

Public Parks in England

Public access for recreational purposes to gardens or parks goes back many centuries. Limited access to royal lands was followed by the creation of public promenades such as at Northernhay in Exeter in 17th century and the Town Walks in Dorchester. Next came private “subscription gardens” like the Liverpool Botanic Gardens in 1802 & Nathaniel Hodson’s Botanical Garden in Bury St Edmunds.

The earliest parks that we would recognize consisted of extensive woods with straight walks between vantage points. They might include raised galleries or elaborate aviaries & cages for wild animals – echoing their hunting park ancestry. These parks were essentially romantic in nature – places for passive pursuits like walking in a naturalistic setting.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution towns & cities grew & population densities increased. By the 19th century the concerns of philanthropists, early pioneers of public health & enlightened industrialists, amongst others, led to parks being seen as “healthful breathing spaces” in these urban areas. Parks were still seen as places for “taking the air” but their location meant that such recreation was no longer the preserve of the privileged classes.

The development of the modern park, which emphasises the creative possibilities of leisure, has continued this process. These parks reflect an awareness of the community’s responsibility to provide adequate space & facilities for recreation. The change to more active recreation has led to parks becoming open grassed areas suitable for sports pitches, running tracks etc at the expense of horticultural displays. This results in a dynamic tension between specific recreational functions and the 19th century “Nature in the city” ideal.

A similar evolutionary process is seen with regard to playgrounds. At the beginning of the 20th century it was noted that rates of TB, traffic accidents & delinquency were lower in areas with playgrounds. These playgrounds were essentially outdoor gymnasia which emphasised the building of body & character. Over the next few decades the psychological & social importance of play was recognized. Through manipulating their scale & equipment playgrounds were increasingly designed to facilitate imaginative play.

Socially the modern day role of public parks is complex. They allow urban dwellers the opportunity to experience open spaces. In an increasingly fragmented society they also provide a forum for generations to mix and interact. Peer groups use them to explore relationships within & without the group. Similarly they are often seen as “safe places” to explore physical boundaries i.e. the kick about or learning to ride a bike. Or you can just lie on the grass & read a book.