

**Spending cuts on the way?
Chairman's Letter, Spring 2010**

Richmond Park faces possible spending cuts of 15 to 20% over the next three years, as part of general reductions in government spending, cuts that are a real threat to the basic fabric of the Park.

The Royal Parks agency (TRP), which manages the nine Royal Parks, spends about £30 million a year, of which £17 million (about 60%) is funded by government and £13 million (40%) from commercial income (Hyde Park concerts, catering, parking charges etc). The proportion funded by government (once 90%) has steadily reduced over the last 15 years.

Now it is considering reducing its funding further, probably by 10% for the next financial year (beginning in April 2010), with a possible further 10% in each of the two subsequent years. By 2012-13, TRP could have over £5 million less to spend, a cut of 17% in its total budget.

TRP has only two options to cope with this reduction – either increase its commercial income or cut its spending. Because most of the big commercial opportunities have been exploited, the bulk will have to come from spending cuts. While it is possible to see how cuts of 5% can be made through efficiency savings and cutting “nice-to-do” programmes, it is difficult to see how a cut of 17% could be achieved without affecting basic maintenance.

The Friends Forum (the Chairmen of all eight Royal Parks Friends) has discussed the cuts with TRP management, and we are clear where they should and should not fall. Our basic principle is that the cuts should be selective, not across the board, with maintenance of green spaces protected wherever possible.

We say this because the green spaces are the defining characteristic of the Royal Parks and because they are what we are all (TRP and the Friends) want to preserve for everybody. Once allowed to deteriorate, it will be very difficult for precious assets such as acid grassland and veteran trees to recover.

First to be cut should be overheads, such as marketing, communications, education and other discretionary spending. TRP has grown these areas substantially in the last few years, along with a steady increase in head office staff. Second should be buildings and “grey spaces” (roads and car parks); if this includes the planned upgrading of Pembroke Lodge car park, so be it. Only then should cuts in the maintenance of green spaces be considered. We are also against any significant expansion of commercial activities, as that could turn the parks into entertainment venues and change their whole characters.

To some extent, the Friends can help to preserve the green spaces. We staff the Visitor Centre which saves TRP money, and in the last year, we have started to fund some small conservation projects. We are currently working on some “Family Trail” leaflets and a guide-book to the Park, both of which TRP might normally have done. And we are starting to organise volunteers to help conserve the green

spaces. We just have to be careful that this is not seen by government as an excuse to cut funding even more.

Finally, the cuts bring the Royal Parks ever closer to self-funding (after the cuts, commercial income will contribute over 50% of TRP's income). Would it not be better for Richmond Park to be managed by an independent trust, not subject to government interference? This is an idea that the Friends have long considered and it makes a lot of sense.