

250 years since Lewis won us the right to walk into the Park

by Max Lankester

This spring we celebrate local brewer John Lewis's 1758 court victory

Throughout Richmond Park there are features which remind us of the people who have, in their different ways, helped to make the Park what it is today. Names such as Sidmouth, Sawyer and Pembroke now attach to a plantation, a road and a landmark building; the architect Sir John Soane has left a physical legacy in his works at Thatched House Lodge, Pembroke Lodge and elsewhere.



But something which is crucial to us all – the right to walk into the Park when we please – should be associated with the name of John Lewis. For it was Lewis (pictured), a Richmond brewer, who took court action to establish once and for all that the public enjoyed the right to enter the Park on foot, after the then Ranger, George II's youngest daughter, Princess Amelia, had closed all the gates and admitted only those to whom she had issued a ticket.

Charles I had preserved certain rights of way when he completed the enclosure of the Park

in 1637. In the 18th century, steps were taken to limit those rights, but it was Amelia who tried in the 1750s to abolish them. A 1754 law suit failed to convince the court that pedestrians and carriages had rights of entry.

In the following year, finding himself physically denied entry on foot at Sheen Gate, Lewis tried to force his way in. It was not until 1758 that Lewis's case came to court, and he shrewdly pleaded his case on narrower grounds – i.e. not on the right of unlimited public access but

more precisely on the rights of way that had been recognised since Charles I's time.*

Lewis's victory at the Surrey Assizes in 1758 resulted in ladder stiles being provided once more. These stiles consisted of steps on each side of the wall, with a small platform at the top; they were erected close to the gates, but had the advantage of being constantly available for use. The Friends plan to mark the 250th anniversary of the re-opening of the Park to the public on 16 May 1758 and to erect a plaque in memory of a determined campaigner.

Max Lankester

* See David McDowall's "The Walker's Guide – Richmond Park", and Michael Davison's article "The Princess and the Brewer" in our April 2005 newsletter (latter available on our website at www.frp.org.uk).

Below: Richmond Gate showing ladderstile



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