

## London's Parks and Squares

A talk to The Eltham Society by Christopher Rudd  
Thursday 1st November 2007

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Christopher Rudd spoke about 'London Parks and Squares' and started with two very familiar local areas. First, he covered Blackheath and told of its historic associations with Wat Tyler (the Peasant's Revolt); with John Wesley's religious campaigns; and with golf, as the birthplace of the world's oldest golf-club (now situated in Eltham). Secondly, he spoke of beautiful Greenwich Park, so tranquil in the midst of noise and bustle, with its Roman connections, its 1,000 years old hollow tree (now collapsed but once used as a constabulary lock-up); plus the General Wolfe statue presented by the Government of Quebec, and the spectacular view of the River Thames. And in the same scenic and historic locality lie Inigo Jones' Queen's House, the Maritime Museum, the old Greenwich Observatory and the Naval College – such a concentration of history and beauty in one corner of our borough.

A much more recent open space in SE London is Burgess Park, an old industrial area now largely grassed and with a newly created lake where the Surrey Commercial Canal once stagnated. Southwark (older than London) has an excellent park where in the past many illicit activities flourished including bear-baiting. On the South Bank of the Thames the resurrected Globe Theatre provides an excellent reminder of the Shakespearean era.

Leaving South London, Christopher presented a cavalcade of the capital's breathing spaces; the Tower of London, whose moat was once the source of many deadly diseases but is now grassed; Trinity Gardens with the impressive memorial to all the dead of the Merchant Navy; Old Street's Sunday flower market with an East-end atmosphere enlivened by street musicians and many little cafes; Covent Garden, now no longer a vegetable market but with stalls selling a wide range of goods plus regular open-air entertainments and of course the refurbished Transport Museum as well as the Opera House. A special London jewel near St Paul's Cathedral is Postman's Park a small secluded space with its walls covered in plaques poignantly commemorating heroic acts of self-sacrifice by ordinary people, including children.

Further flung London spaces covered were Highgate Cemetery with plenty to see, apart from Karl Marx; Kenwood House's vast grounds and concert venue; Little Venice with canal boats, marionette theatre and art gallery; Hampstead Heath and its wonderful vista of London; plus the rich, exotic (and erotic) joys of Soho.

The major London Parks are already well known to most of us but Christopher pointed out that many of them are only available today because of the selfishness of past English monarchs who had 'acquired' and enclosed them for their own personal pleasure. The talk was illustrated by a wonderful selection of the speaker's own photographs, apropos of which he told us of his contribution to the public show of grief in St James' Park after the death of Princess Diana. As a professional cameraman he had his own stepladder to enable him to get the best possible view of the spectacular display of flowers but each time he descended to the ground members of the public immediately climbed his ladder with their cameras. Christopher therefore ascended again and the crowd handed their cameras to him one at a time to take pictures for them – this task kept him busy for more than eight hours.

Christopher's talk was inevitably brought to an end by the old enemy, Time; while he was still in full throttle – but he is due to address the Eltham Society again before long.

Les Murrell