

# Writers and Southwark Park

by Pat Kingwell



It is a pleasure to make a contribution to the Bermondsey and Beyond Literary Festival. Looking back, we can see how writers played their part in the long story of the borough's oldest park. This article will mention the written word in various forms, such as memorials, letters, petitions, official reports, newspaper articles, non-fiction and creative works.

## 1856-1869

The park is so familiar to us now that it is hard to imagine it not existing, but that was the case until 1869, when it first opened to the public. The campaign to secure our local “green lung” started in earnest in April 1856, and was officially begun by the written word.



A memorial was presented to the Bermondsey Vestry, signed by over 250 of the principal inhabitants of the parish. The memorial was a very formal and respectful way of addressing an authority – in this case the local vestry, which was back then a limited type of local government. A statement of facts was usually accompanied by a petition or remonstrance. The message was clear enough – we live in an area with public health challenges and a park will help us meet them. Other places have a park, so why not us? Also, we don't want to see too many houses built on the land in our area, unless they are for those working in the locality. Read it in the words of 1856.

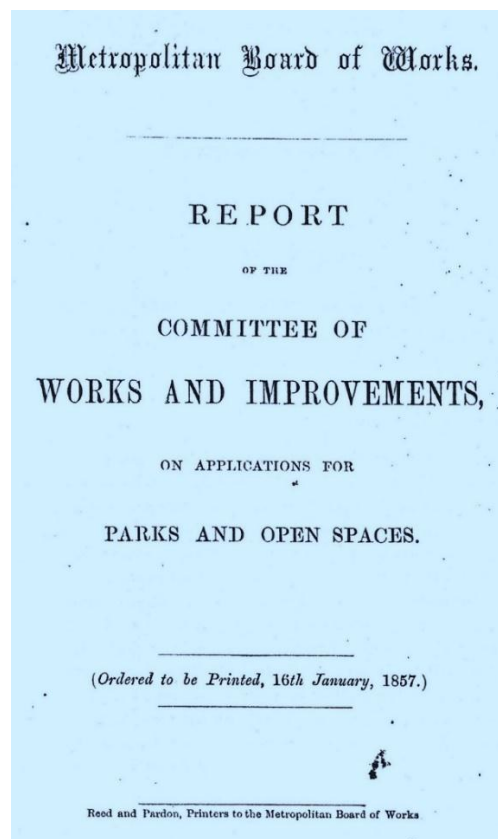
*“To the Vestry of Bermondsey. We, the undersigned, being anxious and desirous for the improvement of the parish of Bermondsey, and the preservation of the public health, beg to call your attention to the necessity that exists for obtaining for this parish the advantages that are enjoyed in other districts.*

*It is well known that occasional epidemics have from time to time visited Bermondsey with greater severity than any other parish, entailing in addition to the sufferings of the poor an increase in the rates; that we attribute this greater severity in some measure to the unwholesomeness of the water used for*

*domestic purposes - the proximity of the parish to the Thames, the laborious occupation of the workmen, and the absence of any public walks or park. That since the last epidemic, unwholesome water has been supplied, and it is hoped before long the Thames will be purified; that in nearly every other district around the metropolis grounds have been laid out for squares, public walks or parks; that there is in this parish at the present time a considerable open space used for market gardens, which might be obtained and converted into a park, but which otherwise in the course of a few years will be covered in houses and let to persons not engaged in the legitimate trades of this parish.*

*That this parish, being essentially a manufacturing one, it is not desirable to increase the number of dwelling-houses except for the accommodation of workmen and persons engaged in such trades.*

*That we request you to take such steps as you may deem advisable for the purpose of providing the public with a park or public walks in this parish.”*



Who were the memorialists and petitioners? The records remain elusive on this point so we can't say with any certainty. We do know that their words worked, for the recently established Metropolitan Board of Works agreed to look into the request. In January 1857 the Board of Works published a vital document, the



report of the Works and Improvements Committee, which officially recommended a park should be built. That rather innocuous looking item, just eight pages long, got us to where we are today, but not straightforwardly.

Although the report backed the idea of a park, it did not say exactly where in South London it should be. This was because there were two contending plans from the vestries of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe, each with their powerful supporters and parochial interests. The former plan was the larger of the two and more expensive. The Board of Works hoped for a compromise proposal, but that did not happen. Instead, between July and November 1857 several large public gatherings were held at which passionate speeches were made for both plans.

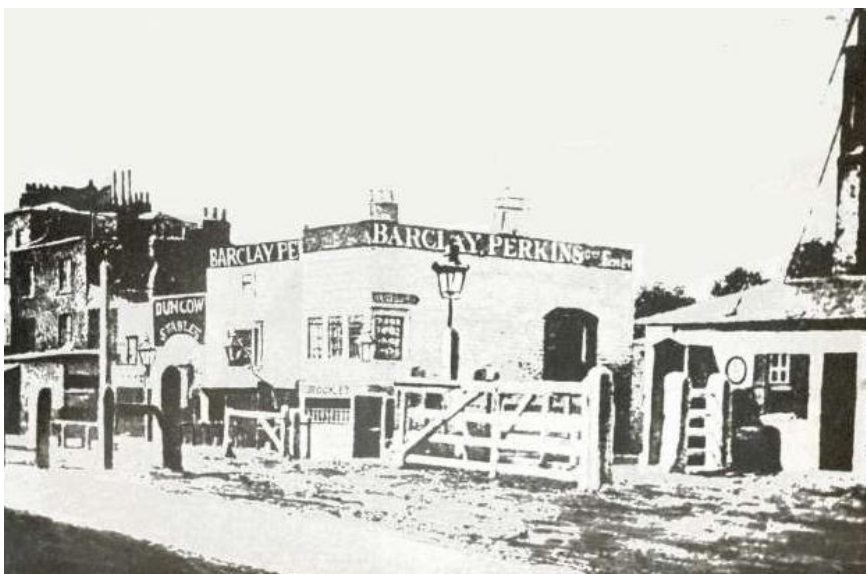


The newspapers of the day covered the meetings in great detail. Thanks to those unattributed writers we know of the eventful evening of 6 July 1857, when the Dun Cow Tavern, Old Kent Road, was so packed that Admiral Sir Charles Napier, one of the local Members of Parliament, had to climb through a window to make his speech. John Locke, his fellow had arrived earlier, and avoided that inconvenience.



Admiral Sir Charles Napier M.P. (1786-1860)

The campaign for the Bermondsey plan reached a high point in October 1857 when the South Eastern Park Association presented a petition to the Board of Works signed by over 6,000 people. However, the Board opted for the smaller and cheaper Rotherhithe plan, locating the park more or less where it is today. The decision provoked a good deal of outrage. On 12 November 1857 a public meeting held in the Green Man Tavern, Old Kent Road, was described by the contemporary press as *“one of the most stormy and disorderly ones we ever witnessed, and will not soon be forgotten by those present.”* Emotions ran high. Accusations of personal duplicity were traded across the floor. The Board of Works was lambasted for *“its great mistake”* in choosing Rotherhithe as the site for the park. The meeting descended into *“indescribable uproar.”*



The Green Man 1865



The Board of Works, uncomfortable with the controversy, and increasingly preoccupied by London's drainage needs, postponed implementation of the park until further notice.

From 1858 until 1863 Southwark Park was virtually in limbo. Then the local vestries reignited the dormant campaign. Learning the lessons of disunity which was so damaging in 1857, the vestries conferred and agreed to push once more for the Rotherhithe location. Harmonious letters and memorials were sent to the Board of Works, usually penned by the vestry clerks. There seems to have been no more disputatious public meetings.

In November 1863 another form of words, a notice, was issued by the Board stating its intention to apply to Parliament for powers to create the park.

from Baslow, at or near to a certain house in Baslow, called the New Buildings, through Wetlands Lane by Bubnell to Hassop, to or near to the Newburgh Arms Public House.

(3) The following portions of the road from the turnpike road at or near to the inn known as Newhaven House, to the turnpike road near Cradleford Bridge, namely, so much thereof as leads from Newhaven House aforesaid through Conkbury to the junction of the said road with the highway, called Butts Lane, leading to Bakewell.

The part thereof from near a house known by the sign of the Rodney, and proceeding along a road called the Wheat Bridge Road, to where the said road joins the main road at the end of Ormond Terrace, in the township of Newbold.

The part thereof from the Chain Bar, on the east side of a highway called Pothouse Lane, in the township of Newbold, to the boundary of the townships of Newbold and Chesterfield, at a place called Salter-Gate, in Chesterfield.

And lastly, the portion thereof commencing at a house in Stoney Middleton, occupied by John Laneske, and terminating at a house occupied by Joseph Walker, and situate in the parish of Eyan.

To declare the said portions of road so to be abandoned to be public highways, and to throw the expense of their repair and maintenance upon the several parishes and townships in which they are respectively situate.

To alter the tolls authorised by the before-mentioned Act passed in the 52nd year of the reign of King George the Third, and the application of the tolls, and to levy other tolls, and to confer, vary, and extinguish exemptions therefrom.

To make such arrangements as may be deemed expedient as to the mortgages debts now due and owing upon the credit of the tolls, and the payment of the principal and interest of such debts. To alter the rate of interest now payable, and to fix the proportion of tolls to be hereafter applied in payment of the said principal and interest, and to make other provision with reference thereto, and with respect to the liquidation of any other charges and liabilities affecting the said roads, and with respect to the maintenance of such parts thereof as will still continue turnpike.

To vary and extinguish all existing rights, interests, and privileges which would interfere with any of the objects of the Bill.

And notice is hereby given, that printed copies of the proposed Bill will be deposited in the Private Bill Office of the House of Commons on or before the 23rd day of December next.

Dated this 7th day of November, 1863.

(By order),

Thomas Mander, Bakewell, Clerk to the Trustees of the said road.

Dyson and Co., 24, Parliament-street, Parliamentary Agents.

Southwark Park.

Powers to Metropolitan Board of Works to provide Public Park for the South-eastern Districts of the Metropolis; Provisions for Regulation, &c.

NOTICE is hereby given, that application is intended to be made to Parliament, in the ensuing session, for leave to bring in a Bill to confer upon the Metropolitan Board of Works (in this notice referred to as the Board) the following powers, or any of them, that is to say:—

To form and maintain a public park in the south-eastern districts of the metropolis, and for

the purpose thereof to take compulsorily and use certain lands, houses, and property in the parish St. Mary, Rotherhithe, in the county of Surrey, situate as follows:—Certain lands, containing about 60 acres, or thereabouts, being bounded on or towards the north by a road called Union-road, and Paradise-row on or towards the east, partly by the gardens belonging to the Workhouse of St. Mary, Rotherhithe, and by lands and property adjoining the Deptford Lower-road, and partly also by the said Deptford Lower-road, on or towards the west by a road called Jamaica-level, and property adjacent thereto, and by Messrs. Morgan's patent rope factory, and on or towards the south by a road called the Rotherhithe Now-road, and Messrs. Porter's patent rope works, which lands belong or are reputed to belong to Sir William Gomm, Bart., and others, and are in the occupation of Samuel Branden, Thomas Cook, and others, and will be more particularly defined upon the plans hereinafter mentioned.

To purchase by compulsion the lands, houses, and property required for the purposes of the said bill.

To stop up and appropriate any streets, roads, footpaths, or ways, which traverse the said lands, and to divert or alter any public roads, footpaths, or rights of ways and sewers, drains, watercourses, or pipes, and to make new roads or ways, and to enclose, drain, lay-out, and plant the said park, and to build lodges and other buildings, and to sell, lease, or appropriate, for building or any other purposes, any land to be acquired under the said Act and not required for the purposes of the park, and to appoint committees and officers, and do all such works, and exercise all such powers as may be incidental or accessory to the objects before mentioned.

To authorize the Board to make by-laws for regulating the use of the park, and for the preventing damage, nuisances, annoyances, and obstructions therein.

To exempt the park and the buildings thereon, and the Board in respect thereof, from all local and parochial rates and assessments.

To enable the Board to charge the expense of forming and maintaining such park upon the rates, sums of money, and funds belonging to, or which can be raised or levied by the Board by virtue of the Acts relating to the local management of the metropolis, and to raise money by mortgage, bond, annuities, or otherwise, and to authorize the application of any such rates, sums of money, or funds to all or any of the purposes of the Bill.

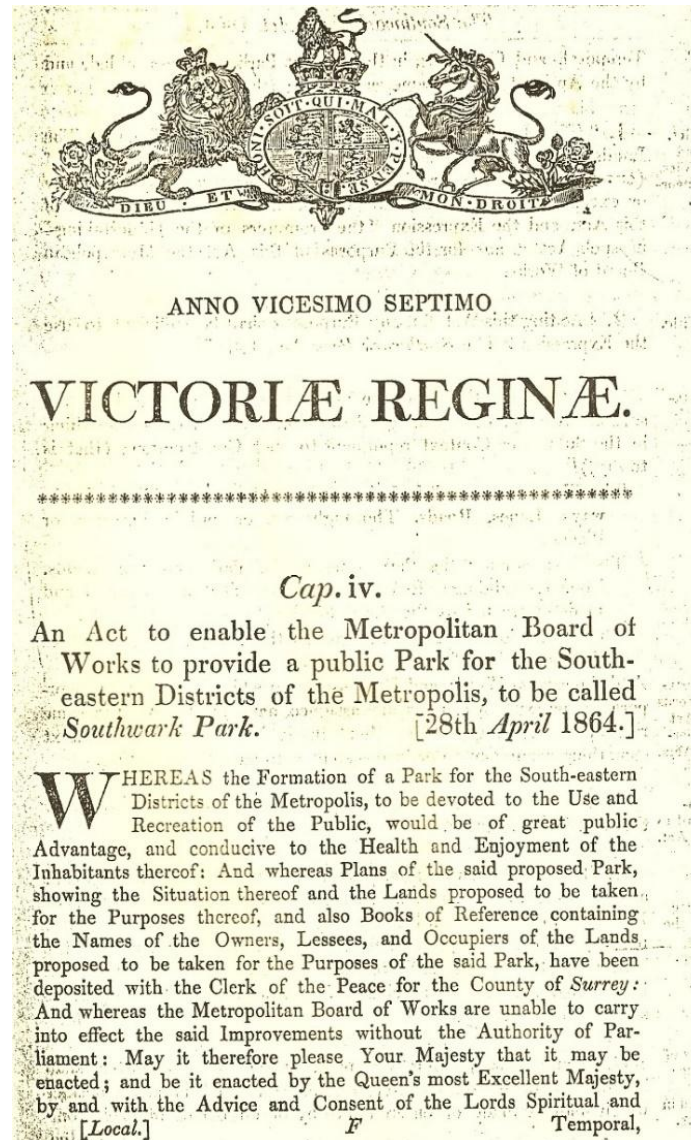
To amend some of the powers and provisions of the Metropolitan Management Act, 1855, the Metropolitan Management Amendment Act, 1856, and the Metropolitan Management Amendment Act, 1862, and any other Acts which relate to the objects of the Bill.

To incorporate with the Bill all or some of the provisions of "The Lands Clauses Consolidation Act, 1845," and "The Lands Clauses Consolidation Acts Amendment Act, 1860."

To vary or extinguish all rights and privileges which would interfere with the objects of the Bill, and confer other rights, powers, and privileges.

Plans, showing the situation of the lands to be taken compulsorily under the powers of the Bill, with a book of reference to those plans, containing the names of the actual or reputed owners, and lessees and occupiers of the lands and houses to be taken, and a copy of this notice, as published in the London Gazette, will, on or before the 30th day of November instant, be deposited with the Clerk of the Peace for the county of Surrey, at his office, in North-street, Lambeth, and a copy of the said plans and book of reference, with a copy of this

On 28 April 1864 the Southwark Park Act was passed. Its 42 clauses and accompanying schedules may not amount to the most beguiling set of words ever written about the park, but they are surely the most significant.



Putting the words of the Act into force was easier said than done. A combination of complicated land and lease purchases; dilatory design and a sleepy works programme, meant five years passed before the park was completed. During that time the local vestries became frustrated at the slow rate of progress, and a number of letters of complaint, memorials and deputations were sent to the Board of Works. The local press joined in too, as evidenced by this sarcastic comment published in the South London Press in November 1866: "The mythical park for Southwark came up for conversation at the Metropolitan



*Board of Works yesterday. The money having been paid for the ground, it is devoted to growing Brussels sprouts, etc., for unknown officials, pending their leisure to design gravel walks on paper and draw specifications for the approved lodges. As only a year has been thus wasted, and £3,300 of the public money expended, the inhabitants of Southwark may hope to see a man and a barrow A.D. 1876, prior to another vote being asked for, as the money now in hand will be paid away that time in interest for the present loan."*

In February 1868 the South London Journal published a letter about the need for the Chairman of the Board, a former Southwark representative, to do something about the delay:

### **SOUTHWARK-PARK.**

**TO THE EDITOR.**

**SIR,**—The old adage that large bodies move but slowly was never more exemplified than in this case. The great Leviathan, the Metropolitan Board of Works, obtained the Act in Session 1863 4, and received the Royal assent on 28th April in the latter year. They have borrowed £80,000 to purchase and make the same at 4½ per cent., entailing on the ratepayers of the metropolis for interest alone an outlay of £3,825 per annum, and yet the same is not yet open for the use of the public, notwithstanding the exertions of Mr. Legg, Mr. Collinson, Mr. Turner, Mr. Harris, and other Surrey representatives at that Board. Can you, Mr. Editor, inform the inhabitants of Southwark when they may expect to disport themselves therein. The way it is proceeding to completion will entail another £12,000 for interest in addition to that already lost, and if some effort be not made by the locality to bring that unwieldy Board to their senses in such matters the present generation will pass away without it seeing the flowers and shrubs so long promised to be placed there. By-the-by, Mr. Editor, don't you think after the first purchase is made the matter of planting and laying out of the same would be quicker and better done by a small committee than by the whole Board, who, in the multiplicity of other duties have not time to devote to that which would be a source of health and recreation to half a million of inhabitants at the least. Pray use your powerful influence to infuse life and spirit into the affair, and call upon the Southwarkians to instil some energy into King Thwaites and his subordinates to bring this matter to an early completion. Had John Thwaites remained in Southwark, and not been removed westward among the aristocracy, it is my opinion he would not have forgotten his old associates, nor would the delay I complain of occurred.

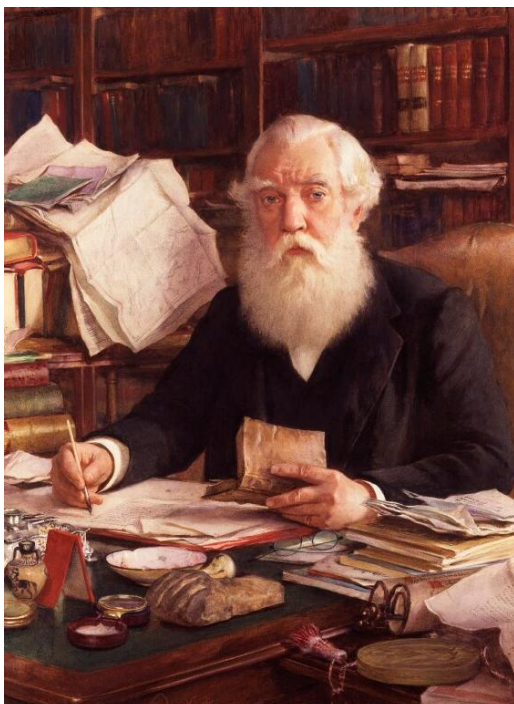
**A SOUTHWARK RATEPAYER.**

Jan. 26th, 1868.





When Southwark Park was eventually opened on 19 June 1869, an esteemed archaeologist and historian made a speech in the rain. Austen Henry Layard, by then a local M.P., said: *“We now see the park at its worst. But the time will come, when our children are become men and women, that these trees which have been planted today will have grown to maturity and this park will then be a glory to Southwark.”* How right he was.



Austen Henry Layard M.P. (1813-1894)

## Some Letters

Over the course of its very long history many letters of complaint, concern and sometimes praise, were published about the park in the newspapers. Here are a few examples from the 1890s that were published in the Southwark Recorder.

*“Now that the summer is approaching it may not be out of place to call attention to an annoyance that visitors to Southwark Park are subjected to every Sunday. On one side of the lake about four or five seats are taken possession of by a number of youths who insult and annoy persons as they are walking around that portion of the grounds. This is very unpleasant, especially to ladies, as the language used by these roughs is in many cases disgusting. There seems to be a regular gang as the same faces may be seen Sunday after Sunday. Surely the London County Council would take steps to suppress this state of affairs if they knew of the existence of such an abuse. Yours Cavalry.” (Southwark Recorder 25 March 1893)*



*“I wish to call attention to a grievance of which all football players in Southwark Park have to complain. The space there is limited - that cannot be helped - but it is further curtailed by the discourteous and ungenerous conduct of the onlookers, who crowd almost into the centre of the field, and*



*consequently utterly ruin the game as far as the players are concerned. On Saturday last this was the case, and not a single officer was there to prevent the heedless and ungenerous crowd spoiling the game. This, I think, should not be. The London County Council pay men to look after the parks. The footballers monopolise the ground but for one hour and a half during the whole week, and should in all fairness be allowed the full space. It seems that the onlookers have not the good sense to keep off the ground so keepers should be told off for that duty. Yours, Krycke.” (Southwark Recorder 28 October 1893)*



*“Sir, I beg to bring before your notice a most disgraceful incident which happened in Southwark Park last Sunday. Upon that portion of the park reserved for public speaking for several Sunday afternoons past a gentleman has been lecturing upon ‘Socialism,’ giving his reasons why it could not be a success. As a rule, he is subjected to rather rough treatment at the hands of some of his audience, both criticism and abuse being thrown at his head, but last Sunday afternoon some of his audience showed their disapproval of what he*



*had said in a rather demonstrative and exceedingly ungentlemanly manner by smashing his hat and tearing his coat from top to bottom behind. Those who participated in this disgraceful conduct must have been either intoxicated or had very defective brains, for no man would lower himself to such a degree as to assault a public speaker if that speaker did him no injury whatever...The people crowded around the speaker to such an extent that one might have thought that free soup tickets were being given away; during the whole of this time two policemen (or ornaments) were standing by and never troubled to interfere or keep the audience in proper order. What use are policemen in our park if they cannot prevent open blackguardism? Walter Thurston.” (Southwark Recorder 14 July 1894)*



*“Having occasion to walk through the park a few days since, in company with a friend, we paid a visit to the children’s gymnasium and were delighted to witness the healthy way in which the children were enjoying themselves. We were very greatly surprised to see with what evident delight the sandpit is*

*appreciated by the youngsters, many of whom have never seen the sand by the seashore. Much was said when the pit was placed in our beautiful park, and many remarks of a derogatory character were made as to its use. After what I saw I am convinced that if a larger one could be secured it would be a boon to the children of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe. It seems to me that Mr. Pomeroy and Dr. Cooper, with their colleagues on the Council, have proved once more that they are alive to the needs of London's children. Apologising for troubling you, and hoping that, if it is possible, a larger sandpit may very soon be secured. George R. Hood, of The Sailor's Rest, Rotherhithe." (Southwark Recorder 16 December 1899)*

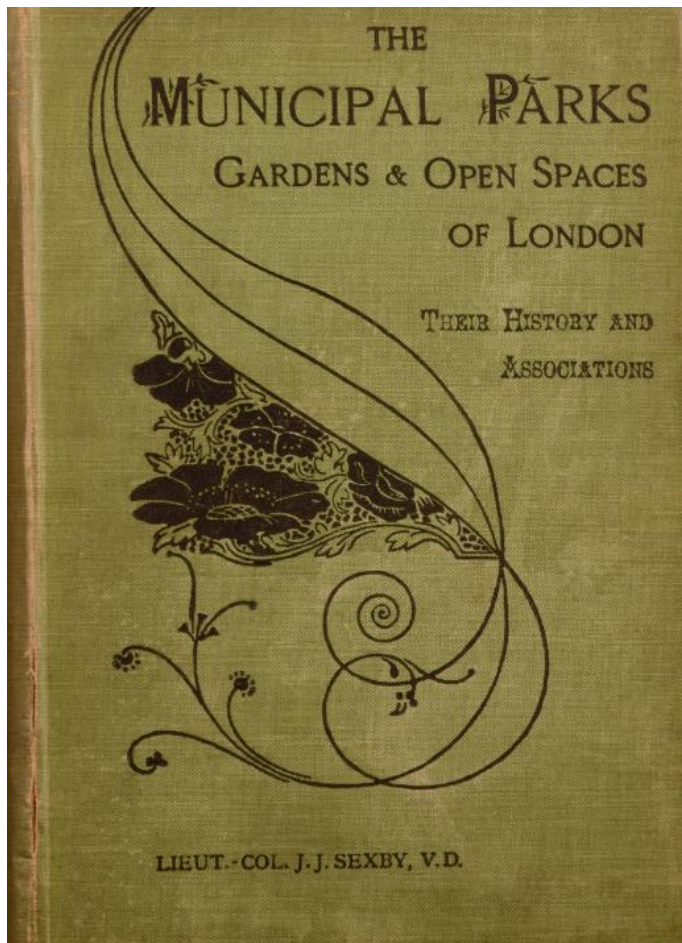


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## Southwark Park In Non-Fiction

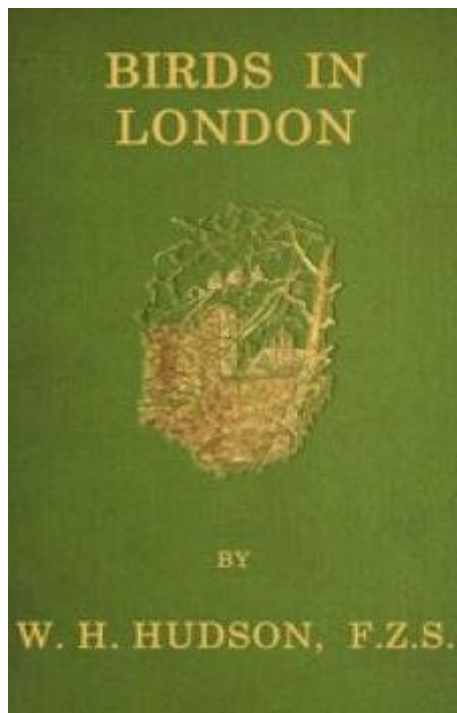
Although the park is one of the oldest in the UK, it has received rather limited coverage in history, reference and guide books. In his book *The Municipal Parks, Gardens and Open Spaces of London* (1898), John James Sexby (1847-1924), the Chief Officer for Parks for the London County Council, did provide a brief background, but he focused far more on the story of the wider neighbourhood rather than the park.



In the same year W. H. Hudson (1841-1922) in his *Birds in London* gave a better picture. The naturalist wrote of the park: “How great the craving for a breath of fresh air and the sight of green grass must be in such a district, when we find that this comparatively small space has been visited on one day by upwards of 100,000 persons! An almost incredible number when we consider that less than half the space contained in the park is available for the people to walk on, the rest being taken up by ornamental water, gardens, shrubberies, enclosures for cricket etc. The ground itself is badly shaped, being a long narrow strip, with conspicuous houses on either hand which wall and shut you in... Even with a space of fifty to sixty acres, if it be of a proper shape, and the surrounding houses not too high to be hidden by trees, this effect of country-like



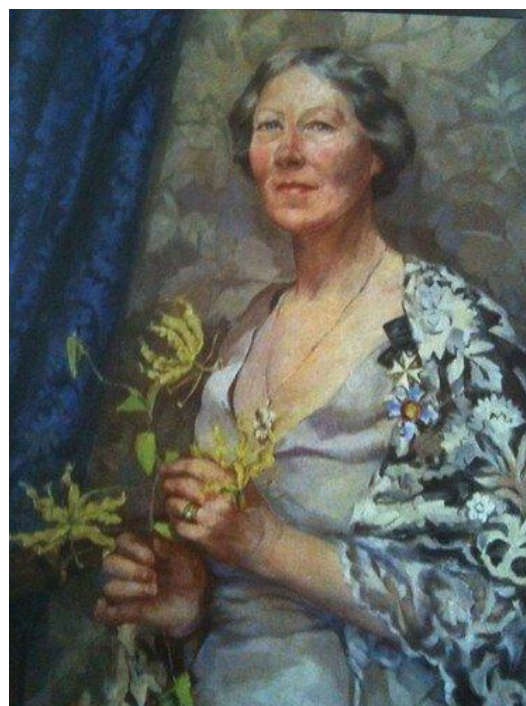
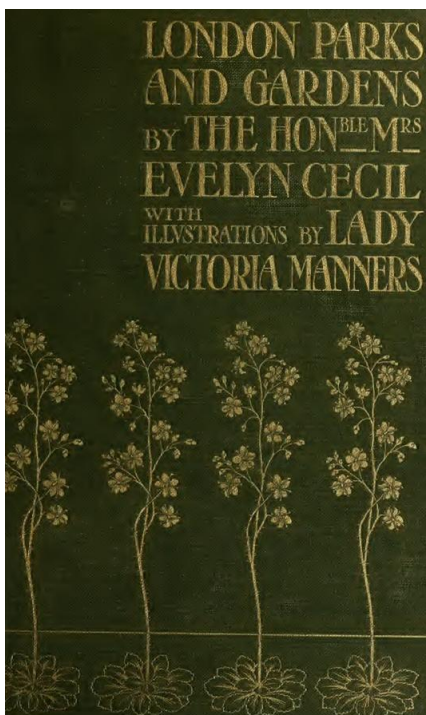
openness and distance, which gives to a London park its greatest charm and value, can be secured. Again, this being a crowded industrial district full of 'works,' the atmosphere is laden with smoke, and everything that meets the eye, even the leaves and grass, is begrimed with soot. Yet in spite of all these drawbacks Southwark Park is attractive; you admire it as you would a very dirty child with a pretty face. The trees and shrubs have grown well, and there is a lake and an island, and ornamental waterfowl. The wild bird life is composed of a multitude of sparrows, and a very few blackbirds and thrushes. It is interesting to know that these two species did not settle themselves, but were introduced by a former superintendent, and have continued to breed for years."

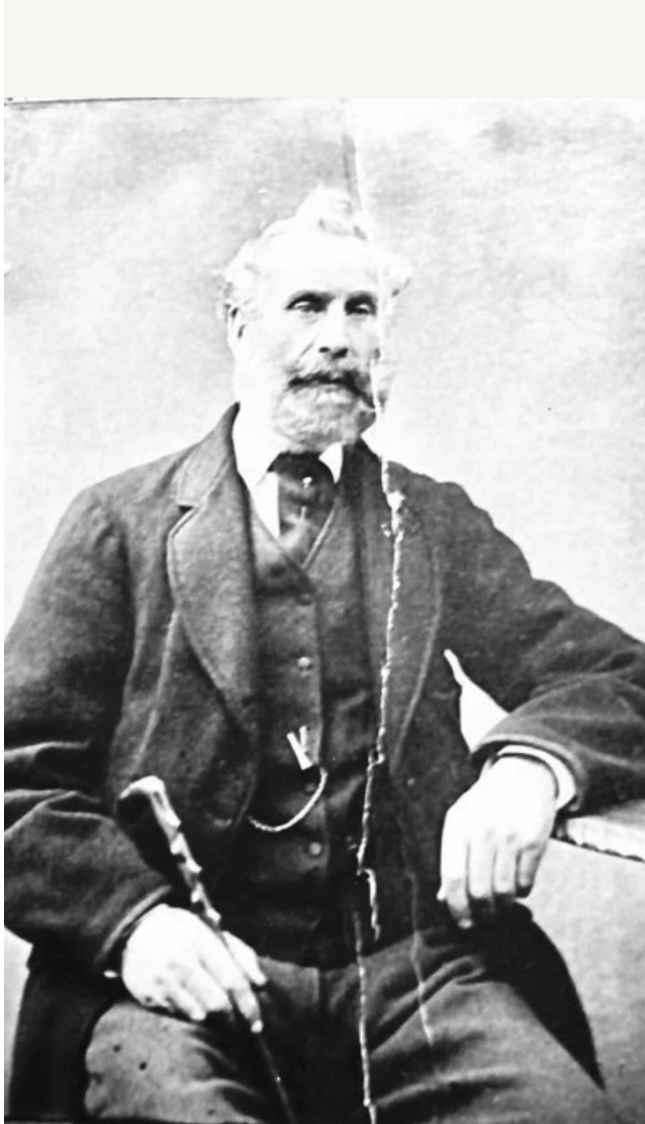


In 1902 local historian R. W. Bowers (1849-1919) in *Sketches of Southwark Old and New* described the park: "It is tastefully laid out with gravelled walks, shrubberies and flower beds, together with an ornamental lake and cricket ground. The two mounds of earth on the western side were formed out of the land excavated from the riverbed when the Thames Tunnel was in process of construction."

In 1907 Alicia Amherst (1865-1941), "Citizen and Gardener of London", writing under the pen name Mrs. Evelyn Cecil, wrote of the park in her book *London Parks and Gardens*: "The Park is a gloomy enough place when compared with the more distant or West End Parks, but a perfect paradise in this crowded district. Between its creation in 1864 and its completion in 1869, a great reformation was worked in the district. Close to the docks, and intersected by streams and canals, with the poorest kind of rickety houses so vividly

described by Dickens in "Oliver Twist," the surroundings were among the most dismal imaginable. The actual site of the park was partly market gardens, which had for long been established in this locality owing to the fertility of the alluvial soil. Grapes were grown here for wine with success in the first half of the eighteenth century, when there was a revival in grape-growing, and vineyards were planted at Hoxton and elsewhere. Over 100 gallons of wine were made in a year in Rotherhithe. Some of the earth excavated from the Thames Tunnel was put on the ground covered by the park before the laying out commenced. When the land, 65 acres, was bought, only 45 were to be kept for the park, and the rest were reserved for building. But when the day of building arrived there was such an outcry that the whole plan was remodelled, the drives which encircled it done away with, and tar-paved paths substituted, only one driving road crossing it being left, and the ponds added. It is more the want of design, than any special style, that is conspicuous, and a good deal more could have been done to make the Park less gloomy. An avenue is growing up, but it will never have the charming effect of the one across Battersea, as the line is neither straight nor a definite curve. The wild fowl on the pond are such an attraction, that perhaps it may be that the wire netting and asphalt edges they apparently require are not drawbacks, but they are not beautiful. The gateway into the park, near Deptford Station, has rather the grim look of a prison, and yet, with the forest of masts behind, all it requires is a climbing plant or two to make a picture."



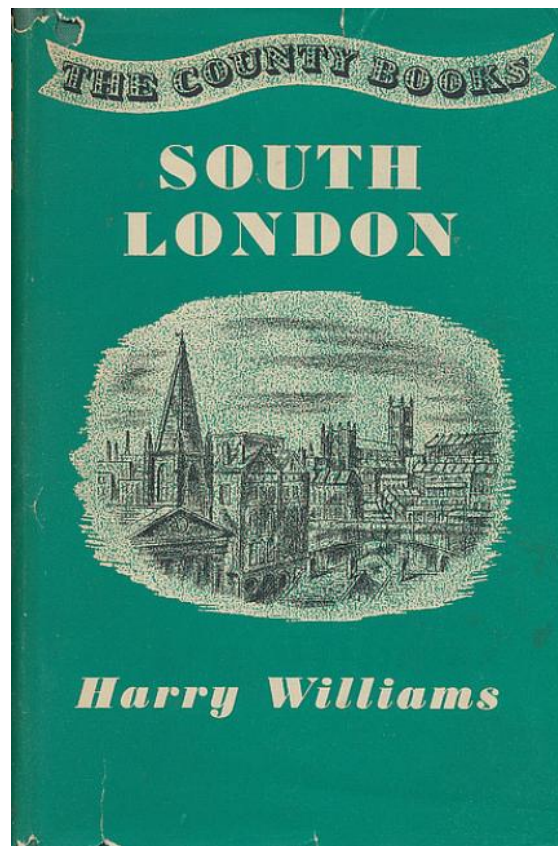


A. D. Webster

In 1920 the antiquary Angus Duncan Webster (1855-1931) wrote in his book, *London Trees*: “There are few trees of special importance in this valuable open space, the plane and poplar, particularly the former, being planted to the seclusion of most other kinds. That the smoky, dusty and chemically impure atmosphere tells heavily on vegetation of every description is well known, and for this reason even the too freely used plane and poplar are precious and doubly valuable. Both succeed amazingly in this confined South-Eastern district of the great Metropolis. The ailanthus also grows rapidly, and looks the picture of health, while recently planted lime trees show that for a time at least, they can battle successfully with the impurest of London atmospheres. The White Beam tree and other species of *Pyrus* likewise do well, as do the cockspur and Paul’s Crimson thorns. A few young specimens of the catalpa in good condition were noticed, as also the sumach, Judas Tree and laburnums.”

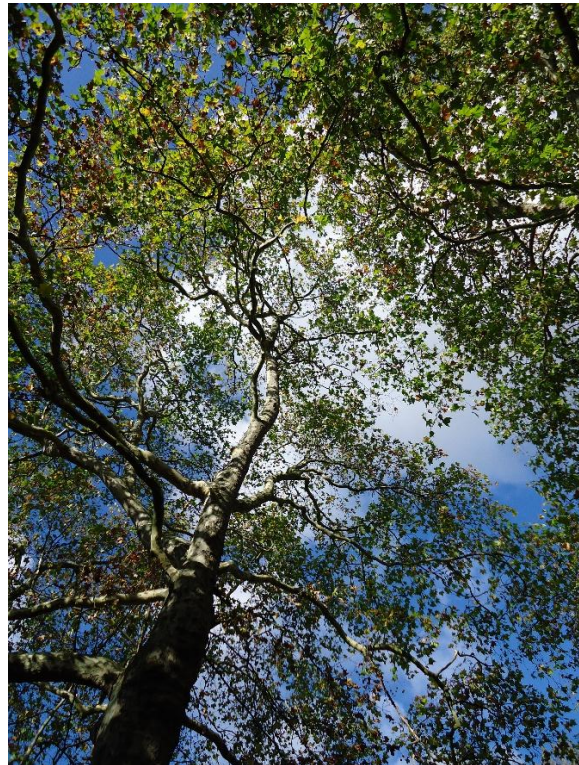
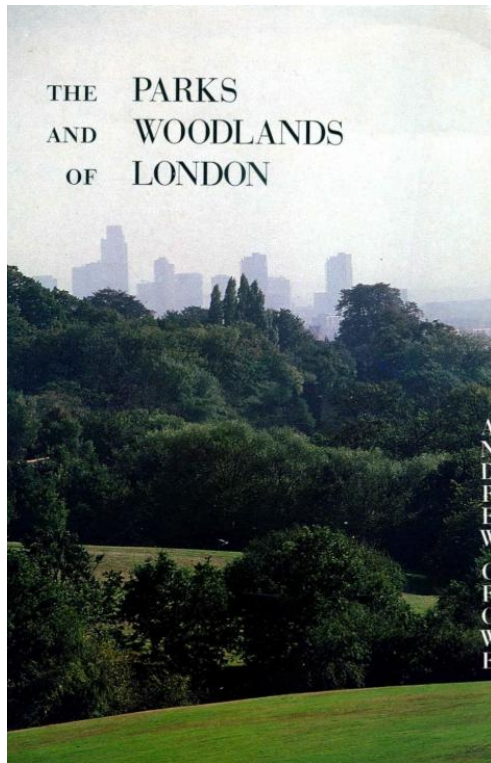


In 1949 Harry Williams' excellent *South London* was published. On Bermondsey he wrote: "There are fifty miles of roads in the borough, and almost every inch of them, with the exception of Southwark Park, are packed with houses and shops – one hundred miles of house and shop fronts, almost entirely devoid of any glimpse of beauty or dignity. It is a terrible thought...Bermondsey, for all its unenviable squalor, is lucky in one particular, its extensive and beautiful park. It is a place of stillness and peace – an almost unbelievable peace. The tall trees give it dignity and a curious impression of size out of all proportion to its true area of sixty-three acres...Formal it is, but of great dignity, and in the quiet of the evening when, as sometimes (but rarely) occurs, the inhabitants of the surrounding ant-heap are mysteriously occupied elsewhere, the colour of the sky through the branches of the trees, the gentle half-tones of nature, aided perhaps by a bank of cloud to limn them with a white background – these things banish into insignificance the vulgarity of the miserable town outside its boundaries. The nostalgic sound of ships hooters from the docks, the tremendous but distant hum of the Metropolitan life, the call of a nesting bird, all these speak in the stillness of the beauty that man cannot subjugate."



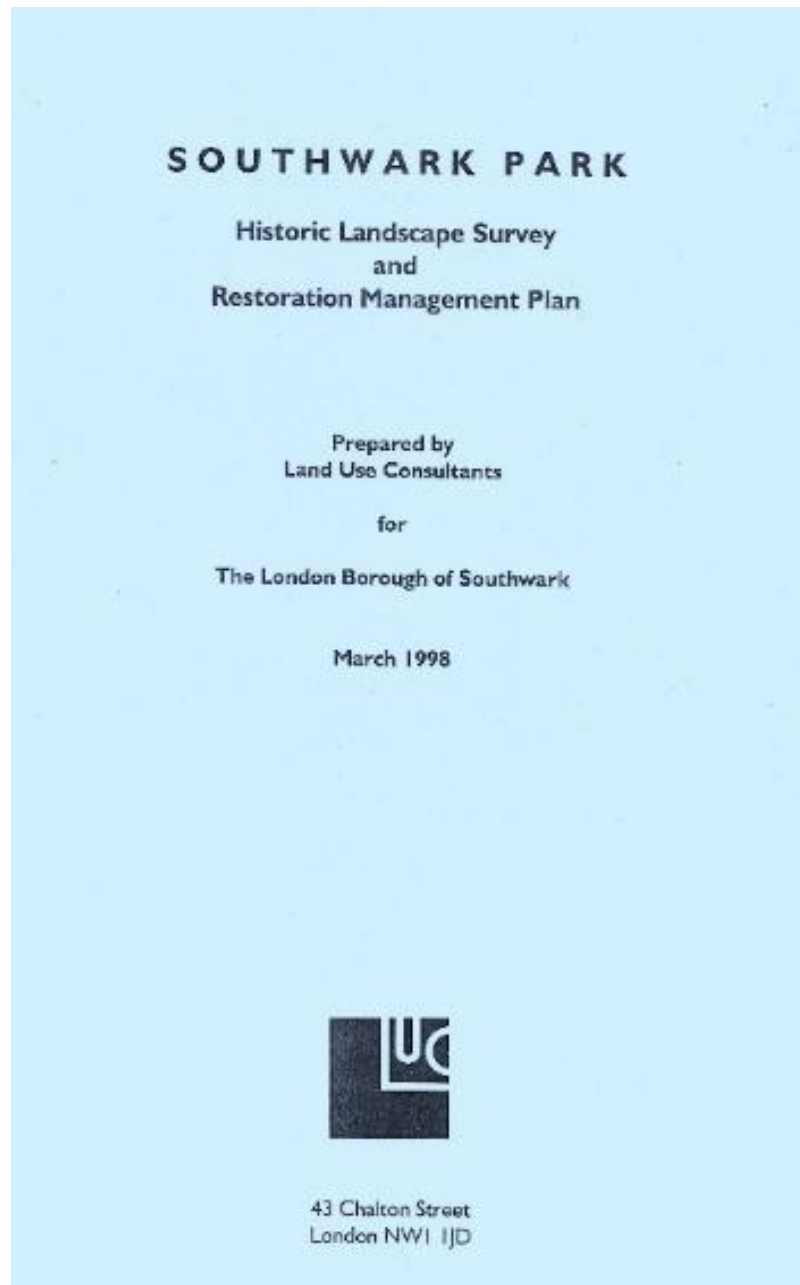
In 1987, in his book *The Parks and Woodlands of London*, Andrew Crowe commented: "Southwark Park's focal features are its bowling green and ornamental lake with semi-circular rose garden. Here, arching round the rose

beds, is a row of well-used wooden benches pleasantly sheltered from the wind, catching the southern sun. At the centre of the garden are the remains of an old sun dial, usually surrounded by dozens of expectant pigeons...In the northern end of the park is that hallmark of all the old London parks: mature avenues of London plane trees. Here and there in the spring, there are small clumps of purple and yellow crocuses, a few primroses and later daffodils.”



The years following Crowe’s book saw a sad deterioration in the park. By the 1990s Bermondsey and Rotherhithe were far different places than in 1869. The process of urbanisation that was beginning in mid-Victorian times was complete. Southwark Park, once the site of market gardens, was by now the only large green space left in a densely crowded area. Over the years the park had matured from the simple place where people promenaded, into a typical twentieth century recreational facility, catering for a variety of sports, children’s play, summer entertainments, and even an art gallery. However, time had not always been kind, and by the mid-1990s the park was under-funded, neglected and not the safest place to visit. At that low point important words were spoken by the local community. Reminiscent of the 1850s, passionate meetings were held in late 1995 and early 1996. The many who attended called on Southwark Council to act. The Friends of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Parks was formed

and their campaigning led to a successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. Fundamental to the application was a Restoration Plan produced by Land Use Consultants. The persuasive case put together in that document, by Adrian Wikeley, Paul Harrison and colleagues, makes it arguably the most significant set of words written about Southwark Park since the Act of Parliament in 1864. It led directly to a major grant award and by 2001 the park was transformed.



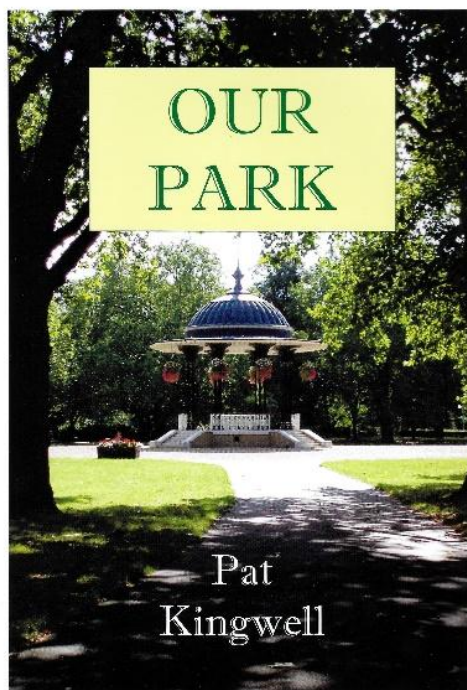
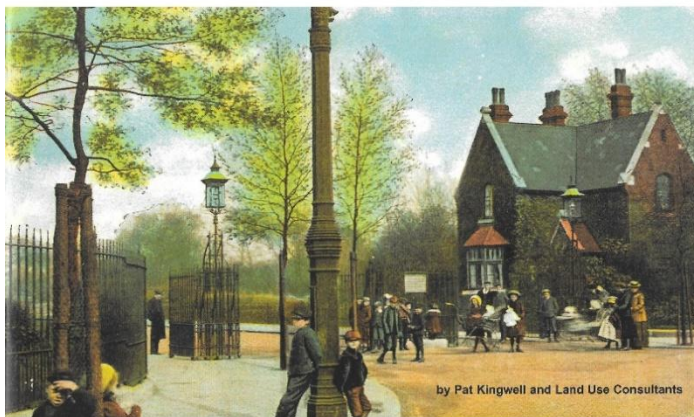
The Land Use Restoration Plan bringing together for the first time in one document the key developments of the park, which motivated people to enquire more into its forgotten history. As one of London's oldest parks it was



surprising that there was no book dedicated to it. In 1999 the restoration scheme gave impetus to myself and Len Reilly to write a very brief history, and in 2010, a history of Southwark Park Bowling Club followed.

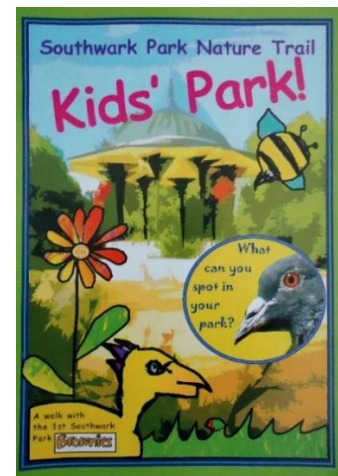
In the same year a Heritage Lottery Fund award produced an oral history - *Our Park* - which combined heritage information and the reminiscences of many members of the community. Written and visual work was given by children of Rotherhithe Primary School and St. Joseph's, Gomm Road Primary School.

**Southwark Park:** a brief history



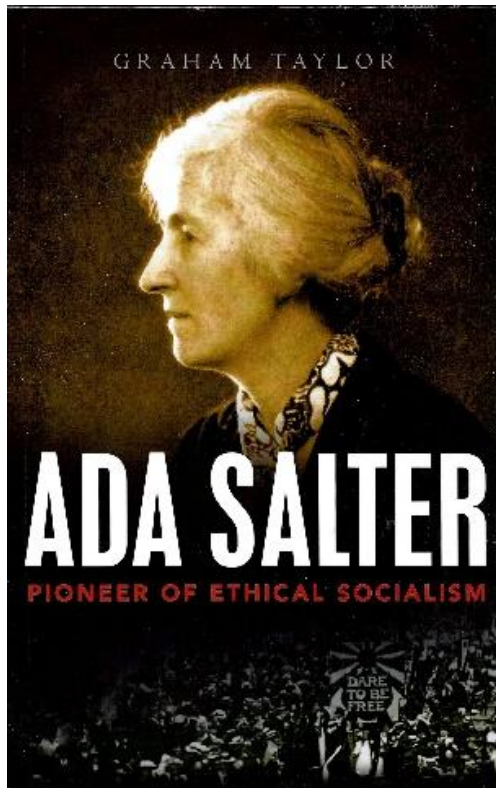
In 2014 the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Southwark Park Act was celebrated with many community-based activities. With the support of the Metropolitan Public

Gardens Association the 1<sup>st</sup> Southwark Park Brownies produced *Kid's Park*, a colourful nature trail booklet, designed by the children and Debra Gosling.

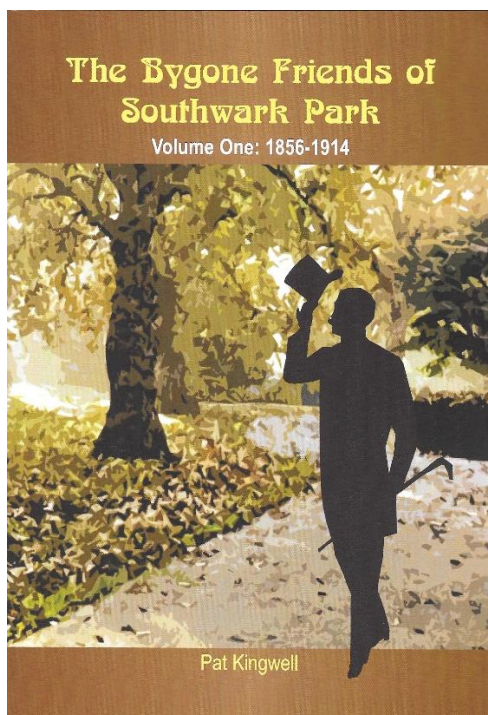




In 2016 Graham Taylor's *Ada Salter; Pioneer of Ethical Socialism* provided a much-needed account of a very important politician, whose environmental work included major improvements to the park.

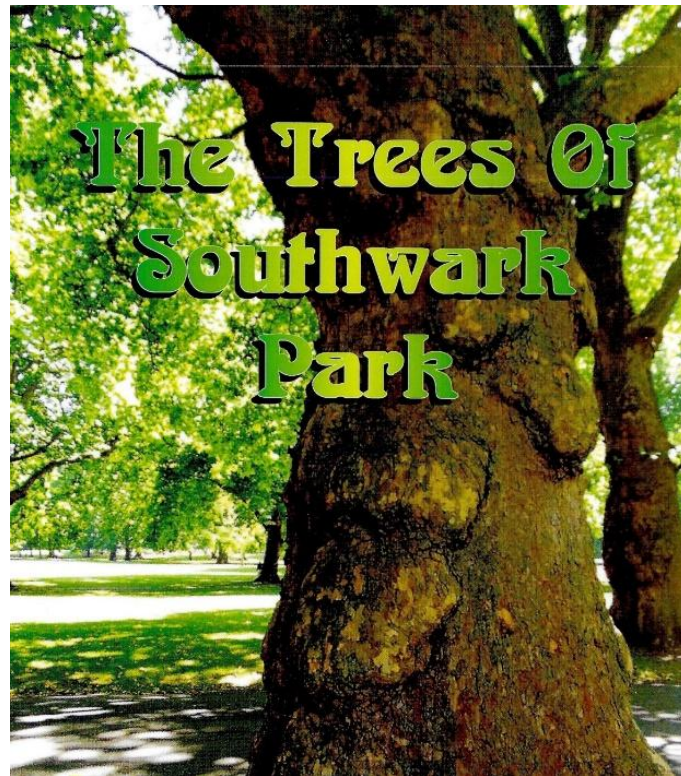


The same year saw the early pioneers of the park remembered in *The Bygone Friends of Southwark Park. Volume One: 1856-1914*.

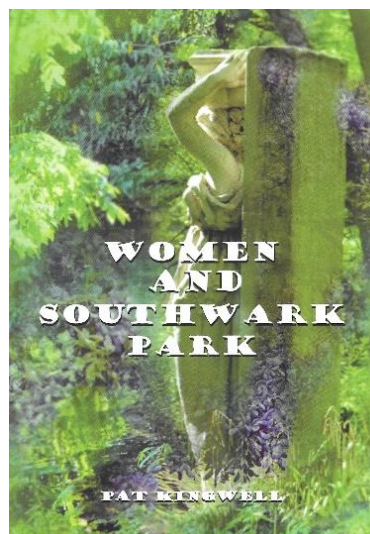




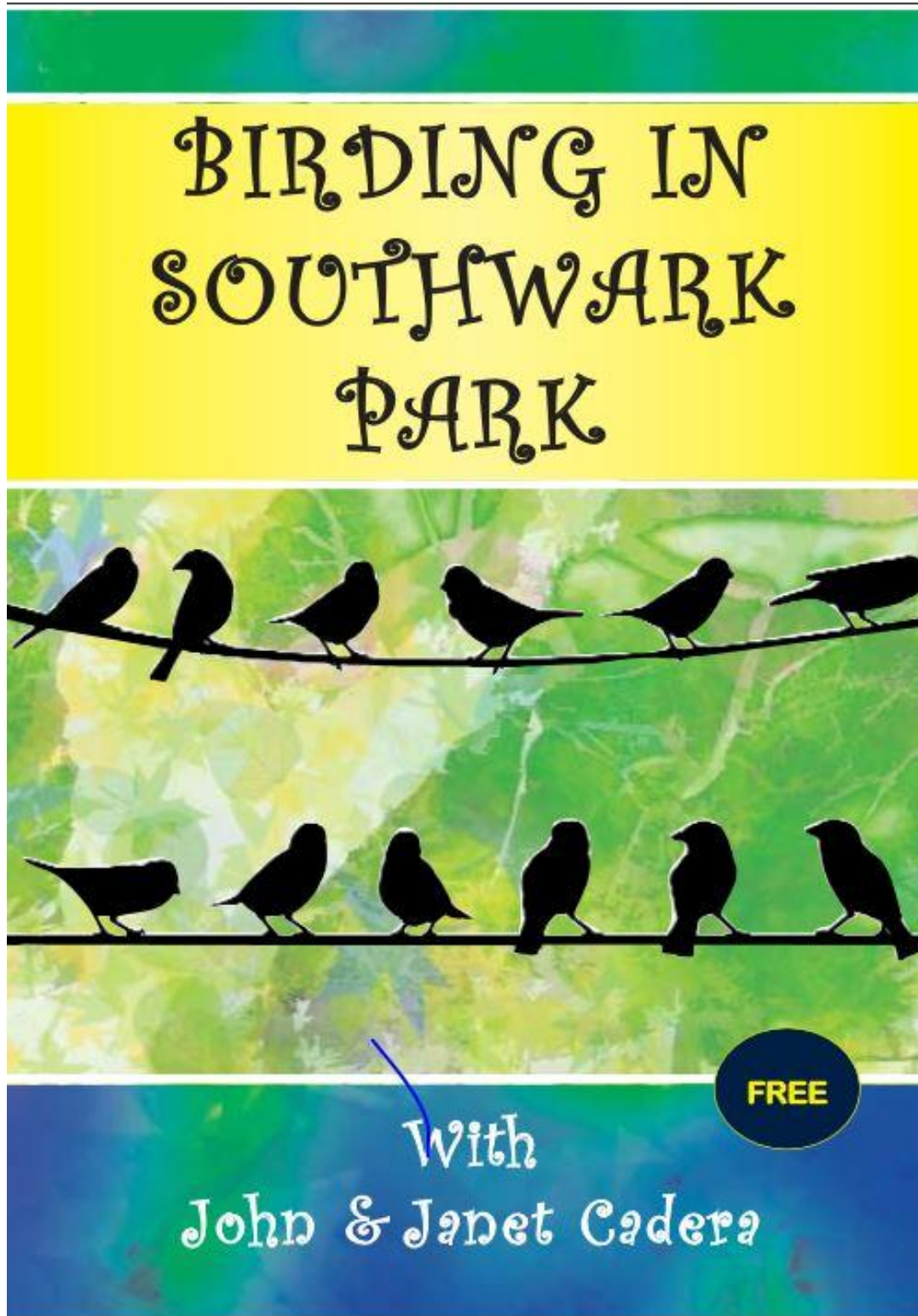
In autumn 2017 Debra Gosling's *The Trees of Southwark Park* was published; as far as we know, the first full-colour work on the natural glories loved by visitors.



During 2019 several activities were organised by Southwark Park Association 1869 to commemorate the park's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. *Women and Southwark Park* was published as a tribute to the part played by over 200 women in the history of the park.

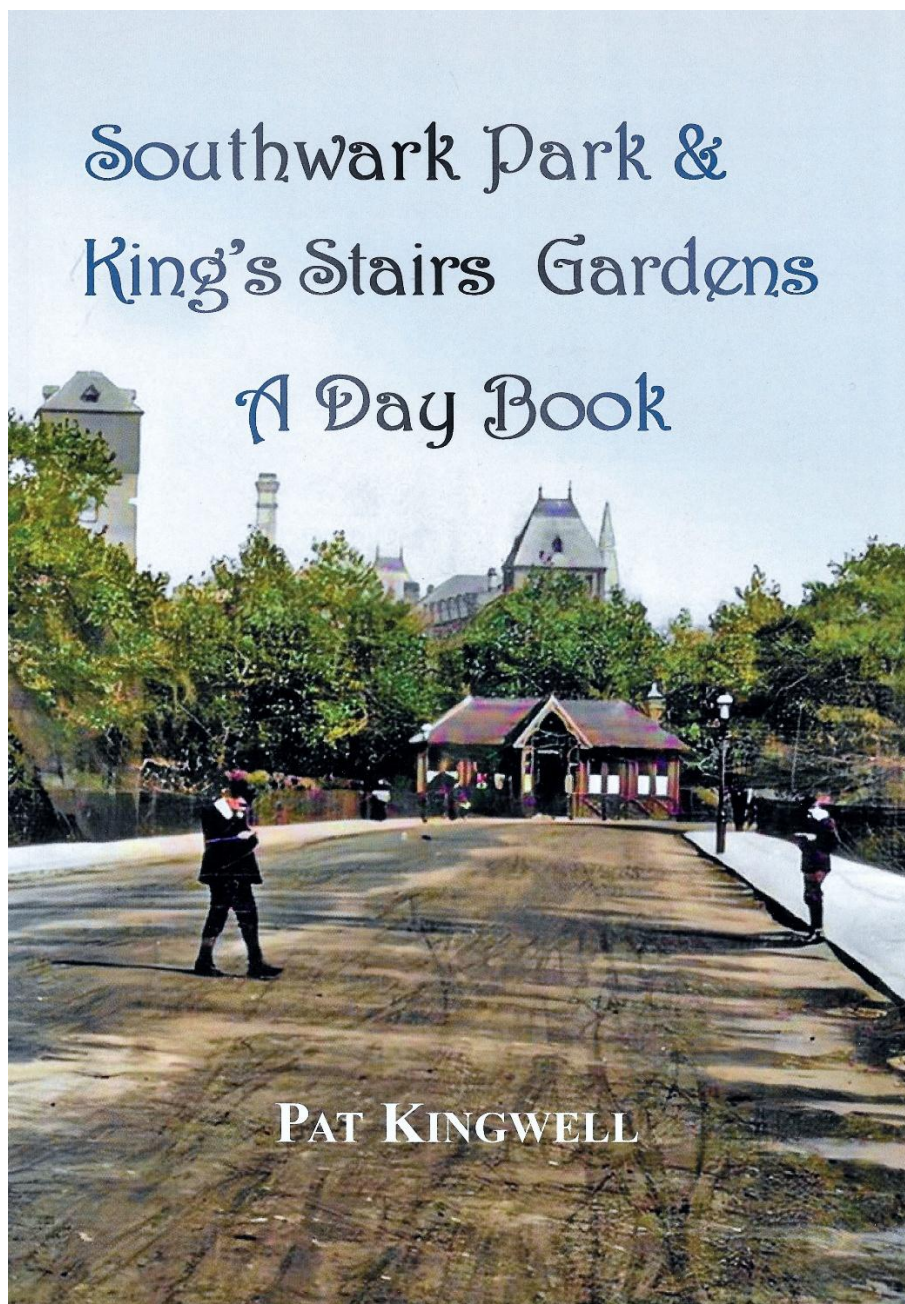


In 2022 two works were published about the park The varied and abundant bird life within the park was highlighted in John and Janet Cadera's *Birding In Southwark Park* booklet, an echo of W.H. Hudson's work over a century earlier.





*Southwark Park and King's Stairs Gardens A Daybook* was born out of the pandemic. During lockdown Southwark Park Association 1869 made a positive decision to try to keep in contact with its members, supporters and the wider community. Rather than hide away, weekly updates were posted on matters relating to both Southwark Park and King's Stairs Gardens. That small weekly diversion from social distancing, masks and all that other miserable stuff seemed to strike a chord with readers. The resulting book was a glance at the history of the two parks, in which important and less important moments were mentioned, as were well-known and less known and even forgotten people. Many aspects of park life were there – the noble, the ignoble, the funny, the tragic, the forgotten and the familiar.





## **Southwark Park In Fiction**

Although one of the UK's oldest parks, little more than twenty years ago there was no published history of it. Hardly surprising then that you will have to search very hard to find much reference to the park in fiction, novels or poetry.

The first poem seems to have been published shortly after the park was formally opened in 1869. The *South London Journal* reproduced a work by J.C. Cox of Bermondsey:

### **Lines on the Opening of Southwark Park 19th June 1869**

A park for Southwark, pleasant sound  
Came wafted on the ear,  
'Twas heard by many gathered round  
Afar, as well as near;  
Though some there were of doubtful mind,  
Who deemed the voice was nought but wind.

Yet there are folks in this loyal town  
'Tis right the world should know,  
Who studious make its wants their own.  
And needful aid bestow;  
And hence, all eyes to joy awake,  
A park there is, and no mistake.

And now its gates to open free,  
To all both small and great,  
Its friends and patrons rising see,  
The hour appointed wait;  
And prompt to call, a gallant band  
Of volunteers, too, takes its stand.

Then comes the hour, 'tis three at noon  
In June - a busy day,  
The train 'neath Music's cheerful tune  
The well-laid grounds survey;-  
The opened park aloud proclaim,  
And blithesome then consigns to Fame.

There, Recreation pleased shall lead  
Her votaries along,

And harmless Sport shall prove indeed  
A theme deserving song;  
While time e'er active on the wing  
Shall further scenes attractive bring.

The sons of toil shall there repair  
Released from duties call,  
The green retreat, so pleasant share,  
That "Welcome!" breathes to all;  
And lads, and lasses, buoyant, free,  
Its meads shall trip right merrily.

There too, shall youths, with ready feet  
There visits often pay,  
When freed from school, its pastimes greet,  
And none more blithe than they;  
Nor these alone; the old as well,  
With grateful smiles its charms shall tell.

And, see! from out of each teeming bed  
The beauteous flow'rets rise,  
Their odours sweet around bespread  
Beneath the summer-skies;  
And soon within their new made bowers  
The birds shall wake their varied powers.

O! may success - complete success  
The Southwark Park attend,  
And Heaven, kind Heaven look down and bless  
All those who've proved its friend;  
Their brethren round, (how great the praise!)  
To lengthen, cheer the coming days.

And thus may other townships rise  
Where'er there space may be,  
And join in all like enterprise,  
The same results to see;  
That Health, Contentment, hand in hand,  
May spread the more our native land!

In 1888 the *Southwark Recorder* published a poem by Sol about a cricket match between Southwark Police and Bermondsey Tradesmen:

On Thursday last in Southwark Park,  
I don't mind telling you,  
A thing or two, but keep it dark,  
About each rival crew.  
Their batting skill was quite a lark,  
Amongst the tradesmen true;  
Who ventured out with this remark,  
'We'll beat the bobbies blue.'

So in they went; the peelers mind,  
They've done the same before;  
With bat in hand the ball to find,  
And off the tradesmen score;  
But when they'd finished bear in mind,  
I looked the figures o'er,  
And found the bobbies all behind,  
With only sixty-four.

'Twas then an interval they took,  
To see what's what on hand;  
Its usual 'fore they bring to book,  
The others understand.  
So round the course of course I went,  
To do the thing that's grand;  
And stopped beside the cricket tent,  
To listen to the band.

At length, the tradesmen made a show,  
The field of fame to mount;  
Five wickets down they let us know,  
The bobbies' score they'd count.  
And when the last was fairly out,  
I counted up the same;  
And found by nine they'd put to rout,  
The bobbies' little game.

Then each one to his heart's content,  
Went out of course - you know;



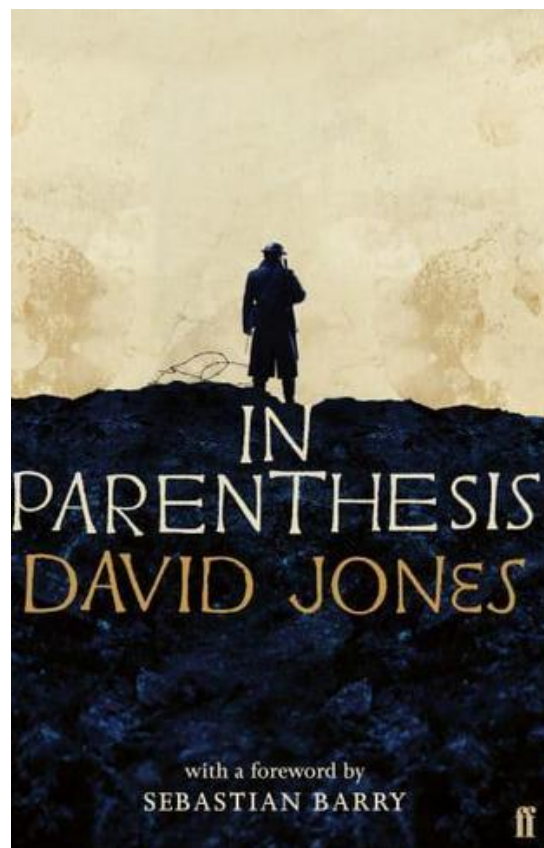
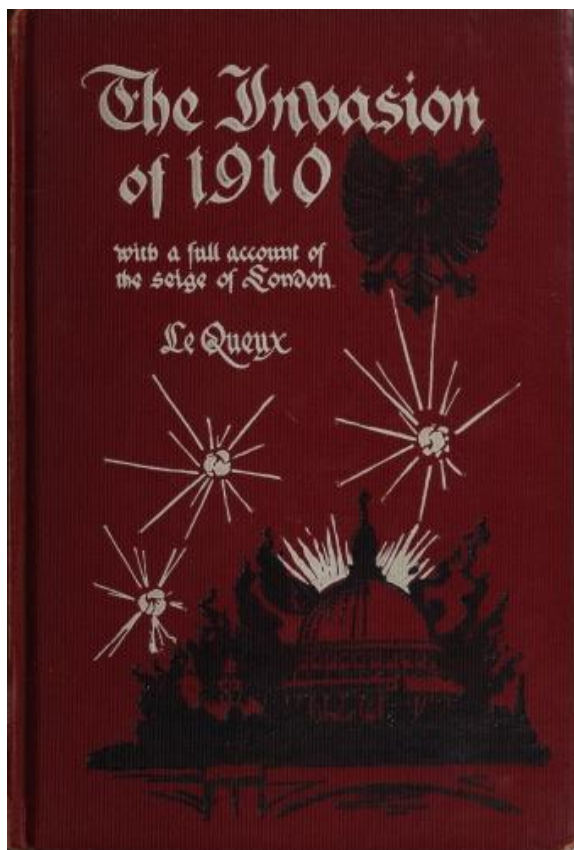
To prove all spirits are but spent,  
When cricketing they go.  
For tradesmen will the police support,  
No matter lose or win;  
And bobbies will the tradesmen court,  
Because they run 'em in.



In 1903 the park was mentioned in William Pett Ridge's (1859-1930) novel *Erb*, of which *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, wrote: "Mr. Pett Ridge is a capital humourist, and incomparable in his own way as an observer of the characteristics of the lower middle classes, their pathetic little bits of pride, their harmless vanities, and the odd manners, which do not irritate us, because we look on them from a distance. He is at his best in short studies: his method is hardly broad enough, nor his material rich enough for a novel. There is much that is improbable and far-fetched in his descriptions, when he ventures outside the world he knows so well. He is more at home in Bermondsey than in Eaton Square. The character of "Erb" otherwise Herbert Barnes, carman, Socialist leader, park orator, and labour agitator, is admirably

drawn and developed, within its natural limitations, throughout the whole book. He is not altogether pleasant, being pathetically vulgar, in spite of his intelligence, his quick perceptions, and his quiet self-respect. The offensiveness of the cockney is in no way softened, the irritating style of repartee, the defiant assurance that is at heart so ill at ease in the presence of superiors, all the half-touching, half-humorous weaknesses of his class are in "Erb". But he has brains, and the power of influencing men, and a fine sense of honour, and we leave him at the end of the book, cultivating the aspiration of his "h's" under the guidance of the charming teacher of elocution who becomes his wife; a very much pleasanter if less ambitious "Erb" than at the beginning. Louisa, Erb's sister, an honest, self-denying, sharp-tongued, vulgar little factory girl, is a creation of which any author might well be proud."

In 1906 William Le Queux's futuristic novel, *The Invasion of 1910*, contained a brief reference to the park as an army encampment.



There is a fleeting reference to the park in David Jones' *In Parenthesis*, an epic prose poem about the First World War published in 1937. He is describing the soldiers in reflective moments before the Battle of the Somme:

“The others sat solitary; each one about his own thoughts, except for the two music makers, who, done with their song, discussed the merits of each other’s artifice; till these too became silent and wrapped their little instruments in Paisley handkerchiefs against the damp.

Perhaps they found this front-line trench at break of day as fully charged as any chorus-end with hopes and fears; or else their silly thoughts for their fond loves took wing to Southwark Park. Their loves whose burgeoning is finery tricktout, who go queenly in soiled velveteen, piled puce with the light’s glancing.

The stall-flares’ play defines or shades; in the flecked shadow warm cast half lights trace an ample excellence, strings of penny pearls, and jostled grace:

...they’re two-a-penny, they’re orl ripe, they, refresh as daisies dearie...and push the barrow home, taking the short-cut, by Jamaica Level.” (*In Parenthesis* Part 4)



Moniza Alvi

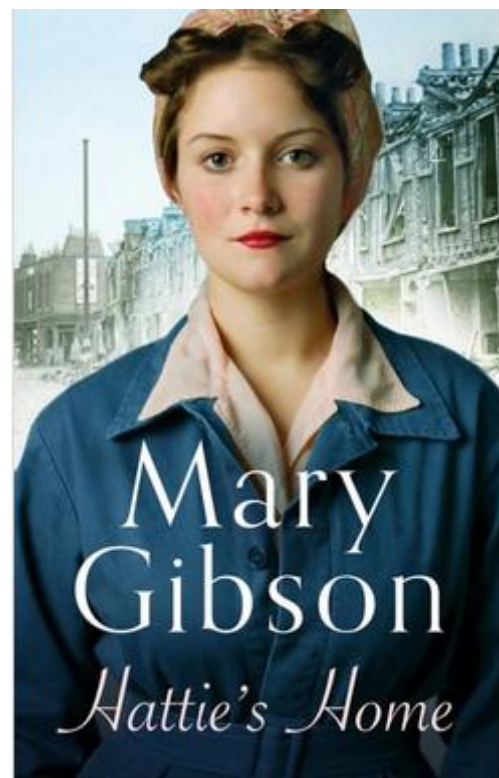
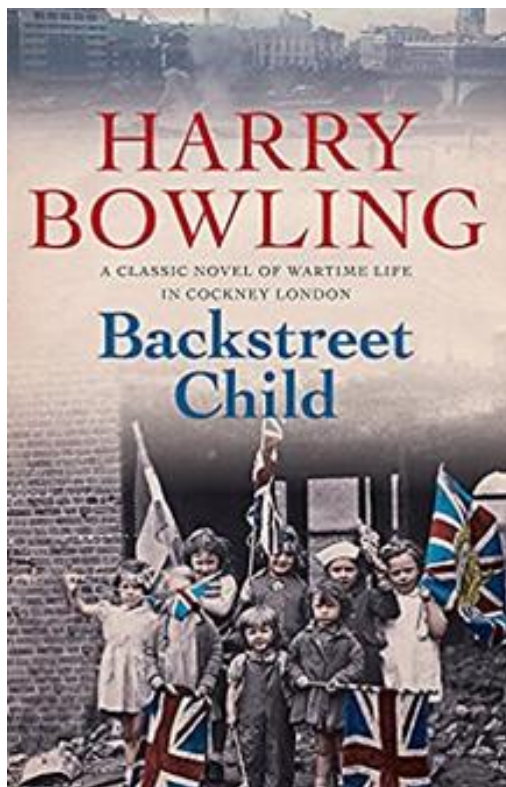
In 1993 Moniza Alvi’s poem *Meeting an Ex-Pupil on a Spring Morning*, was set in the park:

Mary-Jo, schoolgirl turned dental nurse  
Is smiling outside the surgery.  
The wind clears the sky over Southwark Park.  
In the sun-whitened street Mary-Jo smiles-  
A man in a poplar tree lops off branches,  
Leaves shine like silver on the fence.



Mary-Jo smiles as if composing herself  
For a photograph. This used to be my dentist.  
Mary-Jo knows. Tells me she's been looking  
At my records. And then she smiles.  
I see X-rays of my teeth blown up cinematic  
On hoardings all over Bermondsey.

The blossoming trees brush against them  
And hurl their petals to the ground  
Like sweetpapers. Mary-Jo smiles.  
A passing woman fills her baby's bottle  
With Pepsi. And the sun, like flashlight,  
Bleaches the morning to the bone.  
The potential for art in the park.



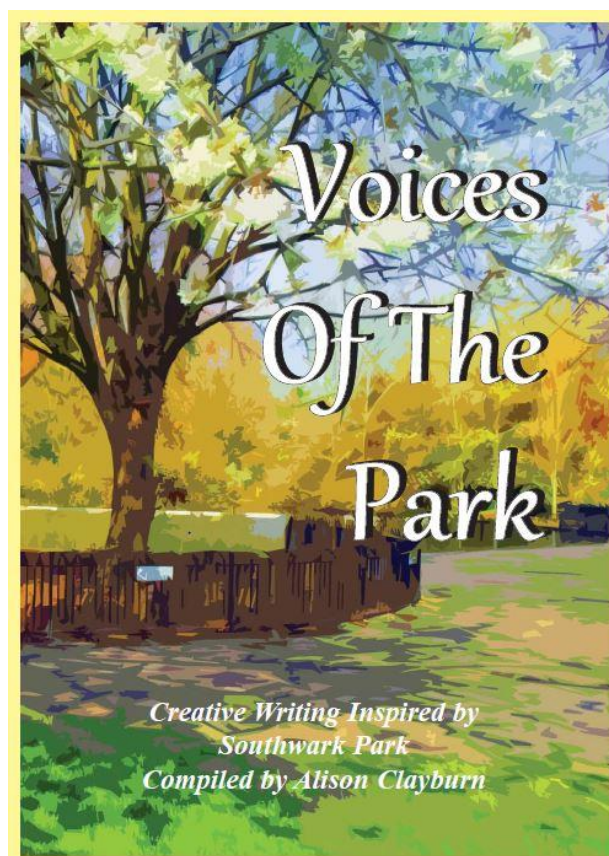
The novelists Harry Bowling (1931-1999) and Mary Gibson have based many of their popular works in Bermondsey, and Southwark Park is a location for certain scenes.

Any account of writers and the park must pay tribute to the Bubble Theatre, who have regularly staged plays in the open-air of summer. Too many to

mention, but what fun was had when they brought ‘Punchikin Enchanter’ (2003); ‘Alice Through the Looking Glass’ (2004); ‘The Crock of Gold’ (2005); Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (2006); ‘The Dong With A Luminous Nose’ (2007); Homer’s *The Odyssey* (2009) and more recently ‘Tales From The Arabian Nights’ (2017).



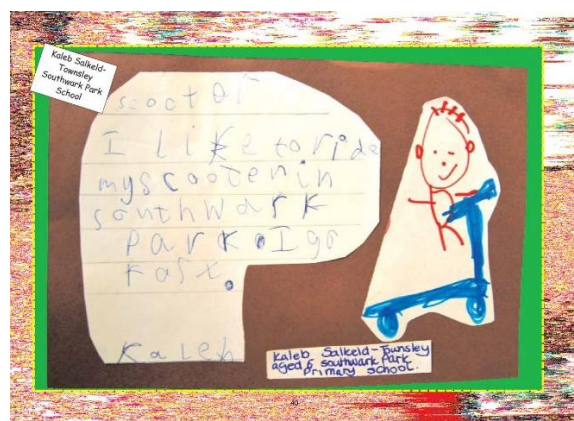
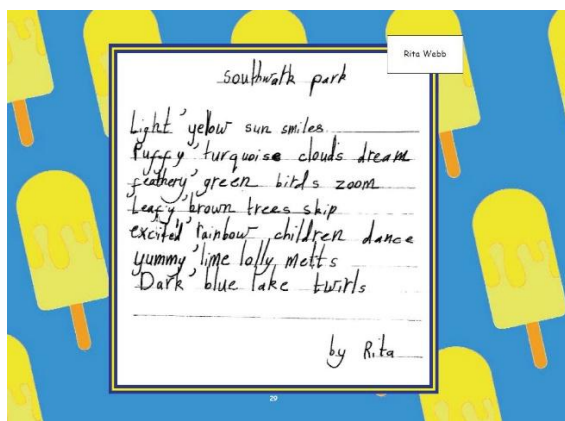
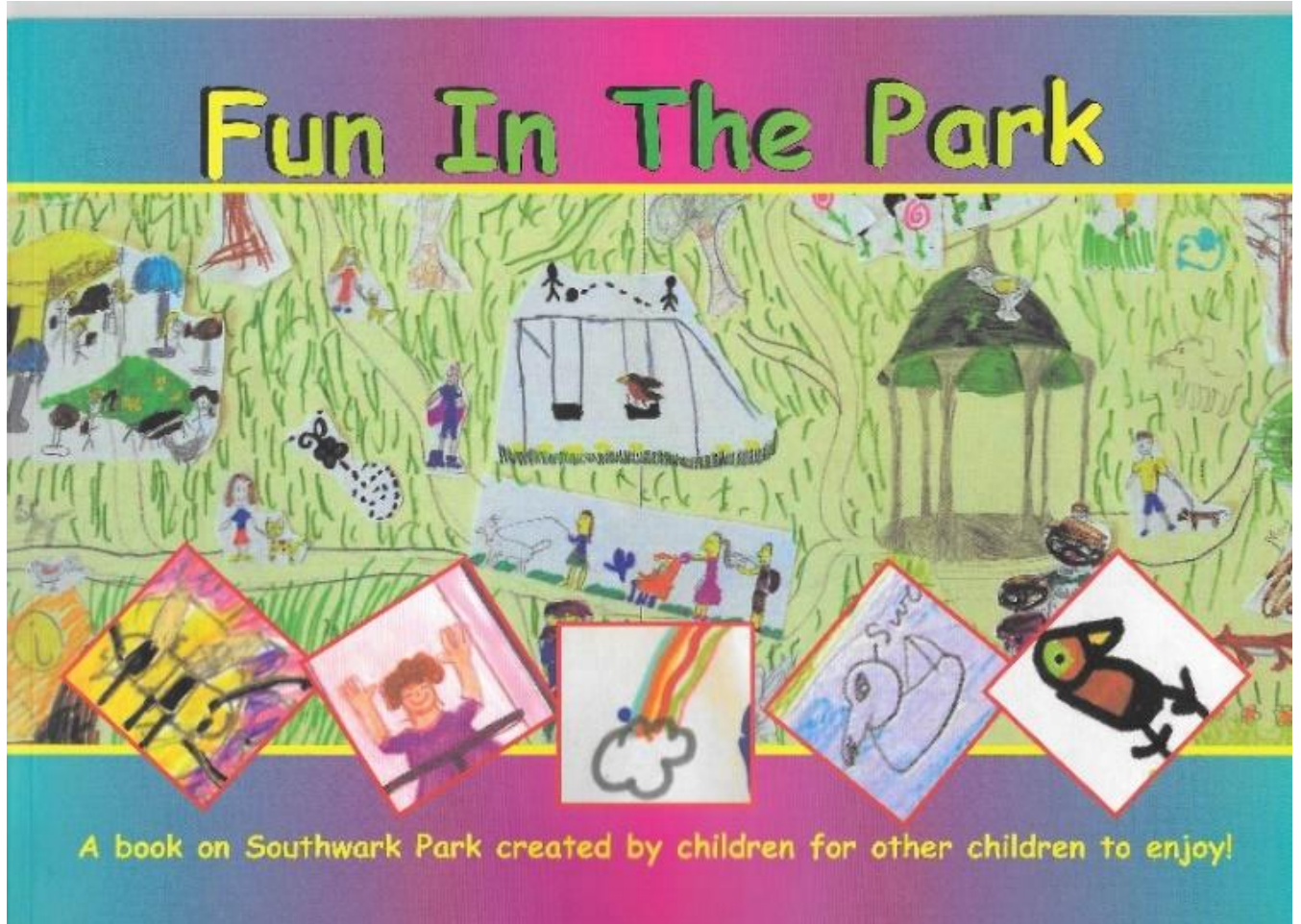
As far as I know the only volume of creative writing inspired by the park is Alison Clayburn’s *Voices of the Park*, a compilation of mainly poems and photographs published in 2016, with works by Rose Ades, Jane Deakin, Katherine Evans, Helen Frederick, Cindy Glover, Sylvia Green, Daisy Moone, Ariadne Pascaldini, Mira Rutter, Simon Rutter, Sue Stewart and Natalie Webb.



Cover © Debra Gosling



In 2019, in celebration of the park's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary *Fun In The Park* was published by Southwark Park Association 1869. It is a colourful collection of creative writing by children from of Riverside, Rotherhithe and Southwark Park Primary Schools.





Today the park is home to Alec Finlay's work *Questions and Answers, after Paul Celan*. Twenty poem nest-boxes have been in place since 2018, and were inspired not just by Celan's method, but also through walking around the park with Judith Carlton, Director of the Southwark Park Galleries. On his blog Alec writes: "I tuned into the park through Judith and the people she introduced me to. Even her love of ice cream made it into the work. And then I spent time watching how different people enjoyed The Park, walking, sitting, jogging, exercising, cycling, flying drones, playing with radio-controlled cars, getting stoned, snogging, keeping bees, eating lunch, consoling their loneliness, passing time."



In conclusion I must acknowledge and thank Big Local Bermondsey for their support in putting on the Bermondsey and Beyond Literary Festival.

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