

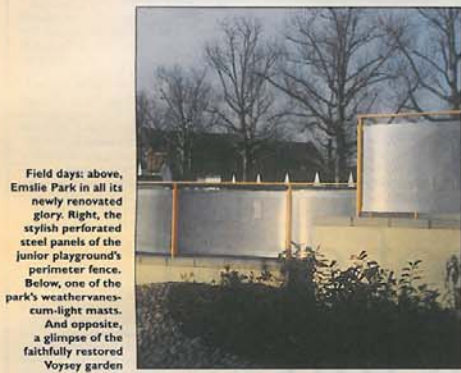
# THE SUNDAY REVIEW



**AN EDGY ENCOUNTER**  
JOAN SMITH MEETS JARVIS COCKER

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY  
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Field days: above, Emslie Park in all its newly renovated glory. Right, the stylish perforated steel panels of the junior playground's perimeter fence. Below, one of the park's weather-vane-light masts. And opposite, a glimpse of the faithfully restored Voysey garden



design

# PATHS OF GLORY

Thanks to Lottery funding, the value of Britain's long-neglected urban parks is again being recognised. **Emma Marshall** reports on the first of many to benefit: a public garden devised by a businessman and a nun almost 100 years ago, and now radically reinvented

A NEW ENERGY is stirring in England's inner cities. The urban park, a national institution born a century ago, had lost its way; the ignorance of central government, irresponsibility of local councils and abuse at the hands of vandals were all to blame. But now many of these neglected urban oases are being restored to their former glory – and, in some cases, surpassing even that.

The English Heritage Lottery Fund is currently revitalising 150 parks across the country through the Urban Parks Programme, instigated in January 1996. Born out of concern about the declining state of many of our parks, particularly those with historical importance, the scheme has now been cited as the most successful project ever undertaken by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Last August, the Emslie Horniman Pleasance Park in London's Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea was the first in the scheme to reach completion. Dating back to 1911, the park grew out of the charitable intentions of Emslie Horniman, a local businessman. Horniman got the idea of a public park from Sister Ruth, renowned in the area for her work with the poor. He purchased an acre of land in Kensal Town in North Kensington and "dedicated it in perpetuity to the people of London as a recreation ground".

Emslie Horniman was not alone in his philanthropic efforts, as Dr Stuart Harding, creator of the Urban Parks Programme, points out. "Most of our parks were laid out 100 years ago and funded by paternalistic businessmen, enlightened councillors and concerned locals, who saw a desperate need to counteract the squalid urban conditions and general hideousness of life at that time."

By the Nineties Emslie Park, along with many public spaces around the country, had fallen into dereliction. Until about 25 years ago, urban parks were maintained to an acceptable standard. But by the Seventies a process of alarming decline was well established. Historically, this makes perfect sense: at weekends, mass ownership of cars led to a public exodus to the country, which made the park a second choice for recreational pursuits. And park departments were increasingly handed

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over to the Leisure Services, whose high-profile art galleries and sports centres took financial precedence over the parks. A final nail in the coffin was Mrs Thatcher's act allowing contractual workers to tender for maintenance, forcing traditional wardens and gardeners into redundancy. For all these reasons, the value of the park became forgotten. Dr Harding concludes: "They were very much a soft target – until they simply became scary places to be." The Emslie Horniman was no exception.

Kensal Town is sandwiched between the Grand Union Canal and the Great Western railway. It is a pocketed area, geographically and socially isolated from the rest of Kensington, which has suffered architecturally from an absence of planning restrictions since the war. The Victorian terraces that once defined a predominantly residential community are largely gone, replaced by a motley bouillabaisse of council housing and office buildings. The result was a disparate community consisting of non-residential workers and multi-racial residents. With few local amenities and little social cohesion, Kensal Town became a post-industrial zone that lay easy victim to vandalism, mugging and drug-abuse. If ever there was a boil on the Royal Borough's bottom, it was Kensal.

And the council knew it. When riots erupted in nearby Notting Hill in the Sixties, the area was given priority attention, not only by local but by central government. North Kensington was targeted as a volatile area of dense population, social deprivation and high unemployment among a multi-ethnic community, and the council's budget was dramatically increased. New housing was erected on the old bomb sites and housing associations were given increased funds to improve their homes. A race-relations policy was introduced to encourage communication between police and ethnic groups. A Task Force and a City Challenge group were set up to highlight areas in most need of funding.

Given this kind of background, it is not surprising that when North Kensington City Challenge came up with a proposal to rejuvenate Emslie Park in 1996, it was met with universal approval. Here was a perfect vehicle to give substance to the council's good intentions. Serendipitously, the proposal coincided exactly with the formation of the Urban Parks Programme. On top of this was Emslie Horniman's choice of designer.

The Horniman family patronised the acclaimed Arts & Crafts architect Charles Voysey for years – in 1894 he designed Lowicks, a country house, for them, and in 1906, the Garden Room, their home in Chelsea. He also created the walled gardens and pergolas for both these homes, and they chose him to lay out their public park. It was this decision that today made it so supremely eligible for public funding – as the only park Voysey ever designed.

But, as Caroline Wilson (an associate at Julian Harrap Architects, which was called in to renovate the Voysey garden) explains: "When it came to the park, Voysey turned his usual country house design inside out." His gardens typically followed a pattern of strict formality around the house and became gradually wilder towards their boundaries. In the case of Emslie Park, the opposite is true. Here, the walled garden and two pavilions act as a sort of urban periphery, with an explosion of multi-coloured herbaceous planting at its centre. This was the work of designer Madeline Agar and was considered unusual even at the time. Her original plans were discovered among the council's records and were much referred to during the renovation.

Studio E Architects, an Anglo-Polish firm, was employed to oversee the regeneration of the rest of Emslie Park with an original budget of £350,000. "From an early stage," explains Andrzej Kuszell, a partner in Studio E, "it became clear that the money would be best spent mounting a Lottery bid. The wonderful thing was that Emslie qualified for three separate grants – Sports, Heritage and Arts." All applications were successful. With a final budget of £2.05m, Kuszell and his team collaborated closely with local interest groups, businesses and schools, the Notting Hill Carnival office, the Institute for the Blind, local artists and the newly formed Friends of Emslie Horniman and the refurbishment began.

The site had fallen into appalling disrepair, and opinions from all sides were damning. Linda Devo, the new chairman of Friends of Emslie Horniman, described the park as "horrible" when she moved there six years ago. "It was basically used as a car-park for the Carnival. I tried to sit there in the summer, but it was just an unpleasant place to be." Studio E's report was equally scathing: "There is no sense of communal ownership. The all-weather sports pitch is unusable for any serious sporting intentions, the Voysey garden has lost all its subtler facilities, and mothers and toddlers find themselves using the park alongside muggers and drug-abusers."

The park opened just before last year's Carnival. Today, its radical design stands testament to the tenacity of local people and the scruples of the professionals involved. Studio E collaborated with the artist Peter Fink to administrate the integration of architecture, landscape and art features: his influence can be seen in the coloured safety surfacing of the playground and five lighting columns. Meanwhile, 11 interactive play features in the circles carved out of the playground walls were commissioned from local artists.

"In design terms," says Devo, "I think the council felt that if the Voysey garden was restored then it wasn't so important for the rest to be traditional." And traditional it certainly is not, although the Voysey garden remains the anchor of Emslie Horniman, its architectural references echoed in the curve of each flowerbed, the swoop of each wall and the angles of the stone and gravel paths. For the rest, fencing, gates and steel light frames establish a contemporary theme throughout. Bright swathes of yellow,



**Park life:** above, Emslie Horniman Park's perforated stainless steel gate posts, which radiate light from within; and below, the colourful, undulating junior playground

'I call it the natural meets the Teletubbies,' says Tom, the park warden. 'The architects were great at listening to the community's problems and complaints, as well as their ideas'



scarlet and blue run through the greys and greens and merge into a kaleidoscope in the play area, where rubberised mounds and mouldings define a miniature landscape.

"I call it the natural meets the Teletubbies," says Tom the warden, from his state-of-the-art warden's tower. "The architects were great at listening to the problems and complaints as well as the ideas of the community, and responding to them."

The carnival, for example, Emslie's most loyal guest, has not been ignored. Land was sacrificed to allow a broadening of the street to the north, providing a paved stage for the steel band event held in the weekend before Carnival. The pavement's curve mirrors the scooped bowl of raised land around it, with granite steps that act as a natural auditorium. Beyond this, a stretch of green bordered by poplar trees leads to the Quiet Garden – a corner of scented plants and smooth pebbles, with poetry inscribed on cobbles and rocks.

The new all-weather sports pitch was relocated to the south of the park to make it closer to residential estates, schools and the adventure playground. Illuminated by night and now much-used, it offers a sense of security absent in its former location.

Asked whether he's seen a change, Tom replies without hesitation: "Oh, yes. The mums can sit and chat and the kids love it. We have on average two architects a week visiting the Voysey garden, there's a blind man who comes to run his hands over the glass pebbles and even the small kids ask if they can use the Quiet Garden. This park is proof that people care about their community."

And, if confirmation of success is lack of vandalism, then the park has triumphed. "All we've found is a little bit of graffiti and we will have to apprehend some children," he says. "They want to look cool in front of their mates, but when you make them realise they are destroying something for themselves and that the council and consequently their parents will have to pay for it – that seems to get through to them." The philosophy of taking pride in common ownership is fundamental to Tom's successful discipline.

As a constantly accessible communal facility, parks will always be more symbolic of social and cultural unity than any building could be. Emslie Horniman's rebirth has many to thank, but its future lies in the hands of its creators as well as its users – for they are now one and the same. If Emslie has proved that local pride can be fired by a tiny park, then the future for Britain's parks and their 8 million daily users has new hope. It may be surprising that a park devised by a businessman and a nun at the start of the century, should reach its prime at the end of it. But only time will tell whether it remains a benchmark for urban parks everywhere.

English Heritage's Urban Parks Programme is now set to run for a further three years. Information Line: 0171 591 6041/6043. Julian Harrap Architects: 0171 729 5111. Studio E Architects: 0171 385 7126