

From Friends of Richmond Park newsletter, April 2005

It is just 250 years ago this year that the determined action of a Richmond brewer began a chain of events that established the right for all to roam freely in Richmond Park that we enjoy today. Your Newsletter celebrates the anniversary

The princess and the brewer: when royalty met its match

A mass trespass, a wall breached, petitions in support of walkers' rights of way, a legal action taking three years to come to court, a litigant driven into bankruptcy.

Does all this strike a familiar chord to readers of today's newspapers? In fact these events were the talk of the town in Richmond in the 1750s, and recorded crucial steps towards establishing free public access to Richmond Park for future generations.

When Charles I enclosed his private hunting ground of 'Richmond New Park' in 1637 he allowed local people into the Park to walk from village to village along at least two prescribed rights of way, or to gather firewood. He put six gates in the wall, and stepladders or 'ladderstiles' beside them so that people could climb in when the gates were closed.

In Commonwealth times, Oliver Cromwell gave the Park to the Corporation of London – even though, like the king he had executed, he too enjoyed a haunch of venison from its deer. Local people were still allowed to cross the Park, though they had to take care to avoid the pikemen of the New Model Army at drill. At the Restoration the Corporation of London hastily returned the Park to Charles II, who continued to allow his subjects to use traditional rights of way across it, if not to wander freely.

It wasn't until the time of William and Mary that ordinary people were given the freedom to walk where they liked – perhaps because the Dutch King William was not possessed of the English monarchs' hunting itch. Alas, this freedom was to prove short-lived.

Public access to the Park took a downward turn under George II. The renewed popularity of hunting in Georgian times was largely to blame for this. In 1727 George appointed Robert, Lord Walpole, as Ranger, or superintendent, of the Park. Both Walpole and his father Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister, were keen huntsmen, who often escaped from London to stay in the Park's lodges and hunt the stag. The hunt became a popular spectator sport, and crowds were

drawn by, as the Countess of Suffolk put it, 'a tolerable chance to see a neck broke'.

The Walpoles and their coterie sought more privacy to indulge their passion. They took away the ladderstiles, changed the locks on the gates to exclude existing key-holders, and built gate lodges to house keepers with orders to admit only 'respectable persons in the daytime and such carriages as had tickets'. Weekly season tickets were signed by the current Ranger.

Worse was to come when in 1751 Lord Walpole died. George II then appointed his youngest daughter Amelia as Ranger of the Park, with a home at White Lodge. Within a few weeks of her appointment, a party led by Thomas Wakefield, the Anglican vicar of Richmond, asserted their annual right to 'beat the bounds' of their parish by entering the Park near Sheen Gate and leaving by Richmond Gate. Faced by a locked gate and no ladderstiles, they got in either by breaching the wall or clambering through a gap and completed their mission.

For Amelia this was the last straw. She proceeded to act as no monarch had dared to do, closing the Park entirely to all except her personal friends. Even the Lord Chancellor, seeking entry, got a peremptory brush-off.

Not surprisingly local people took a poor view of this high-handed attitude, and there were rumblings of discontent. Petitions were presented, without effect. In 1754 a party of gentlemen led by a Mr Symonds, when denied admission, took their case to the Lord Chief Justice – but he, sitting with a jury, dismissed their case after a two-day trial.

Matters came to a head when in 1755 a Richmond brewer named John Lewis felt that firmer action was called for. Refused entry at Sheen Gate he tried to force his way in, and was pushed out by the gatekeeper, Martha Gray. Lewis then brought an action against the gatekeeper – which was, in effect, an action against Princess Amelia's own royal personage.

It was not until 1758, three years later, that the case came to court, at Surrey Assizes in Kingston. Lewis – or his shrewd counsel – based his case 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. To the acclaim of his local supporters, Lewis won the case. The judge asked him whether he would prefer access by gate or by ladderstile. Lewis replied 'Ladders, m'lud: gates can be locked, and the keys lost'.

Grudgingly, Amelia restored the ladderstiles removed 20 years earlier, whereupon 'a vast concourse of people from all the neighbouring villages climbed over the ladderstiles into the Park'. However, they found that Amelia had deliberately put the rungs so far apart that only the most active walkers could climb them. Lewis had to go back to court to force her to place the rungs

at their former spacing. When George II died in 1760 Amelia resigned as Ranger – and her successors to this day have proved better friends to the public.

As fears of locked gates diminished, the ladderstiles were gradually removed: the last to go was at Coombe Gate, which for that reason had by 1850 come to be known as 'Ladderstile Gate'. The name has stuck, even though even this last stile was removed in 1884.

To the act of an autocratic monarch enclosing the Park for his hunting preserve we owe today the safeguarding of this beautiful tract of land from the urban development which could so easily have swallowed it up. To John Lewis's determined fight we owe the re-establishment of rights of access with which no subsequent Park authority has sought to interfere, other than by wartime restrictions when the Park was used for military camps.

A happy outcome for later generations – but no happy ending for Richmond Park's two benefactors. Charles I's fate under the executioner's axe is well known. Less well known are the final years of John Lewis. The protracted court proceedings, coupled with a disastrous flood which swept through his Richmond brewery, bankrupted him. He died in 1792 in near poverty, supported only by a small annuity organised by Thomas Wakefield, the vicar whose 'beating the bounds' ritual had begun the campaign four decades earlier.