

# Alexandra Palace the people's palace.

## Alexandra Palace: Park History

The park and palace with their colourful and chequered history have always strived to become a successful, fully functioning venue. However two fires, two wars and various other influences have all left their mark.

**The present site covers 196 acres (79 hectares) and comprises of various landscape and habitat types.** Over the years a number of leisure facilities have been

added to the park (and many have unfortunately been lost). The current list of facilities includes cafes, a golf course, football and cricket facilities, children's activity centre and a community centre.

The park has seen various developments, changes and improvements since opening in 1863. As this is quite a large site there has been space for all sorts of facilities and activities.



The location for the park and palace was chosen because of its hill top position. Although greatly changed from the mid-nineteenth century the view over London from the palace is a major feature of the site. **The palace is situated a 89 metres above sea level (almost 300 feet).**

The site is largely London Clay, with some glacial gravels forming the hill itself. This caused some concerns during construction as parts of the hill slipped several feet, however, there was no damage to the palace.

The site's origins as part of Tottenham Wood and then Tottenham Wood Farm (a dairy farm) are well documented. Some of the field boundaries of the farmland are still visible today as veteran oak trees remain to depict the lines.

The landscape architect Alexander Mackenzie was well known and his works which include Finsbury Park and the Embankment Gardens. The style chosen for Alexandra Park was one of informality, in direct response to the formal layout of the grounds at Crystal Palace in south London. Curving informal walks wound their way through grassed areas set with specimen trees and shrubs. McKenzie insisted that the primary purpose of the park was to 'provide grass to walk on' and he denounced flower beds as a waste of money! The original carriageways were formed to allow visitors to walk around the site and enjoy views of the palace from all directions. The original entrance to the palace was along a grand avenue to the north.

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Following some financial difficulties some of the northern sections of the park were sold off for development including the main entrance avenue. Although the avenue remains, the main focus of the palace has moved to the southern side.

The current roadway through the park has not always been in existence. **The tram services originally terminated at each end of the building. This all changed in the 1930s when the connecting road was constructed right alongside the southern elevation of the palace.**

The London Passenger Transport Board provided funds to the palace trustees following an agreement in 1938. This was to remove the tramlines and construct a connecting road to allow passage of Omnibuses through the park.

A number of new features to the east of the palace were constructed by the prisoners of war interned here. A bowling green lost when the 1980s pavilion was constructed and the rose garden. The rose garden was renovated in the 1980s and the fountain from the Italian Garden (now the West Hall) was relocated as the centre piece.

The open character of the lower slopes has changed since the park was laid out. The Greater London Council planted thousands of trees in the seventies and eighties, and as they have matured they have become a great resource for wildlife but also a barrier between the upper and lower parts of the site.

**The views, including the protected view of St Paul's, are enhanced by the provision of telescopes along the terrace. They are pay per view and maintained by the supplier.**

The origins of The Grove differ slightly from the main park. Established as a separate regency garden, it was purchased in 1863, this acquisition improved access west to Muswell Hill.

Almost every type of park and outdoor entertainment facility has existed in the park at some point and some of the facilities that have been lost are noted below:

- Miniature Railway (at the boating lake)
- Tennis courts: three in the grove, six at the Avenue
- Japanese village (destroyed by fire)
- Banqueting hall (destroyed by fire)
- Rifle range and cottage
- Race course, grandstand, paddocks and other buildings (demolished)
- Two Football pavilions (demolished)
- Bowling green (lost to the temporary events pavilion in the 1980s)
- Village on stilts (in boating lake)
- Sea scouts facility (demolished)
- Allotments (inside the race course – now open grass)
- Plant nursery (now the garden centre)
- A Bandstand (in the Grove)
- Children's Paddling pool (now basketball area)
- Lido (edging kerbs still visible)
- Air Training Corps facility (demolished)
- Two further ornamental lakes
- Dry ski slope (closed down)
- Royal Observer Corps bunker (closed down)
- BBC Gardener's world garden (on the slope below the BBC Tower)

In early 2002 Land Use Consultants were awarded a contract to plan and deliver and HLF funded Landscape Development Project. The first stage of this project was a landscape review. The main detail from this review, together with a public consultation, formed the basis of the project master plan. The current Park Management Plan and grounds maintenance contract is based on the landscape review.



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New flower beds were created on the south front and these reflect the original design. The area closest to the palace was traditionally more formal than the outlying parts. Early paintings and photographs show shrubs beds in this area.

In a formal capacity many local residents' associations, user groups and councillors are represented on the palace's management committees. These committees receive reports about activities and events in the park and palace. They scrutinise planning applications and make comments about general operation and management.

Outside of this structure, the palace and park are well known and hugely popular with locals and visitors from further afield. The BBC reception provides a point of contact for information. Park leaflets are available here and at the park information centre (staffed by volunteers) which is open for a few hours each weekend.

**A history hunt leaflet and nature trail have been produced and are available from the BBC Tower Reception and the park information centre.**

**The Friends of Alexandra Park have hosted park history walks and talks over recent years. The park and palace is a subject well researched by the Hornsey Historical Society. The HHS has many resources available and is represented on the palace's Consultative Committee.**

During the 1990s a large amount of resource material was deposited at Bruce Castle Museum, Haringey Council's archive facility. Any inquiring members of the public are directed to contact Bruce Castle Museum and Hornsey Historical Society.

**The boating lake was dredged in 2006 and a number of Victorian bottles are discovered. These are on display in the BBC Tower Reception.**

Trustees and management are fully aware of the significance of both the park and the palace. They are managed sympathetically but to modern standards. Every year millions of visitors enjoy visiting the site for any number of reasons as the palace still provides a huge range of entertainment and activity.

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