# PARK LIFE

## AROUND THE WORLD IN 50 PARKS



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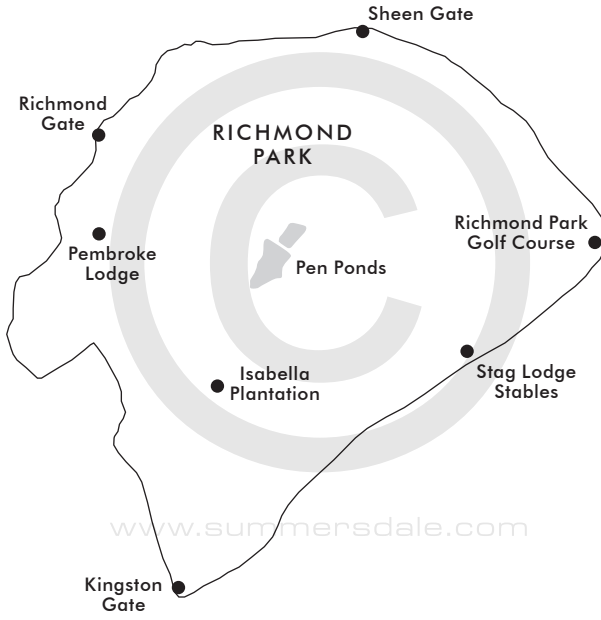
CHAPTER ONE

# RICHMOND PARK, SOUTH-WEST LONDON: STAGS, KESTRELS AND A PEOPLE'S HERO


Sheen Gate
Richmond Gate
RICHMOND PARK
Pembroke Lodge
Pen Ponds
Richmond Park Golf Course
Isabella Plantation
Stag Lodge Stables
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On attempting to enter Richmond Park in south-west London in 1755, John Lewis, a local brewer and lover of the park, encountered a spot of bother.

The gatekeeper, a certain Martha Gray, would not let him in. Lewis, you see, was not in possession of a park permit. Such permits were a new requirement introduced by Princess Amelia, the youngest daughter of George II. This princess had recently taken up residence in a lodge in the park and closed it to all but her friends, who *were* allowed permits. Amelia had been appointed Ranger by her father, a mainly honorific title that did not require actual duties such as looking after the famous royal deer. Underlings could see to that. Her predecessor in the position had been Robert Lord Walpole, son of Britain's first prime minister, who was partial to hunting at weekends. The "job" of Ranger was a plum posting.

Events soon spiralled. Lewis attempted to barge past Gray, but he was held at bay and pushed back. Then the gate (Sheen Gate) was slammed in his face. Affronted, Lewis returned to his brewery in Richmond, consulted his lawyers and took legal action. So began a bitter struggle lasting three years, which Lewis remarkably won, instantly becoming a local hero. The public, fed up with being denied passage across what had always previously been common land, had taken him to their hearts. The mouse had roared! The unpopular princess had been defeated! Free public rights of way were re-established, accessed via stepladders over the walls.

Yet this was not the end of the affair. Princess Amelia, clearly a tricky character, installed stepladders with huge gaps between the rungs rendering them completely impractical to most. Another court case ensued. Lewis won again. But by this time, he had forked out so much on legal fees – and had unluckily during the same period suffered damage from awful floods at his Thameside brewery – he was almost destitute. In stepped local supporters to raise an annuity that saw him through his later years.

Parks have stories – and this one is revealing on several counts. The first is Lewis' obvious, enormous affection for his (and my) local park.

He went to great lengths to establish the right of passage, stretching his finances to the limit. The second is that he was not alone in his enjoyment of the scenery. Witness the rallying around of the local community to support this people's champion. The third is that all this was almost three centuries ago. People have loved parks, in this case Richmond Park, for a very long time.

I love it too. There is something about the wizened old oaks, the dense rolling bracken, the crunch of the grit paths, the mouldering brick walls, the impenetrable brambles, the nervous wood pigeons, the gambolling squirrels, the way the light falls on the wind-rippled ponds, the way the jackdaws cavort in the treetops, the echoes of the woodpeckers, the smell of the foxgloves, the cool hidden corners, the hollows, the bogs, the solitude that is to be had on a quiet morning on the edge of a capital city of 9 million people.

And of course: the deer. Richmond Park has around 600 of them, a mixture of red and fallow deer, spread across its 2,400 acres. This herd is considered the finest in captivity anywhere, with a bloodline stretching back to the days of Henry VIII, who hunted here before the park walls were installed. Each year a cull of approximately 200 keeps numbers in proportion to the size of the terrain. They rut in the autumn; the stags (male red deer) and the bucks (male fallow deer) sometimes fighting to the death. They cast their antlers in February and March. They fatten up on acorns and the leaves of trees, hence the almost perfectly trimmed branches of the ancient oaks. They give birth in May to calves (red deer babies) and fawns (fallow deer babies). They live up to the age of 18 if they are lucky enough to survive the culls; female red deer (hinds) can survive to their mid-20s. They are majestic and ever-present; hazel eyes glimmering in the bracken. As you walk through Richmond Park: You Are Being Watched.

To be able to escape to such scenery, a short walk from the South Circular and the A3, has always struck me as being close to miraculous. In one of the biggest, oldest cities on the planet, somehow this corner of wilderness survives; a lasting testament, if you like, to human beings'

understanding of the importance of nature amid all the terraced houses, tower blocks and shopping malls of modern life.

Richmond Park is one of eight Royal Parks in London and the largest in Britain's capital. The city itself is home to more than 3,000 parks covering 18 per cent of the land. This is more than that given over to railways and roads, and plans are afoot to make more than half of London "green" by 2050, says the Mayor of London's office; an honourable, if ambitious-sounding target that makes you wonder slightly where everyone will live. In warrens with skylights beneath fields in place of bulldozed terraces? In marvellous high-tech treehouses? Or, more mundanely (and likely), in giant apartments stretching to the clouds?

During the lockdown, I got to know my local park very well indeed. I walked round with my girlfriend each weekend, starting at 7 a.m. and taking just over 2 hours including a stop for tea at a bench at the top of Broomfield Hill near Robin Hood Gate, and another pause for more tea and a snack by Pembroke Lodge near Richmond Gate. Our movements became set in their ways surprisingly quickly (perhaps this was a Lockdown Thing). After a while it seemed the deer and the squirrels barely glanced at us: *Oh not them again, I bet they're going to go and sit on that bench, yep, look, I told you so, they're on the bench, and yes, yes, the flask is out, they're drinking that strange steamy stuff.*

At the beginning in March 2020, when the trees were bare and antlers were – somewhere – being cast, the paths were almost empty and our breath formed billows of steam on the way out from Sheen Gate, the scene of such high drama in 1755. On those misty mornings, gloriously free of planes heading for Heathrow, an elemental stillness hung in the air, the quietude magnified as though in stunned memory of the city bustle outside the park walls a mere month earlier. Beyond the huddled ducks on Adam's Pond we would go, waiting to see when the first walker would appear on the perimeter path. Sometimes almost half an hour would pass before this "event", long after the sweeping fields of Roehampton, the golf course and the trickle and weeping willows of Beverley Brook.

Nature came and joined us. A great spotted woodpecker swooped, clasped a trunk a few yards ahead and drummed away, the steak of red feathers on its nape a blur. We watched transfixed until a jogger passed, scaring the creature away. Buzzards and kestrels patrolled the skies near Kingston. At first, we could not tell the difference. Then we learned from the wildlife signs by the gates that buzzards have wider tails and broader, moth-like wings. These would sit on dead branches, looking for voles and field mice. We never did see a kill. But we did with kestrels, at least the aftermath of one. Near Robin Hood Gate, a chestnut-brown creature with streaks of mottled brown was up to something on the path ahead. A little creature was about to be devoured. Frozen still, we watched, the kestrel eventually regarding us with mild irritation – we were, after all, disturbing its meal – and flapped away.

Week by week we watched antlers lengthen. By May, almost miraculously, flamboyant new appendages had formed. On the stags, these had a fluffy, velvety appearance and are, I learned, full of blood before they harden later in the year ready for the autumn fights. Bunnies appeared by an oak by the carless road (public vehicles had been banned). Greyish-blue and not seeming to mind us at all, the creatures hopped about cutely by holes dug by the roots. After a few weekends they were, however, gone. Perhaps the work of the buzzards.

We spotted jays in the woodlands; beautiful birds with patches of blue on their wings amid a handsome configuration of pink-brown, black and white feathers. We came to love green woodpeckers, which on first sighting we took to be one of the many feral parakeets that noisily occupy the treetops. Green woodpeckers are far more distinguished, almost haughty creatures, notable for their swift, jagged wing movements and insistent tree-tapping. The flash of red on their heads and their "ha-ha-ha-ha" calls were their giveaways. What with spotting long-tailed tits and witnessing the antics of a pair of nuthatches skipping up and down the trunk of an oak, we were becoming veritable twitchers.

Richmond Park was coming into its own. Woodlands turned the faintest of green as though sprinkled by heavenly herbs before

deepening in colour and soon bulging with foliage. Emerald bracken shoots unfurled. The tensions of the week – self-isolation, working from home, Zoom meetings and shuffling off to the supermarket to queue 2 metres apart – were released under clear skies in the clean, fresh air. Yes, it was happening. Pollution, after a mere couple of months of lockdown, was lifting. Air quality monitors were confirming this. With cars confined to garages and planes in hangars, city parks felt greener, cleaner places than ever.

Having become so close to the park, I began to delve into its history. This turned out to be a bag of riches dating from the time of Edward I, who established his court at a riverside mansion in Richmond in 1299. From then on, a local royal connection was formed that led to Henry V building a palace in 1414 followed by Henry VII ordering the more substantial Richmond Palace in 1501. He held the title Earl of Richmond, so he changed the local name from Sheen (also spelled Shene) to Richmond, naturally.

All the while, hunting persisted in surrounding woodlands, but it took a certain controversial monarch to form today's park. That troublesome king was Charles I, who was known to be "extremely partial to the sports of the chase". Having been brought up at Richmond Palace, lived there as a young man and set up his queen and children in residence, he decided to wall off an area of land for his hobby: thus Richmond Park (then "New Park") came into being. Amid much resistance, Charles bullied local landowners into selling properties to expand his hunting grounds, built a big brick wall around it and started killing the creatures within during his spare time.

This was in 1637. By 1649, of course, Charles was dead, beheaded at Whitehall after the English Civil War. And Richmond Park, it would appear, played a small part in this dramatic downfall.

Some local landowners, influential men, had at first refused to sell to the king. Yet Charles would not budge and they were overridden. This was despite Charles' advisors being aware of his rising unpopularity and warning against doing so. Yes, Charles had backed down to allow public

access to gather firewood and to cross the park along two newly established rights of way, but his bullish behaviour – he had started to build his wall before legally acquiring the plots inside – ruffled local feathers.

In his illuminating *The History of the Rebellion* (1704), Edward Hyde, the Earl of Clarendon, recounts events: "The building the wall before people consented to part with their land or their common looked to them as if by degrees they should be shut out from both, and increased the murmur and noise of the people who were not concerned as well as of them who were, and it was too near London not to be the common discourse."

By "murmur" read "indignation". By "common discourse" read "gossip" and "scandal". The overall moral of the story being: mess with parks in cities at your peril, even if you're a king.

Add to this history the legend that Henry VIII watched from what is now known as King Henry's Mound, a Bronze Age barrow near Pembroke Lodge, to see a rocket fired from the Tower of London to signal the death of Anne Boleyn on 19 May 1536 (which is almost certainly untrue, as Henry is recorded as having been in Wiltshire that day). Sprinkle in a tale of Admiral Lord Nelson visiting White Lodge, a mansion in the park, shortly before the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and sketching his plan of attack against the Spanish in red wine on a tablecloth. Mix in Queen Victoria's stay in that very same lodge in 1861 – and later return for the christening of her great-grandson in 1894, performed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, no less.

Add that Charles Dickens used to dine at Pembroke Lodge, designed by the eminent architect Sir John Soane, when it was home to Lord and Lady Russell (their philosopher grandson, Bertrand Russell, grew up there), as well as at a lodge at Sheen Gate in the company of Sir Richard Owen, the first director of the Natural History Museum. Throw in visits to the park over the years by Prime Minister William Gladstone, Sir Walter Scott, George Eliot and William Pitt the Younger. And with so much going on over the centuries, you begin to realize that the ancient oaks, some 700 years old, have many a story to tell.

This may sound like a lot of historical name-dropping – which it is – but the simple fact is that a great deal has happened in the park and I knew little of it before the lockdown. Being confined to the environs of my locality provided time to poke about. I was loving my local park more than ever: appreciating both the nature within and its hidden histories. I had turned into a tourist on my own block. No need for airport security queues, newfangled coronavirus tests before departure or even motorway journeys for a "staycation". Just wander about in the park for a bit. Cheap, too! Fantastic!

Although, perhaps, I was becoming something of a zealot for "park life", as my girlfriend did begin to suggest.

* * *

As our perambulations of Richmond Park continued, another level of park appreciation arose. We started to make friends. Almost every weekend we would pass two Korean men near Kingston Gate, whom we fancifully took to be the South Korean ambassador and his bodyguard. One of the duo was in his 70s and highly distinguished with a gimlet eye. The other had a sporty build and was in his 30s; something about his step suggested a military background. After so many "pass-bys" we began to wave, nod and smile. When on one occasion the "ambassador" was walking alone, I asked where his friend was to which the "ambassador" replied: "He has flown back to Korea." This is how we knew they were Korean.

Such encounters became a regular occurrence. Joggers and walkers we had seen previously would grin and sometimes say "good morning" or "nice day". This does not usually happen in London, although I have never had a dog and suspect I have been missing out on a whole world of park friendliness coming from possessing a hound.

Our breakthrough friendship was Xue, whom we noticed early on. She wore an emerald-green jacket, face mask and orange trainers. Her walking style was upright with free-swinging arms. Our timings were like clockwork: we would almost always see one another on Broomfield

Hill. After waving and saying hello a few times, we stopped to talk. We soon learned all about her childhood in Shenyang in China's north-east, her work woes, her holiday plans (Sicily, she hoped), her romantic and life aspirations ("I want to meet someone… I do not want children"), her intention to buy a new car, her love of yellow-and-white colour schemes (how she had decorated her New Malden flat), that she likes McDonald's (particularly partial to Chicken McNuggets) and enjoys baking cakes and soda bread. We exchanged email addresses and have been in touch ever since. Soon after lockdown restrictions were lifted the first time, Xue came round for a barbecue.

I explain this here to make a straightforward point: park life is not just about wildlife and greenery. It is about sharing common space with other people. To return to Lewis and his troubles with Princess Amelia back in 1755, it is clear people in this corner of London have long felt this way. To cordon off the parkland is a no-no. A brilliant print from 1755 depicts residents scaling the walls at a breach in their brickwork to assert an ancient right of "beating the bounds" to walk around the parish. It is full-on rebellion! Figures bearing sticks rise over the wall near Sheen Common as though breaking through the battlements of a castle – with Princess Amelia's underlings looking on hopelessly. It is uncertain whether Lewis took part. Probably. His subsequent Sheen Gate showdown was clearly intended to provoke the court case that eventually led to victory for "the people".

During the lockdown, protests echoing those bygone disputes briefly erupted on the other side of London. With a heavy-handedness typical of some local authorities at the pandemic's beginning, Tower Hamlets Council had attempted to close its hugely popular Victoria Park, stating it was doing so to prevent large gatherings and ensure public safety. All hell broke loose, with legal threats soon made by a hastily formed Parks Action Group. This association demanded recognition of citizens' rights to enjoy the east London park, rights that could be traced back to 1845. The sense of indignation seemed rooted in this historical freedom of passage, originally established so the working classes could enjoy

"rational recreation" in a clean green space in the increasingly polluted, industrialized city. Tower Hamlets Council's move was deemed "a step too far" and to be "overstepping their legal powers", said protest leaders. Mind your own business! Leave our parks alone!

They soon did. A few days later, Hackney's mayor nervously backed down, saying he had not wanted to shut the park in the first place: "I'm unhappy with it closed and want it reopened by the weekend, but we need to be confident in public behaviour. It was closed for operational reasons. Our park rangers and the police advised that it was best to close because of disorderly behaviour."

Victoria Park duly reopened. "VICTORY FOR VICKY", ran the headlines in the local press, using its local nickname.

Meanwhile, related troubles rumbled on in parks up and down Britain during the early lockdowns: disregard for social distancing, occasional clashes between cyclists and pedestrians, anger over people failing to control dogs (especially with so many new dog owners during the pandemic), overflowing bins, late-night parties or "raves" as the tabloids dubbed them (a few rowdy get-togethers even in the leafy suburbs of Richmond Park). Yet, if anything, these "issues" seemed to galvanize people's love for their local parks further still: *How dare anyone abuse these public spaces that belong to us all!* Condemnation from fellow park-users rained down on social media: *The UK is awash with anti-social, selfish, unempathetic, disrespectful citizens… This nation is becoming one giant waste dump as we emerge from lockdown, disgraceful… Part of me hopes that it pisses down for the rest of the summer if only to ensure the selfish twats who left all of their litter in parks yesterday stay at home*.

Pictures of large gatherings of revellers and litter heaps left for park-keepers to clear often featured on these broadsides. At the same time, some city councils – capturing the public mood and taking a different approach to Tower Hamlets – launched awareness campaigns, occasionally adopting waspish wit. "Why are you tossing litter around here?" asked posters put up by the City of York's council. This question was followed by three statements, each next to a ticked box: "I'm lazy. I don't care about

the community. I think other people should pay to clean up after me." The posters ended with a succinct parting message: "Don't be a tosser. You brought your rubbish here, please take it home with you."

All this was, for the most part, a passing phase: lockdown lunacy unleashed. A lot of us live in cities. A lot of us were spending a lot of time in parks. Most – but far from all – of us put this "two plus two" together and quickly calculated the "four": that we were all going to have to get on with one another in our parks, and probably more so in the future than ever. Better to live and let respectfully live than turn just about the only places we had left to venture outside into litter-strewn wastelands.

It was during this period that my mind began to wander and consider parks in general – not just the key part they were increasingly playing in city lives (and my life), but also the ones I had visited in other cities in the UK and around the world. One Sunday, when my girlfriend and I had returned from our park walk, I began to draw up a list of favourites. This quickly grew and a notion began to form: how about "travelling" around them once again – only this time, *in my mind*?

So I did. From the reality of Richmond, I set off on a "park quest" free to "fly" wherever I chose on my list. It was a liberating feeling. First stop? Why not really take to the skies, figuratively speaking? The airfare was cheap: absolutely nothing. The time on my hands was plentiful: everything barring shops selling essentials, after all, was shut. The feeling of wanting to break free was overwhelming. So off I "went" from south-west London to the other side of the planet to the heart of the biggest city anywhere – a green corner of a vibrant metropolis that I had visited a year before and remembered with great affection.

So began a series of happy voyages of the imagination. My park adventures at home amid the ever-busy deer, kestrels and woodpeckers of Richmond, with its proud park history established by Mr Lewis all that time ago, may have been continuing, but across the globe, they had only just started. Bright lights, big cities and some of the world's best parks awaited.

Tokyo: *oresama no tojoda* (here I come).