

## A very Royal strategy for play

The development of The Royal Parks' first play strategy



Buck Hill

With 14 playgrounds to manage in some of the highest profile public parks in London, The Royal Parks decided that a more strategic approach was needed to create a coherent vision for play, establish priorities and better direct effort and resources. To that end, the agency produced its first play strategy in summer 2012, and invited London Play to see the current play offer and talk about what the strategy will mean for the future of play in its domains.

The Royal Parks is an executive agency established in 1993 by what is now the Department for Culture Media and Sport, to manage the eight Royal Parks. In central London they include Regent's Park, Hyde Park, St James's Park, the Green Park and Kensington Gardens; further afield are Bushy, Richmond and Greenwich parks. Play for all ages is seen by staff as an integral part of the

offer and has been the subject of an intensified focus since the Diana, Princess of Wales, Memorial Playground opened in Kensington Gardens in 2000.

The playgrounds in the central London parks in particular are very popular and can become crowded during peak times. So ensuring that the ‘play value’ of the equipment is maximised is a key aim for the agency, and is reflected in the strategy. This means ensuring that each play feature can be used in a variety of imaginative ways, and that many children can use it at one time.

First stop on the playground tour was in St James’s Park. Although installed around 15 years ago (1995), head of landscape Ruth Holmes said that it demonstrates the principles that The Royal Parks is aiming for. Organic in its design and crafted largely from natural materials, features have been chosen for their high play value – plenty of sand, rocks to balance and jump from, deep bark mulch, and even an escargatoire of wooden snails (yes that really is the collective noun!) to climb on or adopt as characters in a play. It also has swings, which although can only be used in one way and only one child at a time, are seen as a ‘must have’ playground item.



St James' Park escargatoire of wooden snails

It is also explicitly recognised in the strategy that play does not solely take place in designated playgrounds and can occur anywhere in a park. Encouraging and enticing children to play on their way to and from the so-called ‘honeypot’ playgrounds is another way of relieving the pressure. Three areas are listed in the strategy as ‘playful spaces’, including the delightful Diana Memorial Fountain and at Buck Hill in Kensington Gardens, a spiral of stones nestling among trees which creates an almost Neolithic ambience. But as the strategy states: “Play can and should happen in a series of networks, defined by the children themselves using elements, which may or may not have been put there with the purpose of attracting play.”



**The Diana Memorial Fountain – a designated ‘playful space’**

Ruth explained that consultation with playground users, local residents and staff is crucial to the success of the strategy and its realisation in the parks. A play audit was carried out in the run up to the strategy’s publication, involving staff in assessing the quality of each of the parks’ playgrounds. Based on the information gathered, discussions were held with everyone from landscape maintenance contractors to directors of departments. This process helped instil the play ethos across the

organisation, so for example, said Ruth: “Some of the contractors responsible for removing leaves became aware of the play value that could be derived from actually leaving some of them in a pile in one corner of the playground. And the service commissioners would not see that as a sign that they had not done their job properly.”



**Honeypot: The Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Playground**

In terms of consulting playground users, the St James’s Park and the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial playgrounds are unique in that they are predominantly used by visitors and do not have significant resident populations nearby – therefore demanding a different approach.

However, most of the other playgrounds are widely used by locals and the next one in line for upgrade at Victoria Tower Gardens, next to the Houses of Parliament is being used to push through a new style of consultation. Among others, The Royal Parks has been working with Pimlico School, a local nursery and an older people’s

tea group who shared experiences about what and where they liked to play. "There was an amazing amount of crossover between the generations," said Ruth.

Our playground tour took in the newly refurbished Buck Hill Playground in Kensington Gardens, which has seen a significant increase in capacity and enables children to better engage with the natural environment. New elements include seating, planting, a 'mushroom pump' water play feature and a nest swing. The £80k investment in Buck Hill came via Westminster council's Children's Centre budget, but funding future playground improvements is an ongoing challenge for The Royal Parks, as it is elsewhere in London. However, thanks to the play strategy, Ruth said that the approach of commissioners has changed. "Now when a piece of equipment in one of the playgrounds wears out, instead of just flipping through a catalogue and selecting an equivalent replacement, they look instead for something which costs the same, but which will give the highest play value." The strategy covers the period until 2015 – either way it will be an interesting time for The Royal Parks as a potential beacon for good practice right at the heart of our city.

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