

PARK LIFE Wesley Kerr (right) in Battersea Park, south London. Volunteers from Thrive (shown in the background) and the Friends of Battersea Park, two charity groups, have worked to improve this popular public park

? What do you think? How can gardeners help safeguard the future of Britain's parks and open spaces? Write to: Viewpoint, The Garden, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT; email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk; please include a postal address

Parks for the people

With Government cutbacks likely to threaten the future of parks and open spaces, **Wesley Kerr** feels it is time for the public to take matters into their own hands. Photography by Neil Hepworth

MANY OF MY EARLIEST memories are of public parks and open spaces: ancient limes and young deer at Bushy; being taken to the funfair and boating lake at Battersea Park; dwarfed by oaks at Windsor; awestruck by Cornish cliffs and moors. We have a great inheritance of free gardens and liberated landscapes – around 29,000 public green spaces and millions of street trees, which make our communities breathable and liveable.

This legacy requires investment and commitment from its owners – us. Parks constitute 14 percent of urban land, amid a patchwork of private land, commons, watercourses, burial grounds and wilderness; they can make cities more biodiverse than intensively farmed countryside. But local authorities have no legal obligation to provide or finance open space. With cuts continuing for the next four years, parks could be one of the first services to suffer. Some councils are considering devolving them into trusts; all are looking at savings and job losses.

I hope we will not let decline happen. Half the population visit a park weekly, a tenth daily and 91 percent of us believe that parks improve quality of life. So what can garden lovers do? Can we make the Coalition Government's 'Big Society' real by forming 'little platoons'? Are we seeing a new model of co-operation between councils, contractors, volunteers, and established trusts and membership organisations such as the RHS? Since the mid-1990s there has been a renaissance for many parks, much of it lottery-funded: community-led restorations, conservation, better maintenance. The Green Flag Award is now a respected benchmark. Thousands of active volunteers have come forward, some under the banner of RHS Britain in Bloom, which measures park quality and local involvement. But while judges cannot be there all year, the communities can.

My hope is that gains are sustained and the model of consultation, Friends groups, training, apprenticeships, and mobilising volunteers will endure. 'A rising tide lifts all boats and if you make your Heritage Lottery Fund project work it gives a formula for improvements in other

places,' says Sarah Finch-Crisp, of the Chiswick House and Gardens Trust. This famous William Kent/Lord Burlington landscape in West London (the park is owned and supported by the London Borough of Hounslow, the villa by English Heritage) has been restored (see *The Garden*, Sept 2008, pp588–591). There are 100 volunteers, who garden, clean lakes, grow (and sell) vegetables and run tours, education and archiving. Another 200 have signed up, but co-ordinating them needs time and money. 'They volunteered because they saw their park was in trouble,' says Head Gardener Fiona Crumley. The new café raises £80,000 a year towards maintenance. Visits have quadrupled and the historic landscape accommodates all this, as well as cricket, bikes and dogs.

Nationwide, entrepreneurship and voluntarism may ameliorate cuts. Steve Smith, Oldham's Head of Parks tells me 'we've re-adapted, work smarter and with partners... many things are now done by Friends and community groups. The crucial thing to keep us going is councillors' backing. We try to increase income across the piece and could share staff and facilities with the neighbouring council.' He expects to continue with apprenticeships.

Working together

With half the population visiting parks weekly, can those of us with enthusiasm and skills be mobilised to stop inappropriate development (and sell-offs) and improve horticultural standards? This is an opportunity. Between the RHS, the National Trust and English Heritage there are more than 4 million members. Then there are wildlife and environmental trusts. These organisations could work together locally to save threatened parks, creating more active Friends groups or community-gardening blogs, assisting hard-pressed councils with advice and ideas.

We can build on existing partnerships between amenity groups and councils. Some famous gardens could adopt nearby parks, similar to the way independent schools assist struggling comprehensives. At least four leading designers have told me they would love to do planting schemes in public parks, which would provide a focus for activism and fundraising and may produce more sustainable horticulture, such as well-planned flower meadows and more perennials replacing some of the labour-intensive seasonal bedding. Let a thousand wild flowers bloom. Gardeners could offer spare plants and horticultural advice, taking time to talk to those working in parks; among them you will find avid gardeners and nature lovers.

Society needs creative solutions to the funding crisis. In places there will be neglect and retreat, but elsewhere, I believe, improvements can continue – as long as we all play our part. In the poet Francis Bacon's words, a garden 'is the purest of human pleasures... the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man.' We must protect our public parks. ■

Wesley Kerr is a broadcaster and journalist, and Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund's Committee for London

WITH THANKS TO BATTERSEA PARK, LONDON AND GARDENERS FROM THRIVE GARDENING CHARITY

PARKS FUNDING

Funding for parks comes from two National Lottery sources: the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), established in 1994 to help support the UK's heritage, and the Big Lottery Fund (BLF), created in 2006 to help fund 'good causes'. The HLF has awarded £525 million to 554 public parks; with contributions from the BLF, that tops £604 million. The HLF is to continue to dedicate at least £20 million a year to its Parks for People programme, with BLF currently contributing another £10 million.

Other lottery funds will continue to flow for biodiversity, wildlife and sports facilities in parks. For grant awards above £1 million, applicants now must contribute 10 percent (down from 25 percent previously), or 5 percent for grants under £1 million. This can include costs for management, maintenance and volunteer contributions.

- Visit: www.hlf.org.uk and www.biglotteryfund.org.uk
- For more from Wesley Kerr on Battersea Park, London, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden