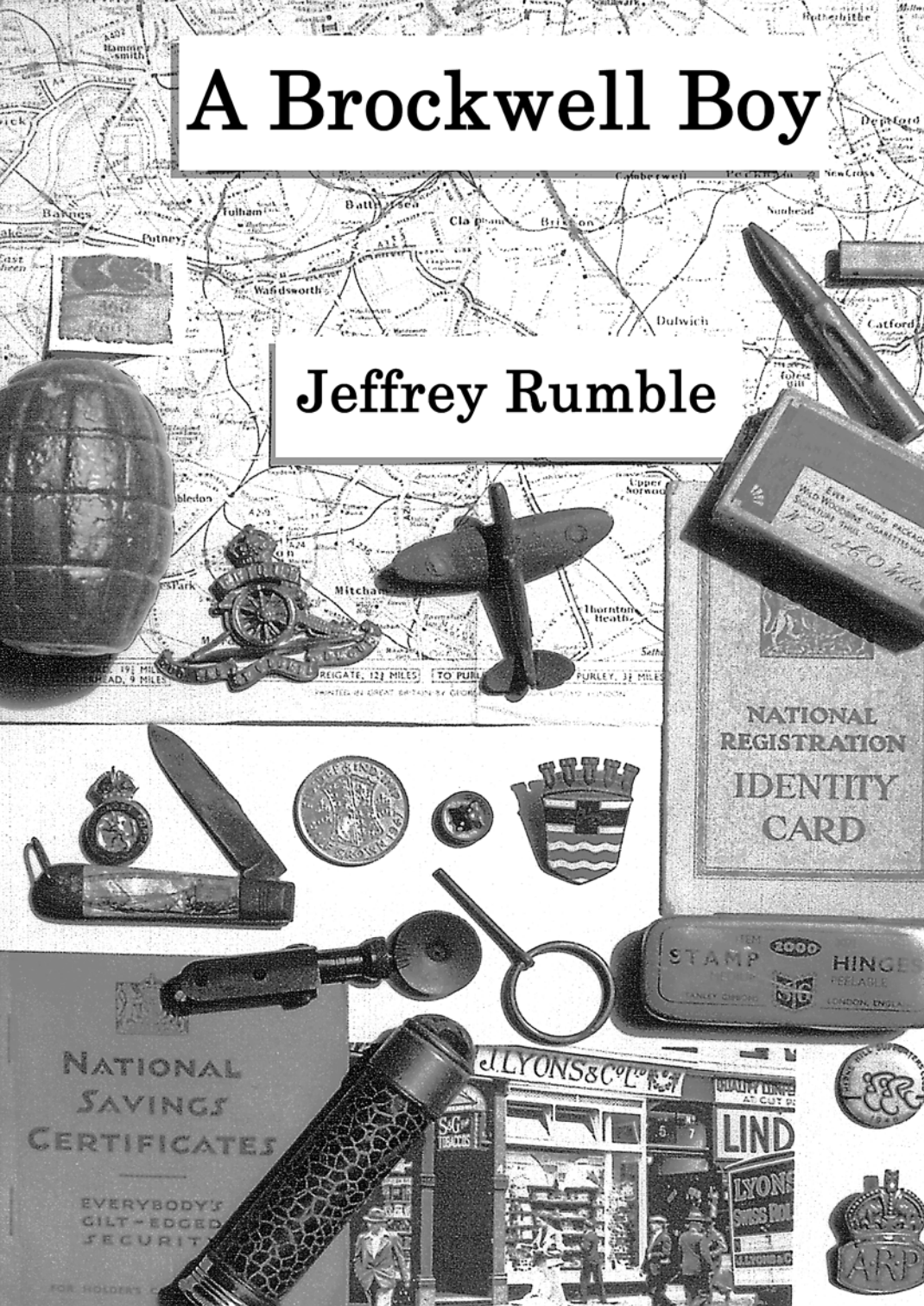


A Brockwell Boy

Jeffrey Rumble



A BROCKWELL BOY

Recollections of times in Brockwell Park,
Herne Hill, London SE24

Jeffrey Rumble

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BROCKWELL PARK – BRIXTON

A BROCKWELL PARK POSTCARD c.1904

Introduction

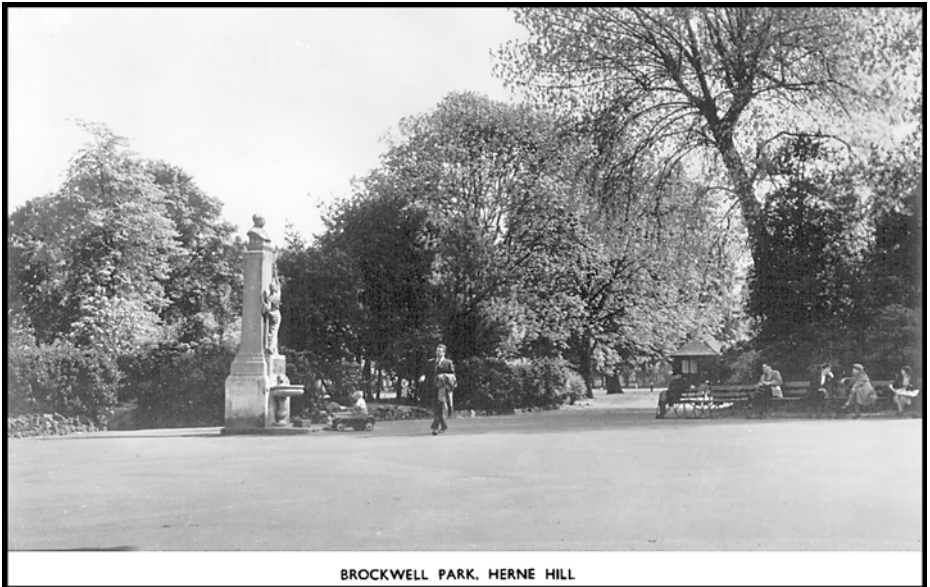
These pages, written in early retirement and some fifty years after some of the events involved, recall the activities of myself as a small boy who grew up in the vicinity of Brockwell Park in South-East London. They are written entirely from memory, without research into the accuracy of the details concerned, and are simply an OAP's recollections of his boyhood during a very disturbed period of our national history.

My motivation is purely personal satisfaction, bolstered by the hope that my reader will compare the present day park with the one I knew and enjoyed as a lad. Looking back over the years, I can see how big a part Brockwell Park played in my early life, starting as a battleground for Cowboys and Indians, and progressing through so many stages until I 'put away childish things'.

I was born a 'depression kid', in 1931 and lived in the same house off Rosendale Road for 45 years until 1976 when my work took me out of Lambeth. I have never had the opportunity to return, but still regard Herne Hill as home and remain a Lambeth lad at heart. I have been encouraged to put my memories on paper through my postal acquaintance with Zena Hutchins who is herself engaged on a history of the park. I trust that her work will verify my own recollections, but I have neither read her draft (although freely offered) nor communicated with the Friends of Brockwell Park, for fear of adjusting my, sometimes vague, recollections to correspond with confirmed facts.

I hope that what follows will revive fond memories for some and encourage further research in others. Long may Brockwell Park continue to exist as a place of relaxation and recreation for the residents of Lambeth, and long may the powers-that-be preserve it as such.

J.R., St. Feock, Cornwall.



BROCKWELL PARK, HERNE HILL

A BROCKWELL PARK POSTCARD FROM THE 1950s

The Mansion

The Mansion (or the Hall, as it is marked on some maps) sits centrally on the highest part of the park, rather splendidly old-fashioned like an ancient aunt who has known better times. It was never open to the public in its entirety, but both before and then after the war it opened its huge double doors to reveal a refreshment room. Small green-painted tables with parasols and folding chairs graced the terrace in the Thirties, and in such leisured times, those that could afford it took afternoon tea or ice cream, and watched the world peramble past to the sound of music from the bandstand.

I believe the senior Park Keeper lived there, it was certainly a suitable residence for a person of such status, with its classically columned portico, its pergola all copper greened, the graceful balconies and the mysterious belfry. Make no mistake, the chief Peekay (as we called the park keepers) was not a man to be trifled with, and he deserved such a residence.

The Mansion suffered the usual fate of similar large old houses. At various times it was neglected, rebuilt, redecorated, vandalised, restored, bombed and more recently, burned, but in spite of it all, it remains solid and foursquare on the top of its hill. It has had a multitude of owners and occupiers including several shades of local authority and also the military. In my memory its heyday was with the L.C.C. (London County Council) who maintained it in first-class order.

After the war, the Refreshment Room re-opened under the control of a Mr. Fry, who was a confectioner by trade. He had a sweetshop on Herne Hill Parade, and I shall always remember him for just one little incident. Sweets were on the ration, difficult to imagine nowadays, but in fact most welcome at the time because, prior to rationing sweets were only available at a price on the black market. I always bought my weekly quarter pound of boiled fruit drops (they lasted longer) from Mr. Fry, because once, and only once, he put one sweet extra on the scales to carry it over the 4oz. mark. I never forgot that extra fruit drop, and that gesture ensured my custom from then onward. Anyway, Mr. Fry held the concession on the Tea Room for many years, and it was there that I developed a taste for Tizer and slab cake. If any function was on in the park, Mr. Fry was open, and many a romance blossomed under his watchful eye in the Tea Room.



THE MANSION IN BROCKWELL PARK
(my own sketch)

The Flag Pole

For the better part of 80 years, a massive flagpole stood just outside the Mansion, dominating the surrounding countryside. It could be seen for miles, and certainly toward the end of its life-span, it was in daily use. We could see the flag flying from our back bedrooms, normally it was the London County Council flag (a shield on a white background), but on special occasions the National Flag would be raised. We could tell by the direction the flag blew what the weather was to be, and such forecasts were reinforced by the various flight paths taken by aircraft landing at Heathrow Airport. If a stream of passenger planes flew over the park from a particular direction, we knew it would be good weather and the flag would confirm it.

Originally the flagpole was part of a weather station, complete with thermometer, barometer and barograph all in a slatted hutch, with a rainfall measure on the ground outside. The whole lot was enclosed by a white-painted picket fence, and the public was not allowed within. The instruments were removed during the war, when the area was taken over by the military, and they were never subsequently replaced. It was only in the last year of the war that the area was re-opened, and it was then, for the first time, that I actually got within touching distance of the mast.

It was in two sections, stepped and braced, and was so big at the base that my arms would not reach around it. The worn brass plate read, 'GIFT from CHARLES TRITTON, CORONATION YEAR, JULY 26, 1902', this being the benefactor that also gave the park its clock.

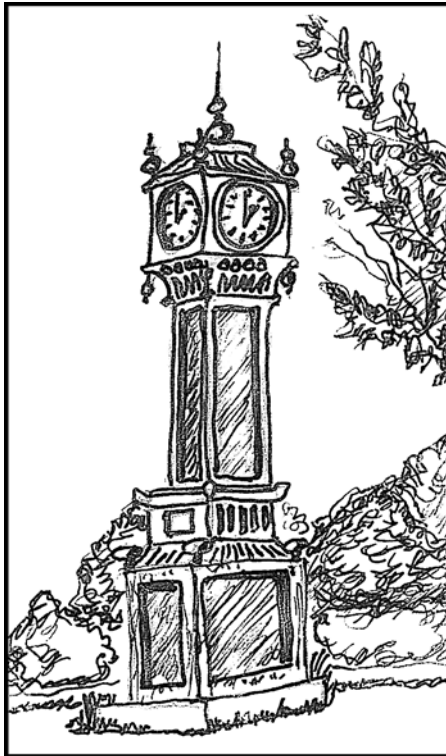
I cannot recall ever seeing any maintenance work carried out on the mast, and I am not surprised to learn that it collapsed in a gale in the early 1980s. It would have cost a fortune to re-erect, and sadly there are no longer men with the generosity of Mr. Tritton about today.

The Clock

The park clock stands in one of the highest points in the estate and was presented, according to the inscription, in 1897 by the MP for Norwood, Mr. Charles Tritton. It is said to be a smaller replica of the clock opposite the Victoria Palace Theatre in central London, but whether the one was the model for the other I do not know. It was a fairly standard design, though, and its style is frequently to be found in similar locations.

I believe it runs for seven days on one winding, as do most pendulum clocks, and we kids would foregather at the prescribed hour to observe the weekly winding-up ritual. A keeper would arrive at the front door of the clock, key in hand, and open up with due pomp and ceremony, allowing us a fleeting glimpse of the huge weight and pendulum. Inserting the key in the drum, he would crank away until the weight reached the top of the shaft.

After the case had been locked again, the keeper would stand back, head bowed, for a few moments. At the time we thought he uttered some form of prayer, but with hindsight, he was probably only listening to make sure the clock was still ticking. On his departure our own eager ears, pressed against the ironwork of the pedestal, could discern the regular thump of the movement. All was well.



THE PARK CLOCK

green with black lining and gilded ornamentation
(my own sketch)

The Peekays

The park keepers were universally known as the PKs, and we were firmly of the opinion that they were recruited on the basis of size and a hatred of small boys. The Peekays were a race of men apart, tall, well-built and sunburnt, and the London County Council provided them with a uniform ideally suited to their profession. It was light brown in colour and tweed in texture, hard-wearing and smart. The jacket boasted broad lapels, tailored waist and a fine long skirt, split at the back. This could be worn with a matching waistcoat, invariably enhanced with a watch and chain, although the waistcoat could be dispensed with in hot weather, when the watch hung in the top pocket from a buttonhole in the lapel. Trousers were of the same thick material, smartly creased, over substantial brogue shoes or boots. Some preferred to wear breeches, in which case highly polished leather gaiters were worn in support. The whole ensemble was set off by a fine broad-brimmed homburg, banded with a dark brown ribbon. On the front was fixed a bright metal (brass?) plate, stamped with the owner's number and the logo of the L.C.C.

How many Peekays patrolled the park at any given time, I don't know, but they had an unflinching knack of appearing on the scene at the most inopportune moments, as when you were knocking down conkers or climbing a tree. At the cry of 'Peekay' everyone scattered, although some got caught and suffered swift justice, like a boxed ear. The Peekays ruled by fear and there was no love lost between us. One way of getting your own back was simply to follow them round (at a safe distance, of course) doing nothing but dogging them and it became a battle of who would break first. Sometimes we would



Park Keeper with bell

get fed up and go off on some other pursuit, and sometimes the poor Peekay would chase us with his stick until we ran out of the park. Even then pursuit might continue and I have been chased through many back streets before giving the slip. This may sound tame by today's standards, but it was the height of daring for me and my cronies, and it never failed to scare the life out of us.

The Chief Park Keeper was known as Seepy Kay, from the initials CPK, but we didn't see a lot of him, and we reckoned he spent most of his time in a deckchair in one of the keepers huts. There were several of these rather attractive square huts in the park, each apparently having a bell. The bells were rung at closing up time, and if you didn't get clear of the gates in 15 minutes after bell time, you became locked in. One particular Peekay always locked the Rosendale Road gate early just to oblige us to walk to the Herne Hill main gate to get out. As I said there was no love lost between us.

At this distance in time I can only remember two keepers specifically. The first sticks in my memory because she was the first lady Peekay we had experienced. She was foursquare in appearance and awe-inspiring in a brick-built kind of way. Tough as old boots and an absolute harridan, she used her spike for many other purposes than picking up waste paper. After a spell at Brockwell Park she was transferred to Dulwich where she was put in charge of the rowing boats. There, for the slightest infringement she would deliver a tirade on the immorality of bad timekeeping. 'Do it again and I shall bar you', she would say, and this threat of excommunication really worked.

The other keeper that I remember rejoiced in the nickname Rubberneck. Never before or since have I known anyone who could rotate his head through 180 degrees, without moving his shoulders, but Rubberneck seemed to have this amazing gift and used it frequently when little boys were dogging him. I don't suppose for a minute he could really turn his head as far as suggested, but he had the nickname, and I can vouch that his head swivelled round like a battleship training its guns. He wore large horn-rimmed spectacles too.

In fairness, I expect the Peekays were simply doing their jobs, trying to preserve the beauty and tranquillity of the park from the ravages of little boys. Whilst it is true that they were not slow to mete out instant retribution, they were respected and the park was a credit to their stewardship. They don't seem to come like that anymore.

The Ponds

There are four ponds in the park, all are inter-linked by a small stream and fed by water draining down from the natural valley. The first pond is devoted to children and has a maximum depth of about 18 inches. It is concrete-lined and paved round its entire area, making it ideal for paddling and sailing small boats. I spent many hours of my youth here, sailing my Triang yacht and a clockwork motor boat, which had just insufficient power to make a crossing at one winding. For this reason the rudder was permanently set off centre to ensure an early return to the bank. Its spring broke eventually, and being beyond my powers of repair, the boat was put away. I found it again recently, worm eaten and neglected --- how the memories flooded back!

If for any reason you found yourself at the pond-side without a boat, a bit of do-it-yourself with a bamboo leaf rectified the omission. Luckily there was heaps of bamboo adjacent and all you had to do was find a long broad leaf and punch a hole with your penknife in the centre. (Everyone had a penknife, being essential equipment of a small boy.) The stem of the leaf was bent backwards and threaded through the hole, creating at one stroke a keel underneath and a sail on the top. These leaf boats were remarkably stable and would sail across the pond in a very slight breeze when other proper boats failed. When interest palled, they could be abandoned at no loss, and invariably several could be found deserted on the windward side of the pond.

Also there were blood suckers in the pond. Exactly what a blood sucker was I never discovered, but they were there alright. Everybody knew it, and everybody knew about the boy who had been attacked by one, but like the Monster in Loch Ness, positive evidence was sparse. But there were blood suckers!

In the winter, the Little Pond, as we called it, often froze over, and with a fairish run from the bank, you could enjoy a slide of some length. There was little danger involved because the pond was so shallow, but the keepers would break the ice to prevent accidents. Even so, I can well remember going through the ice on one occasion and filling my wellies with icy water. This, in itself, taught me a lesson, which was reinforced by the wrath of my mother who inevitably discovered the wet socks that I had hidden in my bedroom. I don't think I have ever ventured on an icy pond since, and much later, blamed my inability to learn ice skating at Streatham Ice Rink (where I broke an arm) firmly on this incident.

The Little Pond drained, via an overflow pipe, into the adjacent Big Pond, which was a much larger concern altogether. It was protected with a concrete surround and had a depth of perhaps three feet at the edges, deepening toward the middle. Before the War, people were allowed to swim in it, and changing rooms were available nearby. There was a springboard too, so clearly there must have been sufficient depth to take a shallow dive. Unfortunately, this activity came to a sudden end when it was realised that an eye infection suffered by bathers was directly attributable to the water. This in turn led to the subsequent construction of the Lido, so it was not altogether an ill wind.

The Big Pond was also a venue for serious model boaters, and some magnificent large-scale yachts were to be found in the water most weekends. Steamboats were also in vogue in the Thirties, and the evocative smell of steam on oil remains with me. At the end of the day, a keeper would set out in a little rowing boat, and recover all broken down or becalmed vessels and return them anxious owners. I believe the presence of the rowing boat was an L.C.C. safety regulation.

During the War, the pond was fenced off, principally because there was simply not enough staff available to control its use. Additionally, a stick of three German bombs apparently straddled the lake, one on either side and one in the middle. As children we believed the central bomb had not exploded, and so we threw stones from what we considered to be a safe distance in the hope of causing detonation. Of course, nothing happened, but I suspect that there are still many of my mates who would not be surprised to see a UXB team on the site one day.

In spite, and perhaps because of, the fence around the pond, we small boys broke into the enclosure whenever we could, especially when fish were discovered in the lake. Word went round like wildfire, gangs of lads armed with home-made nets descended on the place and serious fishing operations commenced. Mother Nature had well stocked her waters, and jam-jars on string, filled with tiddlers, were much in evidence. The poor creatures never survived, of course, but whilst the craze was on, everyone had a bucket or old bath of the fish at home, and fed them with massive amounts of bread crumbs and ants eggs. The strange thing was that the fish too were affected with eye sores just like the swimming humans, so there must have been something pretty potent in the water.

Up to the time I left Lambeth, the Big Pond was still out of bounds, but serious model boatmen were allowed access on Sunday mornings. Radio control was in its infancy, and most R/C equipment was bulky, crude and generally home-made from ex-service wireless sets. It needed a biggish model to carry the gear, and perambulators at the pond-side did not contain enthusiastic offspring, but rather all the paraphernalia of a model boat repair yard, and provided transportation for boats to be conveyed to and from home.

One very popular event was tethered hydroplane racing. A pylon was erected in the middle of the lake, and the boats were raced against the clock, haring round at the end of a wire. They were powered by diesel engines and made a noise like the hammers of hell. Very occasionally the wire would break or a coupling shear, when the boat would fly off into the surrounding greenery or smash itself to matchwood on the concrete surround.

The Big Pond overflowed via a pipe and a little waterfall into the first of the ornamental lakes. This in turn fed the second lake in a similar fashion, and a stream was contrived with a rockery and small plants. These two ponds were stocked with ducks and wildfowl and each had an island refuge. At one stage there was a pair of resident swans and I well remember them landing and flying off from the Big Pond. I imagine the ornamental pond had insufficient flight path for the swans, whose comings and goings reminded us of the Sunderland flying boats we saw on the newsreels during the war.

The bottom lake overflowed into a stream, which disappeared into a bushy area at the lower end of the park. This concerned me for a long time until finally, my curiosity overcame my fear of the anger of keepers, who no doubt, would not approve of my closer investigations. And what a disappointment! The stream simply disappeared down a hole covered with a grating in a most unromantic fashion. Even so, I liked to think that it fed the mysterious River Effra, whose hidden course was not too far distant.

People who regularly walked in the park fed the ducks. The ducks came to recognise their patrons and would come to the hand of the favoured few. Even in the blackest war years and when bread was rationed, supporters found a few crusts for their feathered friends.

The Cinders

One quite unusual feature of Brockwell Park is the provision on the terraced hill above the swimming pool of three all-weather football pitches. These were known as the Cinders or the Ashes, and could be ready for play almost immediately after the heaviest downpour.

Unlike the grass pitches, their use was not restricted by bookings. There was always some form of kick-about going on, and sometimes even scratch game of cricket.

The surface was of a sandy texture and red in colour - the rich hue transferred itself to the clothing and skin of all those who played there.

It was, of course, made of neither cinder nor ash, but the description was a fair one, and far better than 'all weather pitch'.

Everyone knew if you'd been up the cinders because of your red hands, face and clothing, and many an extra bath and early to bed did it cost me!

The Railings

I once read a description of some church railings, written by a person who believed them to be minor works of art. When I went to see them for myself, I was disappointed to discover that they were no more or less than - well - church railings. They didn't arouse any great enthusiasm in me, and neither, I'm afraid, do the iron railings that protect the south-eastern side of the park.

They are, however, impressive in their length and uniformity, and from a functional point of view and staying power, they are extremely efficient, denying access to all except the most determined climber. Set in stone kerbing, with supporting buttresses every few yards, they defied all my juvenile attempts to force an entrance through them!

The Shelters

There are several shelters in the park and in my young day, these refuges provided meeting places for the elderly who took regular walks with their friends and pets. Originally they were fully glazed with clear glass, and the woodwork and benches were painted green.

Sadly, constant breakages, (first by Hitler and latterly by local vandals) has meant that the glass has been replaced by boards, and spray-can graffiti has all but obscured the green background.

The Benches

The park benches were of a fairly predictable nature and were well sited to accommodate the needs of leisure-time walkers.

I have fond memories of the permanently fixed stump-and-plank type seats that originally graced the pathways before the more comfortable armchair benches were established.

I learnt to ride my first bike in the park and the armless benches were ideal to start and stop at. Father bought me a proper child's two-wheeled bike for my eighth birthday and I couldn't wait to get out and about on it. As is usual under these circumstances, Father supported me by holding the saddle whilst I pedalled like fury to obtain sufficient momentum to achieve unaided balance.

I got the knack quite quickly, but my problem was starting and stopping, and that's where the plank benches were invaluable. I could push off from one of these quite well, and could do a sort of crash landing against one when I tired of riding.

The difficulty was to find an unoccupied bench at the right spot. I can still see the look of horror on the faces of people who had just sat down for a quiet rest only to find a juvenile trick-cyclist hammering towards them, clearly quite out of control and apparently fixated with the idea of mincing their legs off.

I learnt several new words at this time. Father disowned me, and I remember one occasion when I broke free from his restraining grip, he prayed after my disappearing figure, 'please God, let him hit something cheap'.

The Water Fountains

The park was well provided with drinking fountains and dog troughs, and many of these watering places were donated by well-to-do benefactors. They came in various shapes and sizes, but were mostly quite substantial and ornate with a great deal of polished marble and granite in evidence. Operated by means of a push button, a spigot directed a flow of water into a basin beneath. The thirsty could catch the flow in a large pewter cup, secured to the fountain by a strong chain.

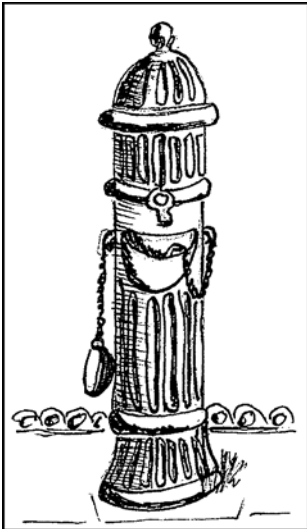
Naturally, every respectable mother warned her offspring never to drink from these fountains for fear of contagion, and because of this, we kids drank at every last one just to see if we could identify any particular disease. These tastings were accompanied by violent contortions and writhings in agony on the nearest grass verge, particularly if there was a keeper in sight.

One of the best fountains was near Herne Hill gate, in the form of a tall dignified column with a bust of the donor on the top (see postcard on Page 3). The water-bowl was reached by a fine stone step, and when actuated by a pushbutton, water flowed from the jaws of a fierce lion. On the front face of tile pillar a young woman in Grecian draperies was sculpted in life size proportions, frozen forever in the act of climbing up to adorn her hero with a laurel wreath held in her right hand.

There was also an inspiring Latin text, extolling the virtues of the donor, Mr. Bristowe, who played a large part in buying the surrounding land for the benefit of the people of Lambeth. The text began with the Latin word 'Ave', and in view of the fact that the Greek

lady was proffering something to Mr. Bristowe, we gave our own translation as 'ave a banana'.

At some more recent time Mr. Bristowe's descendants claimed his bust back when the fountain was demolished. Perhaps the Greek lady is languishing somewhere in a Council yard even now.



Cast - Iron Water Fountain,
complete with pewter drinking
cups on chains. Sometimes,
drinking bowls for dogs were
also provided.

(my own sketch)

Fairs and Fireworks

As far as I remember, the first outdoor entertainment to be staged in the park after the war was a circus. It belonged to 'Lord' George Sanger, a showman of the old school and a well known circus proprietor of the 1930s. It was a traditional circus with lions, tigers, elephants and horses, or at least, that's what the posters showed, and it was accommodated in traditionally decorated carriages and caravans, all bright with fresh paint and polished brass fittings.

Doubt surrounded 'Lord' George's elevation to the peerage, and the South London Press was adamant that the title was strictly a showbiz appellation. Be that as it may, the animals were the genuine article, as were their droppings. Much sought after, the manure sold very well locally at a few pence a bucket, and there was no shortage of young helpers, myself included, to cart the stuff away.

Other circuses followed, and eventually a Fair, with dodgem cars, helter-skelter rides and a roundabout with galloping horses appeared. In those days the rides were powered by steam-engined electric generators, and there were no amplifiers or taped recordings so the music was provided by a proper organ, the genuine and original fairground sound.

The fairs became an annual event, latterly timed to coincide with the Lambeth Carnival, and on the last Saturday of Carnival Week there would be fireworks. The display would commence about 9 o'clock at night and be started by the Mayor, who would arrive with his entourage in the mayoral limousine, accompanied by the Carnival Queen.

We are perhaps a little unimpressed with fireworks in this day and age, but at the time under discussion, the only fireworks we had seen were of a totally different and lethal variety, so the 'oohs' and 'aahs' from the public were both genuine in expression and appreciative in sentiment.

As far as I know, the currency of the fairs and fireworks were the only times the park remained open to the public after dark but none other than the main gates at Herne Hill were left unfastened.

Kites

Flying kites was never high on my list of activities, principally because I could never get any of my kites to stay up in the air. The slope above Herne Hill gate was considered the best site for kiting and although I have seen kites flown elsewhere in the park, this was the place most favoured. I suppose my kites all failed because they were home-made using incorrect materials, but needs must, and when the kite flying season arrived, you simply had to have a kite no matter what. So my efforts with split bamboo and brown paper were duly launched with enthusiasm and retrieved with bitter disappointment.

I raced up and down that wretched hill time after time, increasing and decreasing the length of the tail and adjusting the saddle string to no avail whatsoever. My kites didn't fly, and I didn't have the common sense to admit defeat in the face of my chums, whose efforts of apparently identical design and manufacture, soared in the clouds.

I watched grown men with 'proper' kites closely, hoping to pick up a few tips from them. They even had refinements, like attaching spring balances to their lines to record the number of pounds their kites pulled, and some affixed little parachutes to the lines which could be shaken off at a good height to descend to the ground.

One day a Chinese man appeared, bringing a very fragile kite of coloured tissue. It fairly leapt out of his hands and soared aloft where it performed all sorts of aerobatics, apparently at his spoken command. We watched amazed, and eventually he landed the kite and was persuaded to sell it to one of my acquaintances for sixpence. The lad could never fly it like the Chinaman however and shortly after crashed it irreparably.

The next day, the Chinaman was back with another tissue paper kite, and after yet a further demonstration of stunt flying, the kite was sold to an onlooker for sixpence. The word soon got out, but Mr. Wong tired of his unexpected fame and the pressing throng of young admirers, and he failed to appear again. I must say I have never seen anyone fly a kite quite like he did again, not even the two-line control kites of the present day. Fiendishly cunning, as they say.

Our dreams were realised when the relatives of my best friend bought an ex-RAF kite for him in a government surplus sale. It folded down flat and came complete with its own tubular carrying case. Unrolled, and tensioned by strong elastic webbing, it was quite a monster to behold, and was virtually guaranteed to zoom aloft regardless of the weather.

We knotted two balls of string together to accommodate the pull, and wound it on a wooden frame. We couldn't afford much string, but even with the modest amount we had, that kite never failed to fly well.

Unfortunately its success was almost its undoing, for the continued interest of small boys tends to taper off when nothing much is happening, and a kite, once airborne, needs little attention. Exactly what the fight was about I cannot remember, but fight we did, and in wrestling each other to the ground, the kite string was let go, and off it went. We ran after it as fast as we could, but in vain, and the kite trailing its line, drifted off toward Croxted Road.

By the greatest good luck, the winding frame got entangled in the branches of a chestnut tree, one of the last on the fringe of the park, and, anchored there the kite regained height and flew bravely over the Parade. The chestnut was a tree that neither of us could climb and we were really desperate about our next move when help arrived.

An adult kite-flyer had seen our predicament, and having safely tethered his kite to a tree, came along with a spare bail of twine. He managed to lasso our winder with almost his first throw, and heaved it down into our anxious hands. We folded up the kite and went home early. I don't think we ever went kiting again.

The Swings

The original children's play area was located in the old stable yard behind the Mansion. Known to everyone as 'the swings', it was immensely popular and always full of youngsters yelling their heads off and having a fine old time. It contained two rows of swings (one for juveniles and one for tots), two maypoles, a large and a small roundabout, a see-saw and two rocking horses.

Unfortunately I was a totally uncoordinated child, and thus was quite unable to work a swing for myself. I could only enjoy this particular pastime if I managed to persuade a friend to give me a push, but even so I can remember being shoved hard enough to see over the wall.

My own favourite was the rocking horse, a four-seater job, with a cast horse head at the front. It was named 'Bonnie Brighteyes', and its mechanism allowed it to be thrashed up into a motion guaranteed to throw you off the front or back seat unless you clung on for dear life. It had a real kick.

Looking back, the whole set of equipment was quite lethal, with an enormous potential for personal injury, yet in spite of the hours spent there I cannot remember much blood being spilt. Every boy (and quite a few girls) sported cuts and bruises on knees and elbows, so I suppose we regarded extra damage sustained in the swings as part of our way of life.

Just before the outbreak of war, the 'new' swings were opened on the far side of the park toward Tulse Hill. These were very sophisticated, and included the added attractions of a slide and a sand pit, all very much state-of-art for the time. There were two disadvantages though.

The first was the distance involved. If travelling time was deducted from playing time often the pleasure factor did not outweigh the inconvenience. Secondly, the presence of the Brixtonites in what was after all their home ground, led to a form of gang warfare and getting bashed up became the norm.

On the whole I preferred the 'old' swings, and it was a sad day for me and my friends when they were closed. I understand the site is now used to store the park's tractor, mowers and the like.

Speaker's Corner

For many years there was a special spot set aside for those who wished to harangue passers-by on subjects closest to their hearts. The most popular time was Sunday afternoons when six or seven individuals mounted their soapboxes and sounded forth on matters of moment, ranging through politics to religion, and a 'good' speaker could easily attract a crowd in very quick time.

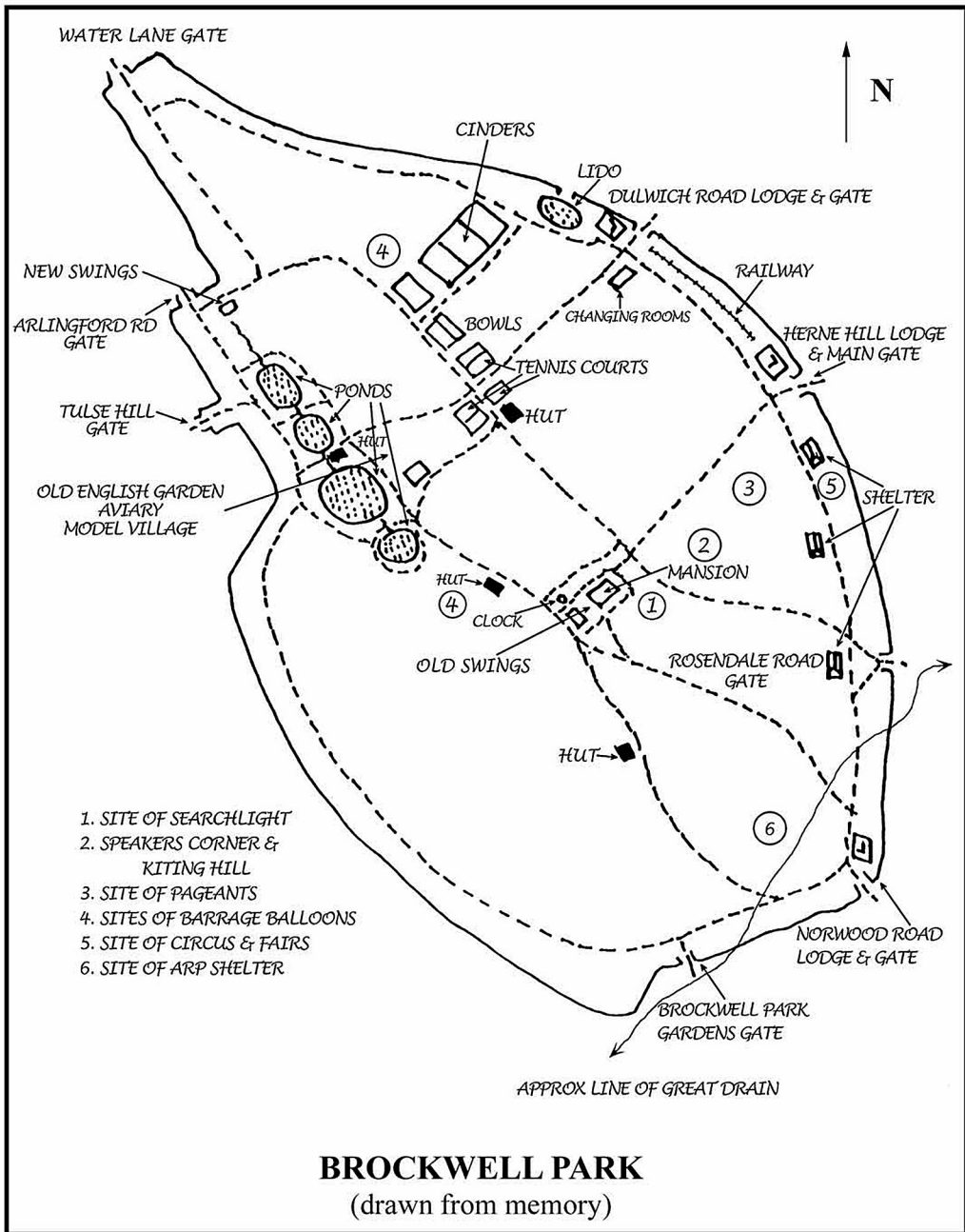
For myself, I always preferred the political speechmakers who not only came complete with folding rostrums and placards, but also had their feeders in the crowd who commented loudly to the spokesman, giving him apparently spontaneous responses to emphasise his arguments. They also jostled away any embarrassing hecklers from rival organisations. This led on occasion to fisticuffs, the appearance of a constable and even an arrest, most satisfying to the youngest of onlookers like myself.

There were the regulars every week, the Jesus-freaks and hippies of their day, the campaigners (anti-war, anti-government, anti-church et al), and those who simply chose a subject, spoke for ten minutes or so, and threw the matter to the crowd for open discussion. In all Speaker's Corner presented an interesting divertissement when you tired of watching football or feeding the ducks.

One incident stands out in my mind. A particular speaker of pink political persuasion was coming to the end of his weekly message to the proletariat. 'Brothers' he exclaimed, 'the people do not want promises, they want power' and he laid such emphasis on the last word that his upper dentures were blown out of his mouth like a rocket.

Without falling off his stand, his right hand flew up and caught them amidst much applause from the plebs.

We all agreed it was the best bit of slip fielding we had seen outside the Oval!



The Aviary and Model Village

I have it in mind that originally the aviary was housed inside the Old English Garden, and then occupied a place against the outside of the Garden wall alongside the big lake.

I can't say I have ever been particularly interested in birds, either caged or in the wild, but there is a certain fascination attached to an aviary, and I always stopped to look at the birds when I was passing.

During my time the birds became more colourful and exotic as fancier species became available after the war, and I could never understand why some of my peers rattled the cages just to upset them. That, and worse still, cutting the wires to allow them to escape seemed so stupid and pointless.

At one time a few rabbits and hens were kept there, but I suspect that this was a bit of private enterprise on the part of the Staff. It should be remembered that everyone kept rabbits or chickens during the war years, and the really keen could forgo their egg ration in exchange for poultry food, if you fancied keeping a few fowls.

The model village was built next door to the aviary, but was not, as one of my more fanciful cousins imagined, a latter day Welwyn Garden City. (She had just got engaged and thought she was being taken up the park to see a series of Show Houses.)

The village was the gift of a private individual who had made the little houses, shops, cottages and church out of concrete and stone.

They stood about 18 inches high and represented a village street complete with pond, millstream, crossroads etc, and were set out with miniature shrubs and fir-trees. They were very attractive indeed, and inspired many of us to make our own model villages in our back gardens at home.

I made mine of fire clay, but as my mother drew the line at allowing my buildings to be baked in her oven, they disintegrated during the first winter. Those in the park however were good for several years.

The Old English Garden

Not being blessed with green fingers, the Garden had no great appeal for me, although it was one of the showpieces of the park. I'm afraid its beauty held little attraction for me, but in any event, as unaccompanied children were banned, I was not a regular visitor.

My parents, on the other hand, never walked in the park without making for the garden, and I was reluctantly dragged along. It had but two features that interested me, namely, the well and the sundial.

I always took a few pebbles in my pocket to drop in the well and listened for the satisfying splash as they hit the water. I was told I could work out how deep it was by counting off the seconds from drop to splash, but I thought it eminently more sensible and get a better result with a long piece of string.

The sundial never seemed to be very accurate to me, and why it was built 8 feet up a wall I never did discover. I stood in front of that thing for ages waiting for the sun to shine, whilst my people drifted off to admire the plants and shrubs. If ever there were a good sharp shadow, the dial (by my reading) would indicate half past eleven when in fact it was three in the afternoon. Even allowing for Summer Time and Double British Summer Time, I could never get closer than a couple of hours to reality, and so felt it was a big letdown.

Of course, the Garden was beautiful, and a great credit to the gardeners who kept the beds in pristine condition summer and winter through. How those men must have toiled to achieve it.

In the centre of the garden was a small pond with a fountain, stocked with goldfish. One of the fish was a real giant, twice the size of the others, who I imagined he ate from time to time. He survived all the years I visited the park and may still be there.

Many people came to sit in that garden, and when I grew older I realised why. It was the stillness and peace of the place.

My own mother would go there after my brother was killed in the war, and I'm sure she found the solace to help her in her grief.

The Lido

I don't recall a great deal about the construction of the Lido, mainly, I suspect, because the site was very well fenced off. The exterior brick wall was built early in the construction stage and precluded little boys making close investigations.

There was much excitement when the pool was opened and it became very popular indeed, certainly in the summer months when long queues formed awaiting admission at each session.

I did not learn to swim until I was 12 and although I enjoyed it, I invariably emerged from the water blue with cold, and shivered uncontrollably for an hour after, much to the amusement of my fatter friends. Until I grew up a bit and put on some weight, swimming in general and the Lido in particular did not claim my attention.

When finally I went swimming regularly, it was because you could get in for free before 8 o'clock in the morning. My friend and I got up at seven and tramped across the dewy grass to join the regular stalwarts who swam early each day. There were perhaps only a dozen at best, usually less, and the whole pool was there to do as you pleased.

There were seldom any ladies present, so it was not unknown for some of the lads to take the plunge nude, especially if it was known that the supervisor had gone elsewhere. This was quite contrary to the published rules, which required gentlemen to wear slippers under their costumes.

How times change. Present day costumes are even briefer than the under-slippers required in the thirties.

One bright morning we met a chum who had just come from the pool and he told us of a remarkable occurrence. Apparently the Brylcreem machine had gone berserk and was pumping out its contents without let or payment. Brylcreem was a very popular hair preparation for men, and at this time was being promoted on the advertisement boards by a photograph of Denis Compton, the great post-war sportsman.

Our friend had emerged to find a container in order to capitalise on this opportunity, and we were only too willing to join him. We found empty milk bottles on the doorsteps of houses in Dulwich Road and hastened back to the Lido in case the bonanza ran dry or authority placed the machine out of bounds.

Happily, neither had happened, and we left the premises that day with a pint of Brylcreem each, hair plastered down, and smelling like a chemist's shop. We were fortunate, for those arriving a little later could only milk the machine of a few drips, and soon the supervisor locked the dispenser completely far too late.

Of course, our problem was how to get the darn stuff out of the milk bottles, but we managed it, and for a while we became the most sweet-smelling, slick-haired kids in the district.

The Railway

I think it must have been in the middle of the fifties that a narrow gauge railway was assembled in the park to operate on high days and holidays in season. It ran from just behind Herne Hill gate up to Dulwich Road gate, several hundred yards away, where a shed was built to accommodate the engine and coaches.

Its single track ran in a fairly straight line, which was landscaped with shrubbery and small trees, and it was even found necessary to build a small embankment.

The station was at the Herne Hill end where there was a platform and a shed to serve as a ticket office.

I am ashamed to say I really cannot remember what the locomotive was like (a 2-4-2, I think) and it normally hauled three wagons bearing half a dozen people each, but I never rode on it myself, for my pocket money was very limited. When operating, it always seemed to be well patronised with children and adults enjoying the return ride.



The Author outside his home in Hawarden Grove at the time of the Silver Jubilee of King George V. Note the ornamental railings, later removed for the war effort (see Page 29).

The Great Drain

Just before the war a great new sewer was laid across South London in an undertaking that took many months to complete, and which disrupted much business. It snaked its way from Streatham, across the park to Dulwich and beyond, and it became a constantly changing tableau of incidents for myself and my friends.

Nowadays the job would have been achieved with a far smaller workforce and in an infinitely shorter time, but in the late Thirties there was not a great deal of mechanical muscle available and labour was cheap. There was no problem with parked cars as very few private cars were on the streets, and the majority of traffic consisted of commercial vehicles and public transport. Where necessary, diversions were easily arranged.

The method of laying the drain was quite simple. First came the surveyors, sombre suited and wearing bowler hats, with their sheaves of papers and plans. We kids took little notice of them (or they of us) for their duties appeared of little consequence and they passed by swiftly.

Next came the men who outlined the position of the sewer on the ground in chalk and wooden pegs, and finally the actual pipes were delivered and placed in long lines on the surface adjacent to the site in which they would shortly be laid.

These pipes were made of concrete and stood about four feet high, flanged at one end. Each was 15 to 20 feet long and seemed positively vast, offering, as they did, new and exciting play potential to the street kids. You could have grand games of chase through these overground tunnels and we effected a peculiar stooping gait, with bent knees and dropped heads to avoid peripheral injury.

It took quite a talent to run at speed along the curved insides of the pipes and greater skill and courage was needed to run along the tops. Here, a misplaced foot could lead to a nasty fall, as we all discovered in time.

The pipes actually ran in front of our house, in Hawarden Road, and although the road surface was broken by pneumatic drills, the trenches were dug by hand and the workmen heaved the clay up by pick and shovel. Several gangs worked on a length in the organised chaotic manner of their kind, and all too soon the pipes were bedded and set, never to be seen again.

To save running round two sides of a triangle, the pipes took a short cut and were laid across a corner of the park, entering at the top of Brockwell Park Gardens, and leaving again at Rosendale Road (see map on Pages 18 and 19).

For some strange reason much of the pipework in the park was doubled up, and it ran in tandem across this line.

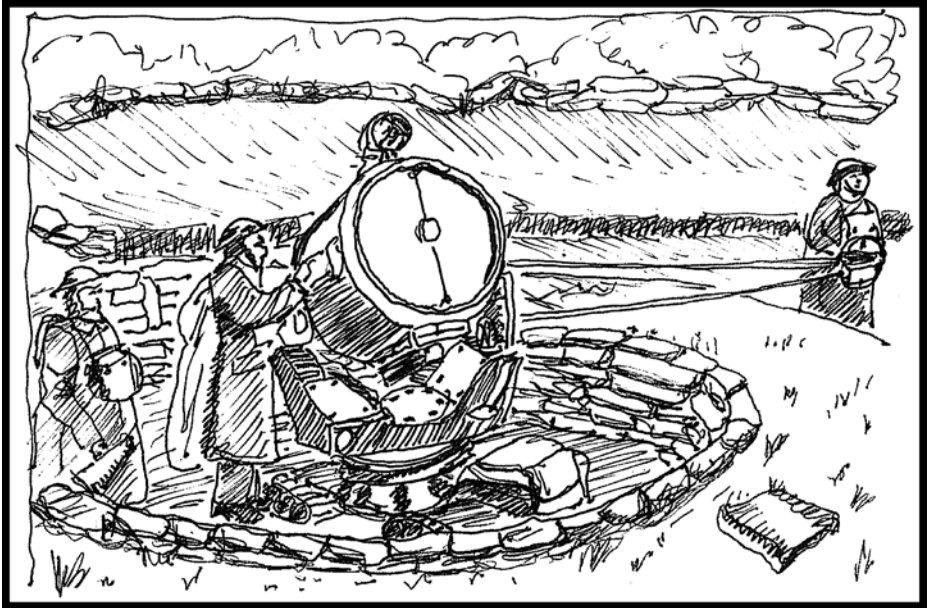
The park railings were cut at the egress point in the Norwood Road, and no doubt a sharp-eyed researcher could still locate the weldings where the repairs were effected. For many years too, the scars in the roads where the trenches ran could be followed for miles, but these are now long gone.

Aspects of War

With the commencement of war in September 1939 various changes came about which quite altered the running and condition of the park. The matters which I mention here have no particular priority of time or significance, but are included to illustrate how the national emergency affected all aspects of life, even in a place where the unimaginative would hardly look for change.

The Army, Air Force and Civil Defence all used the open spaces that the park provided to accommodate their especial contribution to the war effort.

Fairly adjacent to the Manor, the Army chose to establish a searchlight unit, and dug a large circular emplacement. This consisted of a central pit for the projector itself surrounded by a concentric circular footway for the operators to move the traversing arm.



SEARCHLIGHT PIT

The spoil was thrown up outside this footway to form a blast wall for the protection of the crew.

Additionally, a short distance away was another pit; this time much deeper and concrete lined. In one side of the wall a hole was cut to store equipment boxes, and in the centre of the floor was planted a substantial post with a metal pipe or spigot in the top.

We surmised that this was a machine gun mounting, but more probably it was the fixing post for a sound locator, which was a primitive form of direction-finder. This gadget had four 'ears' arranged in cruciform, which picked up the sound of enemy aircraft engines, and the operators, listening by earphone, could calculate the approximate direction and speed of the target. This information was fed back to the searchlight crew, who then had something slightly better than intuition to help them seek the raider.



SOUND LOCATOR

The Germans, in an effort to frustrate the efforts of the sound locators, desynchronised the engines of their bombers, producing the characteristic throbbing sound which became so well known to all those who lived through the blitz.

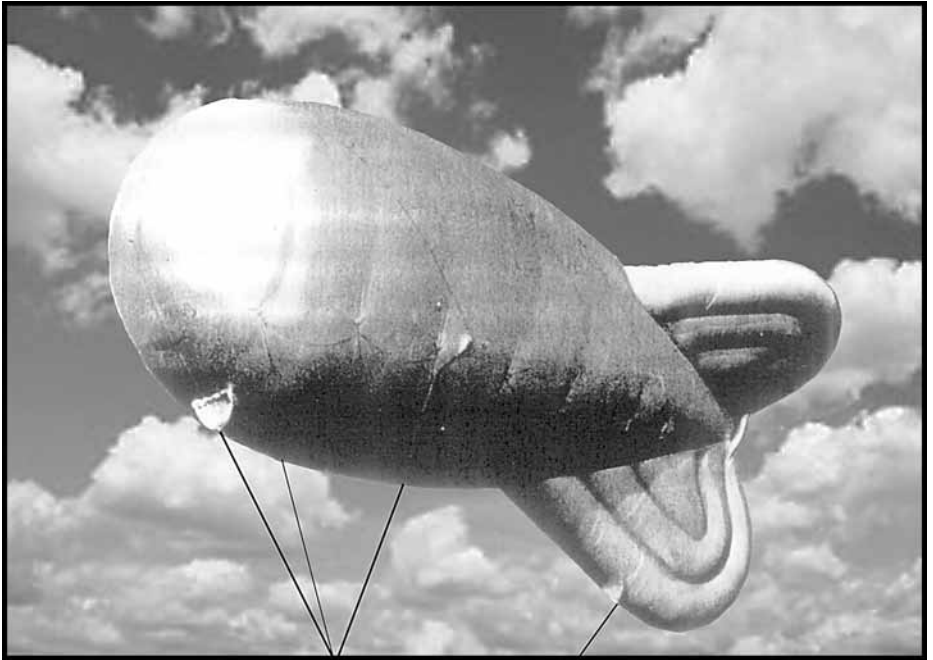
These two emplacements remained in situ long after the army moved out, and provided great playgrounds for would-be commandos - guess who?

Dad's Army, the Home Guard, also used the park for training exercises, mostly on Sunday mornings and spent many weary hours digging slit trenches and defences. We kids promptly filled them in again on Sunday afternoons or, in wet weather sailed twig boats in them, as they filled with water.

The RAF had two barrage balloon sites in the park, operated by ladies of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force most of the time. These balloon units were pretty well identical wherever they were situated, and consisted of a winch lorry, a ground pulley block, gas stores and a hut to accommodate the crew. The balloon, a great silver-grey monster, was usually kept inflated and anchored to the ground by several mooring ropes when not in use. When flown, the winch on the back of the lorry was controlled by an operator who sat inside a metal cage (a precaution against back-lash should the cable break) and who remained there at all times when the balloon was aloft. Whilst no doubt it was a 'cushy number', I suspect it was tedious to the extreme.

From time to time the balloons did break free and drift about for miles, generally ending up by demolishing some poor unfortunate's roof. However it was an ill wind etc. and crashed balloons, if got at by an impoverished populace before its rightful owners, yielded splendid





A BARRAGE BALLOON

materials for the making of blackout curtains, shopping bags and even underwear from the interior linings.

Several air raid shelters were built on the perimeter of the park, giving easy access to passing civilians. They were quite unpretentious, being simple brick built boxes with a blast proof trap entrance at each end. Although some were equipped with bench seating inside, most were completely devoid of furnishings and comfort. Due to their misuse (both immoral and lavatorial) they were later fitted with lockable doors. I well remember being in a barbers shop at Herne Hill when the air raid siren sounded, and a uniformed policeman had to jump up from the chair and depart half-shaven, as he had the key to the shelter by the park gate.

There was a shelter at the Rosendale Road entrance which I recall very well for the following reason. One night after a raid, a large hole was discovered in the forecourt of a shop on the corner of Hawarden Grove, and it was deduced that there was something nasty and unexploded still in it. The immediate area was evacuated, and the nearby residents taken off to this shelter, together with their emergency kit and pets. (We all kept a suitcase packed for such an occasion). My father refused to leave home believing, correctly as it transpired, that we could come to no harm by virtue of the protection offered by the houses between us and the 'thing'. Nevertheless, the area was roped off and the bomb squad duly arrived, poked around for a bit, found what they wanted, and went off with it.

The evacuees returned home, grateful that they had not been obliged to stay more than a few hours in the shelter. I helped some of them to carry their stuff back.

There was also a fairly large underground public shelter built near the Norwood Gate, controlled by Air Raid Wardens (ARP), and equipped with bunks and toilet facilities. It was a large site and was fenced off to prevent accidents to the ventilators.

It was well used for a time, but unfortunately it received a direct hit, resulting in many casualties, some fatal. Eventually experience showed that sheltering in a cellar or in a cupboard under the stairs gave adequate protection against everything but a direct hit. Ordinary householders could also have Anderson shelters for their gardens or Morrison shelters (rather like a steel table) for indoors.

We had a Morrison eventually, which replaced the oak dining table, which I slept under for some months. I can still clearly recall the undersides of that table 50 years on.

The big underground shelter was also a headquarters to the ARP people, who held training and demonstration sessions there.

On one occasion they put up a hut with doors at both ends and filled it with smoke from a home-made bomb. The idea was to teach amateur fire-fighters how best to move across a smoke filled room, but the people who were thrust in at one end looked decidedly ill when they emerged at the other, so the benefits were of some doubt.

There was also training with stirrup pumps, which generally ended up with everyone getting very wet. A stirrup pump was nothing more than a large garden syringe, which when vigorously pumped up and down, sucked water from a bucket, forced it along a length of hose to emerge as a jet at the end. It required at least three persons to operate it, one to pump, one to direct the jet, and most importantly, one (or more) to keep the bucket filled with water. Done properly it was simple and effective, but life is not like that. The water carriers usually spilt more water than they ever put into the reservoir bucket; the pumper very quickly became exhausted, not being amused when the water carriers tipped water down his legs, and filling his boots. Meanwhile, some distance away at the site of the fire, the nozzle operator roundly cursed the rest of his team when only a miserable dribble of water came through the hose. The command 'Water On' became a catch phrase to indicate a complete cockup!

We were obliged at this time, not to drain our used bath-water away, in order to provide an immediate reservoir in the event of a firebomb attack. We were also provided with coal shovels fitted with long handles, to enable incendiary bombs to be scooped up and carried out to burn harmlessly in the garden or street. Bombsites were made into dams where several thousand gallons of water could be held. Some were brick-built, but mostly they were circular prefabricated tanks. Large signs indicated where these Emergency Water Supplies (EWS) could be found, but generally speaking, they appeared after the worst of the raids were over.

Large tracts of the park were given over to allotments, and some remarkable results were achieved too. Encouraged by 'Dig for Victory' weeks, competitions and shows were organised and continued for several years. As far as most families were concerned we became worse off, foodwise, after the war, when supplies from America terminated, so the produce from the allotments was very welcome. It is difficult to imagine that crops once grew where cricket is now played.

Of course, many bombs fell in the park, some exploded and some did not. It was not unusual to see teams of squaddies digging out or filling in, after a heavy raid. We often found the smouldering remains of incendiary bombs, which were borne home in triumph, and I remember a good tail fin with perhaps some German writing on it, could be exchanged for any amount of anti-aircraft shell shrapnel. We all formed our own

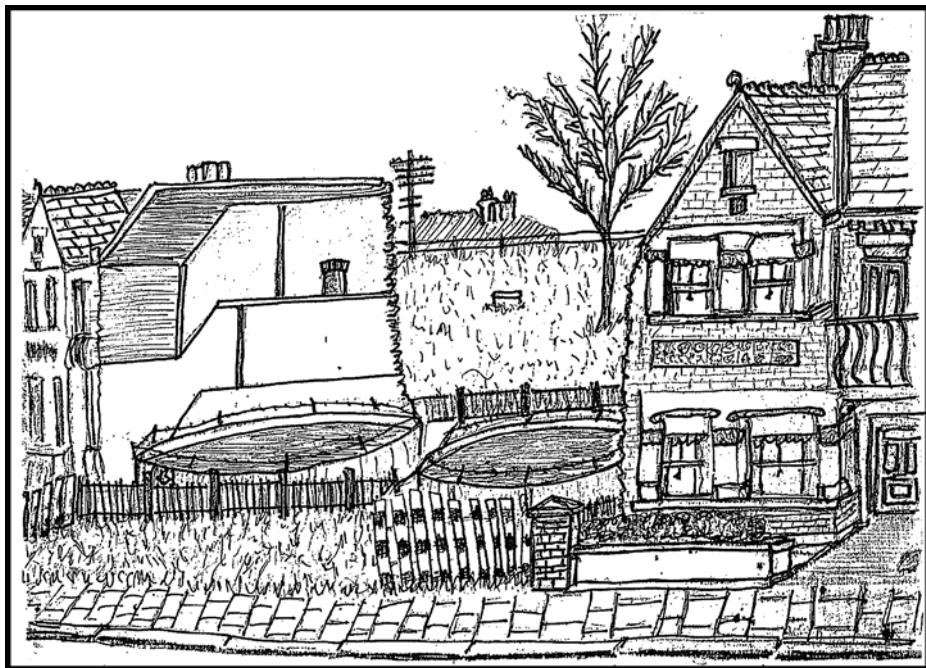
collections of memorabilia, which included anything vaguely military, begged, borrowed or stolen from the forces. At one time I acquired some cannon shells from a German fighter which was shot down in Kent. They came to me fourth or fifth hand via a boy I knew whose evacuated brother went to school in the area of the wreckage. How these explosive shells travelled safely through the ownership of a series of small boys remains a mystery, but I know that the Police at West Dulwich jolly soon came round looking for them once the word got out.

One day we found the keepers had made an emergency fence of bench seats around an object that had dropped from an aircraft. It was a long cigar-shaped affair and might have been a jettisoned long-range fuel tank. The front end was bashed in and revealed what appeared to be wrapping paper. My mother decided that it must have been the airman's sandwiches, and no amount of persuasion would convince her otherwise!

Fairly early in the war, all our iron gates and fences were requisitioned as scrap metal for the war effort. Only those guarding basement areas were excused.

In spite of this, the iron railings around the park were not taken, though how they escaped the order I cannot imagine. It was just as well though, for replacement with even the most modest of fencing would have cost the earth, and in the event suitable (or indeed any) timber was not available.

Goodness knows what contribution our gates made to winning the war, but the disappearance of the ironwork had a very bleak visual effect, and sadly little or nothing of it was ever subsequently replaced.

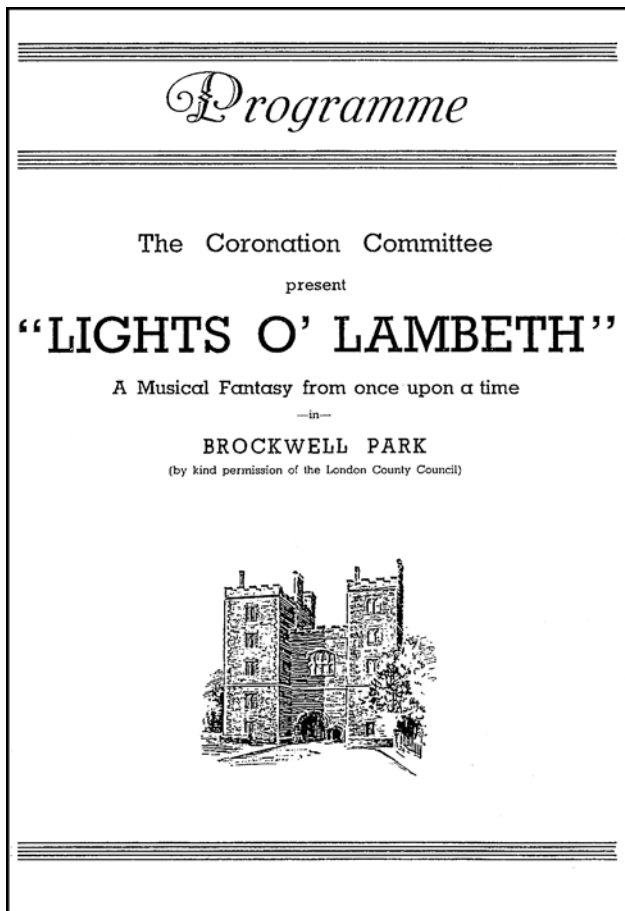


Pencil sketch by the Author, aged 11, of the Emergency Water Supply (EWS) tanks on the bomb site, opposite his house in Hawarden Grove.

Four Theatres and a Bandstand

Well, the bandstand came first, situated on an open space in front of the Mansion, and was a typical ornate affair of its kind. A band would play there most Sunday afternoons in the summer, and there were evening concerts too. I remember being confused over the word 'solo' when applied to an instrumentalist, arguing with my father as to why the rest of the band played even when the programme stated that a solo was to be given. He did his best to explain, but I was not wholly convinced. I think the performances were mostly by military bands for the musicians always seemed to wear dress uniform.

There was great excitement when the Council decided to stage its pageant, 'The Lights 'o Lambeth' in the park. I was too young to remember a great deal about it, but I recall being taken to the site on successive Sundays to see the construction of the theatre complex taking shape. The front of the house was a depiction of a huge Tudor style mansion, based loosely on Lambeth Palace in design, complete with red brickwork, half-timbering, lattice windows and tall twisting chimneys. As far as I could see, it looked most realistic, and as it was built before the days of modern steel scaffolding and



Programme for “Lights o’ Lambeth”

Commencing
MONDAY, JULY 12th, FOR ONE WEEK ONLY
EVENINGS at 7 p.m.

MATINEES :
WEDNESDAY & SATURDAY at 3 p.m.

THE GONDOLIERS

or

THE KING OF BARATARIA

Written by W. S. GILBERT Composed by ARTHUR SULLIVAN

Orchestra under the Direction of ISIDORE GODFREY

ACT I **Venice**

ACT II **Pavilion in the Palace of Barataria**

(An interval of Three Months is supposed to elapse between Acts I and II)

INTERVAL OF FIFTEEN MINUTES BETWEEN THE ACTS

Book of Words may be obtained from the Attendant, Price 1/6

Acting Manager	} For	} R. D'OYLY CARTE	... LEONARD ROOKE
Musical Director ISIDORE GODFREY
Stage Manager HARRY ARNOLD
Assistant Stage Manager...			... R. HUGH JONES

Manager (for the Open-Air Theatre, Brockwell Park) ... C. J. H. BONE

Open-Air Theatre Programme (price 2d)

mechanical muscle, there were a lot of workmen and heaps of materials involved. Unfortunately, I have no idea of the programme of events or how long the spectacle lasted but it was all a great success. I suppose it must have been in about 1936.

Thus encouraged, the Council put on another spectacular, a couple of years later, but this was in the modern idiom and entitled 'The Symphony of Youth'. The theatre this time was very Art Nouveau in appearance, a style much in favour then, influencing both architecture and artefacts. Great slab-sided panels flanked the proscenium with gently curved and fluted ornamentation and all finished in pale cream and pastel yellows. It also boasted an electric organ, something quite new in this country at that time, and greatly admired. The instrument was tested each morning during the run of the show, and could be heard quite clearly in my home, perhaps half a mile away. I remember my brother tipping me out of bed on a Saturday morning and obliging me to stand to attention whilst the organist practised the National Anthem.

The actual performance itself was a series of scenes enacted by various youth organisations and was full of movement and colour. My favourite was the item involving an attack by Indians on a Cowboy outpost. The Cowboys built a stockade on the stage and hordes of Indians descended upon it, actually running from the back of the grassy auditorium, through the astonished audience, and clambered up onto the stage, where they were killed off by much musket fire. I expect there was more plot to it than that. It all ended when the Indian Chief in a full feathered head-dress, made friends with the Boss Cowboy and they smoked a peace-pipe together amidst thunderous applause.

The participants in this cameo were all local schoolboys, and my school at Rosendale Road provided a quota of Indians. The fortunate few not only got time off school, but

LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL		
HOLIDAYS AT HOME, 1943		
Entertainments and Recreation for the Public		
BANDS	CONCERTS	DANCING
ATHLETICS (Competitions)	BOXING	BOWLS (Competitions)
FAIRS		GOLF
LAWN TENNIS		CRICKET
PUTTING	SWIMMING (Galas)	BOATING
<i>For particulars see weekly notices in Local Press or consult posters at the various Parks</i>		
County Hall, S.E.1.	A. R. MAWSON, Chief Officer of Parks Department.	

Above and opposite - Advert for 'Holidays at Home'

also got bronze make-up, knives, bows and arrows, tomahawks and all the paraphernalia that we would-be Indians only dreamed of. After the dress rehearsal, 'our' Indians were allowed to come back to school still in their war paint and they were not reluctant to show off their golden-brown chests under their school shirts. I envied them only slightly less than the schools who provided the Cowboys.

The start of the war in 1939 put an end to any further theatricals for a bit, but just after the Blitz had subsided and the Home Front had quietened down, the Government promoted what became known as 'Holidays at Home'. It should be remembered that travel during wartime was greatly restricted, with many areas completely out of bounds to civilians. For the first couple of years, thoughts of holidays away were out of the question. However, as military pressures eased, people longed for a break in routine, and the idea of holidays at home was conceived.

When I first heard that the London County Council intended to build an open-air opera house in the park, my childish wisdom deemed the intention to be quite mad. Who on earth, let alone in South London, would want to come to our park to hear that rubbish? But the plan went ahead; the old bandstand was demolished, and in its place rose a very creditable playhouse with a generous stage, dressing rooms, offices, and a real orchestra pit. Perhaps it was cheap and cheerful, probably lacking in the professional niceties and, as it was wartime, not over-endowed with every facility, but it was there, and by golly, it worked. They even managed to prevent the orchestra pit from filling with water eventually.

And what concerts we had, the full works, from Musical Comedy to Grand Opera. I sat at the back in the sixpenny seats, enthralled and mesmerised by it all. It was sheer magic, my musical education had begun for, nothing quite like it had happened to me before.

THE COUNCIL FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF MUSIC AND THE ARTS

CEMA administers a Treasury grant to maintain the highest standard of art in war-time and to bring to people all the refreshment and recreation which music, drama and painting can give. It is happy to co-operate with the L.C.C. in their Holidays at Home season this year in the belief that Londoners will welcome an opportunity of enjoying first-class opera, ballet, light opera and musical comedy in a congenial open-air setting

NOTICE

If an Air Raid Warning is received during the performance, those desiring to leave the Auditorium may do so, but the performance will continue. The nearest Shelters are in the Park, Norwood Road. Directions will be given by the Attendants.

Cycle Storage 2d.

There was no old tat either as we had first class companies doing first class performances on golden summer evenings that seemed to have no end. I saw the Red Shadow of the Desert Song win Margot where his alter ego had failed, and Mephistopheles tempt Faust with the lovely Marguerite. The young Marie Rambert introduced her ballet company, carefully explaining the finer points of each dance to we uninitiated in the audience, catching us off balance with asides like 'the sun is in my eyes, am I squinting?' In fact, I suspect that any top-liner who was in London at the time came to perform at Herne Hill, and the audiences, doubtful at first, flocked to see and hear them. It was a huge success.

Sadly it only lasted one season I think. The new secret weapon of Germany, the V1 flying bombs began to fall on London the next year, and once again, large-scale evacuation took place. I can see the 'doodle-bugs' flying over now, and hoping their motors did not cut out until they were overhead. That way, you knew they would fall and explode past you. If you heard one stop before it reached you, it was time for a mad dash for the cellar or any convenient cover. Later a terrifying refinement was introduced, the doodle-bug that turned round when its motor stopped and came back at you. I was truly scared by them, perhaps the only time in the whole of the war that I felt afraid, and I was quite glad to be sent to the country. When I got back, the new theatre had gone, blown to pieces by a bomb. All that was left was the skeletal framework, grotesquely bent and sagging, with not a vestige of its original cladding remaining. I imagine that a doodle-bug had landed on it, or very close by, and probably the sacrifice of the theatre had saved the Mansion. When the wreckage was finally cleared away, all that was left of the alfresco opera house was the orchestra pit, which they earthed in and filled with flowers. It is still there, though few will recognise its significance now.

The fourth and last theatre was a very small affair compared to its predecessor, and erected on the same site sometime after the war had finished. It consisted of no more than a covered stage with a small dressing room in the wings either side. There was no specialist lighting, just a few florescent tubes, and the only other equipment was an amplifier and loudspeakers. It was essentially a concert party venue, giving a platform for general entertainment of the simplest kind. I cannot remember anything particularly noteworthy happening thereon, although there was always a programme of activities posted, including Sunday concerts by military bands and the occasional variety show. During the Summer we had open-air dancing which I think took place on Wednesday evenings, hosted by a husband and wife team of professional dancers. They attracted a fairly regular clientele from all walks of life, and all ages too. It was good fun both to watch and participate, all for free. The two hosts conducted proceedings in some style, he in a white tuxedo and she in a cocktail dress - and both with broad 'Lambeff' accents. 'Lydiz an' gents, perleeze tyke yor partnerz further Vleeta'.

We did the Valetta, the Lancers, the Hokey-Cokey, the Palais Glide, waltzes and quick steps.

It was a happy time.

A Brockwell Boy

Jeffrey Rumble

