

Park Life

In September 2023, 50 local people convened to help initiate the practical processes that we need to secure the benefits of open spaces in Bristol and Bath for future generations. Ted Fowler explains.

The event was set up by Bristol Fellows of the Royal Society of Arts, the Schumacher Institute and the team of *Your Park Bristol and Bath*. We were hosted by Burgess Salmon.

Whatever their leadership, activist or professional roles, that evening people had the opportunity to leave any representational responsibilities behind, work and learn with each other and enquire collaboratively. They contributed to thinking through some truly pernicious issues in a creative, productive, safe-to-be-bold moment. This article reflects those contributions and discussions that followed.

As I write we are enjoying proper summer sun. Listening to the sounds of scuffling balls and ambitious-for-attention babies emanating from Owen Square Park, just behind our house in Easton, perked me up as it always does. It reminds me of my childhood, just as much as a sponge cakes soaked in tea did for Proust 100 years ago. So I took a walk around the block, via our narrow little street and the Bristol and Bath Railway Path and estimated 150 people enjoying this pocket of green: lying around in the grass and shade; reading and snacking and snoozing; chasing balls and each other in the games area; picnicking as families under tree canopies; talking to each other as parents and children in the playground.



Left, Parks and other open spaces are now not so much viewed as infrastructure that adds value to our public and personal lives. Right, Eastville Park. Far right, Eastville Park. Photo Ted Fowler.

Left, St Andrews Park. The big drive for the parks came from the rapid growth of the city in the nineteenth century.

Our approach was informed by inputs offering personal, historical and future perspectives, as well as the huge range of skills and practical experience in the room. We were all there to start securing a 'generational legacy': supporting a growing and diverse population, understanding the benefits we gain from open spaces and the values they bring: social spaces; fresh air; healthy, active lives and communities; play and sport development, growing food, biodiversity and wildlife corridors; climate change mitigation, energy generation, and not least our wonderful landscapes in challenging urban settings.

Virtually all activities under these general headings are not statutory responsibilities for any public body. They do not have to happen by law and are therefore difficult to prioritise when other desperately needed statutory provisions are struggling for resources.

Bristol covers an area of 11,000 hectares (27,000 acres), the Bristol City Council (BCC) estate covers 4,747 hectares of that (12,000 acres), the parks estate covers 2,850 hectares (over 7,000 acres) of the BCC estate. This equates to 60% of the BCC estate or 25% of Bristol.

We know that Bristol is a high growth city, and that we have a serious social and affordable homes crisis. The city is curtailed by a vigorously defended green belt, and competitive relationships at local authority level. However, investors and developers are attracted by Bristol's green and blue (rivers etc) infrastructure as part of their offer, with the right mechanisms they could contribute to that bigger picture as well as more local open spaces.

The Parks and Green Spaces service at BCC has been working to a declining

budget since 2010. In 2010 the parks service received c. £7.5m support through the general fund. In the 2023/24 financial year the service received £1.6m from the general fund, supported, I believe by some cross subsidies. To mitigate budget pressures the service has introduced a series of income streams which go directly to support the parks and green spaces service. Meanwhile the design, development and outreach functions associated with BCC's stewardship of parks and green spaces have minimalised, often funded by external project finance.

The principle of investing in one-off (capital) or short-term projects only when the maintenance and stewardship costs (revenue) are considered realistically, seems to have gone. These days much of the recent "kit" for our green and blue infrastructure has come from one-off sources. Bristol's housing growth provides a source of infrastructure levy cash that benefits some areas. Also there are waves and ripples of Heritage Lottery Funds and foundational support.

All these sources are subject to competition from other good causes, sometimes more immediately urgent (like care, for example), sometimes with complementary impacts. Parks and other open spaces are now not so much viewed as infrastructure that adds value to our public and personal lives but increasingly they are a focus for costs, competing with service providers' core priorities.

Public policy is a wind-vane rather than a windmill

Maintenance, grassland, tree and landscape management remain functions carried out by teams within the City Council. Voluntary bodies (such as Avon Wildlife Trust and the Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership and parks friends groups), also have a huge impact.



Hidden park off Redcliffe Hill, formerly a Quaker burial ground.

However, the financing system has been massively debilitated, leading to the systemic delegation of pressure to those least able to cope on a sustained basis. Roles of professional parks teams and friends groups are transformed from being community partners and capacity builders to firefighting to ensure our amazing assets are just about kept going. Similarly, it is difficult to build the learning from short term project funded activities into our mainstream practices at public sector or volunteer level.

Much of the time, it feels that public policy is a wind-vane rather than a windmill - it cannot sustain, and sometimes isn't necessarily relevant to, these deeper problems.

For this reason, and others, researching this wider/aggregate green and blue infrastructure estate both in Bristol and neighbouring areas was a strong recommendation from our discussions. There are a number of stakeholder groups and priorities which impact on the management and future of our open spaces: developers, sport, local history, wildlife, civic amenity, schools, parent, older people, cyclists, drainage and flood prevention, trees, play, and planners to mention a few. Stakeholder

interest and influencers rarely meet across their zones of interest, and if they do it is usually responsive to crises rather than proactively. They operate in parallel and in ignorance of each other, or see each other only as competitors for space and finance. Developing a network or platform where common values and interests can be developed in practical ways is an achievable goal.

Can we govern what we do not invest in?

Nationally and locally, there is a range of more-or-less independent bodies involved in park stewardship. Most of these are still dependent on Local Government service agreements, commercial income raised from the open spaces themselves (such as parking, cafes and plant sales, energy generation), and charitable funding. They can also be less transparent than *de facto* public bodies. Often this approach involves competing with other good causes, and often each other, for funds from local and national sources. Sometimes sweating the assets can lead to conflicts with the organisation's primary purpose (rock concert or playing on the

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Writing on walls... blue plaques here and in the capital



Dundry Slopes. Photo Len Wyatt.

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grass?) However, these spin outs do demonstrate different approaches and business plans for independence.

To inspire us to be open to alternative resourcing models, we looked in more detail at the approach taken in Milton Keynes which outlined the way in which the Development Corporation endowed a Trust to look after parks and open spaces – through ring-fenced commercial income from assets outside their estate – therefore minimising conflict of use. This enabled parks budgets to be separate from UK Government public spending regulations and independent of local authority challenges (although still able to work closely with local government and other partners). The Milton Keynes Park Trust is doing rather well financially and appears to be delivering a range of progressive benefits to the city's communities:

<https://www.theparkstrust.com/our-work/our-story/>

However, Milton Keynes in the 1990s was a far simpler context than Bristol in the 2020s. Finger in the air estimates show that to meet our present budget requirements we might need an endowment of £200m. That might be difficult to visualise. However:

1. We don't have to get there straight away: an endowment can grow and at the same time contribute increasingly towards supporting our open spaces – an ambitious but tapered approach might make sense.

2. Just as we have to acknowledge as citizens that our amazing legacy didn't just happen, we can learn how to contribute to its future: e.g. through gifts, lottery, local taxation and developers' contributions.
3. The same forces (e.g. population growth) that are stressing the city may be brought into bear to help resource the changes we need.
4. We have a somewhat different institutional structure, with bodies such as Quartet and Bristol and Bath Regional Capital, Resonance etc., who could be sources of expertise in doing things differently locally.
5. There are now more examples locally, nationally and internationally of maintaining public benefit and accountability, yet operating outside Treasury rules, including having

councillors as trustees, including robust ways of stopping asset capture.

The final contribution to our event was made by Mrs Peaches Golding OBE CStJ His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant for Bristol:

"I am encouraged by the breadth of individuals, institutions and constituencies that value our open spaces for what they give us in social, economic, environmental and other terms. Likewise, I am keen for local people to own and invest in their locality for this generation and those to come. Finally, I do believe the King, a strong environmental steward, is always keen to be made aware of novel solutions to everyday opportunities. I think we have an opportunity to do something and that we must be brave enough to start somewhere rather than wait for perfection."

Want to know more about parks?

Four easy ways to understand how parks and some other open spaces were developed:

Know your Place bristol.gov.uk/knowyourplace

Lambert, D., *Historic Public Parks – Bristol 2000*, Avon Gardens Trust.

Manson's Bristol Miscellany Volume 1, Bristol Books, 2021. (Thanks Ted, Ed.)

Conway and Rabbits, *Peoples Parks – The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain*, John Hudson, 2023 (reprint).

Ted Fowler has played a leading role in developing Bristol and Bath Regional Capital; City Academy Bristol; Voscur and various community initiatives over the past 44 years.

Not much to report, says *Gordon Young*. No new plaque unveilings since the last *Better Bristol*. There are several in the pipeline though, for installation in the autumn. But Historic England plans to erect a plaque in Bristol soon – it'll be like the large ceramic English Heritage ones in the capital.

Some background to the London scheme: the idea of placing commemorative plaques on the houses of the great and the good was first mooted in 1863 by William Ewart. A Liberal MP, he wrote that "the places which had been the residences of the ornaments of their history [that] could not but be precious to all thinking Englishmen". Thankfully, the wording on English Heritage plaques has less convoluted syntax – and often really concise text:

John Howard prison reformer
Tony Hancock comedian
Kenneth Williams comic actor
Mary Shelley author of *Frankenstein*
Amy Johnson aviator
Ian Fleming creator of James Bond
Luke Howard namer of clouds

These plaques refer to famous folk so no explanation is needed; Bristol Civic Society plaques generally honour less well-known individuals and they deserve to be celebrated with a little more narrative. But hats off to English Heritage with their pithy, vigorously expressive prose for little-known Luke Howard's plaque: its 'namer of clouds' works well, conjuring up



Above, Our own English Heritage-style plaque in Princess Victoria St, Clifton.

visions of gentle wisps of cirrus; towering, anvil-shaped cumulonimbus, and menacing nimbostratus. In order to guard against sudden gusts of celebrity, anyone granted a plaque will have been dead 20 years.

That way, so the reasoning goes, there is no danger of elevating someone to plaque status only to find a decade later that no one can remember who they were. Our rule is five years, which we regard as just enough time to allow possible skeletons to emerge from cupboards. Scarborough Civic Society installed a plaque to Jimmy Savile just a year after his death. When sexual abuse allegations surfaced, the plaque was defaced and hurriedly removed.

English Heritage is eager to reflect current values in their blue plaques. They refer to 'racist and imperialist sentiments' of Rudyard Kipling and

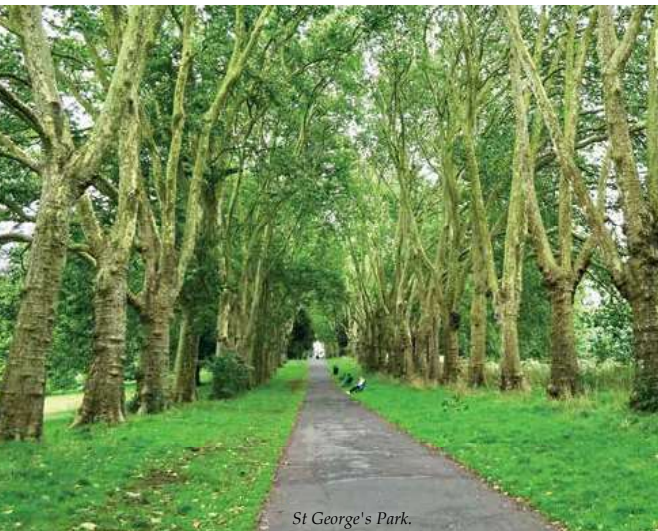
'racism, xenophobia and lack of literary merit' in Enid Blyton's writing (such imperfections didn't register with me as a nine-year-old, when I was totally absorbed in the *Famous Five* adventures. And I was drawn to Richmal Crompton's gang-leader William, but was appalled at lispng, ringletted Violet Elizabeth Bott. She put me off girls until I reached puberty). The plaques commemorating these (considered by some as flawed) fictional characters remain, but English Heritage updated their online Blyton entry in July 2020 with a reference to her work being criticised for racism. This is as it should be – retain and explain.

In Bristol the Panel has not encountered similar issues although we have had to occasionally reassure anxious property owners that the historical subject being celebrated had no connections with the slave trade.

Edward Colston and his ilk cast a long shadow...



Probably our finest example of befitting wording: brief, forceful and deeply moving.



St George's Park.