

The first two years at Richmond Park Visitor Centre

Text and photos by Michael Dawson



Left to right outside the Visitor Centre: volunteers Raymond Garrett, Rachel Hirschler, Brian Baker, Sheila Hamilton, Beryl Jones, and Cynthia Akid

On Boxing Day 2008, no fewer than 214 visitors to Richmond Park called at the Visitor Centre at the gates of Pembroke Lodge. Around Christmas and New Year the average attendance figure was around 100, and in normal times the average figure for each of the three weekend opening days has been around 60. This means that since the Visitor Centre opened at Easter 2007, in its first two years of operation some 20,000 people have sought information about the Park from one of our volunteer staff, and perhaps bought a book, card or souvenir.

That visitors have enjoyed their experience is proved by the generous comments they have added to our visitors' book: "Thank you for the friendly warm reception"; "Wonderful to find out more about the Park we've been visiting for 50 years"; "A great centre for information"; "A wonderful addition to a much-loved Park".

The Visitor Centre's establishment in purpose-built quarters was a joint venture between the Royal Parks and Hearsom Family Limited. Brian Baker, Honorary Secretary of the Friends, and Sheila Hamilton, Membership Secretary, were the

organising geniuses who worked with the Royal Parks to fit out the Centre and persuaded members of the Friends to volunteer their services to staff it.

If visitors speak well of their experience, the enjoyment is shared by the volunteers. "It's a pleasure to share your knowledge of the Park with others," says regular volunteer Alan Sherriff. "It gives you a warm feeling to hear visitors praising the Park, just as if it belongs to you." Says former Friends chairman Douglas Reynolds: "I've never come away from the Centre feeling I've wasted my time. People show such interest, and ask such interesting questions."

What sort of questions? After "Have you a map?" which is easy to answer, one of the commonest is "Where can we find the deer?" (not so easy, until we fit the deer with GPS tags). Others ask: "How long is the path round the Park?"; "Is there a children's playground?"; "Why do the deer have to be culled?"; "Where is the view of St Paul's Cathedral?"; and even "Can you swim in the ponds?" Volunteers have dealt with lost dogs, a lost child, a lost eternity ring, even a lost husband, all successfully reunited with their owners.

Local visitors delight in a Park they've known all their lives and make new discoveries, as they record in the visitors' book. "The Park is as beautiful now as always"; "I'm always finding something new and spectacular"; "For me this Park is the best place in the world". Visitors from abroad who sing the Park's praises hail from as far away as Ontario ("Saw a deer: wonderful!"), Chicago ("Beautiful gardens, right in London!"), Boston ("A fabulous oasis!"), Seoul ("The most beautiful park we've ever seen"), Vancouver ("What an unexpected surprise, so close to London!"), Brazil ("I never knew a park could be so interesting"), and Sydney ("We can't believe there's a park this big in London").

Early this year the band of volunteers numbered around 60, a dozen of whom are called on each weekend to present a friendly face to the Park's visitors. What encourages Friends to volunteer for their three-hour spell of duty? The opportunity to pass on their own knowledge of the Park is a motive expressed by many. There is also the feeling, expressed by Joan Wheeler-Bennett, that "having had so much pleasure from the Park for 50 years, it's good to feel you can give something back."

The same wish to give something back was what motivated Rachel Hirschler to accept the job of Office Manager at the Visitor Centre, an appointment reflecting the professionalism with which the Centre is run. Rachel responds to the feedback sheets filled in by volunteers, monitors cash takings and advises Linda Wadeson of leaflets and sales items that need re-ordering between Linda's monthly stocktaking sessions.

Assessing the first two years of operation, Brian Baker said the Centre had come well up to expectations. Sales of Park-related merchandise are going well, and profits are ploughed back through the Richmond Park Charitable Trust into improvements to the Park. However, Brian and Sheila don't

intend to rest on their laurels. Freed by Rachel's appointment of some of the day-to-day management, they intend to widen the range of merchandise and make the Centre "better for visitors, better for staff." They plan more social events for volunteers, and are keen to use modern technology to make the Park's attractions more relevant to younger visitors, through video displays in the Centre and even audio-guides they can download to their iPods. There may also be joint projects with visitor services at Bushy Park.

In particular, the search is on for further volunteers to enable Brian and Sheila to achieve their aim of daily opening of the Centre. Why not join them? You'll get a day's appropriate but not arduous training, an attendance certificate, and a handsome T-shirt and name badge. You'll work with like-minded colleagues in congenial surroundings, and have the satisfaction of being part of a community enterprise that's already a proven success, and going on to even greater things.

Brian Baker awaits your call on 020 8546 3109, or e-mail briangbaker@greenbee.net.



Volunteers Peter Watson, Karin Lejevahl and Douglas Reynolds

Volunteers and other Park-lovers are invited to send in articles for this newsletter's occasional "My Richmond Park" page – typically around 450 words about what the Park means to you, with a photo, preferably in the Park.