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Title

Urban parks in crisis…again? A historical examination of the political, economic and social context of UK parks

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Abstract

The UK has a long history of providing and managing urban parks. The formal park and garden, developed as a morally improving 'place apart' in the city, can inform people's idea of what a park is. This paper aims to explore the legacy of this conceptualisation of the park through an extensive review of literature and policy documents. This paper examines prevailing discourses by locating them more accurately within its political, economic and social context of the times. The paper also examines why, despite being described as 'treasured assets' by national government today, UK urban parks continue to be undervalued and taken for granted? Why does the lamenting of the fate of UK urban parks sector persist into the 21st century? To answer this question, the paper will focus on the formal urban park by applying the analytical framework of place-keeping as a conceptualisation of long-term green space management and stewardship.

Keywords: Urban parks, Stewardship, Place-keeping, Green space management, Victorian era

1. Introduction: What is the problem with UK urban parks?

The benefits and functions of urban parks have long been celebrated. They provide urban citizens with 'spaces apart' – that is, isolated, green landscapes which provide contrast to the built-up, urban environment in heavily urbanised cities (Conway, 1991, Booth et al., 2021, p. 553). As such, urban parks can help mitigate the effects of flooding (Khodadad et al. 2023) and urban cooling (Liu et al. 2022), help improve mental and physical health (Payne and Bruce 2019; Mears et al. 2019) and provide valuable habitats for biodiversity (Baker et al. 2010). These benefits are experienced by many urban citizens as increasing numbers of people are visiting urban parks (Heritage Lottery Fund 2016; APSE 2021).

Despite the growing evidence base demonstrating these benefits, urban parks face a myriad of problems and challenges. The UK's Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE 2021) recently reported that,

over the last decade, there has been a trend of little improvement or decline to parks. This is not a new phenomenon (Smith et al 2023): in the 1980-90s, 'the declining quality of Britain's urban parks' was described as a 'matter of extensive public concern' (Comedia and Demos 1995: 3).

This paper explores how we got to this point – again – in the UK, despite having a long history of managing urban parks in our towns and cities, including the first public parks in the world (Conway, 1991). If parks are 'one of the most enduring and defining types of public space in Britain's towns and cities' (Comedia and Demos 1995: 3) which continue to be described as 'treasured assets' (HM Government 2017: 3), why are they undervalued and taken for granted? Why does the lamenting of the fate of UK urban parks sector persist into the 21st century? To answer these questions, we use the analytical framework of place-keeping to examine understandings of the 'public park' and its historical legacy over the last 170 years in the UK to demonstrate its influence on current policy and practice.

Place-keeping evolved as a conceptualisation of green space management building on longstanding normative models (e.g. Carmona et al. 2008, Wild et al. 2008) and has been applied to various urban settings (e.g. Willis and Gupta 2023, Jansson et al. 2018, Buijs et al. 2019). Place-keeping developed in response to the over-emphasis in policy and practice on the place-making, or design, phase of place (see Figure 1; Author et al. XXXX). As Author et al. outline, green space management is 'more than a postscript activity based on the assumption that somebody will look after a place' (2016, p. 157). It has direct relevance to established urban parks as place-keeping focuses scrutiny on ongoing stewardship and management driven by the need to manage, maintain and invest in newly created/ regenerated places post-implementation (Author et al. XXXX). Research employing the place-keeping framework can help improve understanding of open space management as a complex and long-term process consisting of different, yet interrelated, dimensions. Place-keeping conceptualises inter-related dimensions of partnership, governance, funding, design and maintenance, policy and evaluation over the long term (Figure 1). This captures who is involved, how are decisions made, how are parks funded beyond capital investment, the extent to which design incorporates maintenance, how policy levers are used to support parks, and to what extent 'success' (however it is defined) is measured (Author et al., XXXX). This paper will demonstrate how the legacy of our historic parks informs, but also limits, the significance of public parks in the 21st century.

Figure 1. The place-keeping framework (Author et al., XXXX)

2. Materials and Methods

The paper will explore this dominant discourse of the urban parks in crisis by focusing on a key example of the 'spaces apart' that constitute parks in the urban context: the formal park and garden (Booth et al., 2021, p. 553). Developed as a planning tool in the Victorian era to counter the 'worst excesses of urban expansion' (Conway, 1991, p. 2), formal parks and gardens are a dominant feature of hierarchies of green space typologies at play in the UK (Whitten, 2021a). This also chimes with public opinion of what is perceived to be good green space. For example, Bristol City Council's Parks and Green Space Strategy's public consultation is typical of other local government strategies around the UK: 'The favourite type of space…is a formal park…[and] is most likely to resemble…existing Victorian parks' (BCC 2008: 66).

This paper calls on an integrative literature review of academic and non-academic sources, which is useful to address topics for holistic conceptualisation and stimulate new thinking around a topic (Torraco, 2016). Using Scopus and Google Scholar for academic sources, keyword searches were also done on organisations by name whose reports would not feature in the above databases (e.g. local government-published green space strategies; government Select Committees). A database (not included here) was created to chart those keyword searches (Figure 2) which led to relevant literature and which did not (e.g. National Parks). A staged review process was followed of the sources where titles, then abstracts were reviewed, followed by

the main body of each literature source, and the review was structured conceptually around the dimensions of place-keeping (after Torraco, 2016).

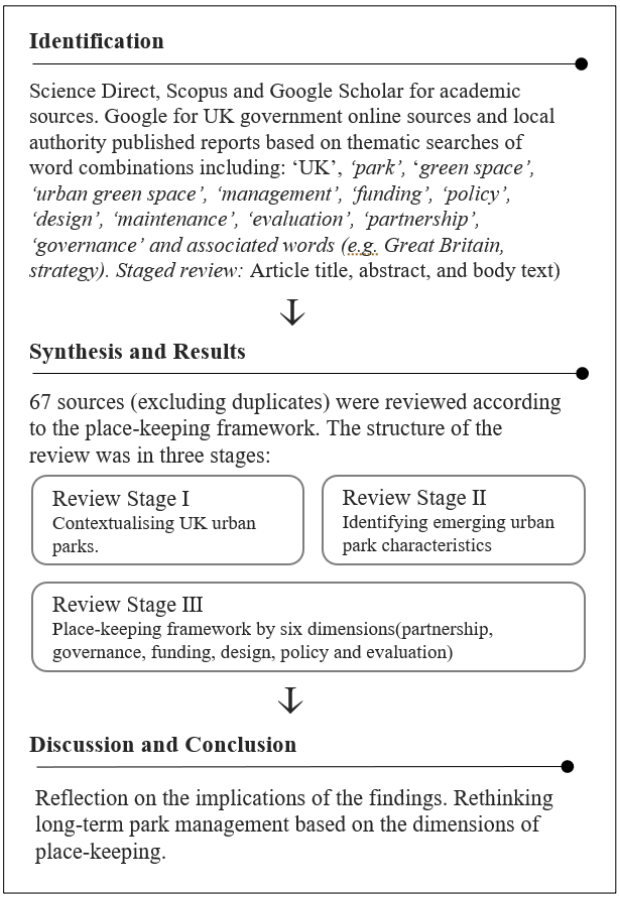

Figure 2. The study's integrative literature review process (after Torraco, 2016).

3. Results

3.1 Contextualising UK urban parks: a short history

In the UK, it is a well-rehearsed discourse that there once was a golden age of parks, a heyday when they were managed and appreciated much more than they are today (Barker et al. 2020; Elliott 2001). This age tends to be attributed to the Victorian era, when many UK urban parks were created; however, there are important historic antecedents to consider. Since much earlier, there had long been a drive for building on green and open land as UK towns were developed by the Romans, during the Middle Ages, Tudor times right through to the Victorians, Edwardians and today (Cunningham 1980). As towns started to industrialise in the 18th century, it was still easy for citizens to access public space. These were often common lands, dating to pre-Monarchy times as land which could be used by anyone, e.g. to graze animals. Elliott (2001) contests that landowners also allowed public access to their estates for recreation at this time. But as urban

populations grew and industrialisation took hold in the 19th century, the long-term practice of land enclosure was accelerated and in 1815 an Act was passed allowing once-public footpaths could be closed by landowners (Readman, 2022). Enclosure led to the loss of common spaces which were once the venues of large-scale community events leading to a severe lack of urban spaces for leisure in the 19th century (Cunningham 1980). For the average labourer living in an industrialising town or city in the UK at that time, their everyday landscape would have been dominated by factories and high-density, often poor quality, housing in unsanitary conditions with little chance of green and open spaces nearby (Conway 1991).

Pressure mounted on the political elite to help provide public spaces. This led to the formation of the 1833 Select Committee on Public Walks. Driven by a collective desire to secure open places for the 'healthful exercise of the population' (HM Government 1833), it helped chart the creation of urban parks in the UK, but didn't really help speed up the process (Layton-Jones 2016). The Committee surveyed towns around the UK and concluded that 'many had no open spaces for public use and none had enough' (Cunningham 1980: 92). It also highlighted how the lack of public space was leading to an increase in trespassing on now-enclosed private land which was costly to police and providing public spaces could help stop this. The Committee went as far as identifying sites for 'public walks and open places' in London, and 'suggested legislation to facilitate the exchange and dedication of land for the purpose' (Chadwick 1966). However, there was caution in their recommendations (Cunningham 1980) which Walker and Duffield (1983) describes as apathy towards public parks up to the 1840s. This became more active support when supporting legislation came after 1859. Walker and Duffield attributed this shift to a combination of the ongoing cataloguing of the 'horrors of the nineteenth century industrial town', a sense of municipal pride as towns and cities developed and a sense of 'social citizenship' (1983: 3).

This sense of citizenship did not emerge initially from the government – national or local. Loudon wrote in 1835: 'public gardens are just beginning to be thought of in England; and, like most other great domestic improvements in our country, they have originated in the spirit of the people, rather than in that of the government' (Loudon 1835). There was no real planning system in the 1830-40s, however there was a collective response to the very detrimental impact of the maligned and insalubrious process of capitalist industrialisation (Layton-Jones 2016). This led to well-meaning (upper)middle-class philanthropists and social benefactors rallying around to improve the living conditions for the working classes (Cunningham 1980). For example, the Derby Arboretum (often described as the world's first urban park) was 'the inspiration of a group of provincial political reformers and supporters of urban literary and scientific culture, principally the benefactor, Joseph Strutt' (Elliott 2001: 144-145).

According to Layton-Jones (2016: 4), 'large public parks were created by the most commercially-minded of societies, during the golden age of British manufacturing, urbanisation, and a mercantile oligarchy'. Public parks were created as an antidote to the commercial activity of the Victorian era, to provide working people often with free, healthy, morally acceptable alternative to the gin palaces and public houses, (Cunningham 1980; Layton-Jones 2016). In this way, the perceived value of green space was broadly linked to notions of productivity (after Cunningham 1980): a healthy workforce is a productive workforce. Towards the end of the 1800s, this was actively put into practice by Victorian philanthropists with an economic interest in the creation of, not just urban parks, but green and pleasant neighbourhoods for their workers. Bournville, Saltaire, New Earswick, New Lanarkshire are all examples of neighbourhoods created by wealthy industrialists who saw the economic value in green spaces (Rabbitts 2023). These were however based on hard-nosed economic decisions which did bring social benefits for residents, as long as the rules were followed (e.g. there are still no pubs or off-licences in Bournville in accordance with the wishes of creator George Cadbury (Bournville Village Trust 2023). This was indicative of a wider trend at the time of removing alcohol as a temptation for the working classes – the modus operandi of the influential Temperance movement (Cunningham 1980; Miller 2010). The Temperance and teetotal movements aimed to promote 'rational recreation' as a paternalistic response to the evils of drink, gambling and other 'low and debasing pleasures' (Cunningham 1980: 92). Cunningham describes this as an attempt at social control - of opening up these middle-class, virtuous cultural goods such as public parks, libraries and museums 'to a presumably grateful working class' (Cunningham 1980: 90) who needed saving from their problematic recreational habits.

Layton-Jones (2016: 5) argues that while the ambitions of the Victorian 'civic worthies' created a large number of urban parks, this legacy was not underpinned by 'the political will or financial and technical superstructures to guarantee their survival'. Walker and Duffield (1983) point to a range of self-interested motives which were at play in the Victorian era. This included the benefactor's desire to be remembered in the name of the park, but also offloading some of their less valuable land to the newly formed municipal authorities – wanted the resulting parks to be 'prestige symbols' (Walker and Duffield 1983: 3). This favoured the creation of large parks that were not always located close to the working populations, because it was easier to finance a park in a wealthier area (Cunningham 1980).

In addition, the prevalent idea at the time of a 'moral miasma' was linked to the idea of bad air in the city. This is ironic – the belief that good (not polluted) air was necessary for parks meant they were largely to be found in more affluent, less industrial areas, i.e. where the bad air was not found. The location of many UK urban parks is therefore 'a legacy of this social elevation that parks were already being given in the 1600s'

(Williams 2001: 195). In some towns and cities, it is not easy for less affluent residents to get the everyday benefits if they don't live in affluent areas where formal parks are often located (after Mears et al. 2019).

3.2 Historical underpinnings of urban park characteristics

While not all green spaces in towns and cities are urban parks, researchers point to a clear urban green space hierarchy headed by formal parks. London parks professionals often describe large parks as constituting 'a more legitimate form of green space' than other, smaller green spaces (Whitten 2021a: 480). This suggests that the concept of the 'park' is culturally embedded as an essential feature of UK towns and cities, influencing decision-making processes. During the 17th century, there was a shift away from using open fields and meadows on the urban edge for recreational use towards more formal sites within towns and cities (Williams 2001) as enclosure and urbanisation continued. In London, sites included the royal parks, pleasure gardens and private gardens such as Lincoln's Inn 'where genteel company are admitted' (Borsay 2013). They were often reached via tree-lined, gravel-laid walks (Johnston 2015) which also featured in churchyards (e.g. Painswick, Birmingham), squares (e.g. Queen Square, Bristol) and institution-based gardens (e.g. the Barber Surgeon's Hall, Newcastle) (Borsay 2013); early conceptualisations of 21st century 'green infrastructure'.

Gray's Inn in London (built in 1600), is described as the precursor of the Victorian park: a 'fenced [space]… used for walking; the enjoyment of plants and verdure; sitting in the open air in pleasant surroundings; and as a background of greenery when viewed from the surrounding houses' (Welch, 1991, p. 3). Hulin (1979) describes the prevalence of *rus in urbe*– i.e. the illusion of countryside created by a garden or park within a city –in Victorian art and literature. Whitten (2021a: 471) describes the 'mimicking [of] idealised rural settings as a blunt counterpoint to urban growth' as a widespread manifestation in public parks which was considered to be a fundamental municipal service by the end of the nineteenth century.

The legacy of the 'pleasure gardens' which became popular as Charles II came to the throne in 1660 is also noteworthy. They were 'privately owned ornamental grounds' opened to the public (via an entrance fee (Johnston 2015: 144)). Described as an escape from the crowded city, they were designed with tree-lined squares to be promenaded around with beds of flowers and fruits; the diarist Samuel Pepys recorded people eating cherries off the trees (Dixon Hunt 2013). Pleasure gardens were found in London (e.g. Ranelagh and Vauxhall Gardens (Johnston 2015)), Bath, Norwich, Bristol and Coventry (Conlin 2013) and marked 'a broader movement delivering commercialisation urban public culture on an unprecedented scale' in a garden setting (Borsay 2013: 53). Pleasure gardens opened in the evenings and held events such as fireworks displays, representations of military sieges, garden concerts and balloon ascents (Chadwick

1966). Being able to pay was usually the main criterion of entry, rather than one's social position/ rank, although Cuper's Gardens (charging a shilling for admission) 'announced that care would be taken to keep out bad company' (Wroth 1896: 248). Municipal parks managed by local governments developed as free to enter public spaces – as long as park users behaved properly (Conway 1991). Such behaviour was overseen by the park keeper whose role was one of park manager in the 19th century (English Heritage 2005). When urban parks were created, they were large, prestigious spaces apart in the city, considered to be spaces of 'moral instruction and social harmony' (Booth et al. 2021: 554). These formal parks are often considered to be the 'best' public green urban space (Layton-Jones 2016; Whitten 2021a) and the problematic implications of these legacies are explored later.

3.3. The changing nature of parks

The above in-depth review of the history of urban parks is now contextualised within contemporary debates by applying the place-keeping framework and presented in summary in Figure 3.

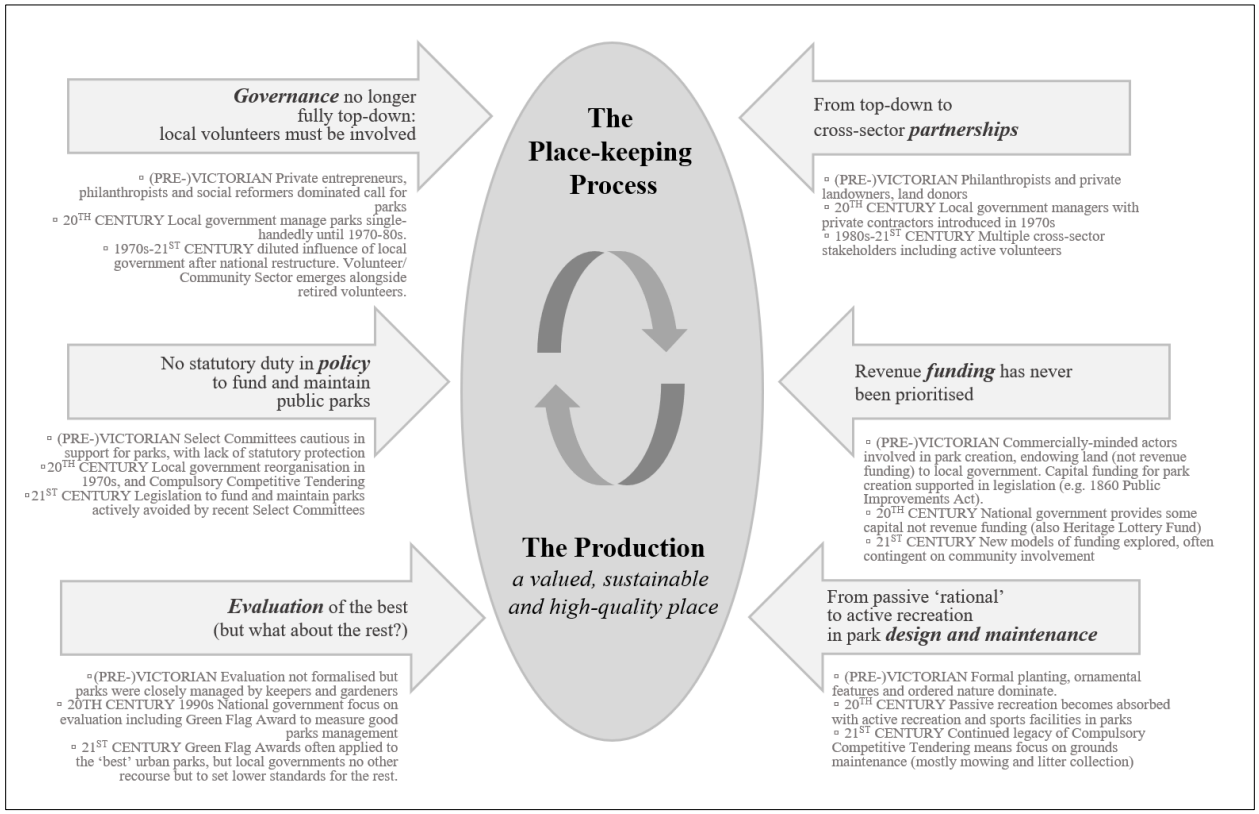

Figure 3. Summary of the integrative review of material according to the dimensions of place-keeping

3.3.1 Who is involved in parks management: is it a partnership?

As the sections above outline, the public sector has never been the only actor involved in parks creation. Replacing philanthropists and private landowners, land donors and public subscriptions, UK local governments took on the mantle of parks creation towards the end of the nineteenth century and have been largely responsible for parks management ever since. The way in which local governments are involved has changed throughout the 20th century. Legislation had made it easier for local governments to instigate the creation of parks (e.g. the Public Health Amendment Act 1890). To manage users, the park keeper was employed from the late 1800s to manage the park, lock and unlock the gates and to generally stamp out bad behaviour, including walking on the grass (English Heritage 2005). Reflecting the democratic nature of parks, the park keeper's role changed in the early 20th century to one of gardener and ranger as socially progressive policies developed (and users were allowed on the grass) (Conway 1991). Budget cutbacks began to affect parks from World War 2 onwards and roaming gangs of maintenance staff began replacing staff once dedicated to one park (English Heritage 2005). Local government responsibility for parks then changed irrevocably through the 1972 Local Government Act, which saw the disappearance of parks departments and their absorption into a range of leisure activities and resources, including swimming pools, art galleries, libraries and community centres (Welch 1991). There was a drop in popularity of parks as people increasingly practised their leisure indoors or visited country parks, marked by the Countryside Act of 1968. The management of urban parks was further affected by the 1980 Local Government Act when the national government of the time required that all public services were put out for tender, via Compulsory Competitive Tendering, meaning that parks departments were – and often still are – clients for contractors, and no longer service providers (Conway and Lambert 1993).

The longstanding effect of these pressures on local governments has meant that some cannot continue to manage parks. A recent survey (APSE 2021) indicated that around 15% of UK urban parks are not managed by local governments . Other research conducted with English local governments asking who carries out their parks maintenance reported that 60% of their respondents use private contractors, 64% use in-house (local government) services, 44% involve community groups, 25% use third sector organisations including social enterprises and 7% use public-private ventures (Lindholst et al. 2020; Author et al. XXXX)[3]. This is indicative of a number of trends that have developed over time in UK parks. The number of Friends groups (also known as park user groups) made up of community members has increased from around 5,000 groups in 2014 to over 7,000 in 2021 (APSE 2021). Friends groups form around a desire to help improve their

[3] The percentages add up to more than 100% as respondents were asked about all organisations that contributed to parks maintenance.

local park/ green space, often when there are problems to be addressed (Author et al. XXXX) around long-term maintenance. Later sections will underline how this tallies with the reduction of local government revenue budgets (which total £475m between 2016 and 2021, (APSE 2021)). This comes with a worsening quality of the parks, loss of skills as front line and management staff are reduced and a need to generate funding from elsewhere (HLF 2016). Friends groups can access funds not available to the public sector, meaning that it can be mutually beneficial (and increasingly necessary) for cross-sector partnerships to form.

3.3.2 How are decisions made: what is the governance structure?

Loudon's 'spirit of the people' mentioned earlier was critical in the creation of parks, not least through the public subscription funding raised for some urban parks (Conway and Rabbitts, 2023). The well-meaning (upper-) middle class teetotallers and rational recreationists (section 3.1) have been replaced by time-rich, high-capacity volunteers. They are an increasingly important player in green space management: unpaid, voluntary and collective in their efforts, providing 'an essential and exceptional form of social solidarity that binds society together' (Hustinx et al. 2010: 417).

Such volunteers are largely supported and welcomed by the local government, particularly when volunteers operate in a way that is compatible with their working practices (Smith, 2018) and - crucially - when volunteers are not engaged in activism but are depoliticised and volunteering due to its 'virtuous and compassionate nature' (Hustinx et al. 2010: 413). Local government also engages with volunteers who are committed to the park's (read, local government's) aims . This can come with a perception that a park with more volunteers is somehow more valuable than others (after Handy et al. 2000: 47–48). 21st century volunteering is associated with ideas of ageing well in post-retirement age (Musick and Wilson 2008: 5). Post-retirement volunteers will often have more time than volunteers with busy (family) lives (Author et al., XXXX). They are also more likely to have interacted with professionals and may have retired from professional life themselves, bringing highly relevant skills at playing the game with them when they volunteer (Smith 2014), disproportionately benefiting formal parks in more affluent parts of a city where they live.

Considering on-site management for a moment, urban park governance does not simply reflect the landowner or the community (Smith 2018). There is a growing distinction between who makes decisions about parks management and who implements those decisions. The effects of the 1972 Local Government Act means that there could be multiple local governmental departments managing different parts of the same park (Welch 1991). Private contractors, non-governmental organisations and community groups

rather than local government parks staff may be the people on the ground putting management decisions into practice (Author et al., XXXX).

We have already hinted at the part that private entrepreneurs (later to include private philanthropists) have played in the history of public parks. This is inextricably tied to the conceptualisation of the UK urban park passed down since the 16th century. In London, the (residential) squares of the time 'managed to communicate an impression of communality and public good while remaining private and enclosed spaces' (Williams 2001: 212). These gardens had controlled entry through payments at a gate which led to similar spatial regulations in the Victorian era to perpetuate 'a refined urban environment, physically, socially and morally' (Williams 2001: 209). Our urban parks legacy, based on an ideal that parks are delivered by the public sector is inaccurate (Whitten 2021a). Victorian park actors took their inspiration from privately owned, designed and managed landscapes (Layton-Jones 2016; Williams 2001). The depiction of private sector involvement in parks today is popularly characterised as unwanted commercialisation of parks (Smith 2018; Barker et al. 2020). But private sector involvement never really left the UK park –circuses, ice cream and food vendors, rowing boats for hire and other concessions are mainstays in formal parks. A result of national funding cuts means local governments now work with partners to bring income to parks. The private sector is increasingly called on to use parks for income generation. This can therefore involve part (or sometimes, all) of a park being fenced off as theatre production, music festival and concert companies set up weeks in advance, significantly reducing access in and around the park. Other ideas, such as the Parks Improvement District model (Nesta 2013), where businesses located around/ near a park contribute financially to its management, have not been taken up in any meaningful way in the UK[4].

3.3.3 How are parks funded: who pays?

As already mentioned, the 17th century antecedents to the Victorian parks – e.g. pleasure gardens – were supplemented by revenue through entry fees and concession income. Victorian and 20th century public urban parks in the UK are free at the point of entry but there was no standardised mechanism to ringfence revenue funding for their ongoing maintenance (Conway and Rabbitts, 2023). Where there are funding streams for parks, they are almost exclusively focused on capital investment without sustained budgets for ongoing maintenance and management (Author et al. XXXX).

[4] Although it should be noted that the Business Improvement District (the idea upon which the Parks Improvement District is based) is very successful in the UK, and focuses on streets rather than parks, with over 70 in London.

Today, the effect of the longstanding national budget cuts have been devastating for some local governments, and testament to the ongoing, historical lack of funding in parks. Newcastle City Council has perhaps been the worst hit with a 97% budget decrease between 2012-2017 (Daly et al. 2023). The Association for Public Sector Excellence (APSE) recently reported that an average of £190m has been lost from local government parks budgets between 2016-21, and these budgets will continue to fall (APSE 2021). A non-governmental trust now manages parks in Newcastle, while at Heeley People's Park in Sheffield, attempts are made to cover maintenance costs through crowd-funding. However, follow-up analysis of such initiatives is thin on the ground and is challenged by evidence from other quarters. For example, empirical evidence in Leeds shows that only a low percentage of residents and local businesses would actively donate to parks and green spaces, while long-term contactless payment technology is currently untested in the outdoors (Barker and Pina-Sánchez 2019). Recent national government funding, mostly through the post-Covid Levelling Up Fund, promises to 'radically expand investment in parks' (HM Government 2022). However, it is limited to funding improvements in only thirty parks nationwide. To put that in context, there are nearly 600 parks in Birmingham alone. And to divide the fund between 30 local governments means over 90 per cent of them in England miss out. Such small-scale national green space programmes which have sporadically occurred over recent decades (e.g. Millennium Greens and Pocket Parks) are not solving the long-term funding shortfall.

3.3.4 What and who are parks designed for?

In the eyes of their Victorian creators, the 'urban park was seen as simulated countryside' underpinned by the belief that countryside was the 'natural and most beneficial milieu for man' (Welch, 1991, p. 4). The impact of this idea has been far-reaching and long-standing with the Victorian park recreated around the world. As Barker et al (2020: 2458) state: 'over the last 150 years, many Victorian parks have remained stubbornly similar in design, appearance and aesthetic'. The park designs we see today go back to their Victorian designers. They include Humphrey Repton who created broad principles of park design based on his work in private parks (Conway 1991), influencing J.C Loudon who took these principles and designed Derby Arboretum (1840), and Joseph Paxton, designer of Birkenhead Park (1844) and the Crystal Palace Park (1855). The original design of some parks did not allow active recreation. For example, Francis Crossley, local carpet manufacturer and benefactor of the People's Park in Halifax 'expressly forbade the playing of any games' so designer Joseph Paxton made no provision for any (Conway 1991).

This was based around the idea that urban parks provided space for rational recreation (Cunningham 1980), such as concerts in the bandstands, promenading on the circuitous paths, ornamental features offering cultural interest (e.g. statues), often a nod to the influential figures of the time (Conway and Lambert 1993).

However, tastes changed and the need to expand the multi-functionality of parks became apparent. For example, in 1844, and ahead of their time, Manchester Public Parks Committee's agreed that new parks should offer gymnasia, water fountains, seating, space for active sports (e.g. skittles and archery) and buildings for refreshments for large numbers of users. From the 1870s onwards, inspiration was taken from French principles of park design to accommodate sports and playgrounds, which meant that some features were added, such as cricket grounds at Birkenhead Park (Conway 1991).

The design of formal parks in the 21st century is largely the same as it ever was (Barker et al 2020). This means that managers, working on restricting budgets, are engaging in limited grounds maintenance (i.e. litter clearance and mowing grass) and not in horticultural or arboricultural management innovations for which their Victorian counterparts were praised. Such deference to past design can be exclusionary. Recent research shows that the prevalence of sports or active recreation facilities is aimed largely at a male audience and is actively discouraging teenage girls from using formal parks (Walker and Clark, 2023).

3.3.5 Do politicians care about parks?

The short answer is: yes. In public life, one can't not appreciate parks – they are 'an essential part of the urban fabric' (HM Government 1998). However, they are often 'an after-thought, at the bottom of the political agenda' (Comedia and Demos 1995: 3). Despite Comedia's report being almost 30 years old, the observations still ring true (APSE 2021). Politicians have never easily put the positive words of rhetoric into effective urban parks policy or funding. White argues this is because: 'since Victorian times public parks have been dogged by the lack of statutory protection and status as essential infrastructure and service' (in Layton-Jones 2016: 2). Welch (1991: 5) describes the output of another Parliamentary Select Committee set up in 1840 'this time on the health of towns. It evolved a long shopping list of improvements low down on which were open spaces, though still only for public walks, and playgrounds near schools'. More recent Select Committees (2017 and 2022) also concluded that making parks a statutory duty is not desirable.

Earlier sections have already outlined how various Acts have deleteriously affected parks management. A glimmer of hope for parks came in the early 2000s. Wilson and Hughes (2011) examined green space policy between 1997-2010 and described a 'new urban policy discourse' introduced by the then Labour government around increasing quantity and improving quality of green spaces. These policy discourses reiterated the same green space rhetoric we read in the days of Victorian park creation. However, Wilson and Hughes highlight two other discourses that differ from the Victorian ideals. The first is around nature and biodiversity: one would more likely encounter terms such as 'verdant scenery' (Loudon 1835), landscape gardens and 'picturesque planting' in the 19th century (Conway 1991: 14) although they were

410 also based around the design and management of urban nature. Their second discourse is a focus on
411 'community participation and community owned or managed green spaces'. This is somewhat different to
412 what was happening in the Victorian era, although the underlying sentiment is similar. No longer
413 philanthropists and benefactors, today's focus for the bulk of non-governmental involvement in parks
414 management is on (non-)financial resources harnessed and provided by volunteers and community sector
415 organisations. Problems with this have already been discussed, including how an over-reliance on
416 volunteers may not be sustainable (HM Government 2017) or representative of the wider community such
417 volunteers are serving.
418
419 ### 3.3.6 Why do we need to measure parks?
420 The final dimension of place-keeping is evaluation. One of the conclusions reached by the 2003 Select
421 Committee (HM Government 2003) was the basic lack of information about parks. It wasn't made clear
422 how such data would help discussions around parks, but there were previous intimations that should be a
423 benchmarkable level of park provision, a need to understand the quality of parks and their cost (HM
424 Government 1998). This sparked a shift towards gathering, measuring and evaluating to quantify data about
425 parks. Some of this evaluation was coordinated by the national organisation CABE Space (the government's
426 advisor on architecture, urban design and public space in England), created in 2003 by the then Labour
427 government to provide the data needed to help 'ensure that scarce public resources are allocated and targeted
428 to best possible effect' (CABE Space 2010: 4).
429
430 CABE Space was often called the national green space champion, until it was axed by the incoming
431 Conservative-led government in 2011. CABE Space galvanised a move towards more evaluation of parks
432 and green spaces by local governments which continues today – where resources allow. This political focus
433 brought with it a temporary, and welcomed, increase in national funding for green space improvements
434 which were linked to housing and neighbourhood regeneration. A prerequisite of this funding was that
435 local-scale evaluation would be carried out on the quality, quantity and use of green spaces. At the national
436 scale, since the removal of CABE Space, there has been a small number of national-scale surveys, all
437 conducted independent of the government, to provide a picture of the state of UK parks (HLF 2014; HLF
438 2016; APSE 2021). The aim of these reports is to provide the data to help avert a return to the poor quality
439 parks in the 1980s. However, the most recent report states how it is 'disheartening that our…report has to
440 repeat our earlier warnings of a looming crisis. We find that once again the level of funding for parks will
441 not meet the needs of local communities' (APSE 2021: 4).
442

Finally, one influential type of evaluation that has become widespread around the UK (and beyond) relates to the quality of parks. Established in 1996, the Green Flag Award (GFA) is given to parks that have agreed standards of good management and can be used by local governments to 'help to justify and evaluate funding'. The number of GFAs has increased, with the largest number of awards given out to parks in 2022 (GFA 2022).

The next section draws together the discussion of the historic legacies through the place-keeping framework (Figure 3) to explore their cumulative effects today.

4. Discussion: historic legacies in the 21st century

The dominant discourse in UK parks practice is that there is not enough money for parks. Nationally, this problem is attributed squarely to local governments and how they deal with the impact of cuts to their budgets, to which there is national political sympathy (HM Government 2017). Locally, this problem is attributed to the lack of funding from national government and an inevitable loss of funding for non-statutory parks – and on rumbles the perennial unsolved problem of not enough funding. Layton-Jones (2016: 1) reminds us that when the Victorian parks were being constructed, funding was similarly lacking. She argues that this marked 'the foundations of the funding crisis we face today'. Land and financial donations by Victorian philanthropists did not cover all the costs of a park and so was not a reliable source of income. As a last resort, municipal authorities raised funds through public subscription for parks, e.g. Phillips, Peel and Queen's Parks in Manchester (Layton-Jones 2016). However, these subscriptions covered the purchasing and landscaping costs, with no provision made for maintenance costs – a state of affairs which continues in funding streams today. Funders' accounting models continue to be based on short-term spending cycles rather than long-term periods of revenue investment (Kreutz et al. 2014). Layton-Jones (2016: 2) states that it is 'erroneous to conclude that the emerging crisis in funding our public green spaces is a consequence of depending exclusively on public taxation'. It is specific political decisions related to parks funding that have made the situation particularly precarious for UK's parks. These include the lack of governmental action on parks and exacerbated by local government restructure and the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering in the 1980s (Author et al. XXXX).

The vacuum created as parks budgets reduce means that other non-public sector partners are again being welcomed into parks management. These partners are today more likely to include the private sector – through running events, concessions, managing facilities such as tennis courts and cafés – as part of the ongoing pursuit of making parks more economically viable (Smith 2014). As the historical review in this paper outlines, the involvement of the private sector is not unusual as they have been a significant player in shaping the UK's parks (and one supported by government). However, it is potentially problematic for

the private sector to provide public goods such as urban parks which have been free to enter for as long as any of us can remember in the UK (pleasure gardens disappeared in the mid-19th century). This idea is unpalatable to some, especially community groups (Smith et al. 2023), and can lead to some groups disbanding in protest (personal correspondence with Sheffield Green Spaces Forum, 2023).

Local governments may be keen to harness the 'capital' or 'capacity' of volunteers to help lever resources into parks management and provide a friendly and depoliticised face to public services that are becoming increasingly bureaucratised and impersonal (Hustinx et al. 2010; Musick and Wilson 2008: 5). However, there is danger in not understanding the motivations that drive volunteers (which are often about actively fixing a parks management problem, first and foremost) which has been unheeded by governments. This active citizenship can also be in danger of exacerbating inequalities across a city. People getting involved in their local patch can mean that well-educated ex-professional retirees have high capacity to volunteer successfully in formal parks. This can be more difficult for volunteers in less affluent areas with more diverse populations and fewer (if any) formal parks and a wider range of community interests to represent (after Hustinx et al. 2022; Author et al. XXXX) which may not be so focused on the cultural heritage associated with formal parks. This is problematic when we consider how guidance (and funding) overwhelmingly supports the inclusion of community groups in green space service planning and delivery and promote partnership working (e.g. HM Government 2003; Heritage Fund and National Trust 2022).

Over the last twenty years, the data about the use, quality and quantity of urban parks has been accumulating but it has not improved the situation of parks. As the most recent national evaluation states: 'not only do we see problems in maintaining existing parks, but there is a clear need to create more parks in areas of need in order to level up the distribution of parks across the UK' (APSE, 2021: 5).

Given the rising number of Green Flag status parks – suggesting that the number of high quality parks is increasing – one can ask if reducing funding for parks really a problem? Whitten's (2021b) analysis of parks in London highlights that it is: some boroughs cap the number of parks that they enter into the GFA given the resources GFA requires, and the fear that the standardised benchmarks can encourage homogeneity in service delivery so that they can be measured accurately. It is clear that formal parks are often prioritised to receive the GFA, which is arguably another way of exacerbating the longstanding problem of unequal access to parks across a city.

This takes us back to the original idea of the park as a place that was designed to be morally improving and educational with 'due regulations to preserve order' (Cunningham 1980: 95). It raises questions about the role that Victorian design – which largely stays intact in many parks – plays in 21st century landscapes. As Whitten (2021a) highlights, the decisions around preserving 19th century urban park design and management continue to attract or deter certain users and volunteers. This potentially perpetuates a

Victorian status quo which may no longer be relevant as 21st century users have different expectations of what parks are for (Smith et al. 2023).

The discussion about whether the provision of parks should be statutory is one mostly raised by community groups and often closed down by national government. The more recent parliamentary Inquiries led by Select Committees show little variation in this pattern. Even when attributing a statutory provision for parks is mooted (e.g. HM Government 2003), this has not been supplemented by meaningful funding. The CLG Select Committee (HM Government 2017: 57) was 'not persuaded that a statutory duty on local governments to provide and maintain parks, which could be burdensome and complex, would achieve the intended outcomes.' This fits the longstanding national position on urban parks that goes back to (pre-)Victorian times when there was little to no public funding available. It is a familiar situation which is not fundamentally addressed by the small-scale and competitive funding streams that national government occasionally makes available, often with specific, exclusive criteria (e.g. specific size of green space; requisite community involvement). None of this challenges the status quo – national government continues to support the idea of parks but not to fund them in any significant way. Other important funding streams include the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF 2023) which has funded improvements to over 900 historic parks over the last 25 years. Ordnance Survey Open Greenspace data indicate that there are almost 11,770 public parks or gardens in the UK. At this rate of funding, it would take over 325 years to improve all the parks and gardens in the UK.

5. Conclusion: What does all this mean for 21st century parks?

There are some key messages that come out of this historical and holistic analysis of the state of affairs for UK urban parks which chime with Smith et al. (2023). Firstly, the current problems facing parks managers are inextricably linked to funding. The refrain from national government is that more funding would not solve the problems, which is particularly self-serving as this discourse is predicated on their refusal to provide public funding. Conway and Rabbitts (2023) point out how funding issues have dogged parks from the outset, except where endowments have been provided for their long-term management, and often considered to be outside the realms of possibility. Rather, going to market for the resourcing of parks is a dominant discourse for parks managers who have to deal pragmatically with significant budget cuts. Yet, public opinion and academic evidence point consistently to a call for more public funding (e.g. Layton-Jones 2016, NFPGS 2022). This requires national government action, not simply rhetoric. Professional and practitioner opinions are more divided (APSE 2021) because, like local governments, they are part of the existing system which has long innovated and been under pressure to explore alternatives to public taxation.

Secondly, there is a need to better understand the role of local government parks officers Daly et al. (2023) and where they can be important in changing/ influencing how salient aspects of the place-keeping dimensions are implemented. This leads to potential challenges and questions for future research: how ambitious can local government parks officers be when their current positions are inextricably bound up with a lack of resources? Will exhaustion and inertia prevail because there isn't the in-house public sector capacity to challenge the neoliberalisation of parks? As landowner and significant player in parks management, the local government is still the crucial partner with influence over practice and local policy (as the case of Newcastle parks trust demonstrates). All of this points to a dispiriting but unsurprising conclusion: there will be continued hand-wringing and lamentations about the fate of the UK urban park in the foreseeable future. Funded projects will be celebrated and alternative models to parks provision through taxation will be lauded. Perhaps it is inevitable that this review concludes, alongside community members and academics, by calling for urban parks to be made a statutory service – is this the only model for parks that has not yet been implemented? Now is the time to implement learning from the past.

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