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past tense

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The Birthplace of People's Democracy

A short one hundred and fifty years ago Kennington Common, later to be renamed Kennington Park, was host to a historic gathering which can now be seen as the birth of modern British democracy. In reaction to this gathering, the great Chartist rally of 10th April 1848, the common was forcibly enclosed and the Victorian Park was built to occupy the site.

History is not objective truth. It is a selection of some facts from a mass of evidences to construct a particular view, which inevitably, reflects the ideas of the historian and their social milieu. The history most of us learnt in school left out the stories of most of the people who lived and made that history. If the design of the Victorian park means anything it is a negation of such a people's history: an enforced amnesia of what the real

Kennington Common, looking South, in 1839. On the right is the Horns Tavern; in the distance on the left is St. Marks Church.

importance of this space is about. A history of life, popular discourse and collective struggle for justice is replaced with a few antique objects and some noble trees.

The significance of Kennington Park goes back to its origins as a common. What is important about this site is not the physical aspects of its layout but the traditions of its usage, a usage which arises from its unique position in South London. It is here that the road from Buckingham Palace to Dover crosses the older road from the City of London to Portsmouth. It was the last common before the centres of power to the north of the river, particularly Parliament. It was first recorded as a common on Rocque's 1746 map of London, but it must have been crucial as a public meeting place long before that.

The Magical Fork in the Road and the Golden Ball.

The southbound highways date from pre-Roman times when a fork in a major road was considered to have magical significance. The fork was chosen as the site of a toll gate house in 1853. Later an underground toilet was built which became infamous for 'cottaging' (anonymous gay sex) in the late 20th Century. A few years ago the public convenience was filled in and almost immediately a monstrous white column, surmounted by a golden ball, appeared on the site. There had been no local consultation - perhaps it celebrates the illicit pleasure of cottaging...

Executions

The importance of its position made it a site of power struggles from an early time. From the 17th century, if not before, the south western corner of the common was selected as the South London site of public execution. In the 18th century the country was still dominated by an aristocracy who had ruled by the sword. History has painted a picture of the elegance and chivalry of the old ruling aristocracy but the term gangster would be more appropriate. But by the 17th century the unifying monarchical state had transformed this naked violence into ordered spectacles of horror - public executions.
The first execution recorded is of Sarah Elston, who was burnt alive for murdering her husband in 1678:

> *"On the day of execution Sarah Elston was dressed all in white, with a vast multitude of people attending her. And after very solemn prayers offered on the said occasion, the fire was kindled, and giving two or three lamentable shrieks, she was deprived of both voice and life, and so burnt to ashes."*
>
> *(H.H. Montgomery, 'The History of Kennington', 1889 p.32)*

Not all executions were for serious crimes - on 24th August 1743 James Hunt and Thomas Collins were hanged for sodomy! The most infamous and perhaps terrible spectacle was the execution for treason of nine Catholic members of the Manchester Regiment. These Jacobites were hung, drawn and quartered on Wednesday July 30th 1746. Now that Scottish devolution has finally been achieved with somewhat less bloodshed we might dedicate the fountain, which stands on the site, to their memory. This fountain, which is outside the park perimeter railings to the south west - opposite Oval tube station, was designed by Georgina Livingston in 1984. It seems an appropriate memorial

to all those whose blood has soaked this ground, but there is not even a plaque.
It continued as a place of execution until the last years of the 18th century. The last person to be executed was a fraudster from Camberwell Green by the name of Badger, hanged in 1799. The history books have portrayed executions as popular entertainments but it only takes a little sensitivity and imagination to realise the trauma that any witness, not already

emotionally calloused, would feel. I imagined the effect on my son, coming home from the nearby Henry Fawcett junior school, seeing dismembered corpses, perhaps the father of one of his school mates, executed for stealing a sheep or a silk handkerchief. Children were, in fact, hauled screaming onto the gallows to be 'wetted' by the sweat of the corpse as this was supposed to be a cure for 'scrofulous' diseases.
The dawn of the 19th century brought many changes. The rising capitalist class was challenging aristocratic power and the composition of the ruling classes changed. At the same time the population was gradually becoming concentrated in cities. London was one of the cities that grew from the proceeds of

slavery and the subsequent sugar trade. The density of the urban population, with its intense social life, gave rise to new political potentials. Consequently the state required new forms of oppression. The Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in which 11 people were killed and 600 badly injured by a cutlass wielding cavalry, taught the ruling class that overt violence could create martyrs and inflame revolt. Their deadly and effective strategy was to sap the vital energies of the new urban population by denying them cultural autonomy. This would be done by denigrating their own culture then 'civilising' them; by training them 'to behave' and adhere to middle class manners. It was a strategy that made many of us outsiders to our own class.

Highwayman Jerry Abershaw on his Way to the Gallows at Kennington.

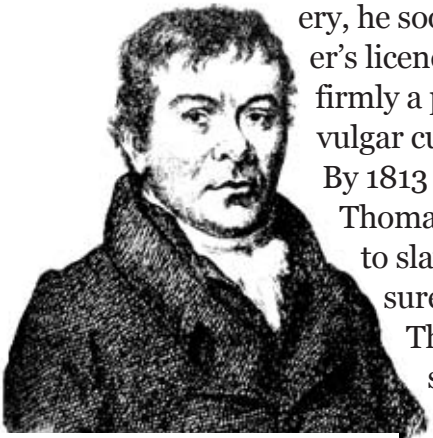
As in the new colonies, violent conquest was followed by cultural repression. The enclosure of Kennington Common marks a point at which class oppression gradually changed gear replacing external violence with more cultural and psychological mechanisms of social control. This was of course backed up by an increasingly sophisticated and numerous police force and judicial system.

The Common on the site of the current park had been a meeting place since the 18th century if not earlier. It belonged to people communally and it was the South London speakers corner. It seems as if there was a mound at this time, perhaps an ancient tumulus, from which orators could air their thoughts. What

were the issues of the day that were broadcast from this site? Large crowds were attracted to many brilliant radical orators. The most famous of these may have been John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who addressed as many as 50,000 people on Kennington Common around 1739. Whilst he was preaching the congregation would have seen the silhouettes of hanged corpses against the skyline. This was a church with a stern morality which stood firmly against slavery. Inevitably anti-establishment and without hierarchy, almost anyone could become a preacher. Methodist preachers could interpret scripture in ways which linked plebian magical beliefs with primitive Christian egalitarianism.

The South London Speakers' Corner

Robert Wedderburn was one such preacher who operated in this area. He was born to Rosanna, an African born house-slave in Kingston, Jamaica, who was sold by her owner, Robert's father, before he was born. He arrived in England aged 17 in 1778 and was in the Gordon Riots of 1780. In 1786 he fell under the thrall of a Methodist street preacher and experienced an instantaneous conversion. Intoxicated on the power of grace and inspired by Wesley's stance against slavery, he soon obtained a dissenting preacher's licence. At the same time he stayed firmly a part of the underclass and its vulgar culture.



Robert Wedderburn

By 1813 he had become a follower of Thomas Spence, who linked opposition to slavery with opposition to the enclosures of the commons in England. This talismanic interpretation of scripture led to millenarianism, freethought and political radicalism. Spence was a prolific

publisher and distributor of handbills, broadsheets, songs, tracts, pamphlets and periodicals. He even issued token coinage to publicise his views.
The somewhat less radical Evangelical Alliance now inhabit a 'house' overlooking the park named after Wesley's prime colleague, George Whitefield.
Within the park the tradition of religious radicalism was long upheld by the Rastafarian temple which was established in a converted terrace of four houses in St Agnes Place (between the two sections of the park) in the 1970's. In 1998 the Rastafarians, as an example of their social programme, organised a lively youth football tournament on the astro-turf pitch behind the temple. The games were accompanied by a raucous and thumping sound system.

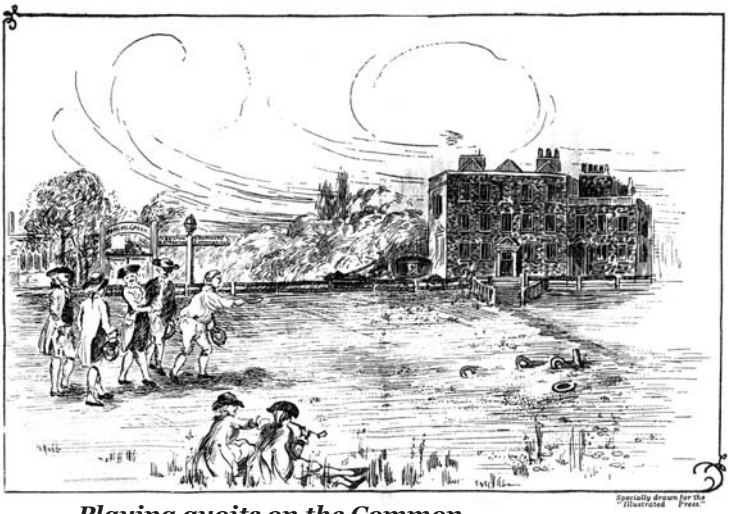
Games and Sports

The common was a flood plain before an embankment was built to control the excesses of Father Thames. This meant that a layer of silt was left over the area after flooding, levelling the ground and making it highly fertile. Good for sheep grazing but more importantly ideal for ball games. It may have been the place that cricket was invented. The first recorded game was in 1724 but it may have been played much earlier. Surrey County Cricket Club played there until moving to the, now famous, Oval in 1845.
It was not only cricket that was played on the common. Quoits was another 19th Century favourite, that is depicted on an old engraving, but was a game with less staying power than cricket. Other games with less 'gentlemanly' credentials were also enjoyed. In 1792 Mungo, a black prize-fighter, matched with a local carpenter, broke his opponents jaw in a match on the common. (Peter Linebaugh '*The London Hanged',* Verso, 2003, p. 414).

Such pastimes are reported in the press of the day in disapproving tones. The following account of the activity on the common on Good Friday 1821 has to be reinterpreted from a viewpoint of those who would have been enjoying themselves:

> *"According to custom immemorial, all the loose, idle, and disorderly vagabonds that infest the Borough, Westminster, and other parts of the metropolis, began to assemble on Kennington Common at an early hour on Friday morning, for the disgraceful purpose of devoting his sacred day to drinking, fighting, jack-ass racing, boxing, single stick, dog-fighting, gambling, foot-ball, and picking of pockets. Upwards of 200 Constables, arrived there at an early hour, seized upon several jack asses and gambling tables, and dispersed the rabble. It was dreaded they would be daring enough to make an attack on the Police."*

So people were engaged in both mental and physical activity on the people's green field 'from times immemorial'.



Playing quoits on the Common

Radicalism

This was a period of intense popular political discourse and self-education amongst the new urban classes. Radical debating clubs became numerous but were then made illegal and had to operate covertly on a smaller scale. One of the most famous was the London Corresponding Society, formed by Thomas Hardy, a shoemaker, in January 1792.

Free 'n' Easies were another social form in which radical toasting contests and political sing-songs would alternate with heated debates. Such toasting, with its satiric word bombs, may well be one of the roots of rap music via Caribbean slave culture. The *Green Man and Horns* tavern, on the corner of Kennington Road and Kennington Park Road, was a likely venue. It was later to become a major social landmark in the area known simply as *The Horns*. More of this later...

The most popular text that arose from these radical undercurrents was written by Thomas Paine, a good friend of the artist, poet and pamphleteer William Blake. Blake lived near the Common so Paine would have also become familiar with the area. His book, *The Rights of Man,* came to be read as an underground manifesto. It was made illegal to possess the book, but that just caused a rash of chapters to appear as pamphlets.

Tom Paine believed that:

> *"Conquest and tyranny, at some early period, dispossessed man of his rights, and he is now recovering them... Whatever the apparent causes of any riot might be, the real one is always want of happiness. It shows that something is wrong in the system of Government that injures the felicity by which society is to be preserved."*

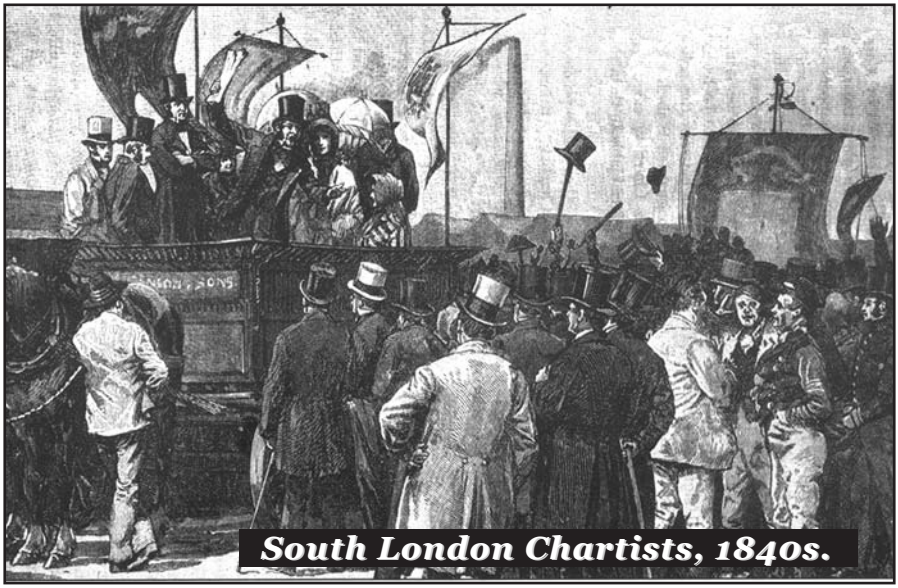
(Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man,* Vol 2. 1792.)

Chartism:

The World's first national labour movement

From these feverish debates came an agreement on the need for republicanism and universal suffrage - for an all inclusive democracy. In 1832 a voting Reform Act gave the middle class the vote but left the working class, who had agitated in favour of the bill, still entirely disenfranchised. The basic political demands, which had been the elements of radical discourse for some time, were then drawn up as a six point 'Charter'. Presented as 'a new Magna Carta', by 1838 it was supported by almost every working class group across Britain and rapidly became the basis of the world's first national labour movement.

The people who supported it were known as 'Chartists'. Not a small active party with a large passive membership but a movement which deeply affected every aspect of people's lives. It was an inclusive organisation with popular leaders who were Catholics, Protestants and Freethinkers. West Indian and Asian



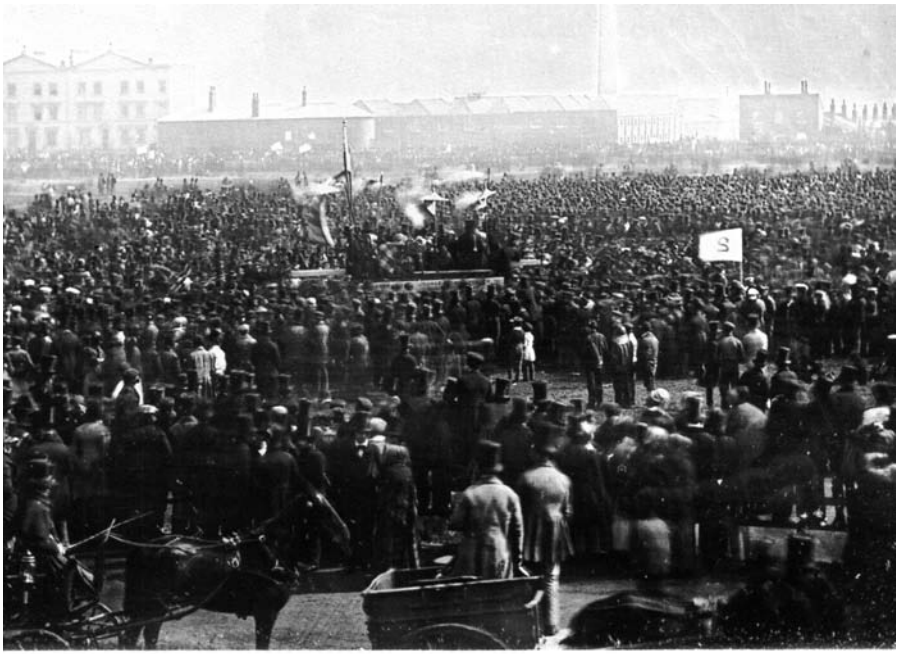
South London Chartists, 1840s.

people were prominent and in fact the organiser of 10th April was William Cuffay, a black Londoner, who was subsequently deported for his efforts. The Irish, in the midst of the great potato famine at home had good reason to take part and did. There were also women's groups in spite of the charter only demanding male suffrage. Chartist meetings sometimes had a carnival like atmosphere, and at other times were preceded by hymn singing and processions. There was a Chartist culture which had its own christenings and funerals and its own songs. It was a counter-cultural experience that changed people's perception of themselves... through this process they became conscious of a profound and unifying new urban class identity. The main political strategies of Chartism became the petition and the monster rally. The petition also grew to be a monster and assumed the status of an unofficial referendum. The great rallies were a show of strength which also gave the participants a direct sense of community. By 1848 Chartism had built up a head of steam. The petition for The Charter had grown huge, by then it had between three and six million signatures depending on which side you choose to believe. A carriage, bedecked with garlands, was needed to transport it. Parliament was to be pre - sented with this petition, for the third time, after a monster rally on Kennington Common on the 10th April 1848.
There is still no authoritative history of Chartism published: This is partly because it was such a collective network of groups that it is difficult to reduce to conventional narrative history, partly because the fieldwork is still being done and partly due to the class bias of historians and their publishers who have done their best to undermine its importance.

An Icon of Modernity

This moment in the struggle for democracy was recorded in a historic photograph. William Kilburn, an early portrait photographer, took two daguerrotype plates of the rally from a vantage point in The Horns. These were the first ever photographic representations of a large crowd. Considering the cultural importance that photography was to assume in next 100 years it is perhaps not surprising that the negatives of this iconic image are held in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle, which retains a strict copyright control.

The fact that the events of the 10th April 1848 did not herald a British Revolution or immediate voting reforms has been held up by official historians as the 'failure' of Chartism. But the success of Chartism should not be measured in such terms but



William Kilburn's daguerrotype of the 10th April 1848 Chartist Rally - the first ever photographic representation of a large crowd.

rather in the effects it had on the consciousness of the millions who took part. This is something historians have found difficult to register. There was a real democratic culture and powerful desire for social justice behind The Charter which remains unrealised to this day.

The stand-off on Kennington Common that day had shaken the arrogant complacency of the British ruling classes. From then on a unique alliance, between the waning aristocracy and the burgeoning capitalist middle class, was forged. This newly united ruling block determined to crush or commercialise urban popular culture. From then on there was an uneven but constant pressure to undermine and destroy the unity, vigor and autonomy of the new urban lower class.

The Enclosure of Our Common

The first step was to symbolically annihilate the common land that had become such a focus of the Chartist struggle. The Commons have symbolic roots going back to before the Norman conquest. They stand for the right of every human to have access to the fruits of our earth: in stark contrast to the predatory individualism promoted by the 'enlightened' imperialist. This individualism was insensitive to the buzz of communality, unfeeling of the humanity and intelligence of the crowd, and incapable of a non-exploitative relation to the earth. This lack of feeling was a necessary precondition for a class of men who were destined to lead the conquest and exploitation of peoples and ecosystems across the globe. And yet, their PR was so good that they came across as paragons of excellence, rationality and manliness - inducing a terrible cloying respect from many of their 'inferiors'.

The spirit of the commons was the antithesis of this dominating cult of individualism and private ownership. It was the spirit that had inspired the Diggers to remind us of a few home truths

way back in April 1649:

> *"For though you and your Ancestors got your Propriety by murther and theft, and you keep it by the same power from us, that have an equal right to the Land with you, by the righteous Law of Creation, yet we shall have no ocassion of quarrelling (as you do) about that disturbing devil, called Particular Propriety: For the Earth, with all her Fruits of Corn, Cattle, and such like, was made to be a common Store-house of Livelihood to all Mankinds, friend, and foe, without exception."*
>
> Gerrard Winstanley, *'Declaration from the Poor oppressed People of England... to Lords of Manors', 1649. (Reprinted by Aporia Press, Camberwell New Road, 1989)*

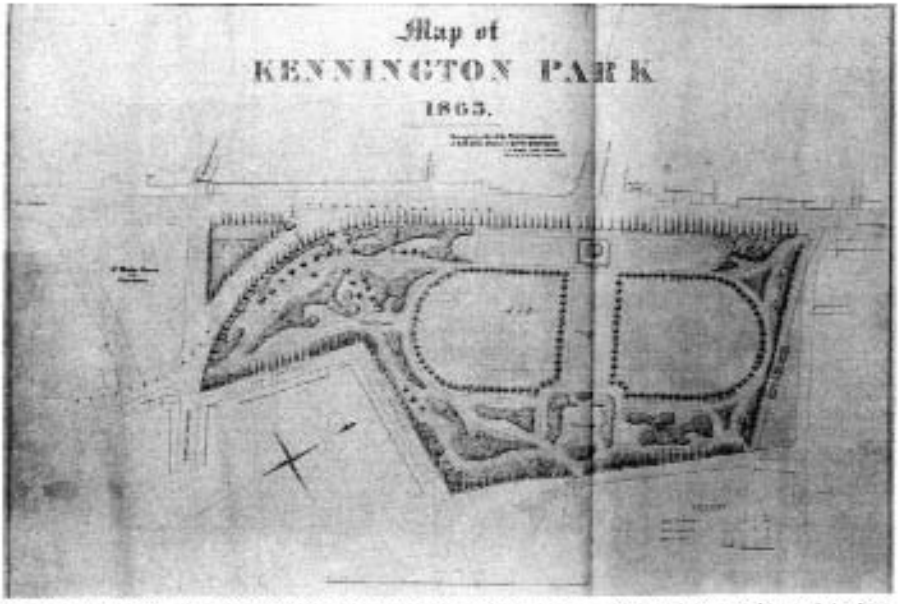
The ruling class united in the face of this new threat to their power and determined that the cultural diversity of the working classes was to be obscured with a bland and ugly concept of 'the masses'. The image of the masses as an irrational and potentially savage mob can be traced through Carlyle and Dickens to Hollywood - It is a manufactured falsehood.

Soon after the great Chartist rally a committee of local worthies was set up and found ready support from the Prince of Wales. By 1852 they had already got the requisite bill through Parliament and Kennington Common was 'enclosed' - its status as an ancient commons was reduced to that of a Royal Park. The planting and construction of the park which forms the familiar pattern we know today was largely completed by 1854. This was a colonisation of working class political space which carried a prophetic symbolism.

The Common was occupied, fenced and closely guarded. Not only was the perimeter fenced but so was the grass and the shrubberies. The paths along which people were expected to 'promenade' with decorum, were patrolled by guards

administered by H.M.Royal Commissioners. Prince Albert donated the 'model cottages for artisans' which he had displayed at the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851. The park stayed under direct control of the Royals until it was taken over by the Metropolitan Board of Works, soon to become the London County Council, in 1889.

During the early period of occupation the use of the park was limited to an annual meeting of The Temperance Societies of South London, starting in the summer of 1861. The north and south 'pitches' were used for local schools sports. Around the end of the century there seems to have been some municipal renewal of the Victorian park ethos with the addition of an arts & crafts style refreshment house in 1897. In 1931 an 'old English Garden' was added. Park Superintendents filed six monthly reports from 1893 to 1911 but they may have omitted to report on meetings that were spontaneous. Certainly we know the park was used during the General Strike of 1926.



18. Kennington Park, 1865. Marked on the plan are Prince Consort's Lodge, a sundial, the gymnasium and the Slade drinking fountain. The remain of the Little Common is shown edged with trees and with the toll house at its northern end. Pound Piece on the east side of Brixton Road is the site of the pound

This was just the beginning of a long period in which the new urban working-class culture was attacked, undermined or commercialised in all its forms. The Unions and Socialist parties either considered culture a distraction or were even active in encouraging their members to follow the middle class programme of 'Rational Recreation'.

Music-hall

In the late 19th century this area of South London was vibrant with popular culture. It had many theatres, assembly rooms, dancehalls and musichalls. In 1898 the London County Council (LCC), later to become the GLC, provided the park with an elegant bandstand - between 1900 and 1950 there were concerts of military bands for a paying seated audience on Sundays, Wednesdays and Bank Holidays. These 'rational recreations' were seen to offer an civilising alternative to the 'vulgar' music-hall culture which hemmed in on all sides.
The beautiful Kennington Theatre, facing the northwest corner of the park, opened in 1898 as the Princess of Wales Theatre. It

The Kennington Theatre, c. 1922...

was one of the most sumptuous in London. But the era of musichall was waning and in 1921 it was showing 'cine-variety'. It closed in 1934, failing to get its licence renewed for the 1935 season - perhaps a victim of the depression. It was finally demolished in the 1950s to make way for Kennington Park House, a block of flats built by the LCC. It is now run by a Tenants Co-op.

Everywhere it was the same; working-class pastimes and meeting places were replaced with commercialised forms, rational recreations or erased altogether, leaving acres of public housing which had been culturally sterilised. The active, autonomous anarchic culture of the crowd was replaced with an increasingly passive, commodified and privatised 'popular' culture of the 'masses'.

... and the block that replaced it.

World Wars

Local people say that the first bomb to drop on London was dropped from a Zeppelin onto the south end of Kennington Park. For many years a white stone marked the spot but has since disappeared.

In the early 20th Century the *Horns* Tavern had become a major social centre with a large assembly rooms to the rear and, further back along Kennington road, at least one brothel. (The house 'of ill repute' still stands now dwarfed by the adjacent Red Devil Storage Co.) The *Horns* was said to be the favourite haunt of Charlie Chaplin's profligate father. At one time the young Charlie lived in poor lodgings overlooking the north of the park in Kennington Park Place. The park may have been where he and his friends would imitate their music-hall heroes and practice their silly walks. In his autobiography he tells us that he met his first girlfriend in the park.

The Horns Tavern, 1885...

Social space replaced by 'Social Security'

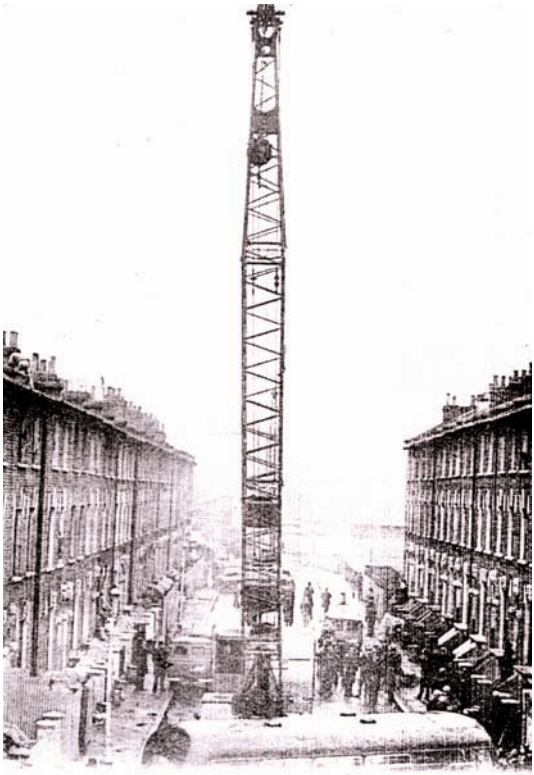
The *Horns*, a key social centre whose life would have flowed naturally into the park and energised it, was partly destroyed by a bomb in World War 2. The remains were demolished in the 1960s and replaced with the formidable dark concrete of the Social Security block designed by Colonel Siefert, architect in-the-pocket of many notorious Sixties developers. Thus a site of social life was replaced with a bastion of social control. Since the original tavern was destroyed, the bawdy spirit of the *Horns* seems to have migrated north to the White Bear with its theatre club and bohemian reputation.

The people of Lambeth suffered terribly in the Second World War - Over two thousand five hundred bombs decimated the borough. The park was the site of two shallow trench air-raid shelters. On 15th October 1941 these suffered a direct hit and at least 46 bodies were recovered. The chaos of war along with the need to keep up morale meant that no official toll of those dead and missing was taken. From the flimsy evidence in the Lambeth Archives it seems as if the remains of between seven

and 17 or more bodies may have been left unrecovered when the site was levelled around the 19th of October. Many people must have been blown to pieces and the south field of the park is their grave to this day.
On a lighter note the north and south pitches of the park were dug up and used as allotments during the war.

The Return of the Commons Spirit

The Park had passed from the London County Council LCC (by then the GLC) to Lambeth Council in 1971. This was the Conservative-led Council, which launched John Major on his career. In January 1977 the squatters in St Agnes Place, situated between the old park and the newer extension, achieved a historic victory against the power of municipal authorities, that had been running riot with the unchecked corruption involved with the high rise developments of the Sixties and early Seventies.
Labour Councillor Stimpson called in a demolition firm to knock down the squatted houses whilst the squatters were living in them. But he ignored necessary legal procedures and the



St. Agnes Place, 1977

squatters were able to get a last minute High Court injunction and call a halt to the demolition before it had destroyed many of the houses. It was the first time an injunction had been served by telephone. The squatters in the area, who were quite numerous at this time, were elated by this victory and spontaneously set off down Brixton Road to march on Lambeth Town Hall. Arriving at the Town Hall they knocked on the front door and, to their amazement, were let in. Angry squatters teemed through the hallowed halls of the council, occupying offices and calling vociferously for Stimpson's resignation.
The council started the annual fireworks displays in the Park in 1978 and the following year had a council led by the Marxist 'Red Ted' Knight. By 1981 the park was again being used for political gatherings. The demonstrators in the Lambeth Fightback Campaign used the park as an assembly point in that year. In subsequent years the park has hosted many important political gatherings including; the Anti Apartheid Rally (1984), Gay Pride (starting 1986), National Union of Students (1986), Irish Solidarity Movement (1986), Vietnamese Community event (1989), Anti Poll Tax March (1990), Kurdistan Rally (1991), Integration Alliance (1993), TUC (1993), Nigerian Rallies (1993), Campaign Against Militarism (1993) and Reclaim the Streets (1997). (Lambeth Parks Department records 1997). These events reflect key moments in the political struggles of the time and are an important part of the democratic process.

What's happening now

In 1996 Lambeth council set up a park Management Advisory Committee (MAC). At the inaugural meeting a local estate agent, lawyer and priest took up the key posts and plans for a 'Victorian Restoration' of the park were quickly put into motion. The powers of Lambeth Council officers to give permissions for

use of the park were to be limited - all future applications had to be monitored by the MAC. This conservative committee of local residents had an influence on the park, which did not take sufficient account of its wider significance and use in the democratic politics of this country.

Claire Asquith, a student of landscape design, was commissioned by the MAC to produce a public exhibition to promote the restoration programme. This began by dismissing the Common as a place which was 'notorious' and whose ditches were "the cemeteries of all the dead puppies and kittens of the vicinity" and into which *"raw sewage was discharged from adjacent cottages"*. She omitted to point out that there were many open sewers in London at this time.

She wrote of the erection of St Marks church in 1824, on enclosed common land, as *"the salvation of the common"*. But the building of the church was the first step in the occupation of the site by the ruling classes. It was the vicar of St Marks, the Reverend Charlton Lane, who led the committee for the enclosure of the common. A hand-out from the church, c.1998, oddly reminiscent of a tract by Robert Wedderburn, tells us that at that time it *"unfortunately became a church for the rich, who alone could afford the price of a pew"*. The paper goes on to use the image of the river Effra, which flows beneath the church, to conjure up a fantastic collage of biblical water metaphors.

The Friends of Kennington Park that came into existence in 2002 is nominally more democratic than the MAC and more independent from Lambeth Council. It does however perpetuate the middle class leadership and reactionary agenda that is so typical of such 'public spirited' committees. Suffice to say there are no more political rallies starting from the park. Even visits from the fair and circus are under siege. Just one annual mass event is allowed - a festival for the local Portuguese community. Games of football on the grass of the north field are being being brought under pressure, and spontaneous gatherings for

Ecuadorian Volleyball has been stopped. It seems the spirit of enclosure has sadly returned.

As the second edition of this pamphlet edition was being prepared there was a mass eviction of 150 people from St Agnes Place (29th November 2005) so ending the longest running large squat in London's history. The Rastafarian Temple was spared for a while, divide and rule being successfully used to split them from the other squats: their turn came a few months later.

Not all the news is bad. Some people are making headway against the reactionary tide. A community cricket ground, the first in Lambeth, is evolving on Kennington Park East. Its existence is down to the dedication of coach Tony Moody, who believes that cricket and reggae music 'in the key of C' can be a tool to promote social harmony, and is supported from the Surrey County Cricket Club at the Oval.

Temple of Enclosure: St. Mark's Church.

Another remarkable local community activist, Cathy Preece, has organised to provide the park with bird-boxes made by people with learning disabilities at local eco centre Roots and Shoots and funded from a jumble sale. She has also fundraised and organized for a monument to be made to the civilians who died in the parks air raid shelter by local sculptor Richard Kindersley. Generally the Victorian park has not marked the true history of the space. Its structures and monuments are damaged and have fallen into disrepair. As they celebrate the enclosure of working class space perhaps this shouldn't concern us. However the Tinworth Fountain, now a ruined stump, was a major work of one of the great working class artists of the 19th Century - George Tinworth, who was born locally and worked at the nearby Doulton's pottery factory. The War Memorial, dating from 1924, stands out as having a clear and important function. It is annually honoured with wreaths and poppies and rarely defaced.

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On Friday 10th April 1998, it was the 150th anniversary of the birth of modern British democracy. The anniversary of the most important date of the Chartist movement, the first national labour movement in the world. The stormy day was marked by a small crowd of latterday Chartists organised by Marianne, an ex resident of the Kennington Park Estate. They draped the bushes with red and purple banners and had music, food and games. A pompous grey council official who tried to call it off was roundly ignored. But two policemen, who arrived in their panda car, seemed happy to watch the proceedings from a distance. A man with a green head was seen declaiming to spring blossom. By late afternoon sunbeams broke through the overcast sky and local birds broke into a hearty chorus.

The Lambeth Archives refused to take the 1997 original issue of this pamphlet on the grounds that it was *"too controversial."* It makes you wonder about the rest of the historic records that are lodged in such archives. For any working class person who has tried to take an interest in the bland genre of Local History it may come as no surprise. The annals of history ring hollow from the absence of working class voices.

This is an important site for anyone who values democracy - at the time of writing there isn't even a commemorative stone to that momentous occasion on the 10th April 1848. Kennington Park still needs to be put on the map as a site of international significance. We need another return of the commons spirit.

Stefan Szczelkun. 1997 & 2005.

- A more detailed chronology is on Wikipedia.
- Contemporary Photographs on pages 2, 3, 15, 17 & 20 by Chloe Bowles.

William Cuffay, from an engraving by William Dowling.

Like Robert Wedderburn, another Black radical associated with Kennington Common, William Cuffay, a tailor, was one of the leaders of the London Chartists. One of the main organisers and speakers of the demonstration of April 10th 1848, soon after wards he was arrested, with other Chartists, in Holborn and accused of planning an anrmed radical uprising. Found guilty of 'levying war on the queen', he was transported to Tasmania for life; he remained active politically in exile and died in 1870.

How about a statue of Cuffay or Wedderburn for the Park?

KENNINGTON PARK

Birthplace of People's Democracy

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past tense