famous proposal, Joan Little's "Fun Palace" at Mill Meads in Stratford, East London is illustrated by the artist by means of a concrete walkway stretching as far as the eye can see and flanked by buildings which would house every conceivably leisure activity. The vision is repeated throughout the valley at Lea Bridge, with its fantastic rival to Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, at Tottenham with a proposed new sporting complex including a 63,000 capacity football stadium, Enfield Lock an ideal weekend boating village, Waltham Abbey as a "weekend resort" with hotels, inns, restaurants and cafes and so forth. These major centres would be interspersed with tree lined water

fronts, daffodil planted reservoir banks and generally the whole scheme would be an opportunity to practise "landscaping in the grand manner". If the criticism may be made that the Civic Trust failed to consider closely how quiet and peaceful recreation – fishing, walking the dog, bird watching, would live with the enormous amount of organised merriment which it proposed, it is fair to point out that the proposals were intended as a vision and a catalyst for further thought about practical realisation of the Lee Valley Park.

At a practical level the report's proposals were clear and specific. The Park needed its own **executive agency** transcending the separate concerns of the various local authorities and it would require a **regional connection** to best achieve the improvement of a valley as a whole. Thirdly it would need **public support**, to encourage and inform the executive body and to marshal voluntary effort and the report suggested that a Lea Valley Association should be formed to achieve this vital third element.

The report aroused a remarkable degree of support and enthusiasm and within a short space of time, the various local authorities were hard at work promoting a private act of Parliament to give the vision concrete realisation.

3. The Lee Valley Regional Park Act 1966

The creation of a regional park nevertheless gave rise to hard bargaining between the relevant local authorities who would be called upon to give up powers to the new body and at the same time contribute to its funding by a precept from the rates.

Perhaps for this reason, the concept of direct public representation through a Lee Valley Association or otherwise was rejected in favour of a system of indirect representation whereby members of the constituent local authorities would form the membership of the ruling body of the Authority. Today (following local government re-organisation) there are 8 G.L.C. members, 4 a piece from Herts and Essex, one each from the six riparian London authorities and two a piece from three new District Councils, Broxbourne, Epping Forest and East Herts. It is interesting that the G.L.C. contributes over 80% of the funds but only half the members – a price which the non-metropolitan authorities are believed to have charged for giving support to a body perceived no doubt correctly of being of primary interest to the metropolis.

A more startling statistic is the extent of financial support given to the Authority, which was empowered to levy a precept of a penny rate (0.42 of a new penny) on the Councils of Greater London, Herts and Essex. That precept was worth £2.9M in 1966–7, a figure which has risen to £23M for 1979/80. Taking account of inflation in the intervening years, the authority has had the power to spend well over £200M in the last decade. Even if it was not expected that the Authority was expected to spend all its precepts, the fact that it was empowered (at its discretion) to spend money at this level is proof of the strong political support for the idea that prevailed at the time.

The absence of any mechanism for direct consultation or accountability was partly balanced by a duty to prepare a Master Plan of its proposals after consultation with local authorities and statutory bodies, and to "from time to time review such proposals" in consultation as aforesaid.* There was also a duty to report annually to the minister (now Secretary of State for the Environment) on the discharge of its functions.

A further feature of the Authority was its undivided and unitary nature which meant that each decision about the Park would be taken by the members as a whole; giving the representative in Ware an equal say with the local member on developments in Newham, and vice versa. The authority was given power however to delegate powers to committees of its members – a possible solution to the problems that this would inevitably present.

4. The Master Plan

The Master Plan, published in 1969 is a less extravagant document than the Civic Trust report, both in its financial implications and its visionary underpinning. Nevertheless, it is palpably a direct descendant of the earlier report and, looking back today a document with a feeling of the 1960's, even though visions of boundless economic growth were already beginning to give way, to put it mildly.

The Master Plan nevertheless remains today the cornerstone of the Authority's plans and it would therefore be wrong to characterise it in a page or two. (It is still on sale by the Authority. Price: £2.10p from LVRPA, Myddleton House, Bulls Cross, Enfield, Middx ED12 9HG.)

Nevertheless, a feeling of its characteristics may be given by summarising some of its major proposals : -

- i) a Park Road would be provided as the "backbone of the plan" for "pleasure motoring through a landscape which would be progressively improved", for "quick and easy access" between Park facilities and "to provide access to remote parts of the Park". The road, mostly four lanes would run mostly through the centre of the park and features indicated in a (never published) feasibility study commissioned from consulting engineers included features such as a raised section at Brimsdown to allow passing motorists to admire the adjoining King George VI reservoir;
- ii) the Plan proposed 13 "major recreational centres" plus a number of more modest regional recreational centres. The former were designed for "multi-purpose recreational activities". The most ambitious at Eastway would include playing fields, cycle circuit, a youth club, entertainments centre (with restaurants, bars, exhibition galleries, indoor games rooms and social rooms) a cinema, dance floors, recording studios, information centre, horticultural centre, ornamental gardens, an aviary, aquarium, woodlands and waterside walks;

* Lee Valley Regional Park Act 1966: Section 14 (i)

- iii) landscaping is given due emphasis and the report refers to an (unpublished) Landscape Concept plan. This included, “extensive tree planting, ground modeling, hedgerow planting (in co-operation with local farmers), a network of footpaths and bridleways, facelifts to adjoining buildings, reservation of a continuous area of open parkland and preservation of woodlands;
- iv) equipped with its great financial precept base (to be supplemented by borrowing powers and by revenue from its facilities as they were built) the Authority promised to substantially complete its blueprint by the early 1980's.



CHAPTER TWO

The Record of the Park Authority 1969–80

1. The Loss of Priority

Eleven years after the Master Plan, out of 13 major recreational centres, two at Picketts Lock and Broxbourne have been substantially completed. In the view of officials of the Park Authority, its work is about one fifth completed. Its precept, as a percentage of its full potential precept has varied from 14% to 34%. This parsimony has extended throughout the period of its operations, even when, in the early 1970's, public expenditure was under very much less constraint than at present. As a result, while individual projects have been completed, the development of the valley *as an entity* has been virtually invisible and many people locally are not aware that there is a programme to develop and improve the valley at all.

The recent cut backs in government expenditure have therefore been to reduce spending from an already low level. A multi-million pound rowing course planned for Turnford has recently been abandoned due to the present financial climate and the Park Authority has now no major projects in the development stage at all.

It might be unrealistic to expect that the tremendous momentum and enthusiasm for the Lee Valley Park generated at the time of the Civic Trust Report could be maintained. It is certainly unrealistic to look for the levels of spending which were then envisaged to be achieved in the near future.

At the same time, political support and enthusiasm must be re-kindled. At present, the Park Authority's politically acceptable level of precept is considered by members as being so low that it has to go as a poor relation to other publicly funded bodies such as the Sports Council to obtain capital support for new projects such as the proposed new Ice Rink at Lea Bridge. Inevitably, the criteria for new projects ceases to be based upon the best development of the Lea Valley. Given the generosity of the initial funding, this would surely be hard to believe for the authors of the Act less than 15 years ago.

2. The Concept of the Park: The Image of Leisure

Among the various forms of leisure which will be enjoyed in the microchip age, the Park Authority has plumped almost exclusively for the razzmatazz and leisure facilities highlighted in the Civic Trust Report and the Master Plan. For example, the Civic Trust, in its report, referred to the growth of sailing whose participants had increased from 15,000 in 1953 to 300,000 in 1964. It sometimes appears that the Park Authority believes in this continuing exponential growth of organised recreation which will crowd out outmoded leisure patterns. Writing of the Park Authority in the Sunday Times in 1971, Ian Niall wrote:

"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".

The oldest and still the most popular recreations, walking and angling have little place in this scheme of things and the increasing interest in the 1970's in conservation seems to have largely passed the Authority by. The three urban parks most similar to the Lee Valley Regional Park, The Colne Valley Park, The Tameside Park (in Manchester) and the Strathclyde Country Park (in Glasgow) all stress conservation in its practical and educational aspects in their strategic planning documents but the Lee Valley Park Authority has failed to show any convincing interest in the subject.

The former chairman of the Authority, Geoffrey Aplin said to members in 1979 that in his view the Lee Valley Association had been misled by the word "Park" into the nature of the Lee Valley enterprise, adding "our job is to provide recreational facilities. That's all". It is this view which we ask above all to be re-considered.

3. The Abandonment of Landscape

However slow the development of leisure facilities in the last 11 years, the progress on landscape has been slower still. It is surely a remarkable fact that the last landscape architect employed by the Authority left in 1976 and that none has been employed in his place.

Only in the matter of tree planting has the Park Authority made any progress towards achieving its landscape objectives in the Master Plan and even here its record has been an unhappy one. The vast majority of tree planting has been in the out of London section of the Park and has largely been confined to formal planting schemes in the Authority's gardens at sites such as Waltham Abbey, Broxbourne and Rye House. Nearly all trees have been of small stature - rowans, whitebeams, flowering cherries amenable to easy management but scarcely to "landscaping in the grand manner" and the imagination brought to bear in these sites has palpably been deficient.

In other aspects, footpath creation, hedgerow planting, facelifting of buildings, screening of unsightly elements; activity has been virtually non-existent. The "continuous area of open parkland" has never featured in the Park Authority's schemes which has rather proposed a series of developments which would stand like a colossus across the valley and break any continuous open areas. Reservations of park long bridleways and cycleways have never been seriously discussed by the authority at all.

It would be wrong to blame the Authority entirely for all of this. There have been many obstructions, problems of land-ownership, long negotiations with landowners (including many statutory undertakers) and technical difficulties in the form of flood relief requirements and preservation of river banks. Nevertheless, it seems clear that where the authority has had the chance to proceed at moderate cost in landscape improvements it has neglected the chance to do so.

The result is the present fragmented feeling of the valley with facilities at Picketts Lock and elsewhere isolated from the valley as a whole. In the circumstances it is not surprising that a proposed motorway along 16 miles of the Lee valley has been proposed on the basis of the dereliction of the area it passes through, and has received widespread support.

4. A Regional Approach

Meanwhile, the Park Authority has had to struggle with the awkward legacy of a financial and representative base covering the whole of the counties of Essex, Hertfordshire and Greater London which means that in developing facilities in Hackney, Enfield and Broxbourne, the Park Authority has been financially and politically accountable to the people of Harwich, Kingston-upon-Thames and Rickmansworth. Indeed the Park Authority apparently sees its role as wider still, having commented on many occasions that it is catering for the leisure needs of the South East as a whole. Thus the recently retired director of the Authority has written:

"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".

The wider proposition appears to be totally unrelated to the legislative basis of the Park Authority and absurd in practice. If it means that the development of the Lee Valley is designed equally for the people of Hastings, and Basingstoke as for local people, it must be said that the entire concept of the Lee Valley as a green lung has become so distorted as to qualify for immediate abandonment under the government's spending axe.

Nevertheless, the narrower and real responsibility to the funding counties retains a real problem which would have disappeared if other regional parks had been formed (as was expected at the time) and an element of cross-subsidy had developed. Instead, later similar projects have been undertaken by private enterprise. e.g. Thorpe Water Park at Chertsey or by local authorities (as in the Colne and Brent valleys).

The problem of "regional justification" is not therefore one that is easily solved, but it is one which will cause less problem if followed less slavishly. Normally a project with regional justification – a cycle racing track, horse riding centre, marina, squash courts, leisure centre answers both a regional need and provides facilities to local people (and at modest cost to their rates). The Authority appears to have erred in looking for a regional

justification for every project. Thus Spring Hill in Hackney – a first class cricket ground – cannot be brought back into use because the Park Authority doubts the regional justification of such expenditure. In Tottenham Marshes, an area used as a place to wander before the last war, the Park Authority has failed to come up with any convincing scheme of improvement since the scheme for a stadium was abandoned in 1974 and a deadlock has ensued with the Park Authority's proposals for regional facilities (such as motor cycle scrambling and model aeroplane flying) resisted by local people and local plans unacceptable to the regional authority. A rigidly regional approach has led the Park Authority to refuse even to talk to exceptionally strong pressure groups such as the Save the Marshes group in Hackney and Walthamstow because, it stated, such groups represent purely local aspirations. This has contributed to the appearance of remoteness on the part of the Authority which has contributed greatly to its present problems.

5. Accounting Problems

A further problem which appears to have bedeviled the Authority in its lifetime to date is the financial justification for its projects. Put most baldly, this is the view reported to have been stated by the former director of the Park Authority that:

"most important, the whole area must be treated as a business and pointed towards making a profit".

On such a view, a capital project can be justified if it makes a surplus of revenue income over expenditure, but it cannot if it leads to a recurring deficit. Thus a major centre is profitable if the income at the turnstiles covers its costs even though the capital expenditure (be it raised through precepts or loans) would if brought into the picture, put the centre into a thumping deficit. By contrast, a modest landscape project of perhaps one twentieth of the capital cost is a loss maker if no revenue can be raised to meet the costs of maintenance.

Increasingly, financial equations are dominated by a third factor which is the possibility of an outside contribution and both the major capital projects promoted by the Park in the last eighteen months, the rowing course at Turnford (now deferred) and the Ice Rink at Lea Bridge are projects of a national/international scale supported by Sports Council money.

The financial basis of the Authority's policies is increasingly breaking down in the present recession as the reductions in income and spending make it very difficult for the Authority to raise its revenues to cover the increasing costs of running its centres with the result that even the most popular centre, Picketts Lock is running in purely revenue terms at a substantial and increasing loss. Indeed the revenue deficit in the Park Authority's projects increased by over 50% between 1978/9 and 1979/80. Perhaps this will persuade the Authority to review its financial policies and accept that landscape amenity work is good value and that it is fully justified to use some of the precept revenue to this end.

6. Sticking to the Master Plan

The changes which occurred in that unhappy decade, the 1970's, have presented a challenge to the Authority which have been met in a most unsystematic and unsatisfactory way. It should be clear that the crisis of economic growth and management, the increasing cost of oil and therefore of personal mobility, the growth of interest in conservation and ecology, and above all the restraint on public expenditure have made the Master Plan an out of date document – not requiring wholesale rejection but needing a continuing and democratic review.

The Park Authority have neglected their legal duty to keep the Master Plan under review in conjunction with local authorities; the latter have never been invited to participate in any such review. At the same time, revisions have taken place – the stadium at Tottenham has been dropped, innumerable plans have been changed time and again but always on a strictly ad hoc basis and never with a view to reconsidering and re-adjusting the Master Plan to take account of changes. Public campaigns such as that to prevent the excavation of Walthamstow marshes have been resisted by the Park Authority on the principal ground that its plans were published in the Master Plan 10 years ago. It is in effect alleged by the Authority that it may review the Master Plans (and so to speak, change the ground rules of the game) but that nobody else is permitted to do so.

7. Pressing on alone

The task of reviewing, re-appraising and controlling the destiny of the park falls upon the 28 members of the local Authority representing the contiguous local Authorities, plus two co-opted members from the Thames Water Authority and the British Waterways Board.

Their task appears to be an impossible one – as breadwinners, councilors, party members, ward resource persons, school governors they generally have far more than enough to do without having the Lee Valley as their charge as well. Moreover, since their Lee Valley Constituency is 23 miles long, the task of acquainting themselves with the issues is a formidable one. The members do not (thankfully) proceed along party political lines (although the ruling party in the G.L.C. traditionally has the choice of chairman) but this does have the disadvantage that there is nothing akin to local authority "group" meetings where issues are thrashed out before being formally discussed. Instead, members meet about once every six weeks and come "cold" to an enormous list of projects, plans and proposals which they generally have to vote on immediately and without reference back to their colleagues on their local councils. Few councils indeed call for reports from their members – the general attitude being that there are other more important matters to deal with at council level and the Lee Valley Park Authority may as well be left to get on with it.

In the circumstances it is suggested entirely without reproach to members that:

- a) they decide most issues without any first hand knowledge whatsoever of the particular matter
- b) inevitably, they are bound to defer to officer recommendations in the vast majority of cases on the basis that the officers' informed judgment is the only basis upon which they can take a view.

For many years, the Authority has resisted any amelioration of this structural problem by declining to form committees to give prior consideration to issues on a "sub-regional" basis

(on the true, but irrelevant, ground that where you have a committee, you go over the same ground twice) and they have resisted direct public consultation on its blueprints on the basis that this is a usurpation of the local authority's planning process and that it is for local authorities alone to carry out consultations.

8. The Crisis

One logical objection (using the Park Authority's own premise) to the local authority as the arbiter of public interest/public opinion is that the local authority is bound to have regard to an exclusively local opinion, which the Park Authority considers ought not to be over influential anyway.

Be that as it may, the Park Authority's success in agreeing on planning matters with local authorities has become so low as to represent a crisis in its affairs as successive planning applications, representing years of detailed work have suffered successive rejection.

1978 - Planning application for squash courts at Spring Hill Clapton was rejected after a local residents' campaign. Subsequent discussions on the use of the site have so far yielded no result.

1979 - Planning permission for the Turnford rowing course granted subject to conditions whose financial implications contributed to the decision to abandon the scheme *sine die*.

1980 - Application for a funfair at Broxbourne refused.

1980 - Application for a motor cycle scramble centre at Tottenham refused. The commercial partner of the Authority appeals to the Minister but the Park Authority (following opposition to the scheme by its local members) remains neutral.

1980 - total rejection of the gravel winning scheme at Walthamstow Marshes by G.L.C. following a campaign of public opposition. Park Authority is appealing to the Minister.

CONCLUSIONS

In September 1980, the Park Authority issued the Lee Valley Association with an invitation to conduct its own re-think and present a modern alternative to the Master Plan. The LVA has accepted this challenge and proposes to fulfil it to the best of its abilities during the coming year.

It will clearly be up to the Park Authority to decide whether any alternative master plan represents an improvement on its own plans, based upon the feelings of the individual members and its constituent authorities.

We think that the case is made out, however, 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 1980's - 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.

The Authority must also find a way of conducting a continuing dialogue with its public. Its publicity for the features it has provided are excellent but there must be dialogue with the public and not just advertisements to the consumers of its products. We cannot afford to waste the resources that are available on blueprints which can never be achieved.

Finally, the Park Authority must restore vision to the planning of the Park, build up its landscape and horticultural departments and create the Park as a unity and a genuine green lung for North and East London.

