

# Highbury Fields Association



Affiliated to Living Streets - Islington  
and the London Forum.

## Newsletter - October 2008

### Chairman's Report

Problems - always problems!

Looking back through our file of HFA Newsletters over the last 30+ years, that, sadly, is what I mostly find. As any journalist will tell you, their meat and drink is bad rather than good news – in our case, there often didn't seem to be much good news.

Yet, it is comforting to realise that many of what seemed crises at the time, have turned out remarkably well. At the time there would be much tearing of hair, emergency committee and public meetings, and letters to the Council and to the newspapers.

A few examples. We were threatened with the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, *overland through Islington* to St Pancras. We played an important role in winning an enormous campaign to put the route in tunnel. This resulted, in 1997/8, in some of us then being on the Corsica Street Working Group to negotiate the new threat of the Vent Shaft and the prospect of many hundreds of lorry-loads of spoil being driven through our streets. The work never started until 2001 and our many fears were largely unfounded.

It is hard to believe now, how much controversy and near schism in the HFA was caused by the prospect in 1985/6 of a new children's playground. That was to replace the miserable existing one, partly because the original plans would have taken over far more of the lower Field. The HFA worked closely with the Council to improve the plans. It is also perhaps hard to believe, now that the playground is showing its age, how much praise was lavished on it, when it finally opened in the spring of 1987, and how parents brought their children from all over London to use it.

So, does every major nightmare eventually turn out better than feared? No, we still believe the various Arsenal developments have been as inappropriate for this densely populated borough as we first thought. We have lost the battle, on Appeal, against the redevelopments of Aberdeen Works and the Mann and Overton site in Holloway Road. Time will tell, if they are ever built, whether they prove to be as unsuitable for the neighbouring locality as feared.

The Highbury Fields Association was formed, in 1975, because of a campaign to save 31 diseased

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## AGM

On Monday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2008

At Christ Church, Highbury Grove, London N5

7.30 for 7.45pm

Guest Speaker . **Tony Cumberbirch**, Principal Strategist in the GLA London Plan team, to speak on "Planning a better London"

elm trees and a further suspect 65 others. We lost that campaign but the trees on the Fields have been an important matter to us ever since. Elsewhere in this Newsletter Robin Hull has written about the brochure on Tree Strategy that the HFA is publishing in cooperation with the Highbury Community Association (HCA). It is an excellent, useful and important document, which can be emailed to you. It is timed to inform residents prior to a Council consultation on Tree Policy and I want to thank Robin for his very hard work on our behalf.

We are delighted that the 20mph Zone is finally completed: most people feel that traffic has slowed as a result. We are now not likely to hear the results of the Highbury Corner Consultation until early October. We are hopeful that the first steps to instigate the 'Vision' for the Fields will start in the next few months. Most streets in the area around the Fields have now had their pavements relaid; lamp standards have been replaced to comply with Brussels regulations and the 'Desire Line' across the Mother Field has been repaired and returfed. It is too early to tell if the new fencing at the top of the Field will persuade some fans to take a different route: old habits die hard!

*Martin Jones*

## **Confessions of a Lay Tree Hugger**

We live in the Age of the Expert. Whatever the problem, whatever the difficulty, there is always an expert on hand. If it's climate change you're worried about, or the credit crunch, or data protection, or the chances of *Fly Boy* in the 3.30 at Kempton, you'll always find an expert with a ready opinion. Sometimes, however, there is an advantage in being a layman amongst the priesthood of expertise.

There may be moments when professionals, immersed in their field, make an assumption or advance a proposition, which is common knowledge amongst their colleagues, but to the outsider has a truly jaw dropping impact.

When I was talking to one of the Council's Tree Officers recently, he casually dropped into the conversation that new building developments, particularly commercial developments, have a life expectancy of no more than thirty years.

The more I thought about this, the more it took on a personal significance. My generation had given the world the concept of built-in obsolescence.

My parents inherited Victorian values of building things to last. My Children accept that next year's model will be better, brighter or at any rate newer than today's. Somewhere in the middle, my lot became consumers and wanted everything to be disposable. And now, it seems, we have disposable buildings.

The Tree Officer was not particularly bothered by this. He was exercised by the way trees that stand in the way of developments, or at any rate are an inconvenience to the developer, very often get swept away in the process. When you think that an established tree may have a life expectancy four or five times greater than the building which takes its place, it all seems a bit cock-eyed.

Even if a developer agrees to keep a mature tree on the site and plan around it, very often arguments are adduced later, during the build, to chop it down. Perhaps the tree impedes vehicle access to the site. Maybe light to habitable rooms will be impaired. Even "We need space to put up scaffolding outside the building". Whatever, these seem rather flimsy excuses for felling a tree that might be around for another two hundred years when what you're going to put up, you're going to tear down again in thirty years time.

Now, I confess, this aspect of the developer's rapacity had not struck me quite so forcefully before. I know it should have done. But it didn't. The revelation may have come too late but it is, however, quite timely.

In the autumn the Council is to hold a series of Scrutiny Panel meetings. One of them will ask how we can best protect trees through the planning process. With my new insight into the longevity of trees and the ephemeral nature of modern building construction, I think I may have something to contribute to the debate.

I am a little worried that I may now be characterised as a tree hugger. But rest assured, I will always maintain my layman status.

*Tony Miller*

## **Planning: Will Boris make a Difference?**

There are two ways of looking at this: firstly changes in Policy, and secondly how will the Mayor use his planning powers.

On Policy, it seems to me that there are two key proposals which have emerged since the election: housing and the protection of famous London views. These changes have to be made through the planning system. The Mayor has recently published 'Planning a better London' – a report setting out how he intends to revise the London Plan, the city's statutory strategic planning document, (see Mayor of London website for both documents).

Key changes proposed for housing include abolishing the 50% London-wide affordable housing target, but committing to an expanded programme of 50,000 affordable homes over the next three years. Instead of a London wide 50% target, the new approach will involve agreeing individual affordable housing targets with London boroughs.

On the London Views, speaking at his first press conference since he was elected, Johnson said he wanted to reintroduce the wider protected viewing corridors across London 'shrunk' by his predecessor, Ken Livingstone. These original guidelines, known as the RPG 3A Strategic Views Directions, protected 10 key 'viewing corridors towards St Paul's Cathedral and the Palace of Westminster from places such as Greenwich and Primrose Hill.

Johnson said: 'We are salami slicing the views of heritage sites and I want to protect them. I am not hostile to beautiful tall buildings – but they need to be in the right place'. 'Planning a better London' is not quite so bold and says that the Mayor will introduce additional protection for London's historic landmarks and World Heritage sites, and while he supports new tall buildings in appropriate locations, this will not be at the cost of undermining the unique character of these sites.

'Planning a better London' also worthily supports stronger policies to ensure new developments are better designed to cut down on crime and anti-

social behaviour and sets out how the London Plan needs to press for stretching targets to reduce London's carbon footprint, concentrating on achieving clear carbon reduction outcomes, rather than specifying detailed technologies. It is a consultation document that invites responses until 10 November, following which the formal process for reviewing the London Plan will begin.

Changing the London Plan will not be quick, and for a politician wishing to make important changes, 'Planning a better London' suggests a pretty leisurely approach; 'over the next 8 months or so we will start the process to alter the London Plan'. At this rate not much progress will be made before the next election. Therefore, how the Mayor proposes to use his range of planning powers over the next few years will be crucial for local development matters.

In April of this year the Government gave the Mayor a considerable range of extended powers over the way Boroughs exercise their planning responsibilities. Coupled with the detailed approach of the London Plan these provided the Mayor with very substantial opportunities to intervene, for example in all housing developments over 150 units (see GOL 1/2008).

The 'Planning a better London' report outlines how the Mayor proposes changing London's strategic planning policies and describes how he wants to build stronger partnerships with local communities, London Boroughs and those developing in the capital. There will be less emphasis on detailed targets and more on collaboration and consensus around priorities that are agreed between the Mayor and local interests.

The Mayor said: "I want a London Plan that helps give Londoners a better quality of life, that takes proper account of local needs and which developers and local boroughs can easily use. Although the London Plan has achieved a lot of good over the past eight years, it is too unwieldy and there's too much focus on detail rather than outcomes. I want to see a slimmer Plan, which deals with genuinely strategic issues, but this won't be at the expense of London's need for more homes and economic success. In future, both inner and outer London will be equal priorities, and I'll be working more collaboratively with local Boroughs, especially to see that we get the 50,000 affordable homes we need to build over the next three years".

These are potentially important changes for Londoners and for us in Islington, though those hoping for lower densities will be disappointed as the document proposes 'increasing housing development densities where this is appropriate'.

The GLC had a strong centrist planning approach. When the GLC was abolished, the strategic planning approach was much diluted with a London Planning Advisory Committee, and the Boroughs had more of a free hand. Livingstone slowly rebuilt a strong central approach and the London Plan is a pretty prescriptive document. The new powers given to the Mayor entrench this approach.

Such was Ken's rehabilitation with New Labour that the Government's changes set the stage for a very strong central planning regime with almost Soviet dimensions. Livingstone could not have believed his luck. It now looks as if the pendulum will swing back in favour of the Boroughs though whether it actually happens will turn on how tough and determined Johnson proves to be and, of course, whether he and his advisers really want to stand back. Politicians seldom give up power and Johnson may find that the London boroughs turn out to be less co-operative in achieving London-wide objectives than he hopes. After all, one of the reasons for inventing the GLC was because the LCC had difficulty in persuading the Boroughs to provide the housing that was needed and is needed now and one of the reasons for reforming London Government with the Mayor was to provide more effective strategic planning.

So watch this space and if this was not enough for us to be worried about, the current Planning Bill provides that planning appeals for minor developments will be heard by local councillors rather than by a planning inspector. Christmas has come early for London Boroughs!

*Robin Mabey*

## **Cycling: the view from the saddle; the view from the pavement.**

A double-spread in *The Times* on July 10, containing such phrases as 'The selfishness of cyclists is absolutely galling' and 'They believe the rules of the road don't apply to them', has inspired me to reflect and write. I have always

known, from talking to friends and neighbours, that I am not alone in my feelings, but the cycling lobby is very articulate, indeed militant, about cyclists' needs and rights and, perhaps, sadly needs to be faced with such a newspaper article.

Many years ago, when I was a teenager, I remember cycling, on a very old twentieth-hand bike with no gears, from my home in Palmers Green to Bumpus bookshop in Oxford Street. I felt pleased that I had the confidence and energy to cycle all that way. But of course, during the war there was not a great deal of traffic; although, even then, cycling across Salisbury Plain, free-wheeling at no great speed down a gently sloping road, I suddenly saw in the distance a line of army tanks heading towards me. Nowhere near me, no great threat, but I simply lost my head, hit the grassy side of the road, flew over the handlebars and landed on my back. The front wheel of my bike was badly buckled, and I spent the next hour trudging back home trailing my bike behind me. I know that I could not cycle with any confidence in today's traffic – the thundering lorries, the nippy cars, the zooming motor-cycles. And *The Times* article tells us that last year 136 cyclists were killed and 2,428 seriously injured. Cycling today is dangerous, particularly in our cities.

So I don't cycle! But I do walk – our doctors tell us that it is good for us – and today, as a pedestrian, cyclists, not tanks, do worry me; and, interestingly, much more than lorries or buses, or even most cars. Why is this?

I think that there are three reasons: speed, lack of warning, and failure to follow accepted practice and the rules of the road. Many cyclists today cycle much faster than we ever did – perhaps because we saw cycling as an alternative to walking, a little faster but not much more than an amiable amble; today they appear, indeed are encouraged to see it as a greener alternative to using a car, not quite as fast, perhaps, but ridden with a certain fierce determination – "I have to get there, yesterday!" – oblivious of their surroundings.

We all know that many motorists behave with the same determination, but we pedestrians know where we are going to encounter them – on a space labelled "road" a few inches below our pavement, and separated by a clearly visible kerb;



and if we do seem unaware of them they usually give us a warning toot, and even slow down. Bicyclists come at us, at speed, from every direction; and many don't even possess a warning bell – in the old days, these were obligatory. And, notoriously, many will cycle against traffic on one-way streets, through pedestrian crossings already occupied by pedestrians, through red lights, and up onto pavements. Indeed, where not?

Moreover, in this aspect of traffic control, our local authority hasn't helped us pedestrians very much, eager as our councillors are to be seen promoting cycling as a greener alternative to cars. To point to merely two examples in our immediate locality where recent Council action has created further hazards for us. When the exit from Highbury Place onto Highbury Corner was improved by removing railings and planting trees, why were cyclists allowed to enter Highbury Place along their dedicated cycling lane, against motor traffic? And why on earth were they given a lane across the traffic light junction from the Post Office to Barclays Bank? Why, if they were cycling up Upper Street and wanted to enter Highbury Place, are they not expected to dismount at the traffic lights, walk their bike along the pedestrian crossing, and past Barclays Bank, until it would be permissible to remount by the War Memorial and continue cycling north? This is what we would have been required to do when I learned to cycle. But, today, how often does one see a cyclist dismount except at the chosen destination?

Are there any solutions which would help us all? Ken Livingstone, when Mayor of London, suggested that cyclists should be required to display number-plates – a proof of their identity when caught on camera. Could they, like motorists, be required to take instruction, and pass a test? The Highway Code does offer tips for safer cycling, and underlines behaviour that is illegal.

Perhaps the only real answer is that we should all – motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians – become more aware, more concerned for others sharing our world, more self-critical? And just a little slower, a little less pushy?

*Paul Williams*  
Highbury East Safer Neighbourhood Panel



*Spring 2008: the badly worn 'Desire Line' path on the lower 'meadow' Field.*



*July 2008: the ground aerated; soil improved; lush, hard wearing grass*

## **Equipping our houses for the Low Carbon future**

As I write this at the start of August, Al Gore has made a speech calling on people to "Repower America" and get 100% of American electricity sourced from renewables within 10 years, and a Green New Deal programme has been launched in Britain by the new Economics Foundation under the heading "100 months to stop the Climate system tipping": it seems a good moment to be writing about reducing energy use in old houses.

Energy use in our homes is responsible for more than 25% of the country's carbon emissions (another 26% coming from our food and our

travel). In our home we have on the one hand electrical gadgets and stuff, and on the other, comfort provided by the fabric of the home: i.e. space heating, hot water and cooking (from gas for most of us in London); and lighting. Given that burning gas and generating electricity (unless it's from renewables) generate greenhouse gases, in order to head off the risk of runaway global warming (that "tipping" word) all this energy use has to be reduced, so we produce 80% less carbon emissions as soon as possible (the government target is 2050, but it's more urgent than that).

The lighting part is easy since getting rid of incandescent bulbs and replacing them with low-energy fluorescent ones will cut your electricity bills by 80%, so that's your carbon reduction target on the lighting front. Hot water, even in Britain, can be supplied by solar thermal panels on your roof for over half the year; they are really very discreet and should surely not be banned from conservation areas. That's 10-12% of your gas bill saved.

The big one is space heating. The development of insulation, air tightness (cutting draughts) and glass technology, means that new homes can be built now which require no heating at all – they are heated by the sun coming through the windows, by heat exchangers, by the appliances being used in the building, and the heat from the occupants' bodies!

The old houses most of us live in in Highbury were built with open fires – a system which did a very good job of drawing cold air into the house and sending the heat up the chimney, while leaving a small, hot area to huddle around. Even the most basic central heating is massively more efficient than that, but at least £1 of every £3 we spend on gas is simply thrown away, because without insulation heat is lost through the roof, walls, windows, floor and outside doors. But recently it has been shown that Victorian homes can be retrofitted with insulation in the roof, on the walls, and under the floors, and with either secondary glazing or double glazed windows, with good draught-proofing, thus achieving reductions in energy use of 65% or more. So your £3 bill comes down to £1, and the wastage to 33p.

The nearest example of such a refit is Sarah Harrison's house in a conservation area in Tufnell Park, a 3-bed semi-detached house built in 1870.

In the last couple of years she insulated the walls and floors with 10cm of wood fibre and double glazed the windows (with new wooden frames at the back of the house), and achieved a 75% reduction in energy use. In Highbury Fields the architect Robin Nicholson lined the walls of his Georgian house (then in a state of dilapidation, and before the building was listed) with fibreglass insulation 4ins deep 30 years ago. Insulating inside the walls is a challenge for highly ornamented (and mostly listed) houses where part of the cornice would have to be remade, and other elements such as dadoes replaced, but a thinner insulation called Spacetherm C is available (at a price) which would be little thicker than the plaster it replaces.

Most of Highbury is not listed, and around half is not in a conservation area. I believe we can develop a low-carbon plan for each terrace in Highbury. We can make a plan for one house that sets out the measures needed to achieve 80% emissions reductions and use that as a basis for the rest of the terrace, which were after all built as repeats of the same plan. This work will become essential for maintaining the value of our houses in the low carbon age, which is approaching fast.

I am seeking 50 homeowners to join together and apply to the government at the end of this year to be a Green Neighbourhood, which means we could get a bit of grant money for insulating older houses. I am calling this the VICTERI project – that's a misspelt acronym for the Victorian Terrace Energy Reduction Initiative, exploring ways of making Victorian streets into low carbon communities. I don't wish to exclude Georgian houses, but there's an awful lot more Victorian housing than Georgian, much of it far from the concerns of English Heritage – and besides that GEOCTERI doesn't have quite the same ring to it as VICTERI. If we start in Highbury we can then go Islington-wide, and then London-wide – we could make ourselves a "tipping-point" for low carbon living in old housing stock.

If you'd like to be one of the 50 to make a Green Neighbourhood in Highbury, please contact me at [antonymelville@dsl.pipex.com](mailto:antonymelville@dsl.pipex.com) or (020) 7607 1540, and I'll come round and talk about what you need to do for your house.

*Antony Melville*

*Everybody talks of the constitution, but all sides forget that the constitution is extremely well, and would do very well, if they would but let it alone.*  
Horace Walpole. January 1770

## **Climate Change and Me**

There is to be a free, all-day Festival on Climate Change, attended by Jeremy Corbyn MP and Islington councillors, with talks, stalls and workshops, activities for children and a crèche.

**Venue: Highbury Fields School, Highbury Hill, N5 – Saturday 11 October, 11-6pm**

For more details, and to register your interest, contact Nicola Baird on 020 7704 6420. Or go to:  
<http://climatechangeandme.blogspot.co>

## **New Guidelines from English Heritage: on Climate Change and your Home**

English Heritage have now published three guidelines on:

- energy conservation in traditional buildings
- micro wind generation
- small scale solar thermal energy

They are all available online:

[www.english-heritage.org.uk/climatechange](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/climatechange)

## **Something happened on the way home from the Albion**

It was a warm August evening, when I bicycled over to the Albion on Thornhill Road to have a glass of wine with my former editor and Islington neighbour, Jenny Hone. We had much news to exchange since starting new jobs a little over a year ago, she as a free-lance editor and myself as co-proprietor and editor of a new publishing business. We had both recently started working from home and were enjoying the luxury of being able to meet at a local venue rather than a noisy City café.

Our meeting was early – before the crowds began to gather. I cycled over on my new shiny bike and locked it against a gate in front of the Albion

with my ancient but sturdy Kryptonite lock. The lock was more than 20 years old and served me well during journalistic assignments in both Amsterdam and Brussels. But lately, it had become difficult to turn the key. The internal mechanisms had become worn. And on this August evening, the lock finally let me down.

Jenny and I enjoyed our one hour of gossip. But when it came time to go home, I couldn't turn the lock and free my bicycle. We took turns with the key, but to no avail. We then sought help from a pub waiter who tried a corkscrew. But that too failed to disengage the lock. I was mildly panicked. What would happen if I left the bike overnight outside the Albion? Would it be vandalised, leaving only the frame the next morning?

In such moments, one tends to blow up predicaments into proper emergencies. In that frame of mind, we walked over to the Islington Fire Department on Upper Street and asked for help. Sheepishly, I asked if the firemen had any equipment that would dislodge a Kryptonite lock. "Of course," they responded, recounting how, only a few weeks earlier, they had rescued a young boy who had caught his head in a turnstile at the Emirates Stadium.

We piled into a fire truck with four firemen and drove to Thornhill Road to the Albion. Mercifully the sirens were not ringing. Upon our arrival, the pub guests started piling into the front garden to witness the spectacle. One even started recording the event on a mobile camera.

At first, the firemen tried to break the lock with a huge metal instrument. It was, as the fire chief told me, the same instrument they use to rescue drivers from cars which have been crushed in accidents. But the bike was locked too snugly against the gate to allow this. They then switched to a blow torch. Not surprisingly, this destroyed the lock instantly.

With thanks all around, we walked back to 39 Calabria Road to have dinner. The next day, I brought a thank you note and chocolates to the Fire Department. But what did they want most? A mention in the Highbury Fields Association annual newsletter!

*Victoria Ellington*

## **Collaborating on trees: a community involvement.**

This summer, in an unusual and thought-provoking initiative, the Highbury Fields Association and the Highbury Community Association joined forces and produced a fully illustrated, thirty page book entitled *Highbury Fields Trees*, to present the open fields, the trees and how they influence the life of the park as a whole. We have been pro-active in showing the local community groups' continuing interest in participating in decision-making and caring for the park. It is our expectation that this document will be used by Greenspace officers but also by consultants engaged on any plans for the park that could impinge upon the trees – and as specific support for the trees themselves, of course. Our publication, with its thirty recommendations, has already contributed to the tree strategy for Highbury Fields currently under discussion.

Unlike other parks, the Highbury Fields landscape rests on the simplicity of the interaction between open fields and the interlocking avenues of plane trees. A few of the issues addressed in *Highbury Fields Trees* centre upon how best to conserve this Victorian heritage and how we must take a long-term view and give the trees long-term care, delivered through a robustly determined management plan.

*A Vision for Highbury Fields*, published by the Council in 2007 after a long consultation, indicated some of the places where new plane trees should be put, into gaps that have developed in the avenues and we fully support this. Indeed, we would want to see any plane trees that fall prey to misfortune and have to be removed, being replaced with young, substantially sized, new planes. There are good examples of this approach carried out by Islington Council in the recent past at Percy Circus, in Old Street and on Islington Green; all are plantings where plane trees are the main or only arboricultural feature and where the young planes are clearly settling in well. On Highbury Fields, most interestingly, are several quite rare variants of the London plane, so we have also recommended propagating from them to maintain this richness of the tree stock, creating a bank of 'original' trees for any replanting that becomes necessary. This is the action already taken by the City of Westminster

for the London planes that are unique to Berkeley Square.

Because they form the basis of the park's design and its main arboricultural feature – and because there are 100-200 years of useful years left in the mature plane trees – the series of avenues on Highbury Fields should be refurbished. As well as there being large gaps where planes should be planted, there are some instances where diseased elms were removed in the 1970's and replanted with different species. With hindsight, this has been something of a mistake; the spaces were too small for new trees to grow to maturity; now some are forcing upwards into the expanding branches of the planes, disturbing the integrity of the older trees and the 'architectural' nature of the original scheme of planting. There are cases of young and old not mixing successfully and we have recommended some of the younger trees be removed quite soon to allow room for the planes' continued growth.

There are other, immediate problems such as the violence wrought by bull terriers that persist in stripping bark from the stems of young trees. Moreover, proper handling of grass cutting equipment such as strimmers is a 'must', because damage at the base of trees is continuing from their cutting into bark and allowing rot to set in. Astonishingly, 20% of trees on the Fields are affected by one or both of these types of damage. Forms of protection are not beautiful but effective guards must be put around the stems of trees until their diameter is large enough to discourage dogs and prevent disfigurement. Our brochure shows different styles of potential guards.

Less obvious, perhaps, is the problem of insufficiently thought out planting of new trees on open grass. Everyone participating in the consultation events for the Vision was agreed that the Orchard areas near the tennis courts are too congested and that the trees should be thinned. But similar overcrowding is being replicated in other parts of the Orchard and on the Mound at the bottom of Highbury Place, where many large-growing species have been planted in recent times. They will soon spread to cover these areas, as will happen on the Meadow, too, in the southern part of the Mother Field, where yet more trees are creeping in: together with the earlier plantings, they will come to cover most of the open grass in that part of the Fields. Trees must not be allowed to encroach on the much-admired



and much-used openness of the park. We must determine what is the 'right tree in the right place'. The brochure recommends a moratorium on planting new trees and especially on the open fields. Where there are too many young trees, better now than later to remove or relocate some of them.

At this turning point, we have a magnificently consistent, extensive collection of trees come down to us from the nineteenth century. Despite our changing lifestyles, it has stood the test of time. We must be watchful to conserve this heritage into the next century and nor make the mistake of thinking that any planting of a tree must be a good thing to do: at Highbury Fields, if new planting alters the balance between fields and trees it may well not be the right thing to do; if it takes away our ability to appreciate the original design, that too would be a loss to this, Islington's unique arboricultural asset.

The brochure is available in electronic format, *Highbury Fields Trees pdf*. It is too expensive for us to print because it contains many colour photographs. If you would like a copy, then Martin Jones at: [jones.lassartesse@virgin.net](mailto:jones.lassartesse@virgin.net) or Gill Shepherd: [GillShepherd@compuserve.com](mailto:GillShepherd@compuserve.com). will be pleased to email it to you if you contact them.

Robin Hull

## The Urban Dad

One of the benefits of Highbury Fields is the opportunity it provides for people-watching. If you settle down one day with a notepad or sketchbook and simply observe the different types who frequent the playground, the tennis courts, the café and the open green spaces, you will see among those who use these facilities a number of recognisable types. One of them (and of particular interest to me having been something of one myself) is what I call Urban Dad.

You will see him, first thing in the morning, walking across the Fields on the scenic route to school. His wife is already on her way to work in an office, or running her own business from home. So the Urban Dad is there in the schoolyard, chatting to the other dads and mums,

arranging lifts and dates for after school activities, for art classes, dancing lessons or play dates.

You may even spot him afterwards in the café round the corner, where the cliques of Yummy Mummies eye the Urban Dads at their separate table with curiosity or even suspicion. What are they doing here? Haven't they got jobs to go to?

The fact is they *do* have jobs to go to, and they go home to do them, but not before taking their toddlers to the playground. And it is there, later on in the morning, that you will have your next chance to spot the Urban Dad.

There he stands, checking his i-phone or Blackberry, taking his work-related calls even as he anxiously watches his toddler ascend the steps to the "curly slide" or hovers at the foot of the climbing ropes, ready to catch him should he fall. He sits by the edge of the sandpit, jotting things in his pocket notebook, while his daughter covers his feet with sand. And sadly, for this is an inner city playground, you will also find him carefully scanning the bushes behind the "choo-choo train" for those unwelcome signs of the park's nocturnal invaders: used condoms or hypodermics carelessly discarded among the broken bottles, rusty cans and junk food cartons. And if, as I often used to, he finds them there, he will anxiously steer his child from them, before attempting to report the matter to the attendant or phoning Greenspace (020 7527 4953) on his mobile.

The playground, incidentally, was once a great facility, praised and prized for its imaginative design when built; and it has the potential to be a great place again. But that will take more than patchwork repairs and the occasional makeover; it will require keen proactive attendants with real authority and a council prepared to provide continuous maintenance. I am glad to report that there have been hopeful signs of renewal. Fencing has been replaced and there are plans, as part of the *Vision for Highbury Fields*, for a major overhaul. Go to:

<http://www.islington.gov.uk/Leisure/outdoor/parks/parkimprovements/hf/default.asp>

Long may it last. For indeed I love this playground. I love the infinite variety of its multi-cultural parents, and I love to watch the children as they climb, or slide, or run through

water, laughing. But for me, as for any responsible parent, it is also a source of anxiety, because of the disgusting toilet, the broken glass in the bushes, the rotten fencing, the run-down facilities, the surly truanting teenagers who hang out there every lunchtime. That is why Greenspace must have resources and the *Vision* must prevail.

The Urban Dad, meanwhile, is on his way home for lunch. He stops on the way at the butcher's or fishmonger's to get something to cook for dinner. Because, yes, the Urban Dad is also something of a Domestic God.

I don't mean that you should worship him. Perish the thought. But he is a creature not dissimilar to what TV cook Nigella Lawson once termed the Domestic Goddess: a kind of multi-tasking (or in her case multi-tasting) parent who juggles work, play and parenthood, with all three centred on the kitchen. Well, perhaps I exaggerate. But not much. We latter-day Do-it-all Dads are equally at home in the kitchen, baking cakes or cookies with our kids while the dinner simmers in the oven, as we are in the garage, knocking up a bookcase, or in the garden, hanging up the laundry before weeding the flowerbeds, then getting out the sewing machine to hem up some trousers or even throw together a cushion cover.

What you need to remember is that these are all tool-using activities. Food processor, power drill, garden spade, sewing machine: all just different types of tool. Even writing, to my mind, is a practical, tool-using task. And for a self-employed person these are all perfect displacement activities. Rearranging paperclips or filing tax accounts has nothing on them. There is always pesto to be made, deadheads to be snipped off, and children to be collected from school.

The first point I want to make is not that I or any of the Urban Dads I know actually *do* all of these things, though all of us probably do some of them. (And our wives or partners do most of them, too) The point is that we *can*, and that no one (least of all a nine-to-fiver in a suit and tie) should be allowed to tell us we can't. The second point is that Islington in general and Highbury Fields in particular, is the sort of place you will find us.

You will find us again in the Fields in the middle of the afternoon, sipping tea or cappuccino in the Oasis Café. Perhaps we have just dragged our toddlers from the Two O'clock Club (now renamed the Bandstand Drop-in Centre), with painty fingers and sleepy nap-ready eyes temporarily widened by the prospect (always worth asking for) of an ice cream from the café. Perhaps we are biding our time till school or playgroup pickup time. Or perhaps we are waiting to let our children trounce us on the tennis courts, or catch us out with a Frisbee on the green. After which it's home to cook the dinner.

By now perhaps, with the sun beginning to set, your notepad or sketchbook is full. Along with the Urban Dads you will have noted the Yummy Mummies, in their top-drawer leisure apparel, pushing big-wheeled turbo strollers in the southward direction of Starbucks; the Nattering Nannies, stubbing out fags on the concrete under the benches while their charges yell for attention; the Workout Wranglers, with their Personal Trainers, buffing themselves up for the bathroom scales or mirror; the Joggers doing their endless circuits; the Gym Bores and Lap Swimmers making their way to the Highbury Pool "fitness facility"; the Canine Catwalkers, with their pedigree chums, daintily collecting their doggie's doings in little plastic bags, while steering themselves aloof from any over attentive Mongrel Moochers or bandy-legged Pugnacious Pitbulls; the Slouching Hoodies with their concrete-coloured pyjamas, shielding their smouldering smokes in curling fists; the Truanting Scholars, practising their decorative skills on the playground shelter wall; the Community Support Officers who stroll through all of this and none of it, whose presence alone is supposedly enough to be proactive, but who somehow never seem to be there when you really need them...

The list is incomplete, as it always must be. And of course, not all nannies are negligent, and not all pitbulls are pugnacious, and not all urban dads are multi-tasking paragons. I certainly never have been myself. (And is there such a thing as an Urban Mum?) The point is that, once you start, you begin to realise that there is no such thing as a typical "user profile" when it comes to Highbury Fields, or indeed any London park or open green space.



As for the Urban Dad, you have not seen the last of him. For you can sometimes spot him at night, on his way to (or, much later, from) the pub. This is an occasional luxury, for most of us work in the evenings. Some of us have professional outside engagements, in music, theatre or TV. Others, locked in studies at home, are simply making up for time lost during the day. But maybe once a month we allow ourselves a night off, and go for a drink with one of our fellow dads, and discuss music, art or football. Or better still; take part in a pub quiz.

But that, I suspect, is another subject entirely.

*Paul Magrath*



*Northampton Lodge, the home in Canonbury Square, of the Estorick Collection.*

## The Estorick Collection

The Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art is based locally in Canonbury. It is a unique and elegant venue for lunch with your friends or private and corporate entertaining. It recently celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

I am a staunch supporter of the Estorick, which boasts six stylish galleries on three floors of an imaginatively restored Georgian villa. The Gallery contains a world-renowned collection of Futurist paintings and figurative art and sculpture from 1895 to the 1950's and stages innovative temporary exhibitions under the hard-working director, Roberta Cremoncini, herself of Italian origin, who is so competent at working with her board of directors – which include two members of the Estorick family.



*The deep tines, used to aerate the compacted earth all over the Mother Field.*



*The extended post-and-pole fence, with closeable gap, intended to dissuade fans from taking the 'Desire Line' route across the Fields.*

You will remember 'PASTA, Italian culture on a plate', an exhibition much loved by Islington children which we reviewed some years ago !

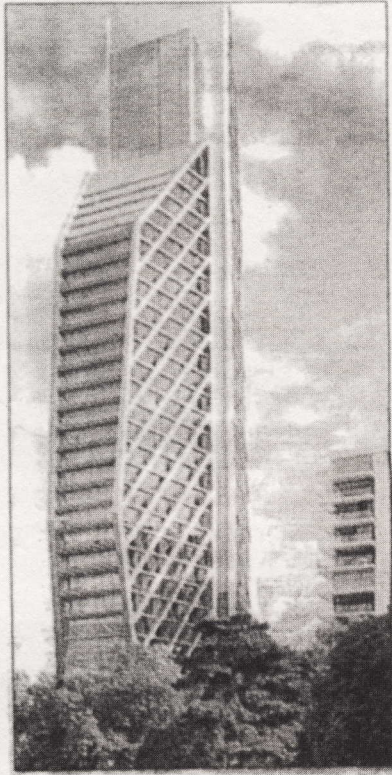
There are some exciting talks to go to. In addition to the versatile gallery spaces the Estorick has an attractive landscaped garden, ideal for summer parties. By the time this newsletter comes out, the latest Estorick exhibition 'Cut and Paste' (European Photomontage 1920-1945) will be showing from 24<sup>th</sup> September till 21<sup>st</sup> December 2008.

Finally I want to quote what Sir Nicholas Serota, Director of the Tate wrote about them :

*'one of the finest collections of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian art anywhere in the world'*

*Maryse Jones*





*The original design for the 41-storey "Penny Whistle" in Ealing.*

## Spotlight on Another Society

The Ealing Civic Society is a member, like ourselves, of the London Forum and recently they have achieved a remarkable victory over the plans for a 41 storey tower, nicknamed 'Penny Whistle', scaled down to comply with Boris Johnson's new policies on suburban skyscrapers.

Yes, the 41 storey tower has been reduced to a less intrusive 24 storeys by a leading firm of architects who have redesigned it. Even the smaller tower is not in keeping with the overall area and is out of character with adjoining conservation areas.

The society joined a coalition of more than 30 local organisations, including residents' associations and other amenity societies. Its chairman said:

*'Our mission remains the same: to preserve the best of our urban environment while ensuring that new developments improve the quality of the borough'.*

This is very much the philosophy of the HFA.  
*Maryse Jones*

## Climate Change: How trees can help

The earth's great forests, together with the plankton in the oceans, are life's great absorbers of the greenhouse gas Carbon Dioxide, which threatens our climate system. In the summer heat waves which will come with global warming, when the "heat island effect" can make cities over 6 degrees hotter than the surrounding countryside, mature urban trees will be hugely important. A recent study (by Manchester University) has shown they can reduce temperatures around them by 4 degrees or more.

*Antony Melville*

## HIGHBURY FIELDS ASSOCIATION COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Martin Jones, *Chairman*

David Boniface,

*Vice Chairman*

Anita de Lotbiniere,

*Membership Secretary*

Maryse Jones, *Treasurer*

Pamela Welson

*Secretary (Co-opted)*

Jeannie Burnett

Victoria Ellington

Muriel Feder

Carrick James

Octavia Jennings

Ian Kelly

Robin Mabey

Paul Magrath

Nicky Manby

Tony Miller

Jennifer Purchase

Caroline Russell

Paul Williams

Nicolas Witter

Ginny Worsley

**Do join the HFA, and keep in touch with developments in our area. Please advise the Membership Secretary if you wish to receive Minutes by email. Appointments to the Committee will take place at the AGM on 20<sup>th</sup> October.**

*Members of the Association are welcome to raise and discuss any particular concerns they may have. We like to hear your views. Please telephone Martin Jones.*

*Editors: Martin & Maryse Jones*