

# From dawn to dusk – something’s going on in Burgess Park

It is 6am in Burgess Park. Golden cone flowers and purple salvia shine in the dawn light as tennis champion Mukhtar, 13, starts his training regime. First a run to the end of the park, jogging past Jim who arrived at 5am to claim a spot by the lake for the community barbecue. Then a jog back and forehand practice on the tennis courts with brother Jabril serving and mum Adimbola coaching from the side-lines. At 6.30 Joe Ogunbiyi and his litter clearing team of 14 arrive, picking their way between the increasing numbers of dog walkers and joggers. Their target is to clean the park by 10am. Nowadays, Burgess Park’s 140 acres is busy – home to a dozen sports clubs, a theatre, farm, café, playgroup, youth and children’s centre, BMX track, playgrounds, art centre, fishing, pond dipping, Nordic walking and many other uses. According to park manager Louise Wilcox, the space is used by 3,000 to 4,000 people on a summer weekend and there is always “end-to-end activity 24/7”

Yet when the park opened in 1972, and even after renovations in 1982, it was criticised for being flat, short on relevant facilities and at times, dangerous. As recently as 2001, when local teacher Vernon



*Ally outside Giraffe House*

Neve Dunn started the park’s under-18 rugby club, Southwark Tigers, he and his bag of balls shared the space where the playground now stands, with burnt-out motorbikes and the occasional caravan. So what turns a failing space into a popular park? *CQ* spent a day in the Park to find out.

It is 8am at the lake. A black cormorant hovers, a pair of swans glide by, and geese honk as Nick and John set up their tents and fishing tackle. Nick has been fishing at this spot for 20 years. Carp, tench, bream and catfish are common (a 22lb carp caught in the Burgess Park lake made the *Anglers Mail*). He comes for the peace and quiet.

A teacher from Coburg primary school stops for a few minutes to sit by the lake and “just chill” before the school day begins. Parents on their way to drop off their children at First

Place Nursery at the Children’s Centre pass joggers. Commuters cut across the park to catch a bus.

Park attendants open Chumleigh World Garden behind the Victorian almshouses in the centre of the park. It was planted in Mediterranean, Oriental, African and English styles in 1995 to reflect the area’s diversity. At 8.30 every Tuesday, a group of Nordic walkers set off from here, swinging their sticks to climb the Burgess “mounds” – small hills planted with meadow flowers.

It is 9am: at Giraffe House off Albany Road, parents drop off toddlers at Half Pints playgroup. Lorraine Biddulph welcomes some dozen children, as she has done for the past 20 years. A local mum, born in Carter Street off the Walworth Road and qualified in child care at Morley College, Lorraine started the group when her own children were young. She has looked after generations of children, mostly from the Aylesbury Estate. She is concerned about the future of the estate’s residents when it is demolished.

Meanwhile John Reid, who leads a team of six park wardens, arrives. Their job is to ensure that the park is used responsibly. He works closely with police and social services. He

At 140 acres Burgess Park is one of the biggest parks in London. It was slowly stitched together from open spaces around the old Surrey Canal. According to Susan Crisp and Jenny Morgan of the Friends of Burgess Park, it is in constant danger of encroachment. As the Friends’ Lottery-funded history of the park *A Bridge to Nowhere* explains, the area was, until 1800, market gardens for London. The Surrey Canal was built in 1820. Industrialisation followed with the construction of the lime kiln and factories such as R White’s ginger beer, Watkins Bible factory and Newby’s ice store. And lots of pubs arose in the area – five on Albany Road alone. A stretcher was stored permanently in Addington Square to carry drunks to the police station.

The founder of the National Trust, Robert Hunter, was born at Number 13, Addington Square, but the square is perhaps better known from the heyday of the Richardson gangsters who lived there in the 1960s. Rapid population growth led to the building of a wash-house, baths and library in Wells Way in 1903, partially funded by Victorian philanthropist John Passmore Edwards, to improve the health and quality of life of local working people. From 1820 their spiritual needs were served by St George’s Church.

The area suffered greatly from bomb damage in the two wars. In WW1, for example, two houses were bombed and 10 people killed. One of the babies who was pulled out of the wreckage attended a recent Friends’ event to mark the anniversary. The park was named after Camberwell’s first female Mayor, Jesse Burgess, well known for her work in the Blitz. She championed the clearing of bomb-damaged areas to create a new park as part of the London County Council’s Abercrombie plan of 1943.

The Friends of Burgess Park was formed 10 years ago when Southwark consulted on a new £8 million Masterplan. The park reopened in 1912, with a lake double the size, a large 3.000m playground, a new sports pavilion, the BMX track upgraded to National Standard and a 5k running route. To increase safety, sightlines were improved and the high walls and bushes removed. New toilets were built and barbecues installed. Despite problems such as the discovery of underground petrol storage tanks, biodiversity was improved through two rain gardens, lake and wetland planting, woodland and six metre high mounds of soil – enough to fill the Turbine Hall).

To find out about the Friends’ work go to [friendsofburgesspark.org.uk](http://friendsofburgesspark.org.uk).



Left: Shani with mum Mary, the club's volunteer welfare officer Above: Tennis champion Muktar

has the power to issue an impressive number of penalty notices, eg, cycling on a footpath, £50; dog fouling, £100. The litter-clearing team tell John that they removed two tents and a table left by a couple sleeping on top of a mound. Rather than imposing a fixed penalty fine for erecting an unauthorised structure, John liaises with social services and St Mungo's who encourage the couple, a man and woman in their 40s, to return to Lambeth.

Back at Giraffe House the children are having milk and fruit. Ally, the Burgess Sports Director, a largely unpaid post, opens the summer sports camp for some 100 children aged five to 12. Fifteen-year old Kevin Jacob is now an assistant coach. "I live nearby," he says, "and I have been coming here since I was eight for the chance to play tennis, hockey, tag rugby, boxing, football, cricket, BMX. It is free and even the warm-ups are fun. I volunteered here and was offered training and a job running sessions on Wednesday nights after school. Once you learn how to structure a good session and get the kids to trust you, it is great to see them happy and engaged."

Ally agrees. "It is rewarding to see the children slowly changing behaviour, developing listening skills, winning a medal, developing friendships and children from different backgrounds mixing." She deals with behaviour problems by

discussion, not accusation. Not "You are stubborn", but "If you are stubborn you will get this reaction." Some come hungry. This affects their behaviour. Giraffe House provides fruit and cereal bars. It is a member of Fairshare which distributes supermarkets leftovers. Local chef Francesco Amato runs sessions for parents on cooking healthy food cheaply.

Ally was introduced to Burgess Park by her husband Vernon, a local teacher. Injured in a car crash at 21, he had to stop playing professionally, but he saw that rugby's values of respect for others and physical challenge would help local children. The Southwark Tiger's Rugby Club he founded now has some 100 players, boys and girls aged four to



Park Run volunteers put their contributions on the trestle table

17. Some are very talented. Silas from the Peckham Academy was taken into the Harlequin's National Academy and won a rugby scholarship to a private School in Guildford. He is currently studying for a degree in sports science at Kingston and playing for London Scottish.

When more sports clubs opened in Burgess Park, Vernon brought all 12 of them together in Burgess Sports. The Chairs of the clubs' meetings are friendly if competitive. Current issues include ensuring that the redevelopment of the park's sports centre has facilities for all sports and raising money to replace two minibuses that were stolen. There is a brisk trade in stolen minibuses for export. The replacement cost is £35k per bus.

Every Saturday at 9am some 300 runners line up by the Camberwell Road entrance for the 5k Park Run. Chris, the organiser, explains that recruitment of runners and volunteer organisers is all by word of mouth. The run is free and by registering on-line each runner gets a code used to time their run. Runners come by themselves or in groups, such as the band of vegan runners. Volunteer Jo who is leading the warm-up says, "It's what I do on a Saturday. It gives my week a structure and I have made so many friends." Milo runs the

*Continued on next page*

# From dawn to dusk *Continued from previous page*

course in 28 minutes despite pushing his 22-month-old daughter in her pushchair. "There are a fair few of us pushchair dads,' he says, "and we can get quite competitive."

At 11am John meets his boss Park Manager Louise Wilcox at Chumleigh Gardens by the bust of community activist Kaim Tober. Schools break up for summer this week, so they decide to turn off water facilities to avoid water fights. Since groups of youths got into fights in the park in 2016 park staff are especially aware of safety. Other things matter too: cleanliness, working toilets, repairs, grass cutting, tree safety, lighting. Louise also supervises the newest changes to the west of the park, a new play area, planting, pathways, CCTV and a lit quiet way. She says, "I've the office with the best view in the borough. People are always stopping you, so you know what is going on."

At 12 noon the Burgess Park Drawing Club for eight to 16-year-olds meets outside the Art in the Park studio. This artist-run charity provides classes in pottery, upcycling, drawing and wreath making. (see *CQ* Winter 2017)

It is 1pm and in Glengall Wharf Garden's open-air kitchen Sue Amos, gardener and horticultural therapist, is preparing lunch. The salad leaves and herbs are freshly picked from the garden and seven volunteers put their contributions on the trestle table – apples, hummus, bread and cheeses.

They come from a wide range of backgrounds – professionals, unemployed, retired, some with mental health problems. Journalist Mary who lives around the corner doesn't have a garden ("only a window box and an irate squirrel"); she has been planting today, working with Nicky, a corporate volunteer from Farrar's. Nicky also brings her toddler to Glengall Little Gardeners on Mondays, one of Glengall's many activities from campfire nights to training gardeners.

The 2,600 metre square site was handed over by Southwark for a community garden in response to local requests for spaces for wildlife and food crops, nut and fruit trees.



*Vernon with Kevin, the assisant coach at Burgess Park Sports club*

Formerly a canal wharf, then a wasteland, it has been transformed into a forest garden. It has three ponds with frogs and goldfish, fruit trees, vegetables, and beehives, all built on top of concrete through the application of permaculture. An example is the huge mounds, 26-foot-high clumps of apricot trees, blackcurrant bushes and wildflowers, created through layers of logs and twigs which were covered with turf and soil and sown with wildflowers. As the wood rots, it releases nutrients and heat and promotes growth. After lunch Jenny, one of the beekeepers, heads off a possible swarm, carefully smoking a hive of wild and bumble bees. "Calm and purposeful" is very much the ethos of this remarkable urban farm.

At 1.45pm a moped rider snatches two mobile phones. Park wardens and police give chase. John stays to reassure an elderly couple from Cornwall who witnessed the crime.

At 2pm Liz, reception teacher at Coburg Primary School on the edge of the park brings her class for an end-of-term play. "By this time of year, they are bored with all the equipment we have in the classroom, so we brought them here – just for fun. The Park is great for the children's physical and social development. Today Sammy, who had a fear of climbing, scrambled right up the monkey bars!"

By 3pm parents and carers have

come to collect their children from Half Pints. A good day for Lorraine is when adults recognises and praise what the little ones have learnt; a bad day, when they crumple and bin their children's prized artwork before they leave.

At 3.45 an ice cream van plays its tune by the old locomotive. A group of 12-year-old boys swap scooters and bikes, trying to impress with wobbly wheelies. In the World Garden a robin hops round the feet of two girls loudly dissecting the drama of the school day. A man cycles past in a blue polo shirt, an orange speaker strapped on his back, broadcasting Buena Vista Social Club's catchy Chan Chan. Dog walkers stop and chat while their charges pull, sniff and scratch. At 4pm a family rushes into Park Life Café for a last lolly before it closes.

At 4.30 John, the Park Warden, walks into the sports centre, stopping to speak to a gentleman who is looking for the passport he lost the previous night in the park, "being rather drunk at the time." John gets on his walkie-talkie to ask colleagues to keep their eyes open for it. They broadcast back that a large heron has landed on top of the fountain and could trip the mechanism. After a chat with Sam from the centre about the Women's Latino football matches on Sunday, he spots the police and local volunteers arriving for the knife sweep. He is teamed up with Julius, a special constable. Holding litter pickers, John and Julius beat through the reeds around the lake. Nick, still fishing, points out a man showing his young daughter how to fish with a handmade fishing rod – a small stick and line. As John approaches, the girl tells him, "We haven't caught anything. " Fishing without a licence (which is mandatory, as is a landing net and unhooking mat, as all fish need to be returned to the lake) is subject to a fine, but John lets the enthusiastic dad off with a warning.

At 5.30 volunteer Scott Lockwood finishes his stint at the knife sweep and goes back to the Sports Centre where children are arriving for football practice with Walworth Wanderers Football Club.



*A policeman carries out a weapons sweep*



*BMX riders hone their skills on the track*

Walworth born and bred, by day Scott is a football coach for AFC Wimbledon, but every Thursday evening from 5.30 to 7pm he and six other volunteers coach teams from four to 14 and 15-plus.

At the other end of the park on the tennis court, Mukhtar is back for a lesson with head coach Umran Ali, working on that more aggressive forehand. Mum Adimbola, the Judy Murray of Camberwell, is there with brother Jabril. Mukhtar is on the National Player Development Scheme. He needs Adimbola's support for the two hours of training he does every day, for travelling to regional, national and international championships (he recently competed in France and the Czech Republic), for liaising with the Lawn Tennis Association and for paying for extra coaching before competitions.

At 5.45pm on the BMX track another dedicated parent, Nigel Whyte, is celebrating his son Kye's victory, a silver medal in the European BMX Championships. A driver by day, Nigel has given most of his free time to the club over the past 15 years since his eldest son Daniel showed an interest in the sport. The whole family of seven children followed, spending weekends camping near competition grounds. Nigel became a coach and

his sons Kye and Tre are now in the UK team. Nigel is not the only dedicated parent. Mary, mother of 12-year old Shani Harris, is the club's volunteer welfare officer. Shani has already competed in the world championships and is training to win the UK girls title.

About 40 other children are taking to the track. According to Chair, the DJ, CK Flash, who started the club in 2004, many of the Olympic BMX team are nurtured in Peckham BMX. The secret of success is to "give kids a goal so clear they can almost touch it. Teach them to turn up, because if you choose to be there you will succeed. Life is about choices and chances. If we make the wrong choice, we run out of chances."

At 6pm Lyn boxing club opens its doors. Based in the washhouse next to the Old Library, this is England's oldest amateur boxing club. It runs junior and senior sessions, five nights a week.

At 7pm in the Old Library, Theatre Deli hosts comedians Amir Shah and Matt Forde to try out their material for the Edinburgh Festival in front of an appreciative audience downing Bellinis and beer. Emma Blackman, Theatre Deli's producer, goes in for eclectic programming, a "delicatessen of choice for people to see and appreciate," is how she

describes it. In the basement among delicately traced murals, Blackmann explains that as well as performances, the company rents out affordable rehearsal space and hosts 10 artist residencies a year. The most recent artist transformed the basement into a representation of his gut, so visitors descended the stairs into his belly. "This park is buzzing and there is a huge sense of community," says Blackmann, who particularly enjoys the work with First Place Children's centre and local parents. The forthcoming winter season sees Mandinga Arts return for a Day of the Dead Burgess Park parade and the People's Company return with an anti-panto about what is really happening inside the heads of panto characters.

As the audience leaves at 10pm, the adult football clubs by the sports centre finish their practice. A solitary man with a sleeping bag trudges up a mound. So why is Burgess now successful? Of course good planning, careful management but most of all, determined and dedicated volunteers, giving their time.

Burgess Park Sports is recruiting 100 volunteers to help with community sports, from coaching to fundraising to events. Contact [team100@accesssport.co.uk](mailto:team100@accesssport.co.uk)

*Marie Staunton*