

PARK HISTORY

A royal irony

by Michael Davison

It began with a wall.

Even before Charles 1st had bought up the land he needed to create himself “a great Park for Red, as well as Fallow Deer, between Richmond and Hampton Court” he started in 1635 to build a wall to define the boundary of his hunting park. It was an effective way of putting pressure on any landowners reluctant to sell up, who speedily changed their minds when they found themselves separated from their fields by a nine-foot high wall.

Even in an age used to the autocratic ways of monarchs, local people did indulge in a bit of grumbling about the wall. So much so, in fact, that the builder Edward Manning who was given the contract found it hard to recruit local labour for the task. A bit of royal press ganging, however, did the trick: “mayors and kings' officers” were instructed to assist Manning in “taking up the required bricklayers, labourers, carts and carriages”.

So, with varying degrees of willingness, Manning's men went to work. The bricks were made on site from local London clay, and the sky over Richmond was smoky from the fires that heated the kilns. It has been estimated that some 5 million bricks were made and laid. The job was finished in 1637, in less than three years, and presumably Manning pocketed his promised £2,500 - as it worked out, a pound per acre enclosed.

Edward Manning didn't, in truth, do a terribly good job. The wall was built without foundations, and soon started crumbling. A large proportion of it had to be rebuilt within 25 years - by which time Charles was in no position to claim compensation.

Over the centuries, keeping the wall intact has proved an endless task, which continues to this day. Visitors to the Park will often see work in progress on one section or another, necessary to maintain what is officially classed by English Heritage as a Grade II listed structure. As the present Park Superintendent Simon Richards told a recent Kingston Society meeting, “we try to restore a bit of the Wall each year: in a hundred years we might get right round it”.

How long is the wall? No two sources seem to agree. The “official” booklet *Buildings and Monuments in the Royal Parks* (1997) says it's 6.3 miles, but this can't be right. As anyone who

came on last year's Friends of Richmond Park "Wall Walk" will testify, we kept to paths well within the wall, only cutting a few overgrown corners, and we weren't allowed onto the golf course which occupies part of the eastern side of the enclosed Park. Yet the Friend who used one of the new GPS (satellite) devices recorded our distance as 6½ miles. The perimeter road and the Tamsin Trail clock around the same distance.

An earlier (1993) Royal Parks booklet gave a figure of 8 miles, and I suspect that if you walked along the top of the wall all the way round (don't try it) this would be about what you'd clock up. Earlier books giving a length of "not less than 10 miles", and one even claiming 12 miles, should, I think, be viewed with suspicion.

Of course, our notional wall-top walker would have to leap the breaks at Charles 1st's six original gates, and at a further six gates added subsequently. Each gate has its own story, which perhaps there'll be room to tell one day. There's also the gap near the car park at Broomfield Hill, where the handsome facade of the former Kingston Hill Place can be seen through an iron railing which runs above a deep ditch or ha-ha. The house was built in 1828 on land purchased by a builder from Dorset, Samuel Baxter, who presumably had enough clout to secure a view of the Park from his mansion windows. He also had his own gate into the Park; its piers are still visible, though the opening has long been bricked up.

There's another short gap in the wall beside Richmond Gate, where railings reveal the garden of Ancaster House. Here again it was a landowner with clout, Sir Lionel Darell, who in the late 18th century secured himself an extension to his garden – in this case by a personal appeal to George III whom he saw riding past one day and made his modest request, which the King instantly granted.



English Bond brick pattern: alternating courses of all stretchers and all headers

Look closely at the wall and you'll notice that in some sections the bricks are laid in alternating courses (or layers) of "stretchers" (with the long sides facing outwards) and "headers" (with the ends of the brick exposed), a pattern developed in Tudor times and known as "English bond". These sections are probably closest to the original appearance of the wall. During the 17th century,

however, builders gradually adopted the more decorative “Flemish bond”, in which every course consists of alternating stretchers and headers. As so much of the wall soon had to be replaced, Flemish bond came to predominate.



Flemish Bond brick pattern: every course consisting of alternating stretchers and headers

In Charles 1st's time, local people could still enter the Park to cross from village to village, and to “take and carry away” firewood. Later monarchs and their park administrators were less tolerant about public access, and it was to take years of court action to establish the full right to roam that we enjoy in the Park today. But that's another story for another day.

In the meantime, let's be grateful that the selfish action of a despotic king, resented at the time and contributing to the revolutionary upsurge that was to cost him his head, had the fortunate effect of preserving over four centuries the unspoilt tract of natural splendour within a few miles of the heart of a bustling city.

Michael Davison leads walks in the Park for the Friends