

CLISSOLD PARK USER GROUP CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT

March 2011- February 2012

The Clissold Park User Group has existed for over twenty years and is open to everyone who uses or cares about the park. We hold six meetings a year to which everyone is welcome and work with the Council to ensure users' voices are heard

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Hackney Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery for the £9.5 investment in our park.



Ken Worpole leading a guided walk, March 2011



The cafe terrace, February 2012

1. Restoration and revitalisation

As the final year of the Restoration Project and the year in which we saw the completion of all the major strands of work in the park, 2011 was always going to be an exciting and challenging year for the User Group. Summer saw the opening of the new wheels park and playground and during the autumn the animal enclosures were completed. The new Education Centre in the old bowling pavilion was completed; the old toilet block was demolished, opening up new views of the house; new bins, benches and bridges were installed and new planting took place across the whole park. The culmination of the project was the reopening of the house, returned to its former glory both inside and out. At the opening event in December, Wesley Kerr, Chair of the London Committee of the Heritage Lottery Fund, and Mayor Jules Pipe both spoke passionately about the importance of Clissold Park as a “flagship park” within the borough and across London.

Gradually, out of the chaos, as fences came down and contractors' compounds disappeared we began to see a new park emerge out of our old park with unexpectedly beautiful vistas suddenly appearing to remind us of how the house would have looked when it was first built and the old Newington Common first landscaped over 200 years ago. Over the last three decades, while local people have worked and campaigned to help bring about these changes there has been a long debate about how we strike the right balance between celebrating the heritage of this extraordinary park and house whilst still retaining the park as a vital and welcoming place for everyone. No doubt this debate will continue and there is still much work to be done, but it is clear that in all the most important ways the physical restoration of the park and house has succeeded in getting this balance right.

2. Partnership working between park users and Hackney Council

If the user group is to have a real impact we know we need to have a strong and effective working relationship with Hackney Council. Over the past year this relationship has been strengthened by the inclusion of User Group representatives on the Clissold Park Restoration Project Board chaired with great energy and drive by Kim Wright, Director of Health and Community Services. This is the first time that users have been invited to sit, as equals, with Council officers around the table on a major capital project and been party to most of the important debates. This partnership working has been enhanced by high levels of attendance from senior Council staff (in particular John Wade and David Woodhead) and Councillors (Linda Smith, Daniel Stevens and Jonathan McShane) at our regular User Group meetings. The Council has welcomed the strong but positive challenge from park users (both officers and individual people attending our meetings) which has meant many problems being averted altogether or addressed quickly when they arise. As Chair, I would like to thank Hackney for their commitment to involving users through our group and through working with the Stakeholder Group which included Hackney City Tennis, the One O'clock Club, St Mary's Church and Growing Communities.

I would also like to thank the many individual park users who have come to six bimonthly meetings, shared their views and listened to each other and given the elected officers a strong mandate as their representatives. We have had an average of about forty people at each of our meetings this year, some of whom are regular attendees whilst others have attended because of an interest in or concern about a particular issue. We have also had input from other users through our presence on Facebook (175 members), via email and letter (over 300 on our emailing list and 40 on our snail mail list) and our website (21,700 separate visitors this year). This high level of involvement and broad range of interests, combined with a shared commitment to the park and to other park users, is what has made our group so successful and has meant that we have been taken seriously by Hackney Council who recently described our input on this project as "positive, committed and invaluable" whilst recognising that we have been "constructively critical when we (the Council) have needed a nudge in the right direction". The Project Board has now been disbanded and will be replaced with a new Clissold Park Management Board on which CPUG will be represented.

3. User Group projects and events

In terms of other activities and events provided by the User Group this has been a relatively quiet year with most of our energies going into the project. We received a small grant from Grassroots East London to run a series of walks around the park in the early Spring 2011. Russell Miller of the Tree Musketeers led two walks which focussed on the trees of the park and our Honorary President Ken Worpole led three guided tours of the park looking at the ongoing works. Since the house opened, CPUG reps have also helped lead some of the the regular guided tours of the house which take place on Tuesday and Saturday afternoons.

Future events in which we will be involved include the Olympic Torch event on 21 July and the Big Draw in October. We are also hoping this house will be part of the Open House weekend in September.

4. Key issues addressed by the group this year

We have dealt with so many different issues this year, that it is not possible to cover all of them in detail here. Full notes of all our meetings and supporting papers can be found on our website.

4.1 Park management: One of our successes this year was finally to persuade Hackney Council of the need to have a single over-arching manager for the park and house. Our view is that this is the only way in which we can ensure that the park provides the environment and level of service that users require. We have lobbied hard for this for several years and eventually it was agreed that this post would be created at a level of seniority that would ensure that the whole team within the park (rangers, gardeners, the venue managers and the cafe) are working well together and that relations with other stakeholders work effectively. In addition to this new post, there is also a further post of Park Development Officer which will be responsible for the education and interpretation work and for forging links with the local community. It has always been our view that the ranger service is vital to the day-to-day working of the park and we are hoping these changes will help to bring about the improvements in the general experience of using the park that we have been pushing for for so long. Eleanor Johnson, the Interim Park Manager has been in post since January and the Development Officer post is being advertised now.

4.2 Animal welfare: Early in 2011 concerns were raised about the welfare of the deer during the works. Unfortunately one deer was attacked (probably by a dog) and a second deer died soon after, apparently from stress. There was a campaign to have the deer permanently removed from the park for their safety but the User Group concluded that most people did not want to lose the deer and that the focus should be on ensuring that they were safe in the short-term, that the new, extended enclosure was appropriately designed and equipped, and that the deer would be properly looked after. We worked with the Council to develop a detailed management plan for the care of the deer. The Council consulted with veterinary expert Peter Green who acted as an advisor during the works and continues to be closely involved in monitoring the deer. He is now content that the deer are being well cared for in a safe and suitable environment and two new fawns have been born. You can read his various reports on our website. We are pushing to ensure that similarly stringent regimes are set in place for the goats, chickens, birds and butterflies. Recent concerns about the birds have resulted in some changes being made to the aviaries and their care.

4.3 Dogs: As a result of repeated concerns raised with the User Group in relation to dogs (raised both by dog walkers and those without dogs) we carried out a consultation about dogs in the park. Whilst we recognise that the vast majority of dog walkers act responsibly in the park, we are also aware that some do not. A Hackney-wide code of responsible dog ownership has now been posted in notice-boards in the park and we are awaiting the outcome of a wider consultation about Dog Control Orders which may well result in some changes around the park. This is typical of the sort of issue where the user group sees its role as being to foster a spirit of respect, consideration and understanding between park users with different and sometimes conflicting interests. We are planning to organise an event for dog walkers in the near future.

4.4 House and Cafe: The restoration of the House has rightly been acclaimed as a stunning success and it has been genuinely thrilling to see its long lost interior reclaimed to such a high quality and with such sensitivity. We must now ensure that its use remains true to the two equally important design intentions: community access and commercial income. We are especially keen that the rooms in the house should be used by organisations working in our community which will be providing services to a wide range of local people and which are free for them to use. In particular we would like to see events and opportunities which relate to health and wellbeing and we are discussing how this might happen.

The Café was leased to Company of Cooks, who successfully run cafés in several other London parks. Unusually, the User Group was extensively involved in the short listing and interview process for awarding the lease. During this process Hackney Council remained committed to providing a quality service that would meet the needs of all park users. We agreed with the choice of Company of Cooks but shared the concerns of many users in its opening weeks that the café's menu was limited to a particular style (contemporary genteel?) and lacked the range of basic and reasonably priced items that had been promised. Reassuringly, our suggestions have been taken on board and the menu has now been revised. We fully accept that the new café should develop its service carefully and in response to its customers but we see the User Group as having an important role in representing the needs of *all* park users: potential as well as existing café customers. After all, the café was provided at public expense to provide a service for park users and local people as well to generate much-needed income for the house.

4.4 Tennis club: The User Group has always seen the tennis club and courts as a significant asset in the park. The club has wanted to install lighting on the tennis courts for a number of years in order to allow training for squads, club players and members of the public after dark in the winter. After a public consultation, the Council submitted a planning proposal for lighting but this was withdrawn after the planning department raised concerns about its impact in conservation terms. Some local residents had objected but there were significantly outnumbered by supporters. Simultaneously, the Council is planning to demolish the derelict house at 3 Queen Elizabeth's Walk and build a small club house on the site. The user group is generally supportive of these two initiatives and is keen for the tennis club to continue its work in the park which provides many local children and adults with the chance to take part in sporting activities in the park. The lighting plans as presented met our concerns about light seepage and impact on the environment. The club is now submitting revised plans for the lighting and we are working with them to help ensure their continued presence in the park.

5. The future: a new way of running the park

It is easy to think that the project in the park is now complete but it is important to bear in mind that the capital works are only the first phase of this project. At the heart of the HLF project is the need to increase access to the park from the widest possible range of local people and to improve the quality of their experience when they are here. We believe that Hackney Council is now very well-placed to take this forward through a wide range of new initiatives that will be getting off the ground soon. This will include much closer working with local schools and community groups to identify what they want from the park and develop the services they are offered.

We see the park and house as providing not only an opportunity for leisure activities but also having huge scope in the areas of general health and wellbeing, heritage and education and, of course, biodiversity. We want local people to have a greater sense of ownership and involvement within the park and we will be working with the Council to develop all these areas including a volunteering programme within the park.

6. Goodbyes and thank yous

During the course of the year we have sadly said goodbye to some key people. In particular we would like to say thank you to Park Manager, Mike Dixon, and Head of Green Spaces, John Wade. Mike attended our meetings regularly for several years reporting on what was going on in the park and helping to address user concerns. He had a particular passion for planting, resulting in many beautiful displays over the years. John Wade worked tirelessly with the User Group and was always responsive and keen to find solutions to problems, often taking up issues with the Council on our behalf. He played a crucial role in the earlier stages of the project and we greatly regret that he was not able to see it through to the end. We wish them both well in the future.

Thanks, as always, are due to the rangers and gardeners who have worked hard for the park despite the disruptions of the last two years. It is a real credit to them that most of the park remained vibrant and usable during the works. Special thanks are also due to Eleanor Johnson who has recently been promoted from the post of Park Development Officer to Interim Park Manager. Her patience, energy and vision throughout the last year have been a huge asset to the project and we have great faith in her ability to take the park forward in her new role. Thanks also to the final and most recent project manager Jon Markovic who kept up the momentum in the final stages of the project and to the GLL team in the house, especially Emma Finch and Ollie Brennan who got the house off to a great start as the best new venue in Stoke Newington, dealing with everything from broken toilet seats to wedding planning. Thanks also to the St Mary's Church for providing us with a place to meet whilst the house was out of use and to Company of Cooks for providing teas and coffees for our latest meetings.

Finally thanks must go to all the User Group officers who have contributed in different ways over the last year: Ken Worpole our Honorary President for his support with walks and tours and for his wise advice to the new Chair, Richard Logan for his support as Vice Chair, Anna Gualtieri our Treasurer, Matt Jeary, our minutes secretary and to Isabelle Gore who runs our website and carried out a full overhaul of the site this year incorporating lots of new photographs and information. We have a number of special interest reps who have also played an important role in the Group and to whom thanks are also due: dog walker rep, Mark Forsyth; disability and access reps, Anthony Larvin and Carol Lynn Scott; reps for children and families, Lisa Gormley; the skatepark reps and older people's rep Sylvia Anderson. Thanks also to Yvonne Hill for occasionally taking our minutes and being a very thorough proof reader and to Shonagh Rae who designed the poster for our park walks. Most of all I would like to thank John Hudson, our Secretary, who has spent many hours attending meetings with Council officers, Councillors and with the cafe providers and who has been keenly committed to the detail of the project and to the interests of park users throughout this year.

Caroline Millar, Chair

3 March 2012