

‘This Strange Place I Know Too Well’ (BY FAR THE BEST ROUTE TO AREA 10)’ by Dr. Paul O’Kane

If you take a bus from town get off at Camberwell Road / Albany Road. That’s what the computer voice on the bus will call it, so you don’t even have to look out for it. If you get off there you will see a park in front of you, and a fence and a gate to go through. It’s Burgess Park.

Please enter the gates. Think of it as an escapade if you will. Once you’ve entered the gates you will sometimes see –depending on the time of day and the weather - slightly derelict persons here, perhaps face down, beer can in hand, having stumbled into the park the way people once sought sanctuary from the hostilities of society by entering churches. The edge of the park is still strongly influenced by the proximity of the busy road and it’s a zone into which you would only stumble and stop, if you were somehow desperate. Anyone in better shape is likely to enter the park, either to traverse it on the way to another place or, to enter more deeply into it so as to feel its real benefits. To simply plunge headlong here, within ‘spitting distance’ of the bus stop is not really to fully enjoy or appreciate, nor enter into the spirit of the park, or what parks are really all about.

Nevertheless, parks do, unavoidably have edges and it is perhaps good to know that these edges serve a purpose and that someone uses them. Otherwise they may appear strangely superfluous, or fall prey to entrepreneurs who might regard the apparent redundancy of

the edges of parks as an excuse to build profitable capital there, thus reducing the overall dimensions of the park by shifting its edges a little further in. The option to wander into a public park at any time of day (or night for that matter) and simply drop, is of course available to every free citizen, and it may only be a certain sense of normative responsibility that keeps us from doing so on a regular basis. But for most of us, once we have entered a park, we tend to push-on, at least a little further, if only to have made entering the park truly worthwhile and allow it to serve its primary purpose as an alternative space, an island amid the car-crushed city streets we know too well.

There is usually some good reason to go on, some motivation, deadline, appointment, gain or pleasure that justifies moving through a park and not simply collapsing immediately at its edge. Then again, why not abandon the heart of parks and popularise their under used and under appreciated edges, which only those few extremists referred to above have, as yet, found a good use for. What is most useful about the edges of parks is the fact that they are so readily accessible and the time it takes to reach them is far shorter than the time it might take to, for example, traverse the whole park or enter it deeply enough to lose contact with the surrounding traffic. In our increasingly hurried, technologically rushed lives, speed is often of the essence. And so, these quickly accessible parts of the park should really gain in value the faster our lives become.

You may notice the unusual straightness of the path on which you are walking. I will return to this important point in a moment, for the time being, look immediately to your left and you will notice a strangely half-hearted, rather failed looking piece of now-

redundant splendour, evidence of activities of some long-departed well-meaning members of the local council to provide the park with some kind of ornamental frontispiece, by which to announce the park to the world, in case it wasn't sufficiently apparent. The remains of a little curved brickwork and a small planting of symmetrical shrubs huddle around a small but effective Red Maple. But this is all that remains of this little scene, which somehow invokes closed bandstands and winter seafronts in its melancholy appeal to a glory that was probably always –as the English say- 'above its station' (i.e. beyond the reach of its inescapably lowly status). Perhaps this serves to illustrate my earlier point, that places, zones, spaces, recreational facilities, do have and do need both entrances and edges, and, like the start of an important piece of music, require some assertion or ornament to mark the point at which one thing is ending and another begins.

Before you begin pushing along the path, note to your right a mildly intelligent assembly of logs, woven into a clumsy corral by well-meaning contributors in the 1980s or 1990s. This object is rarely used for anything, but now and then you may see a shady-looking youth using it as a vantage point from which to scrutinise buses and passengers at the nearby stop. The artist Keith Coventry once made a piece of bronze inspired by Burgess Park's well-intentioned ornaments, and it was installed as a definition of postmodernism at Tate Britain.

If you now push along the path you will find yourself passing tennis courts, guarded by a majestic conifer. If you look through the matrix of nets and fencing you can discern,

beyond the courts, a lovely period square which film crews regularly hire to produce illusions of past times on film. It was also used as a stereotypically 'housey' square for a Goldfrapp video. As you pass the tennis clubhouse note its vaguely Japanese-influenced design and artful solution to the problems of making a building that is both welcoming and vandal-proof in an area notorious for high crime rates. The tennis club was installed as part of a solution to drug use and prostitution on the fringes of the park which caused disruption to, and increased the insecurities of the square's professional inhabitants.

Just beyond the courts is a spot where I found the biggest edible fungus I have ever seen, and also where, every year, a middle-aged man -of, I suspect, Sri-Lankan origin, returns to practice advanced yoga techniques wearing nothing but loin-cloth-like underpants and a well seasoned skin.

Once you have passed these significant sites you may feel that you are, at last, fully immersed in the park and now somewhat distanced from the road and the city.

All histories -I have noticed- tend to be contested, bickered about, and rightly so as all are clearly unreliable. The shifting qualities of our present perspectives are sufficient to warn us against confidently upholding any notion of accurate or objective history. While so-called historical 'facts' were -even in their time of origin- subject to unreliability, vicissitude and mere point of view. History -it is said- is 'written by the victors' and I am afraid that have lately grown to concede that the archive of so-called 'truths' probably is indeed assembled according to self-interest by those most lacking in conscience, self-doubt, regret or sensitivity. Awareness of this possibility, might influence our sense of the 'History' of any particular place, person or thing, and

motivate us to be more forensically fastidious in our historical foraging or, permit us to be fanciful, freewheeling and 'fervent' only in the degree of our flippancy. Here, I have chosen the latter option (you may be glad to know) and here endeavour to contribute some honestly idiosyncratic 'angle' to the established history of Burgess Park, and the journey through it to the doorway of 'Area 10'.

I can tell you that Burgess Park is presently living in breath-holding anticipation of a great 'make-over' (of a kind with which we have recently become rather too familiar). The Burgess Park 'make-over' is enthusiastically titled 'Re-VitaliSe5' (sic) by the powers that be interested in its success. But those who enjoy the exceptional mysteries of the park at night, may be disappointed to find that it will be soon be well illuminated, and that its paths will be widened sufficiently to allow police patrol cars to cruise unhindered through its unruly spaces, bringing law and order to every lump, bump and exception that might prove an unpredictable obstacle to the health and safety of an imagined majority of the good citizens they are paid to protect. Local residents and regular users, have apparently been canvassed with questionnaires, asking what they like best about the park and what they would like to see happen to it. But I am never sure if these are really sincere, or simply a way of justifying changes already decided.

After all, many of the regular users of the park are unlikely to participate in such an exercise. The 're-vitalisation' of the park is happening simultaneously with an enormous project to empty and demolish the notorious high rise estates that stretch down from Elephant and Castle to the edge of the park and so it is difficult not to suspect that the whole area is undergoing some slowly executed form of gentrification (for better or

worse, but possibly to the advantage of one strata of society, and achieved only by disruption to another.) But to get back to our journey,

The unusual straightness of the path to which I referred earlier is caused by the fact that it follows the course of an old canal. This canal was filled-in, in the 1970s I believe, because of the expense of maintaining it as a clean and safe facility. It seems unlikely that such a decision would be made today, and a canal running once more through Burgess Park would surely be a great attraction, enhancing its use and atmosphere. Nevertheless, as far as I know, there are no plans within the 're-vitalisation' to return any stretch of the path to a water facility. The artist Roman Signer once made a slightly ludicrous, event-based work in which he was dragged along a road in a canoe by a car, and I often think this would be an appropriate artwork to re-enact on this path, if only to point out the rather drab decision-making that caused the canal to be closed.

As you proceed along the path, evidence that it was once a canal is also provided by a redundant bridge, spanning the path, now without any reason or purpose. To cross this bridge is today wholly unnecessary as it is quicker to simply step across the path which, unlike a canal, provides no obstacle to human perambulation. Nevertheless, people, in their charming way, do occasionally cross the redundant bridge, purely from a sense of curiosity or solely for the pleasure of carrying out an activity that is ultimately folly (an exception to the presumed meaning and assumed responsibilities of this world.) Close to this bridge a little Red simulation of a steam train's engine attracts the attention of children, but who donated it, when, and what its origins might be I'm afraid I cannot presently tell you, nor do I expect to be in a position to tell you at any time in the not-too-

distant future. The little engine rhymes with the architecture of the bridge -which is vaguely redolent of Victorian railways- but the link is tentative, requiring the imagination to bend slightly in contemplating the equation.

Unfortunately, by the time you have reached this bridge you will have already passed several important attributes of the park that you really should have been advised to acknowledge by any guide worthy of the title. And so here I am forced to apologise and we are forced to backtrack a little. You will have passed playground facilities - off to the left and hidden by raised ground -which include Go-Kart and BMX Cycle tracks. And you would probably have passed through a tiled subway that takes you under a road. On these tiles you can find graphic allusions to the area's origins thoughtfully baked into their ceramic surfaces. Looking at the old graphic maps burned into the tiles you can immediately see that Burgess Park was never designed as an ornamental park. It is rather the space left by the clearance of an industrial zone which included factories, small workers' houses, and more desirable managers' houses which once flanked the canal. Here, where the canal (now path) dives beneath the road, an old washhouse and library still stands (undergoing extensive renovation). Some community activities take place here. I believe that a boxing club may exist and even perhaps a regular dance class for Islamic women which can be heard, but certainly not seen. Nearby stands an ornate stone chapel (now converted into luxury apartments) with a gilded spire, adjacent to the site of what the map refers to simply as 'Picture House'. There is also a piece of graffiti of a funny looking dog executed in marker pen.

Back at the bridge with its little red steam engine you can look across to the North (noting the silhouette of the 'Gherkin' and other outlines of the financial district's architecture on the horizon) and see the greatest expanse of the park now opening out. It is in this enormous flat area that African and South and Central American football matches are played with great care and enthusiasm at weekends. The teams are semi-professionally equipped with smart kits, referees, and even a magnificent display of trophies. The matches are often accompanied by music drawn from the same cultures, played as loud as possible through portable music systems as if to emulate the glories of televised soccer. One league regularly has Bolivian wives and daughters on the touchlines ready to sell indigenous foodstuffs at the end of a match and this communitarian gesture reveals that the games clearly form a fulcrum for a people nervously integrating itself into the harsh economic environment of London.

In August the park plays host to London's biggest 'Pueblo Festival', when tens of thousands of Bolivians, Columbians and Mexicans converge to dress up extravagantly, hold dance competitions, and honour big-name musical artists flown in for the occasion. There is also a smaller Afro-Caribbean festival held in the same month at which the latest innovations in reggae, soul and rap are represented. The fact that new lighting is being introduced to the park has caused an artist friend of mine to protest. She suggests that the park's difference - its unplanned unruliness- should be preserved as an exception to the tamed and illuminated city. And she has gone as far as to suggest that the council introduce more spooky elements, such as simulated cobwebs to pass through as one negotiates the park's pathways in the dark, or perhaps the sound of inhuman wailing

springing up at unexpected intervals during one's twilight journeys, thus developing the park, less as a bourgeois paradise and more as the equivalent of an enormous haunted house. Perhaps a more real and thorough democracy would also accommodate the 'dodgy' deals and goings-on after nightfall to which Burgess Park plays host, particularly on warm summer nights, when rats teem around the little red steam engine, foxes mate in long cacophonous bangs, and the sound of stolen scooters mixes with the thunder of hovering police helicopters casting searchlight beams over the studded turf below. Many's the morning jogger, keen to impress their office-bound colleagues with a sweat-trimmed neat physique, that's here had to swerve around the burned-out carcass of an abandoned joy-ride smouldering in their path.

At the foot of the slightly sloping football fields, you can also find the oddity of 'Chumleigh Gardens', This is the remains of a little Victorian estate of almshouses made with medieval reference according to the Neo-Gothic revival or Arts & Crafts movement. In the 1980s this was squatted and used as a venue for gigs and solstice festivals by well-stoned hippies living out of sardine cans and trundling around the area in badly maintained ambulances and other idiosyncratic trucks. Now it has been 'spruced up' and has quite beautiful ornamental gardens as well as rooms available for conferences. There is also a cafe which was recently transformed into a slightly more chi-chi affair after years of being a bit of a 'greasy spoon' (a sure sign of the park's changing clientele). Adjacent to the ornamental garden you will find the more practical and more maverick 'community plots' in which railway sleepers have been heaved up to form deep beds sprouting proud poppies, splendid spinach and enviably edible ears of

asparagus. There is a resident cat that has just had kittens, and, beyond the fence, a sizeable hump in the earth with a metal door leading to a deep, pitch black void below.

This must surely be a shelter in which local residents hid from German air strikes in the 1940s. Ironically today it rather presents a danger to inquisitive local children.

WW2 bombing would presumably have targeted South London's industrial complex as it stretched along the Old Kent Road through Bricklayers Arms, including whatever facilities were once here.

At the far side of the park you can find a large pond or small lake, edged by one of those magnificent red-brick schools that can still be found all over London. Mostly built around the first years of the 20th Century, they feature wonderfully varied heights and a complexity of differing rooms, roofs and spires (thus clearly preceding the repetitious austerities of modernism). All this extravagance appears to have been expressly designed to gain maximum light and space for children in the dense and polluted city. In the 1980s this pond supported a little flotilla of sailing dinghies that could be hired -along with an affordable instructor- from the school's yard. Now it continues to support a solid citizenry of committed fishermen who daily line its banks. I've seen some magnificent Carp pulled from there. I can't recall the weights but they were certainly longer than a man's chest is wide. Many years ago, I can also recall that, the mostly unemployed anglers were forced to carry on their serious hobby in front of a strategically targeted piece of graffiti, that proclaimed, in huge white letters on one red brick wall of the school "FISHING IS A PASTIME FOR THE MINDLESS" You may see the occasional heron here, swans, a variety of ducks moorhens etc. all of which have been recently encouraged

by local environmentalists using artful cultivation of small nesting islands in the lake. Old milk cartons (the 2 litre, plastic variety) have been used, bound in clumps with green netting as a buoyant base from which to cultivate grasses and thus provide wildfowl with an invitation to linger longer in the exceptionally inclusive and welcoming Borough of Southwark. This year I was surprised to be greeted at the pond by a backstroking turtle, an event that I take to be yet another sure sign of cultural shifts gaining pace in Burgess Park.

The canal path meets another road at the limits of the park but this time you have to encounter traffic and cross over the road. On the other side of the road there is evidence of submerged, in-filled and abandoned canal locks. Then the path swings South and the East towards Peckham, here officially becoming 'Surrey Canal Walk'. The path here becomes more winding and undulating but also passes under several quite ornate 19th Century bridges. On the supporting stones of these bridges you can still see grooves worn by generations of taugh ropes as they once strained between powerful horses and laden barges plying between the Peckham canal terminus (at the doors of the wood yard now known as Area 10) and on to Surrey Quays perhaps, or an outlet to the Thames still visible between Lambeth Bridge and Battersea Bridge (though these assumptions of mine have been recently challenged). If you look very hard you may discover a plaque carved into a tree to mark the time and place at which Dimitri Launder - a founder of Area 10- had his bicycle effortlessly wrested from him in mid-cycle by a nifty team of early 90s muggers. As you proceed along Surrey Canal Walk today you pass acres of recently built housing which overlooks the now concretised canal (regrettably now

clinging only to its evocative but redundant name.) On your right, climbing upon purpose-built artist's studios, luxurious looking apartments -topped with penthouses- gaze out over the park. On your left some less well-appointed 'affordable housing' schemes have recently arisen. But you may also see the odd nag tethered near here, adjacent to a site that has been progressively and insistently claimed by some Romany people, enviably disdainful of the law, but whom Southwark council (who now have a salaried 'Traveller's Officer') have been forced to accommodate officially. It has indeed been an intriguing narrative to follow, as the travellers' mobile homes, during the course of a decade, gradually had their wheels replaced by jacks and then stacks of bricks, before the homes themselves became permanent substitutes for the original caravans. And in an unusually sensitive and organic display of architectural procedure, these homes curiously follow the forms and proportions of the original itinerant vehicles, thereby, sensitively allowing this ancient culture to maintain, as much as possible, its traditions, even as the demands of modern, urban society enforce a reconciliation of their extreme difference by artfully converting the wandering heart of their culture to fit-in with the more sedentary tendencies of their current surroundings.

By now, you have almost reached the door of the renowned independent arts establishment known as Area 10. The building soon looms up on your left, just after passing the rear of a busy new wood yard that superseded Area 10's original purpose, when it was left abandoned c. 2002 until being put to better use. Go up to the door and give it a rap with a hard metal object such as a key.

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