

The "itch to improve"

Last week, I heard the good news that London's new Mayor, Boris Johnson, has pledged to protect the view of St Paul's from Richmond Park. Coincidentally, the same day I read that the Forest of Fontainebleau (twinned with Richmond Park) was the world's first nature protection zone, created in the mid-19th century largely as a result of pressure from the Barbizon painters (Millet, Corot etc), and many years before the Yellowstone National Park (created in 1872).

What do these two things have in common? Well, they both illustrate the continuing conflict between development and the "built environment" on the one hand, and preservation or the "natural environment" on the other. Mankind has an irresistible itch to develop, to improve, to build, usually at the expense of the natural environment (managed though that may be, as in Fontainebleau and Richmond Park).

We face this conflict in the Park itself. Currently we have development at the golf courses (sensitively designed with new areas for wildlife, but more built environment none the less); the Ballet School (sorely needed student accommodation, but with a big visual impact on the Park); Holly Lodge with the location of an old Victorian pharmacy there (valuable history, but greater building on the site and more traffic); a swimming pool at a privately occupied Lodge (well screened from the Park, but an odd development in a National Nature

Reserve); and a new restaurant and visitor centre at Roehampton Gate (likely to be well designed, but intruding into the Park and creating more visitors, many coming just to eat).

And so it goes on – a steady nibbling away at the Park's natural feel, urbanising it by stages, satisfying man's itch to improve and build. Each development may be justified and relatively minor, but cumulatively they result in a steady erosion of what makes the Park unique.

In saying this, I am not harking back to the past. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Park was much more of an amusement park, with a funfair and bandstands, and I have no wish to recreate that. The Friends concern to preserve the Park looks to the future, and fits with a broader trend. The movement to protect the natural environment has grown rapidly, from the creation of the first nature protection zone at Fontainebleau 150 years ago to current attempts to halt the decline of the world's rain forests. The Friends founding in 1961 was part of that movement and we should be proud of it.



Photo: Patrick Eagar

*Ron Crompton
ron.crompton@frp.org.uk
143 Palewell Park
London SW14 8JJ*