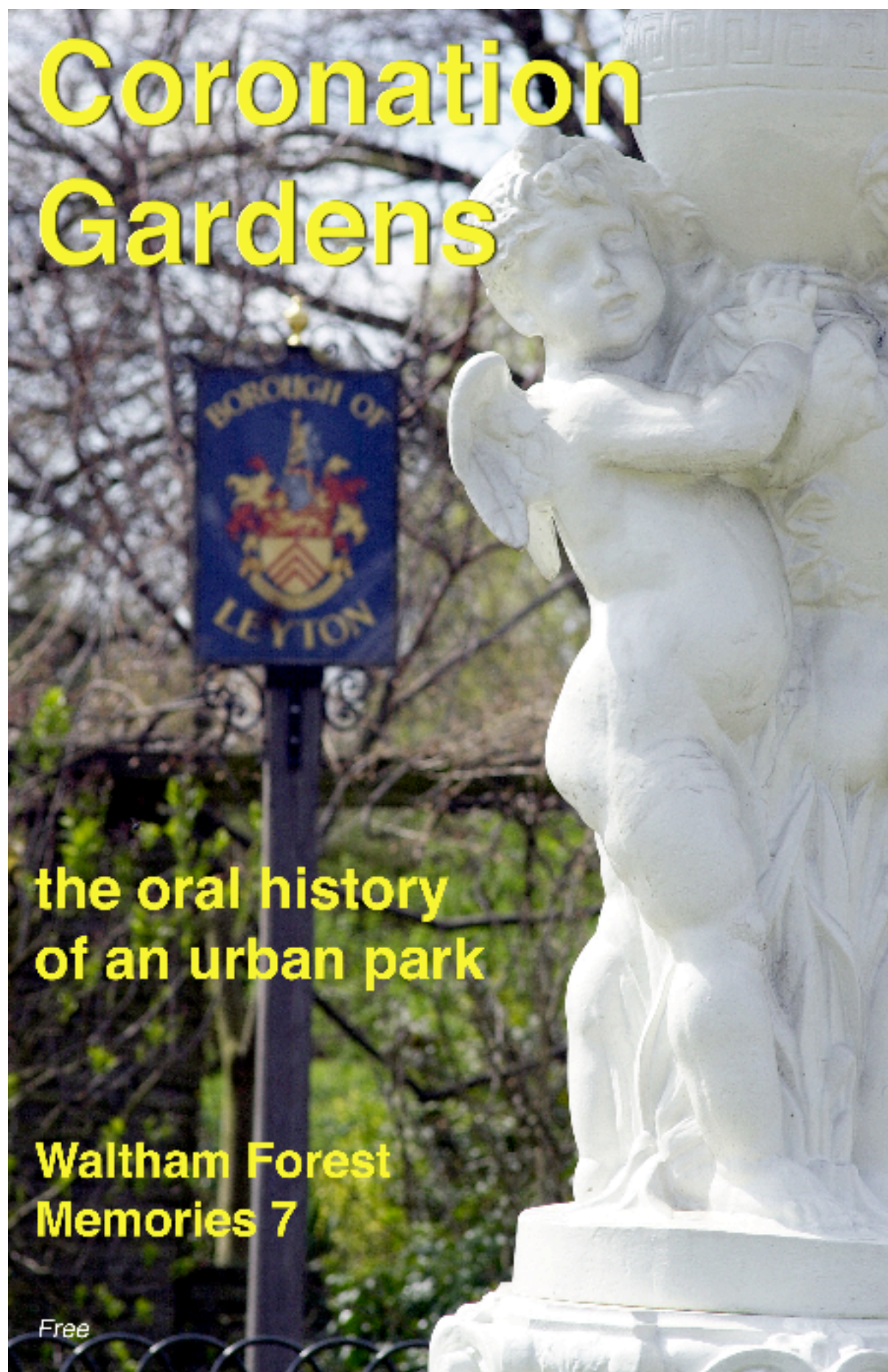


Coronation Gardens

the oral history
of an urban park

Waltham Forest
Memories 7

Free



CORONATION GARDENS

The Oral History of an Urban Park

Waltham Forest Memories 7

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Founded 1983

WFOHW has collected more than 500 recordings of the social history of Waltham Forest; these are archived at Vestry House Museum and are available for listening by appointment.

This book is published as an Adobe Acrobat PDF file to make it publically available before the centenary of Coronation Gardens. It was intended that it would be published as a book using funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, granted to LB Waltham Forest to refurbish the park. The Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop very much regrets that LBWF has taken funding intended for this publication into general funding for the park; the Workshop has little money of its own and is unable to publish without external support.

We would welcome more memories and photographs of Coronations Gardens, especially pictures from 1945 onwards; please email or write.

CORONATION GARDENS

The Oral History of an Urban Park

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Foreword

This wonderful and most evocative book shows how the history of a local park has reflected the history of an urban community from its inception in the expansion of London to the present era of regeneration and has also reflected the history of the nation as a whole - the times of national rejoicing and national sorrow, of prosperity and of recession, of national emergency and national achievement.

Coronation Gardens developed from the earlier site known as the High Road Recreation Ground, a site acquired for open space in 1897, at a time when the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria had been used as a catalyst for the promotion of a campaign throughout Britain for the creation of new public parks and gardens to commemorate not only the Jubilee but Victoria's entire reign, as an ongoing contribution to the quality of life in town and country. Landowners were encouraged to donate land and local authorities were urged to allocate funds for landscape design and implementation. The humble Recreation Ground was upgraded to form Coronation Gardens at the dawn of the twentieth century. From the references made to the fact that the Gardens were to be laid out in a manner similar to Central Park, East Ham, it may be inferred that there was a little gentle rivalry between neighbouring authorities! Moreover, the Gardens grew with the community which they served; they were extended in 1924, to include facilities for organised sport.

The recruitment of unemployed people to undertake the work of construction of the Gardens was another important aspect of the project, of benefit to the local workforce.

I note with great satisfaction that the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association donated a proportion of the seats needed for the Gardens, in 1903. The MPGA originally focussed its work upon the alleviation of open space deficiencies and the promotion of amenity schemes within the Metropolitan area (which became the County of London); eventually, however it recognised that the new suburbs spreading beyond London's boundary into the Home Counties, such as Leyton, needed assistance to ensure that they would be equipped with public parks to meet the needs of their growing population.

Having roots in the era of a Royal Diamond Jubilee campaign and receiving a new impetus at the time of a Coronation, it is most appropriate that the Gardens are to be renovated at the time of a Royal Golden Jubilee, accompanied by the publication of this book to carry them forward into a new phase of public appreciation and enjoyment.

Joyce K. Bellamy
Metropolitan Public Gardens Association

Introduction



A colour postcard of an idyllic day in the Gardens

Coronation Gardens has played a major part in the life of the local community ever since it was officially opened on the 23rd May 1903. When the park first opened, it consisted of formally laid out beds, with large areas of grass and a variety of trees and shrubs. It soon acquired a bandstand, a children's playground and in the following ninety odd years it has continued to change and expand with the various extensions to the original park, beginning in the early 1920s. As a meeting place for local people it has always reflected changing local habits and customs.

The gardens have, in the past, offered a place to escape some of the noise and grime of urban living, somewhere to walk and show off the new baby, stroll with friends or eat one's lunch. They have provided a secret rendezvous for 'courting couples', a place to play for countless local children and a setting for many an afternoon snooze. When in a more lively mood, the park hosted performances by every imaginable sort of performer, from the Leyton Silver Band to the Hilarities Concert Party, Shakespearean actors and even the Swinging Blue Jeans.

In the early twenty first century Coronation Gardens is entering a new phase of its existence. With much more mobility among the population, urban parks might be seen to be past their prime. In many respects this is not so. Issues like the loss of open spaces and a reassessment of urban life means that after years of neglect that parks such as Coronation Gardens are enjoying a new lease of life. In recognition of this the Heritage Lottery Fund have awarded £500,000 to restore and develop the park's amenities.

Interestingly the oral testimonies gathered for the Workshop were used in the funding bid to the lottery. It was felt that these gave a much better insight into the value of the Gardens to local people and the Fund's case officer particularly remembered the quotes about the metal drinking cups.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following for their help in producing this book:-

The interviewees:

- **Rob Baldock** Born 1940 in Leyton and is a retired fireman. One of the first tapes in the Workshop's collection is of his father in the 1970s; he was also a fireman based in Leyton.
- **Eleanor Bartram** She grew up in Leyton and lived for a while in the temporary huts in Oliver Road after the Second World War. She served on Leyton Borough Council on various committees from 1959 to 1965. She later became a Waltham Forest Councillor from 1965 to 1986 and was Mayor in 1975-6. She died in 2001.
- **Carole Brooks** Born 1947 in Leyton. She now lives in Chingford.
- **Edith Clarke** Born 1918 in Leyton.
- **Tony Clarke** [her son] born 1941.
- **Mrs Clay** Born 1910 in Leyton. She contracted polio age fifteen months. She still lives in Leyton.
- **Eric Frith** Associated with amateur dramatics and adult education for many years, he lives in Woodford Green.
- **Stan Gimson** Born in Leyton. Active in the Leyton Orient Supporters Club in the 1950s and 60s. Recently awarded the MBE for his services to pensioners, he lives in Walthamstow.
- **Ted Gross** Born 1921 in West Ham. Started working as an electrician for the Borough of Leyton in 1951. Presently lives in Woodford Green, Essex.
- **Terri Hallet** Born in Leyton in 1952, she is a youth worker within Waltham Forest and now lives in Ipswich.
- **Mr Heath** Born in Leyton in 1909.
- **Kenneth Hurry** Local undertaker whose offices were a few hundred yards away in Leyton High Road. He died a couple of weeks after being interviewed in 1997.
- **Brenda Jones** Born 1938 in Leyton. Taught locally at Newport Road School in the 1950s. Now lives in Walthamstow.
- **Mrs Lewis** Born in Leyton in 1918. Now lives in Clapton.
- **Mrs Mason** Born in 1907.
- **Elsie Mortimer** Born in Leyton in 1903.
- **Margaret Mudd** Born 1907 in Hackney, lived in Leyton, now resides in Walthamstow.
- **Betty Smith** Born 1928 in Leyton.
- **Mrs Taylor** No details currently available.
- **Dick Williams** Involved in the theatre locally for many years. Runs a studio in Orford Road Walthamstow.
- **Thelma Wolfe** Born in Leyton and worked as a teacher for many years. The Workshop's 'Boats, Billets & Letters Home' is based on her memories of evacuation to Norfolk during the Second World War. Her father was a member of the Leyton Silver Band; he played regularly in Coronation Gardens.

Staff at Vestry House Museum, especially the former manager Nigel Sadler, who wrote most of the historical background to the text; Lisa Swatridge, formerly of Waltham Forest Council's Environmental Services Dept who funded the cost of interviewing; Arnold Stroud, landscape architect with Waltham Forest Council's Environmental Services Dept and Praveen Bahl, formerly of Waltham Forest Council's Community Services Dept.

Members of the Workshop involved in this project were: Ruth Adams, Norma Crooks, Michael Custance, Nick Hayes and Robert Wilkinson

NB We have used the original pre decimal money values within the text - there are too many individual items to give a modern value to each one. 6d = 2.5p, 1s = 5p, 10s = 50p

When we were married we moved into Leyton, High Road, a turning off the High Road.... I think it's called St Mary's. My youngest boy at the time, as a baby I used to take him round the Coronation Gardens for a bit of exercise, you know push him in the pushchair, around the Coronation Gardens. And at that particular time it was a, more or less I used to look upon it as a sort of miniature Regents Park or Hyde Park, because there was always plenty of people in the gardens, and especially at the weekends.

Mr Heath



The Victorian Era



An early colour postcard of the Gardens

The Wider Context

Urban Parks are often described as the lungs of inner city areas. Indeed the heyday of most such areas of green space was in the late Victorian and early Edwardian period, when major expansion of towns and cities was still occurring. Leyton as a district, lying to the north east of the metropolis, had such an expansion in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This was largely brought about by the opening by the Eastern Counties Railway branch to Loughton in 1856. Before then Leyton was a haunt of the very rich including bankers and brewers like the Barclays, Buxtons and Charringtons. Local farms grew produce for the London markets and the low-lying land and marshes by the River Lea was largely used as pasture.

When they first came to live in Leyton he used to get out at Leyton Station and say, "Lovely air!" He used to walk from here to Tottenham across the cornfields. His sister used to live in Tottenham, so he used to walk Sundays across the cornfields to Tottenham.

Elsie Mortimer describing her father at the end of the nineteenth century

New housing estates, varying in quality, started being built from the 1860s onwards. The original landowners were by this time selling off large tracts of land to build these estates. By 1881 about 700 houses were being built locally each year. Much of the land was utilised for building with very little green space in between.

Until 1894 local government was the responsibility of the Leyton Local Board. This body oversaw the rapid expansion of Leyton. In 1882 public offices, later the Town Hall were opened by the Board in Leyton High Road. Under the Local Government Act of 1894 Leyton Urban District Council (UDC) replaced the Local Board.

Rapid expansion of Leyton carried on apace - between 1891 and 1901 the population grew by over 50%. All the time the Council was trying to catch up with the need for better

services, most importantly sewerage and drainage to the increasing number of road and houses being built.

My mother had lived in St Mary's Road, nearer to the Town Hall, up until she was about ten. Then they moved to Windsor Road and she told me how that had been cornfields. Well you couldn't imagine that because in those days you never saw any housing being built like it is now out into the countryside. A child now I think would take that as being quite easy to imagine, but we couldn't imagine it.

Thelma Wolfe

The first recreation ground to be opened to the public was the James Lane Recreation Ground (now Abbots Park) bought in 1885 by the Local Board and the lammas land commoners. Lammas land is named after the day - normally August 1st - that cattle and other livestock were allowed to be turned out to be grazed on common pasture footnote. This recreation ground was enlarged in 1902 and was a much simpler scheme than the slightly later Coronation Gardens.

Planning the Park

In February 1897 the Council agreed to acquire land in Leyton Road [now Leyton High Road] and to use it as a recreation ground. The contract was made with the Rt. Hon. Earl Cowley and the trustees of the will of the Earl of Mornington. These were local landowners and belonged to the Wellesley family, the Duke of Wellington being their most famous member. The agreement was completed by April and it was recommended that an application be made to the Local Government Board for sanctioning the borrowing of £1,500 to purchase the land and erect fencing and sewers. However, in May the recommendation for fencing along the High Road was dropped. In August 1897 there were reports of road sweepings being deposited on the land. By the 14th September plans had been produced showing the proposed new roads on the recreation ground, which had been approved by the Council.

In December 1897 provision of a surface water culvert was agreed for the Recreation Ground and when completed by May 1898, had cost £434 4s 1d. In November 1899 it was recommended that fencing be placed along Sydney Road, Buckingham Road and the High Road with a brick pier being erected at each corner of Sydney Road and Buckingham Road.

Well, the point is, that's all reclaimed land, you see, my mother remembers that as a rubbish tip 'til they re-laid it out into a Gardens, 'cause that is one of the lowest points in Leyton - floods there, doesn't it. And it all floods down Oliver Road, the back of the football ground, Oliver Road, it really floods there.

Kenneth Hurry

In 1900 railings and gates for the front of High Road Recreation Ground were purchased from David Rowell & Co. at a cost of £150. This was to fulfil the covenant related to the land and raised by the solicitors of Earl Cowley's Trustees. However, it was also clear around this time that local residents were unhappy with the state of this land. For example a letter received by the Leyton UDC on the 24th January 1901 from Mr F.C. Pearce stated that the recreation ground was insanitary. The refuse dumped at the site, mainly road slop

that in those days would have been largely comprised of horse droppings, was a nuisance and danger to public health. In response to the letter the Council agreed that the recreation ground should not be used for depositing vegetable matter collected from the roads and that the whole site be fenced, to be provided by Mr J. Elwell at a cost of £382 10s.

There were various improvements to the site in 1901, but in May 1901 the Council was urged to make it clear to local residents how they were dealing with the nuisances on the recreation ground.

The Drinking Fountain

One of the biggest projects at this time for the recreation ground was the development of a drinking fountain. In the October Minutes there is an entry from Mr A. P. Wire, dated 29th September, 1897 forwarding copy of a Resolution passed at the Town's Meeting on the 9th July last, requesting the Council to maintain the public drinking fountains proposed to be erected in commemoration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee at the recreation ground. The Sanitary Committee agreed to this as long as the construction of the fountain went ahead. The detailed planning appears to have been delayed and it is not until November 1899 that it was suggested plans ought to be submitted showing the proposed location in front of the recreation ground adjoining Buckingham Road.

This project was still being overseen by the Jubilee Celebration Committee and in February 1900 a plan of the proposed fountain was presented. Messrs Doulton of Lambeth was providing it with an estimated cost of £140 exclusive of fence, foundations and electric light. In October 1900 plans for the foundations and plumbing were provided. In December a design for the cups to be used was presented which included an engraving of 'Leyton District Council' on each cup. The fountain was probably finally in place by May 1901 as the minutes recorded the fitting of an electric light to the fountain by the recreation ground and paving the area in front of it.

Outside, there used to be a common fountain you could go there with the old iron cups. They had the chains with the old iron cups on the end of it, you couldn't take them away, you pressed the thing and water would come out and you could drink it. It was part and parcel of the old Victorian era, where they used to have the horse troughs.

Of course the fountain was a really old stone fount so, I think they were lion's mouths that it came out of, and the chains were held on the side, and you couldn't take the cups away, and when nowadays they would, wouldn't they. We were brought up to use it just for what it was for, just for a drink. I don't think half the children used the cups, either, they just pushed the thing and put their mouths under it, like running water, we thought we was really daring.

Mrs Lewis

We saw the fountain, there used to be a fountain there, with water coming out, and we used to have a drink there as well with an old aluminium cup or whatever was hanging on the chain. That was when the weather was summery. That was the first impression we got of Coronation Gardens.

Mr Heath

Laying out the Gardens

It was suggested that a sub committee be formed of Councillors Alexander, Hurry, Shadrake and Smith, to consider laying out the Recreation Ground. By June 1901 the Surveyor had submitted plans for the layout and costs of the project in order that an application to borrow the funds could be made to the Local Government Board for sanctioning.

However letters of complaints still arrived. For example in July 1901 a Mr Friend complained about refuse on the recreation ground. The Leyton Tradesmen's Association had requested the Council to lay out the recreation ground (it took until November 1902 for the Council to notify them of their plans for the site). But by September 1901 the Council stated that the complaints from residents on Lyttelton Road about nuisances on the recreation ground were unfounded. The whole area was now fenced and bye laws for all recreation grounds in Leyton were being prepared.

The commissioning of works proceeded quickly. In October 1901 agreement was given to obtain designs and costs from two landscape gardeners to lay out the recreation ground. In November Mr W. J. Stuckey was hired to inspect the site, and design and prepare plans for an ornamental layout for a sum of 15 guineas. In December 1901 it was agreed to seek costs for a bandstand, shelter and other items, and in January 1902 the cost of maintenance.



In June 1902, the surveyor's report stated:

'I present another plan for laying out the above Ground with ornamental flower beds and shrubs, fronting the main road. Curved walks along all the boundaries with shrubs and trees planted on a slightly raised bed between the walks and the fence. These beds would have a turf border about 3 feet wide. The ground itself I propose to have double-trenched and properly prepared for grass seed. It is not proposed to drain the ground but I have estimated for a trench to be cut through the centre and filled in with clinker. The walks would be drained by a large number of gullies and would be formed

by clinker for foundation with gravel and hoggin properly rolled in. My endeavour has been to reduce the cost as much as possible so that the work can be proceeded with before the Autumn and the place put into passable condition'

The surveyor estimated the costs for this work to be £802 7s 0d and recommended that an application be made for a loan for this amount to the Local Government Board. It was also agreed that the dividing fence on the recreation ground be removed. In November 1902, the committee reported that they had viewed other local parks in neighbouring boroughs and recommended that the recreation ground be laid out with gravel walks, grass plots and shrubberies, in a similar manner as Central Park, East Ham, at a cost not to exceed £1000. In accordance with this the surveyor reported:

'The paths in every case will be 12 feet wide, and will be made up with 12 inches of clinker and 6 inches gravel, and drained with a 6 inch pipe with the necessary manholes and gullies complete; the sewer trench will be filled up with clinker: the surface, coloured green on the plan, will be turfed after having previously covered with a good coating of fine clinker and a foot of mould. An allowance of £120 has been made in the Estimate for the supply of shrubs, and the margins which are planted will have turfed edging about 2 feet wide. A similar space to that at East Ham Park has been left in the centre (to be made up with hardcore and gravel as provided for the walks), 195 feet in diameter, but no provision has been made for a bandstand or railing. A space at the west-end of the ground, 250 feet by 130 feet, has been left for a children's playground, but the only provision for that part is that it should be levelled down and covered with a thin coating of gravel. If this is to be part made up with 12 inches of hardcore and 6 inches gravel, similar to that provided for the walks, it will cost about £200. No amount has been allowed for a Urinal, but if it is thought necessary, a space has been provided for it at the west-end of the ground. No amount has been provided for seats.'

In January 1903 the committee reported that the Local Government Board had sanctioned a loan for £1000 and work could proceed, giving employment to the unemployed in the district as far as practicable. A sub committee to monitor the work was set up and had the 'power to engage a Foreman Gardener to superintend the laying out of the Ground'. In February 1903 it was reported that Mr Frogbrook has been appointed as Foreman Gardener with a weekly wage of £2.

But as I say I think the Coronation Gardens, when they were created, I think that would have been a very interesting period of living. My grandfather used to tell me about the staff that they took on when they were building the Coronation Gardens. Obviously the Coronation Gardens was a memorial to the old regime, wasn't it.

Mr Heath

By March 1903 there were already plans to hire bands to give performances on alternate Wednesdays during June, July, August at the High Road Recreation Ground. The 4th Essex Volunteers, under the conductor, Mr T. Bidgood, were hired at a cost of 5s per man for the 20-man band and 15s for the conductor (a total cost of £5 15s per performance). Also hired was Leyton Town Military Band, at 4s per man for the 20 man band and 8s for the conductor, a total of £4 8s.

Final Stages

In March 1903 the final stages of the development of the gardens were listed in the Minutes. This included the acceptance of the tender by Mr Fraser, of Woodford, to supply £71 13s 4d worth of shrubs and confirmation that the surveyor had in fact received most of the shrubs already. The Surveyor's report in fact stated:

'since commencing to plant, I have ordered 120 feet of hose and had a connection made at the Drinking Fountain, and I would further recommend that a main be laid through the Ground, with three hydrants. This, with the 120 feet of hose already supplied, will cover the whole of the Ground as planted, both with turf and shrubs. I wish consent of the committee to have this work done at once, before any more turf is laid'.

For this work the tender of £11 9s 3d by Mr Lawson was accepted.

The surveyor also reported that if a bandstand were to be incorporated, it would be advisable to have a dwarf railing round it so that an enclosure may be reserved for chairs. The railings were provided by Mr Elwell of Birmingham who had already carried out work at James' Lane Recreation Ground at a cost of 5s 11d per yard and a total of 105 yards would be required, with two hand gates to match. The total cost of £41 was to include painting of the railings, delivery and fixing as well.

It was agreed that a lawn mower should be purchased at a cost of between £4 and £5 and the committee also agreed that 40 seats should be applied for after hearing the surveyor's report:

'I have applied to the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association for a grant of seats, and I have heard from the secretary that he will place the matter before his Committee. The condition on which the Association makes grants of seats are as follows: That the Council agrees to divide the cost (about 17s each seat being its share) and undertakes to keep the seats properly painted and in repair for the use of the public, retaining thereon the name-plate of the Association. The seats are strong with central as well as side arms and hold four people comfortably. I think about 40 will be required'.

Thanks were also given to the Barclay Park Syndicate who had presented some trees and shrubs for use on this Ground. On the matter of staffing the surveyor said it would be necessary to employ men to keep in order the High Road Recreation Ground and these men could also be employed to look after Leyton Green and Harrow Green Recreation Grounds as well as the railway banks. This was taken in hand. Finally, it was also agreed that the park should be publicly opened.

In April 1903 the committee decided that the High Road Recreation Ground be renamed 'Coronation Recreation Grounds' and that the site should be opened at 3pm on Saturday 23rd May. The Coronation Gardens name stems from the fact that it was conceived in the year of the Coronation of King Edward VII and the first record in the Council Minutes to the name 'Coronation gardens' was in May 1903.

Also in April 1903 it was reported that the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association had supplied 12 seats but a further 20 would be required. The surveyor was authorised to get

these, as well as to purchase two dozen small cast iron notices bearing the words 'Please keep off the grass' at a cost of 6s 6d each. Additionally, he was allowed to spend £15 on bedding plants.

Even at this time there were acts of vandalism. In September 1902 there was a report on trees being vandalised and in April 1903 the surveyor reported that the police had been informed of wilful damage to the railings around the gardens. A notice was put up near the fountain offering a 10s reward to anyone giving information leading to a conviction of the culprit of this damage.

The June Minutes carry a financial record of the development of the site which includes the cost of laying out the gardens of £1050 18s. 11d. and extras not part of the original estimate of £1000 including the items as listed below :

	£	s.	d.
Lawn Mower	5	4	8
Fixing Hydrant and Main + 120ft of Hose	19	3	5
Circular Fencing and Gates	42	19	8
24 Seats	25	4	0
Wooden Seats in Playground	5	2	1
24 Plates "Keep Off Grass"	7	16	0
Wire Netting	13	2	6
Painting	16	9	10
Total	135	2	2

On top of these items of expenditure was a further £1810 5s 9d which had been spent on this site including brick culvert, planting, fencing etc. The total cost therefore being £2861 4s. 8d.

In these minutes permission was also given to purchase from A.W. Gamage Ltd. one set of double horizontal bars, one set of double parallel bars and one set of double swing frames with two swings for £29 6s 6d, to include supply and fixing. It was agreed that Mr R. Frogbrook continue as foreman of the garden at £2 a week with W. Bagg and A. Nichols being appointed as Gardeners at the wages of 25s per week, to include working at Harrow and Leyton Greens, Railway banks at Leyton and flower beds at the hospital. It was also agreed to seek plans and estimates for the installation of a bandstand. Additionally a caretaker was to be appointed at 15s per week (including uniform).

When I went there as a child there used to be swings and a playground at the far end of Coronation Gardens for the children. At the bottom end used to be seesaws and swings and we had to take our turn at having a go on the swings and the seesaws. It was done in an orderly fashion. There was no rough business; it was all done in a very fair way. Mums used to bring their children in pushchairs and somebody used to supervise and make sure that you had your turn sort of business, but even as a kiddy I used to love watching the gardeners at work, and the way they controlled the children because at holiday time it was pretty full of children. Nowadays on the few occasions when I pass it, it seems so strange that there's nobody in the gardens and yet, as I say in my kiddy days or young man days, there was always a crowd of people in the summer time, ladies were knitting or had their children in pushchairs with them. It was the spot in Leyton, Coronation Gardens

Mr Heath

Opening the Gardens

In the June 1903 minutes it also states that the Garden was opened on May 23rd, but the best records for the opening are to be found in the local papers. The Leyton and Leytonstone Express and Independent of 16th May 1903 records that:

'the recreation ground in the Leyton High Road is no longer a disagreeable eyesore. In the space of four months it has been rescued from its former miserable and unkempt appearance and converted into a decidedly pretty and inviting looking pleasure ground.... under the imposing title of Coronation Gardens.... an urgent appeal was made to the council to find work for the unemployed.... between 50 and 60 unemployed men being taken on at the work.'



In the coverage of the opening it reported:

'In delightful weather, and in the presence of a large gathering, the ceremony of publicly opening the Leyton Coronation Gardens was performed on Saturday afternoon by Mr H.V. Chew, the chairman of the Open Spaces Committee of the District Council. The gardens comprise of between four and five acres of ground which was given a few years ago by the trustees of Earl Cowley's Estate'.

And that most of the work was 'performed during the winter months by unemployed residents of the district'. Mr H.V. Chew was given a gold key inscribed 'Presented to H.V. Chew, Esq., on the occasion of his opening Leyton Coronation Gardens, May 23rd 1903' to open the entrance on Lyttelton Road.

Early Years

Most of the entries of the Leyton Urban District Council Minutes after the opening of the park consisted of hiring of bands, repairing and replacing fittings, replacing plants, staffing and repairing vandalism. However in the first years after the opening the bandstand and staffing took priority.

In July 1903 the committee recorded their appreciation to Mr Dawson, the Surveyor to the Council, for all his work on Coronation Gardens. Mr E. Minns was appointed as caretaker and selected a uniform with 'pattern cloth for a blue frock coat, suit and cap at the price of £5 5s with an additional amount of 7s 6d for a gold lace collar, the letters L.D.C. to appear on the collar and cap....'

As far as I can remember they had a peaked cap with a navy blue uniform. There were always two of them. They were parading round all the time because even then there were little terrors around - not dangerous, but to go on the grass, or pick the flowers or anything like that, you know. No, we didn't have any nicknames (or I'm not going to repeat them!). One of them's name was Percy. He was a very nice man, and he lived locally, but I don't suppose he's about now.

Mrs Clay

Day to day management of the site included in September 1903, the provision of five notice boards to display Bye-laws, permission to install two plates at the front entrance giving times of closing and the purchase of £20 worth of bulbs for Coronation Gardens and Leyton Green and Harrow Green in Leytonstone. Whilst in December 1903 it was agreed to spend £100 on a shelter and store. In February 1904 it was also recommended that trees be planted around the children's playground. Additionally that the swings had become unsafe and the ropes should be replaced with chains at a cost of 20s per swing. The repair of the swings was agreed, as well as providing oilskins for the three gardeners.

The Bandstand

It was in the centre of the island. It was dead centre of the Coronation Gardens and you have an entrance from Buckingham Road one side, an entrance from Lyttelton Road the other side. In other words if you dissect the gardens you will find that the bandstand dead centre as you might say. It had iron railings all the way round, because originally you had the bandstand, the iron railings all the way round and the chairs, the old iron chairs and things used to sit around where people came in and sat around listening to the band.

Ted Gross



In July 1903, the surveyor also presented designs for an iron bandstand, estimated at £275, with foundations costing around £120. A sub committee was formed to consider other plans. In January 1904 it was recommended that Messrs W. MacFarlane & Co., Design No 287, be adopted and an application be made to the Local Government Board to sanction borrowing £450 for the bandstand, foundations etc. However, in February 1904 the agreement on the bandstand was adjourned and it was agreed to have bands play in the park on Wednesdays, as in the previous year. In March 1904 they agreed to go ahead with the bandstand and to surround it with rock work at an additional cost of £60. It was also decided that band concerts be on Thursdays and not Wednesdays. The 1st Essex Volunteer Band (24 members) was hired at a cost of £5 a performance. On alternate Saturdays between 6pm and 8pm the Boys Band (30 members), in conjunction with the Poplar Training School, be engaged at a charge of £3 13s 6d per performance.

There was a local band called the Leyton Silver Band who used to play on the bandstand. They used to play on a Sunday, and incidentally, when I look back on Coronation Gardens, I used to think that was a focal part of Leyton. Because at the weekends there were none of these businesses like you see at the pop concerts which you hear about today with crowds and crowds of teenagers at pop concerts. The majority of them at the weekends they used to put on, if they had any fair clothes, they used to put on.... and parade themselves around Coronation Gardens. And the boys used to do the same and it was a question of looking out for a partner sort of business.

It was quite a parade on a Sunday morning to see the people with their Sunday best on, and in actual fact you could hardly get a seat if you were that way inclined or a bit on the elderly side. A lot of people used to get there early on a Sunday morning to get a seat, I am talking about in the summer weather. But the concerts, as far as I can remember, the concerts used to go all the year round, twice a week, one midweek and one on the weekend.



They used to play semi-classical music, but the concert parties used to be like a miniature variety show. The point was that usually, for quite a few years, it was the same concert party who used to do their stuff, like about once or twice a year, and there were requests, sketches, plays and that sort of thing, which were played. It was quite a do.

Mr Heath

Saturday night, you'd queue up to go in for these concerts, which were run by people from Leyton, and they were lovely concerts, beautiful concerts. I don't know if I did say, a lot of people used to go there really just to go courting, you know, making eyes at one another.

Christchurch Silver Band used to play there, Sundays, you know, and as I say, we weren't afraid of the park keeper because we were only afraid of him because, there we were, it was something he would tell you off if you were really doing.... going on the grass or anything like that. Being young, you know, we weren't really afraid, in that sense, but we knew we had to behave ourselves a bit different from today I think. Anyway, as far as that goes, it was a lovely place. (It) used to have loads of seats all round that you could sit, as we got older, just sit there and relax and enjoy ourselves, you know, as an open space, which was really lovely in those days, a lovely place really. Well, the bandstand was well away, in the middle of the Gardens, and they had seats round by the grass where we could sit and relax, but never, ever, walk on the grass, nobody to walk on the grass, keep off the grass, yes.

It was early in the evening.... the Silver Band was on a Sunday, but the concerts were on a Saturday night, the concerts, and the Silver Band on Sundays, and it was a lovely band, really, you know, but you still had to pay to go in, oh yes, you know, to listen to it, but you could hear it from outside without paying, but people used to go in there, you know, and, as I say, it was really something

Elsie Mortimer

Well, there were six of us living here - six children. We had one of the old-fashioned Bath chairs, you know, made of wicker. I couldn't walk at all then. My elder sister used to have all the kids on my lap, and then we all went down the Coronation Gardens. The only thing was, you weren't allowed on the grass as you are now. We used to go in there and have a run round. Then we went into the

swing park opposite, down the bottom. But what I enjoyed most were the concerts they used to have of an evening. Of course in those days we didn't have any money, so we used to go over the hedge which ran all the way round. When the man came round with a box for collection, we all slid away! On Sundays, there used to be a lovely band playing there - I think it was the Leyton Silver Band. That was very nice; it was lovely music. And then as we got older, it got more like what I would call a monkey's parade.... that was what we went down there for really.

We used to go and pay to sit in the bandstand and listen to the band... I was about twenty. But my sister, she was only a tot, because I'm twenty years older than her. She used to go and play over Leyton Orient ground; you could climb over the fence and play on the field.

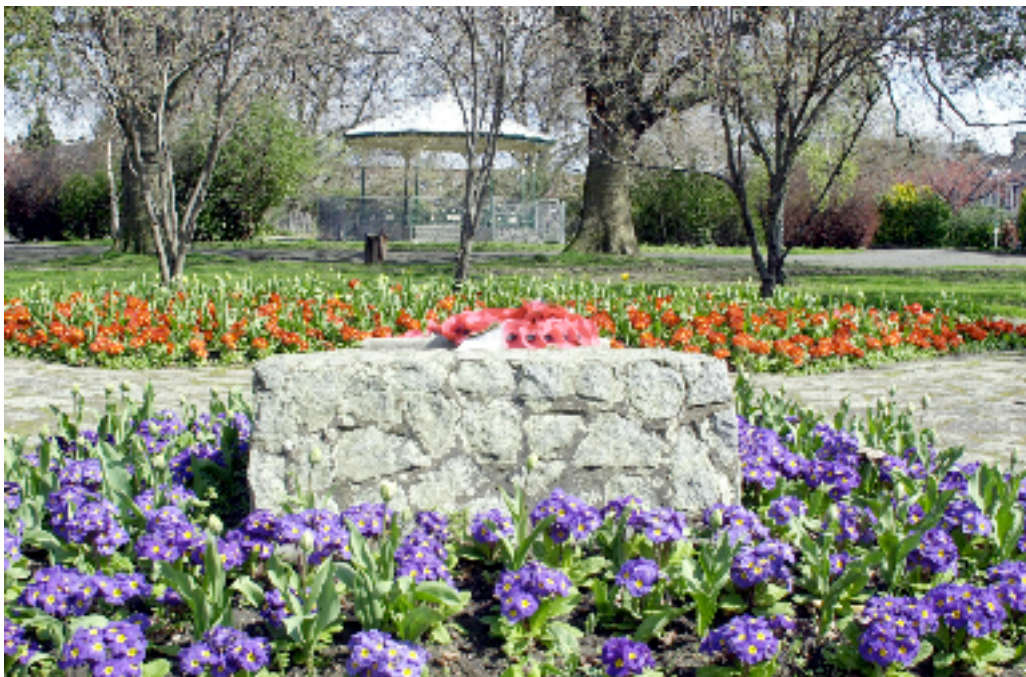
Mrs Clay

The bandstand, we used to walk round and round, arm in arm looking for boys. We found some nice boys, yes, but we didn't keep them long.

Mrs Mason

We never married, there were no men to marry. They were all killed or maimed or something. People say to us, "Ooh you never married." We say, "Well no, there were no men to marry really in those days. I suppose there were some, but you just didn't fancy them."

Elsie Mortimer



The 1920s and 1930s

It was during these two decades that the Gardens would have come into their own. The western world was in the grips of a massive economic depression. Jobs were few and money was tight. Paid holidays for those fortunate to be in employment were largely introduced after the Second World War.

Why I mention about Coronation Gardens is because my wife was a proper film fan when she was a kiddy, and it used to be the cinema next door to Coronation Gardens. When we mention about the old days and old times and the films, it is always the Coronation Gardens. When I lived here and when I was courting my wife, I used to go over to Leyton. She lived in Francis Road, Leyton at that particular time, I used to think I would rather live on top of the Coronation Gardens than down here and that's why I spent quite a bit of time in Coronation Gardens. I used to go in there, what we used to do was, two friends and my father-in-law and myself, we used to go into Coronation Gardens after we got fed up with trying to find work, because it was a terrific state the country was in, in 1930, terrific state money wise.

Mr Heath



Most of Leyton is comprised of smaller terraced houses with very small gardens. Again Coronation Gardens became an important amenity for people who lived nearby.

We only had a tiny, tiny little patch of a garden at home, which we shared with someone else, so flowers were something that weren't always a part of my life, so I really enjoyed the flower beds, they were always very colourful and they were regularly changed in springtime obviously there were always spring bulbs there, daffodils and tulips, but there were flowers all through the year.

It was all laid out with beautiful flowers and rockeries and things like that, and little brass verges all different places and paths going, all the way round and park benches. It was very nice.

Brenda Jones

They used to have over Buckingham Road side, they used to have great big tubs of disinfectant, I

take it, that was sunk into the ground, and I can remember walking alone there once, and you smelled this disinfectant coming up, and somebody said to me, that's all dead bodies in there. I wouldn't go down Buckingham Road for years, not until I was grown up because I thought, these buckets of blood down there, what the hell do they need those down there for?

Mrs Lewis

Mostly, the flowers, they've always been beautiful. I love flowers and plants and I always have done. And I think that was a big attraction for me as a child, really. The park keeper was very strict; if you got on the grass you got chased with a stick.

It turned out to be, they were great big drums of like disinfectant, or food, I should think, looking back on it now, I should think, you know, you get a pot plant nowadays, and you put one of these little things inside it. It feeds it gradually, so it must have been liquid fertiliser, it must have been food for the plants of some kind. When I first found that out - you could smell it. I thought, no, there's no way I'm going down there, and I wouldn't go down that place for years.

I was grown up when somebody said to me, if you come down Buckingham Road. I thought, Buckingham Road, no, but you've got to get over this; just one of those things like when you're a child. How somebody can frighten you with these things. At a certain age you don't believe that people are telling you lies. It's only when you get older you realise people are telling you not exactly the truth, not too badly lying, but could obviously be poking fun or something like that. But when you're a youngster you believe everything you're told. Of course you were brought up to believe that what grown-ups told you was right.

Mrs Clay

Oh lovely, it was always kept down nice, you know cut, all cut lovely like a lawn and you had your stone side pieces, you know where you walk down to the seats at the side of it and sit and enjoy yourself. We used to sit there and have a bit of lunch.

Mrs Mason



Coronation Gardens, Leyton. No. 1.

The lavender, there used to be a lovely smell of lavender. That was in the summertime of course in the flowering season. Yes, a lovely smell of lavender. Roses, the strange part about roses is - I mean I used to grow a few myself like, when I was able and fully fit, I used to have a lovely show of roses - they don't smell now like they used in those days. The old fashioned type of rose used to be a lovely.... to me it was a smell that attracted the people, the smell of roses.

Mr Heath

The gardens were really kept in very good condition, the raised sides, the raised bricks and then the gardens and the bushes. Well, it was very pretty because it was an oasis in among all the streets. It was just in that little area, and it was kept so lovely, they used to have all the roses and at the back of the Coronation Gardens, the roses were absolutely beautiful.

Eleanor Bartram

The rose garden is not original. When the Gardens were set out this area was probably left grassed and was used for informal children's play. Nor does there appear to be an entrance as there is today from Oliver Road. Another aspect of an urban park was that it created a haven for birds.

Oh yes a terrific number. We were never stopped from feeding the birds. Nowadays they don't like the idea of the birds, especially pigeons, being fed. But in those days you always had a bit of stale bread when you went to play. You were told there were some crumbs for the birds and we used to be fascinated throwing crumbs to the birds.

Mr Heath

We used to go in there and play draughts. Oh at one time there used to be a big draught, one thing I didn't mention, there used to be a big draught board and the old boys then, they would be about my age I'm talking about, they were more or less like cripples, you know, dodderly people, walking stick people. There used to be a proper square, four of them at the far end of Coronation Gardens, and they used to move the draughts with a sort of stick, like a little hockey stick, and they would play draughts, and that used to fascinate me because I like playing draughts. You would see the old chaps pushing their draughts, the draughts boards were about six foot square and we used to sit there and what used to make me smile was people trying to tell them what to do, like, "Mind, be careful of that king". We used to take our own draughtboard just to kill time. That's what it was.

Mr Heath

The Parks Committee Minutes continue to record everyday use and maintenance of the site during this period. For example on 30th June 1923 the St John Ambulance Brigade used the Garden for fund raising. However, there were several changes to the appearance of the gardens. On 23rd September 1922 the War Memorial Fountain dedicated to local men who fell in the 1914-18 war was unveiled at Coronation Gardens by the Lord Lieutenant of Essex. The fountain was presented by E. R. Alexander and Sons, local printers whose works overlooked Coronation Gardens, in memory of one of their Principals, Major Alexander of the 6th Essex Regiment, 'and all other brave Leyton men who made the supreme sacrifice'. This fountain was repainted and repaired in 1925.

There was a memorial thing up near the High Road end that was like an angel flying on a fountain. That was a memorial to Alexander the printer, it was for his son for the First World War, I think it was like an angel flying, and a fountain used to come out of it. Yes, you couldn't drink it there, it was ever so tall just inside the gate, you wasn't allowed to go in there, you could look over the gate and

look at it, but you wasn't allowed to go in there.

Margaret Mudd

Alexanders had their works in Lyttelton Road, Overlooking the Gardens. Major Harold Percy Alexander of the Essex Regiment was killed on Monday 26th March 1917 in Egypt or Palestine. He was aged 35. He has no known grave and is commemorated on the Jerusalem Memorial in Israel. The Alexander connection with the Gardens was continued in other ways as well.



And I always remember the, what shall we say, the elections about that time. There was a printing works next door to the Coronation Gardens called The Alexander Printing Works. And the head cook and bottle washer there was eventually the MP for Leyton, the name of the printing firm was Alexander's. That was round about when I was 5 or 6, because at that particular time he got the kiddies, when he was doing his electioneering, to go around shouting out his name and singing, "Vote, vote, vote for Alexander". And we used to get a sweet for that, a sweet and a farthing for that, so it was a little bit of bribery for us to do it.

Mr Heath describing the 1918 General Election

Mr E Alexander first stood for Parliament as the Conservative and Unionist candidate in the Leyton East constituency in 1918. He lost by 200 votes to the Coalition Liberal. He fared better in the 1922 General Election when he was elected by a margin of 1,500 over the Labour candidate. He lasted for one year when he was defeated by Major Church the previously defeated Labour candidate. He got back two years later when he defeated Major Church by 1,600 votes. He lasted a bit longer this time but was defeated by Labour again in the person of Fenner Brockway in 1929. The family firm unsurprisingly printed all his election addresses.

In October 1923 the Parks Committee recommended to extend the Gardens, including a new bowling green, shelter for the bowling green, tennis courts and a croquet lawn. The cost of the agreed Cumberland turf was listed in November 1923 as £279 9s 8d, which included transport costs from Carlisle of £115 12s 6d and from Leyton £17 8s. The

superintendent was requested to see if it would be cheaper to bring the turf by water rather than by rail, but in the December Minutes this was decided against. It was suggested that to lay the turf, the borough use those who were unemployed and an application to the Unemployed Grants Committee be made. In March 1924 a grant was agreed to cover 60% of employment costs up to a total of £820 (work to begin by May 31st 1924). In May it was agreed that part of the children's play area be grassed over and that children would only be allowed admission to the sports section of Coronation Gardens if accompanied by an adult.

Over in the Coronation Gardens extension where the children used to play, the toilets there were just very, very ancient like the old school toilets used to be, when you went out into the playground and that sort of thing. So they weren't much, but the ones in the Coronation Gardens were quite up to local government standards for the 30's and 40's. I don't know when they were closed, because even now I go to different parts of the borough and I am amazed to see the toilets as closed.

Ted Gross

Maybe because money was so short due to the economic recessions of the 1920s and 30s that Coronation Gardens was used so much. People could not afford holidays - very few employers gave paid leave. So an area of green space came into its own.

The most pleasant recollection of Coronation Gardens was the entertainment they used to put on at the bandstand, where during the week there used to be a little show from a Concert Party, twice a week on a Tuesday and a Saturday. When I was married, of course I married a Leyton girl you see, and that's why we eventually went to St Mary's Road. It suited my wife more than I because it was nearer her family, but I used to go to these concerts pretty regularly. There were some very bad years regarding the upsets in commerce and that sort of thing. During the 1929 to 1930 period we had the Wall Street crash, and the unemployment figure was terrific. Whole families were put out of work at that particular time, and my father-in-law, myself and another relative, we used to go out together to try and find work.

I, at that particular time, was in the building trade, and we usually used to finish up, if it was a weekend, in the Coronation Gardens listening to the band or one of these concerts. In actual fact we used to go to the concerts on the Saturday night if we could afford it, and it was only a penny and tuppence a time. It was tuppence to sit down on deck chairs inside the railings that circulated round the bandstand. And of course loads of people, all they had to do was to lean on the railings and see the show and listen without having to pay anything. On one occasion, we all bought us a penny programme each, on one of the Saturday nights, my father-in-law, his friend and myself, we bought a programme each. They were numbered programmes and during the interval there used to be a draw for the winning number. On one occasion I won a quarter ton of coal. At that particular time I suppose coal was, what, say, 2/6s, what we call half a crown, for a hundredweight of coal, so that was worth, at that particular time I suppose, about one pound.

I will mention this about Coronation Gardens, regarding what people used to do while they were waiting for the band; you hardly ever used to see a person, especially the ladies, sitting down doing nothing. If they had a seat outside of the bandstand and they've got their children in the prams, there's hardly any ladies sitting there just listening. They would be listening all right to the music but they would be doing something with their hands, either knitting or crocheting or sewing.

Of course, at that particular time we didn't take a lot of notice of it we thought it that was the normal

thing to do, but you would see some of the ladies there perhaps putting new collars on shirts and doing a bit of sewing and putting buttons on and it was quite common to see them doing that, repairing and patching their husband's or children's trousers because in those days you hardly ever see a kiddy from a working class family that had anything new on, it was always patched pair of trousers, patched shirt or patched jacket. As I say, you would see them in the Gardens sitting, even on a Sunday morning, patching and sewing and knitting. That's my recollection of the Coronation Gardens.

Mr Heath

We used to have lovely concerts in the Coronation Gardens, absolutely lovely concerts, you used to line up outside, there was a big bandstand there. Wally Barker and May Stephenson, they lived in Leyton, they used to run the concerts. They were really lovely, and a lot of young people used to go there to.... get off.

Elsie Mortimer

Well he [my father] had belonged to the Walthamstow Silver Band. I don't know why but most of my memories are with the Leyton Silver Band. We lived in Windsor Road, which was quite close to Coronation Gardens. So a lot of my life really was centred on the Coronation Gardens.

I don't know how frequently they played there, but certainly there were entertainments there on Saturdays and Sundays. So they must have performed there once a month or once a week, I've no idea. Of course in those days they had military uniforms with braiding and epaulettes and so on. He was a percussionist so we had so many instruments in the house - tubular bells behind the dressing table and bass drums under the bed.

Thelma Wolfe

Regarding my wife, I met her at a local cinema here and it's the supermarket now, Leo's (in Leytonstone - now closed). At that particular time when I met her it was a cinema called the Rialto. As I say I met her there and she lived at Leyton at that particular time. As a kiddy she used to go regular to the cinema next door to the Coronation Gardens, so whenever we're talking about the old times it was always near the Coronation Gardens. That was the focal part of Leyton because, once again, right on top of the Council Offices. When people asked us for directions, used to say, "Look for Coronation Gardens and go from there".

It wasn't a pool that was open and round; it was set up against a wall. If you went in from Leyton High Road, through the gates that way, it would have been on the left hand side of the park, and it had a wall with rocks and water that trickled down it, and in there were the most enormous goldfish, they may well still be there, as I say, it's many years since I've been. But that was my favourite bit, and I'd often sit there and watch the fish, and I loved the flowers.

Mr Heath

Well they would just be sitting there talking to each other. There was in the right hand corner before you go into the rose garden, a shelter of some sort, because I can remember my neighbour was perhaps 10 years old, and a friend I went to school with, and I would have been perhaps 12 years old, and we had a meeting there once. Always meetings. When we discussed calling ourselves the Brown Guides, because the ten year old was the Brownie and we were Guides, and we planned what we would do, and then we voted who would be the leader.

Thelma Wolfe

Because of the small houses in the area - many like Brenda Jones' home were further split into two or more flats - somewhere to play was essential for children. Although the areas where play was allowed were clearly delineated.

Well the point is, as far as Coronation Gardens is concerned, they were there to walk in and sit around, not necessarily to play in, because on the other side of Oliver Road you had the children's swing park. You went through the Coronation Gardens to get to the swing park.

Ted Gross

No we couldn't do that (play in the Gardens). I suppose that's why we played in those streets near the Gardens, but we would only be able to run around on those wide paths. I can't remember, but possibly we would perhaps go down there rather sedately and sit on the seats down there.

Thelma Wolfe

Swings, seesaw and I think that was all, Oh I think we had a twist thing but nice, we all had goes at swings and then there was a big place to play in and it was great.

Mrs Clarke



Well I didn't go there much. Possibly my mother was a bit wary of the dangers of being on those swings or the seesaws, but I certainly did go there. I can remember it very well the sort of carousel thing and some of the swings were for small children that could be fastened in, and the seesaws.

Thelma Wolfe

The only thing that I was always amazed about is why they had this shelter there. It was a sort of corrugated thing and it had seats going round. At the swing park area, it is probably that if it rained there was somewhere that you could go and get away from the rain, shelter from the rain. Yes, a corrugated thing with a bench going around inside.

Tony Clarke

The Extension also contained the sports facilities, again separated from the more tranquil surroundings of the main park area. Sports facilities in the inter war period became

increasingly important as people became more aware of the healthy benefits of exercise.

Then there was a bowling green there, where the flower beds are, you know, the rose Gardens, isn't it? Then they moved it over the road to where the tennis courts were.

Mrs Taylor

Oh, the tennis courts. They were at the bottom of the hill, there's a slight hill, but to us it was quite a steep one. So the tennis courts, and then there was the bowling green, but they did at one time have quite a big wooden building, but I think they were serving refreshments there as far as I can remember.

Yes we must have had to pay; well perhaps it was in this building where the refreshments were being served, because there wasn't anywhere else. Of course the Gardens, the swing rec., the tennis courts all had high railings, and I can remember they had big locks to them and they must have been locked up at night.

Thelma Wolfe

Leyton has a history of good sporting facilities not just for local people but also for the professional game. Adjacent to Coronation Gardens is Brisbane Road, the home of Leyton Orient Football Club since 1937. A mile away to the north, Essex County Cricket Club set up their headquarters in Leyton High Road in 1886. They played there until the 1970s.

Coronation Gardens for quite a few years was my second home. Because when eventually things did get a bit better regarding work, and when I got a job in the building trade and used to go to football matches, one of the grounds that was on top of the Coronation Gardens of course, Leyton, the amateur side. In those days they were one of the top teams in the country, and of course, once again we hardly ever said we're going to the football match, we used to say to the wife or our friends, we're going to Coronation Gardens and that meant the football.

Mr Heath

Of course when the Gardens were open for these bands and performances, the concert parties and the Shakespeare that would have all had to be open in the evening. A lot of people would stand on the outside and wouldn't go in, and I think I can remember the wooden kiosk with the green paint where you paid to go in for those events.

Thelma Wolfe

Yes it must have been about eighteen to twenty strong that was in it. It was really a good band. It was really quite a nice pleasant afternoon if you could get the time to sit there. But of course it was nearly always elderly people then that would sit there and listen to it because the majority of children had to go to Sunday School. So you would spend more time at Sunday School than what you did over the park.

Elsie Mortimer

See I can only remember the band and us being all down there in the same crowd and it was really nice. I can't explain it to anybody, and everybody was in their best clothes, you know, and everybody took pride in themselves, poor but nice.

Edith Clarke

There's the Coronation Gardens extension at the back. And on the other side of the road, well that is

also the extension of Coronation Gardens, isn't it? And there's a café up there which you go up steps to. The Works Department was behind there. You had to go through a little passage to the Works Department at the back.

Eleanor Bartram

The Gardens have always had staff based on site during the day. They often left an impression.

As a child I used to play in the Coronation Gardens, but if we saw a park-keeper, we'd do a bunk, because, you know, in those days, it was so it was a marvellous place, not allowed to walk on the grass or anything like that. So we used to play there, you know, three or four of us girls, no boys or anything, like that. We only used to er, lark about in there, but if you saw the park-keeper, we'd run out, because we were afraid, he'd come up there and say, "What are you doing?" You know we had to behave ourselves really in those days.

Elsie Mortimer

No the park-keeper used to keep his eye out, which I think is nice because today the parks get ruined for the children. Oh well I don't say the children, the 14 year old and 16 year olds either set light to something or other. I live at Buckhurst Hill and the park, and the children, the kids there, they sort of do it and squirt anything over.... There's nobody there to make sure they don't get up to anything. But I don't think it's the young children, I think it is the 14 year olds. They swing, make all the swings.... sort of climb up so the young children can't get on. That's it.

Tony Clarke



Well I think we didn't play games because he (the park-keeper) was too strict about what we did. We might have played 'catch-us-ball' and that, but I think it was more that we were out in the air with nice scenery. The concerts were very, very good, smashing, they were. But when I was a teenager I was on crutches. They were the old fashioned ones with tocks like that and a straight one. My sister used to bunk me up on this crutch; I had to hold on to the railings so I could see. We thought this funny, though. When we saw him coming, we'd say, "Get down quick - he's coming!!"

Pulled the crutch away and I nearly went flying! We had some good laughs because, as I say, we made our own fun. It was very nice.

Mrs Clay

I lived in Sidmouth Road, which is right opposite Coronation Gardens. When we were children, obviously it was the nearest place we could go to, but we could only walk in the Gardens. There was always a chap in charge of the gardens, therefore you were never allowed to run around, you couldn't skate, you couldn't take your bike in there. If you wanted to go in one gate and out of the other you had to walk the bike. There was notices on the grass saying you couldn't walk on the grass, and definitely couldn't play ball in there.

Mrs Lewis

Oh yes, yes and at that particular time what impressed me as a little kiddy was the roses, the flowers, and the way they was kept and the way the Garden Attendants made sure that you didn't tread on what you shouldn't have trod on.

Mr Heath

When I was about eight we used to go through the Coronation Gardens into the park at the back, which was called swing recs., and we used to play on the swings and then we used to have a paddle in the pool, which was all blood-suckers in the pool. Very dirty but we loved it because it was, in summertime, it was lovely and cool. Then we could come out of there, go into Coronation Gardens and walk all around the park. It used to be beautiful, but there used to be a policeman there. We was told - I expect it was a park-keeper - but we were told it was a policeman. He was a very stout man and we used to look at him. On the grass used to be 'Keep off the Grass' and no one ever attempted in my time ever to go on the grass.

Yes, I should say he was about nearly 6 ft and he was as wide as he was tall and a ruddy complexion, very smart, very smart. That's all I can remember that part of it. I was told that he was a retired police.... no I don't think we were told that.... we were told it was a policeman and that was good enough, because policemen in our day were respected.

Couldn't get up to nothing when we were little, see because, as I say, we used to just run around, as long as you kept off the grass, you wasn't allowed on the grass, and it was beautiful. No flowers was touched and we had crowds of children going there but there was one man that held the Coronation Gardens as it should be.

Edith Clarke

Of course, I was brought up in a very - regarding behaviour - strict manner, and it was easy for me to behave myself sort of business. But I remember one or two gardeners there that, to me were like regimental, very strict in their behaviour in telling the children off, but it didn't happen very often. But they did keep their eyes on the children and they seemed to behave themselves a bit better than they do now. I recollect there were two there and they always impressed me with their build. They always looked massive to me and they wore a uniform of course - a grey/greenish uniform with a nice big hat. We called them park keepers at one time, but I suppose what they actually done was that they were employed by the Council and not only did they work on the Coronation Gardens they worked on the parks as well. You had the Wanstead Flats, any surrounding grounds belonging to the area they were well looked after. You even had regular inspection of trees and that sort of thing.

Mr Heath

Yes, they was in uniform and they had complete authority. That was just like your parents chastised you, and you got a lecture on the rights and wrongs of taking other people's stuff. When you look at it now, you think to yourself, well, whose flowers really were they? Who did they actually belong to? But there you are.

My mother went into hospital once, and I picked a flower, and I got caught, and I got a slap round the ear, and the flower got taken away from me. The excuse was, that because I'd taken the flower, I told him what I needed the flower for. Because I'd taken the flower, then my punishment was that I couldn't take it to the hospital to give to my mother, so that was that. I remember crying my eyes out because I couldn't take her this flower. I must have been about seven, eight, something like that, then. It seemed terrible to me to think that there was all these hundreds of flowers there, and nobody could have one, just to take to a mother that was in hospital. But rules were rules, and we were made to obey to a certain extent.

Eleanor Bartram

Before I lived here I used to come over twice a week to see grandfather and grandmother, and mum used to bring me over. Used to come on me three-wheeled bike. The entrance to the gardens now, there on the corner, each corner, they used to be each end, and I used to be allowed to ride in on my bike, round the war memorial, as you walk outside. The park keeper caught me and had us both in there and read the Regulations to us - that you mustn't ride cycles inside the park. That was it, and we were never allowed in there again.

Kenneth Hurry

From childhood I always remembered it, the actual swing rec., you used to have a section there where you had a slide with swings, rocking horse and all the rest. I always remember next to that was the chap, there used to be a hut there, and he was the park keeper and he used to make sure the children wasn't getting up to any mischief or anything like that, or doing things they if you was doing something wrong he would come over and tell you off.

Then there used to be a big shed there, I don't really remember what the shed was there for. This was on the main, where the swing rec. is now, and then from then onwards they had a sort of big field there that you used to play football on. Across the road they used to have, it was the gardens, and they used to have a big pond there with big goldfish in and things like that. The elderly people used to sit in there and of course all the children. But I think, going back, it was nice to have a park keeper, if you grazed your knee or something like that you used to go to him and he used to put a plaster on and things like that.

Oh yes, you wouldn't dare argue with him because in those days he would have said right I'll get the police and you would behave yourself.

He had a peak cap, he had a proper uniform and it was nice because you felt safe, probably children today don't, but the park-keeper, if you had any problems go to the park-keeper. I don't think we ever did, but as children we were quite frightened of the park-keeper, in case he - perhaps I was always a bit frightened of people - in case he ever found us doing something wrong. But they spent quite a lot of time the parkies, chasing off the boys, but I really don't know what they'd all been up to. But obviously they crossed the park-keepers quite frequently.

In the flower part, no you wouldn't be allowed on the grass. But then there were plenty of paths that you could keep to, and there was always the bit the other side where you could play freely. So I don't

think I ever tried to play in the park, because there was somewhere else to play. The park itself, and then there were the tennis courts further down. But I didn't ever use those till I was quite a lot older, and then I would only use them a few times.

Edith Clarke



The Second World War

By 1938 it was clear to many people that war was inevitable, it was just a matter of when. However, life continued as normal, clearly shown by the Baths, Halls and Parks Committee being concerned with the poor seating in the bandstand enclosure and hire of the venue. In December 1938 provision of suitable covering for the chairs at a cost of 2s per chair was agreed and the Leyton Borough Silver Band were given permission for four Sunday evening concerts during summer as in the previous year. In January 1939 it was resolved to allow dancing to be held on Saturday and Thursday evenings throughout 1939 and samples of different types of seating were presented in view of the need to improve the provision.

In February 1939 a rota of employees was produced to staff the garden during dances and other events. In April 1939 there were discussions about sale of ice creams and refreshments, with Mrs Lang being accepted in May to provide refreshments in the Gardens. A request was also granted to the National Old Age Pensioners Association for free use of the bandstand one afternoon a week with Wednesdays being agreed. This agreement lasted several years. In July 1939 the Salvation Army, Leyton Citadel were given permission to perform on the bandstand on alternate Sundays as long as no collections were made. Even in November 1939, after war had been declared, the committee were resolving to hold dancing on Saturday and Thursday evenings during the 1940 season, as in the 1939 season.

An air raid shelter was built on the Lyttelton Road side of the Gardens. It is unclear from the official records when this was. The first real entry suggesting the war was to affect the use of Coronation Gardens came in March 1940 when it was resolved that for the duration of the war closing time of Coronation Gardens would be half an hour after sunset. In May 1940 the Borough Engineer and Surveyor had been approached by the Police about open air dances at the Bandstand and were of the opinion that if an air raid siren sounded the people would fill the shelters and hinder police clearing the nearby streets. It would also be necessary to shield the bandstand to prevent light, and it was therefore resolved that dancing would cease at the official time for blackout.

In June 1940 the Emergency Committee considered the Minute of the Baths, Hall and Parks Committee which covered the report of damage and theft of plants during black-out, during which time the gates of the Coronation Garden were kept open to ease access to the public shelter. They recommended the employment of a temporary patrolman but this was later amended to state that instructions be given immediately for the gates to be locked. It was agreed in July 1940 that the gates were to be locked but the Air Raid Precaution (ARP) officer was to be given a key for use at time of warning.

There was a big cannon on show near the railings by the side road, up the side road, but they took that away for war metal, you know, for the war effort

Mrs Taylor

In September 1940 the committee was notified that, to comply with blackout regulations, the Borough Engineer had closed the Bandstand to open air dancing from 17th August. In October the committee were notified that owing to air raids the Leyton Borough Silver Band were unable to perform and it was agreed to suspend the rest of the season.

A year later it was recorded that some people were taking advantage of the fact that Coronation Gardens was not patrolled after certain hours and it was agreed the committee would approach the Police to assist in patrolling. Even with the misuse of the gardens and the war it appears standards were not allowed to slip. In October 1941 the committee acknowledged receipt of a letter from Rev. R. Newman Wycherley, of Leyton Tabernacle Methodist Church, conveying his and Leyton resident's admiration of the flowers and upkeep of the Gardens.

A Messerschmitt 109 was shown in the Coronation Gardens near the bandstand.

Mrs Taylor

In January 1942 the Borough Engineer reported on the condition of the shelter at Coronation Gardens (as well as James Lane and Skeltons Lane). It stated that the London Civil Defence Region had given approval for the erection of overground shelters and where the site for these shelters should be.

The only structure I remember in there was when they built air raid shelters right down the far side, down Lyttelton Road. I think they put them right down Lyttelton Road, and I think along the bottom. I'm not sure, I can't remember now, it's a long time ago isn't it. I think they were more full up with water than anything.

Kenneth Hurry

The Government decided that entertainment and other public performances would be good for morale. During and after the Blitz there was great concern about the potential for the collapse of morale particularly in the heavily bombed urban areas. In March 1942 it was agreed to allow the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) to put on a series of Shakespeare's plays in Coronation Garden in the forthcoming season. The Libraries Committee assisted in putting on these shows between the period 13 and 29th July, with a matinee on each Tuesday (the hire cost of £130 for three performances and a matinee). These shows continued through 1943 and 1944.

They used to have at one time, if I can remember rightly, it always used to be in the Summer, you really didn't need too much black-out, you didn't need too much light. So really speaking, you were just dancing the evening away. You might have had a couple of lights underneath so they could see the records and things. But apart from that, I used to go over there a bit. I should think it was round about six to eight, somewhere like that. Yes, it wouldn't be too late at night because, and even then, I think, the war had been on a couple of years before that started. Because obviously the first year when all the bombing was going on, nothing would work then. People were too busy trying to get down air raid shelters, things like that, which, incidentally, I never liked, although we did see London burning from where we lived.

My father and I were left here, and the rest of the family was moved out to Epping, above all placed, right next door to the flying field, if you could believe (at North Weald). When you look back on it, it was so outrageous, it was unbelievable, but it was there, of course in those days, we didn't travel very often or very far, not like you can nowadays, to go to Epping was practically a major effort, especially to take the children with you as well

Mrs Lewis

January 1943 saw the erection of a rest room in Coronation Gardens (in close proximity

to the existing ARP post) to replace the rest room at 280 High Road that was very damp. There was also a request from the National Fire Service for use of the Bandstand in the forthcoming season, which was agreed at a provisional cost of 8 guineas per concert. In July and August 1944 the 'Holidays at Home' scheme took place at Coronation Gardens and one aspect of this was for allotment holders and others to provide food whilst concerts were put on.

During the war a Barrage Balloon Section was based at the Children's Playground, Coronation Garden. The Minutes are unclear as to when they occupied the site as originally they were denied permission, but the site was recorded in the Minutes of 1st January 1946 as being vacant.

I have been over there (to the swing park), I used to go over there a bit, then there used to be a balloon barrage over there during the war, in the far half, as you look at it down there, over in that corner, by the school (Ruckholt Road), but I never went down there much.

Kenneth Hurry

Peace Returns

Coronation Gardens escaped fairly unscathed during the Second World War. Two High Explosive Bombs had fallen on Lyttelton Road, one at the western end on 3rd October 1940 and one at the eastern end on 8th November 1940. These appeared to have done little damage to the buildings according to the Civil Defence Incident Map. An Anti Aircraft Shell fell onto the eastern end of Buckingham Road, 19th February 1944, again causing little damage.

One of our interviewees has a different perspective on the damage to Coronation Gardens caused by bombing.

Oh, the bandstand, I never went dancing there because, the bandstand, that's a reproduction, isn't it.... yes, because it got burnt out, during the war. They dropped a load of incendiaries on it, and they only put incendiaries out that went on people's houses or property, anything else would let burn, you know, like the football ground and all that. We had one night of real incendiaries down, but we only sort of looked after people's property, we left everything else to go. But that is a reproduction. We used to go dancing up the Town Hall.

Kenneth Hurry

In early 1945, as the end of war in Europe drew near, a Peace Celebration Special Committee was set up in Leyton to co-ordinate the forthcoming VE Day Celebrations. In April 1945 it was resolved,

‘that open air dancing, without charge, be permitted during the celebrations up to 12 midnight, and that enquiries be made as to the engagement of a suitable dance band for two performances’.

On 7th May it was reported that Chas. Mead's Dance Band had been hired for two evenings during the Peace Celebrations at a cost of £15 per evening.

In June 1945 Leyton Council started working on a suitable memorial for those killed through enemy action during the war, both Civil Defence and civilian casualties. In July 1945 it was resolved that,

a 'small portion of land at the entrance to Coronation Gardens be kept as a Garden of Remembrance and that a memorial tablet, in the form of a scroll, be placed therein'.

This recommendation from the Emergency Committee was passed to the Baths, Halls and Parks Committee and plans were put in hand. This was being urged at great haste so that it would be finished by the time the Mayor held a thanksgiving service in the Coronation Gardens later in 1945. In September 1945 the Emergency Committee approved the design which was to be made out of Cornish granite with the inscription, 'In grateful remembrance of all those people of Leyton who suffered in the World War, 1939-1945' at a cost of £100. The memorial was unveiled on the 28th October 1945, just over two months after peace was declared.

And you used also to have there - well they do still have there - the service on 11th November, the Memorial Service. They had one there early in the morning which, when I was Mayor I attended there, then went to the other one afterwards. They had a nice little show there, the memorial service.

Eleanor Bartram

The other Leyton Remembrance Day Ceremony was held at Harrow Green, Leytonstone where there is a more imposing war memorial.

Yes, I've been down there and put a wreath on there, you know, somebody's asked me to put a wreath on there, poppies, yes. But I think that's only the civilian people that got killed - all those poor people that got killed on the bus, in Dames Road - two buses, one going one way, the other going the other way, and a doodlebug fell in the middle, just inside Leyton. It was, just in the borough, if it'd been a few feet the other way, it would have been in Forest Gate or East Ham or Stratford, wherever it is, that bit, you know.

Kenneth Hurry

In June 1946 there were major Peace Celebrations. The Entertainment Committee co-ordinated the celebrations which included a Variety Concert for elderly people at the bandstand on June 8th. Also at this time it was agreed that as the ARP base at Coronation Gardens failed to meet Town Planning and Building Bye-laws it should be demolished whilst the rest room was to be retained.

It's a long time since I've been there. I don't know whether our seat is still there, or my sister's seat, but it was kept nice. Then there was a hut there, up on the right, for Ladies and Men - separate - and there was quite a little to-do over it because our ladies and men felt they shouldn't be separated! But it was felt that the men were smoking, and used to play cards - I don't know if that's still there. But behind that, there used to be some of the workmen's tools and things.

Eleanor Bartram

You sat with somebody, then you started chatting and then you'd become friends. I know there were a couple of elderly ladies who came round at different times on a Sunday afternoon to have a cup of tea. It was only through seeing them down there, sort of lonely. There were several elderly men. They all had their newspapers and pipes and cigarettes, but the women mostly only chatted. They were nearly all elderly people - there weren't a lot of youngsters. Of course in the daytime they'd be at work, wouldn't they.

Mrs Clay

When I lived in Oliver Close, just along further where the allotments are there used to be Council allotments. Just after the war we used to buy cucumbers and tomatoes and things like that

Eleanor Bartram

Oh, I've got the actual Coronation Gardens programme, (but) I didn't see this.

'8 July - 13 July 1946, Leyton Borough Council, A G Matthews, Entertainment's Manager, Leyton Borough Council in Association with Walthamstow Education Settlement Drama Group presents 'Twelfth Night', produced by Cliff Beloe, music chosen by Eric Frith.'

The Council is presenting this Festival Week in the belief that the people of Leyton are desirous of having brought to them the works of the great masters of drama and music, and it is the policy of the Council that only the best is good enough for the people of East London."

Eric Frith

Eric Frith and Dick Williams both remember the preparations for 'Twelfth Night'.

Roger Atkins, who was going to do a show at the Coronation Gardens was unable to do it, and the Council approached us and said - we had a Shakespeare class at the Walthamstow Adult Centre,

The Settlement - and they said could we do a couple of Shakespeare's for the week? And we arranged to put on Twelfth Night and Macbeth. We had a very strong cast, with people like Eric Shilling, he was in it, and a large number of these people on this programme, like Gwen McStocker, she's a professional in America, Cliff Beloe's producing, still producing up North, Eric Frith is here still connected with drama and organising classes, Philip Pratt is running drama in Scotland when he can, June Jenn has been connected with drama all her life and is still producing shows, who else is there, Alfred Rogers he is still producing near Southend, so that gives a rough idea, Margaret Boake, Catherine Harding was professional, and is professional still, and Edith Simpson, these were all local people and many of them have gone on to achieve fame in the professional theatre.

Yes, when you walked into the Garden, you walked through the Garden and it was in an area at the back away from the road, wasn't it? Do you remember, Eric?

Dick Williams

It seemed to be more enclosed than that, it seemed to be rather more of the type of building which you might find at Lloyd Park, not the Lloyd Park Theatre but something which you could certainly act in an enclosed area, that's my memory.

It was because we had them, so to speak, hot working on them, that when this call came urgently from Coronation Gardens to say they had been let down unfortunately by Robert Atkins, who couldn't appear, could we do anything? And we said well, right the two Shakespeare plays that we have, one that was going on at the time and one prior, that we had done. We said right we will take those over and do them on alternate evenings.

Eric Frith

We would have done a dress rehearsal, but it probably was only one dress rehearsal there, we shouldn't have done very much more, this is what we still do. We still have open air shows at my place at Curtis Mill Green, and that's famous all over Essex now, isn't it? They set up on a Saturday and they rehearse all day Sunday and then the following weekend they do the show. It's the same sort of set up because the majority of these are amateurs now, although some do hope to do professional work and, as I said, some have been acting and producing for years and years and years, haven't they?

Dick Williams

I think the Coronation Gardens effort that we did was an effort, because all the cast came to do the performances straight from work, and if you can imagine doing these plays on alternate nights, having come from work, it really threw you into the deep end.

Eric Frith

I think there was, yes there was a good house because at the end of the week the Council came to us and said we would like to give you a fee for payment of the artists and we said they are not professionals yet but we will take the £250.

Dick Williams

We couldn't differentiate really from the local population and the general audience. It was basically, I would imagine the local population, because after all no-one would have come to see it from the audience that normally went to either The Settlement [in Greenleaf Road Walthamstow] or to Buckhurst Hill, because they would have seen it. A few might have done but I suppose mainly it was the local population and they seemed to enjoy it thoroughly.

Eric Frith

Yes, coming from our offices to Coronation Gardens, and once having got there, then it was.... I don't know whether you really even looked at one another but you probably did, I mean you must have done, but I mean you were concentrating on your make up, you were concentrating on your costume and everything and the time was going by, and you just made it and everything like this, and it was really a question of curtain going up in 10 minutes or whatever. So it's impressed, I am sure, on everybody's mind from that point of view, because we really, for the first time, we were doing two plays throughout the week, which was asking quite a lot from people who had already done a day's work, and it was quite something. Very, very enjoyable, and I would suspect, having seen programmes on television about the Globe Theatre and the actor's response to people in the new Globe Theatre, I would suspect that really we had the same sort of feeling then, that here we were faced with an audience and, well it really was open air, and we would have had the same sort of feelings. I've certainly never forgotten it.

Eric Frith

It was Macbeth that I remember seeing particularly. The person who took the part of Lady Macbeth, she lived in Woodford. When we moved to the road in South Woodford and we always called her Lady Macbeth. We probably knew her surname but to us she was Lady Macbeth. It was a wonderful time after the War because money was being lavished in all directions. There was opera being performed in Victoria Park open air, and so much was spent in Walthamstow on music and productions for the school children to go to. It was fantastic.

Thelma Wolfe

Post War Development

With the war ended, Leyton Council started carrying out urgent and necessary repairs to their property that could not be undertaken during the war. At Coronation Gardens this included purchasing new chairs and repairing the bandstand at a cost of around £300. This enabled the Council to put on a more varied programme of entertainment and hire out the facilities.

But my favourite part of the park was the other side of the road, across Oliver Road, and there were beautiful flower beds. They were really my favourite, and the bit I liked best of all was the bit, it had a little small waterfall and lots of lovely goldfish in the pond there. I'm not sure if that bit's still there, because it's many years since I've been there. Well, I'd got married by then, so that must have been about, after the war that must have been, I suppose that's when they was renovating everywhere. I'd moved then up to the top of Murchison Road, so I didn't come down Coronation Gardens very much, I went out the other way, to the High Road.

Margaret Mudd

Things started to change during the war, when they had dancing over there, dancing of an evening you could go there and dance. Obviously there was no dance halls around here that you could go to. So they opened it up and the dance bands although we didn't have very many of those. I think we started off with two dance bands, though it became more tape music, things like that, records. During the war, when they got rid of the bands, when we used to go over there during the war, bands weren't in fashion in those days either, because obviously they were either in the army, navy, air force, wherever. But yes, we used to dance to the music over there; quite a few people used to get over there then. Of course since the War you have had some extra things happen there. There's the

memorial to the Civil Defence people who died during the War period.

Mrs Lewis noting the changes that occurred after the Second World War

The war also had led to many families being displaced through bomb damage. In July 1945 the Housing Committee considered locations for temporary hutments. This included the Old Tennis Courts, south of the paddling pool in the Coronation Garden Extension, as well as at Skeltons Lane Recreation Ground, with a total of 60 hutments being planned. In October 1945 it was reported that the Skeltons Lane Recreation Site and the area south of the paddling pool at Coronation Gardens had been refused permission by the Ministry of Health. However, hutments were to be built on the old Tennis Courts at Coronation Gardens Extension, whilst locations of bombed out houses were considered for temporary housing as well, which had now been raised from 60 houses to 100.

In December 1945 nine tennis courts were requisitioned, with a condition that the land was returned to its original state once no longer required for housing. A fee of £125 would be required to be paid for the council to cover the estimated loss of income from the tennis courts and the inconvenience. After the hutments were built there were problems with children trespassing on the bowling green and it was agreed to fence the hutments off from the main Coronation Garden area. In April 1948 it was agreed that the residents of the temporary hutments would be allowed to use the adjacent land formerly allocated for cultivation.

I was born in January 1938 and Coronation Gardens had always been a very special place for me. It was a place I was taken to by my elder sister, it was also a place that my parents took me to, but I remember it mostly as a place that I took small children to.

In thinking about this, I realise how much things have changed over the years, because in the time that I was about ten or eleven years old, one of our favourite pastimes was to take out small babies. There are very few parents today who would let a ten year old take out a small baby, but we took out babies in prams. It got the babies out of the mothers' way, and it also earned us some pocket money. There would be several of us who might go together or we might just be on our own. The little baby I took out was called Jacqueline Lay, and she lived halfway down my road. She had one of those tall basinette prams, you know, the Silver Cross prams, and I used to push her, mostly to Coronation Gardens, because living where I lived in Leyton, off Lea Bridge Road, there weren't very many nice places to go to. We could have gone to Hackney Marshes, but to go up to Hackney Marshes, meant going up a hill then down again and back, and that was hard with a pram. So I used to cross over Marsh Lane, then go through past the school I used to go to, which was Church Road School, and down to Coronation Gardens. It was a long walk, I realise that, thinking about it now.

We used to pass the old fire station, which of course has now been very much modernised, opposite St Mary's Church. Next door to that was a little shop, it was called something like 'Pickwick' - Pickwick was definitely in the title. There we would often stop and buy something like lemonade powder, just for a few pence. Then we'd walk on down to the park and then we'd go to the swings, the swing park first of all which was on the same side of the road that I walked on. I always enjoyed going to the swings and going to the slide. When this little baby Jacqueline got a bit bigger, we would take her out and put her in one of the boxed-in swings, and she loved that.

Brenda Jones

Another development within Coronation Gardens was the building of a covered extension to the bandstand. This was to enable all weather events to take place. In effect the bandstand was boxed in to become a stage. The extension all around was where you sat, stood or danced.

Well I was working at the time as an electrician for the Borough of Leyton, we were involved with electrical works. In the time that I joined the local authority, which was in about 1951, the Coronation Gardens, I think the bandstand had already been converted to a degree, because originally it was just an ordinary open bandstand. But it had been converted with a covered in extension so that it could be used for concerts, I believe it was dancing and that sort of thing then. It wasn't dealt with by the Borough Engineers Department; it was dealt with by the Parks Department, Mr Mason being the Park Superintendent at that particular time. He had his general handyman cum fitter chap, Frank Dutton, who created the stage and stage lighting and the whole set, and amplification for the general purpose of concerts, dances. We still in those days had the bands at weekends, the visiting bands, but the only other involvement I've had, in the early days we used to electrical work at the pavilion but then it was taken over completely by the Parks Department's own staff.

Ted Gross

They used to charge to go in to the bandstand, because, if anyone come in and wouldn't pay, that's why they put sort of railings round it, wooden railings round it. 'Cause some people used to come in and not pay, well, it was all in the open, wasn't it? That's what they used to charge, about - I don't remember paying, but I supposed I did, I must have done. As I said, I went with my sister and a friend, and we used to go to the dances. I thought it was a band, but they said no, they were records, somebody told me there used to be records, not a band, you know.

Mrs Taylor

Well I just remember that on a Thursday night my friend and I used to go along to Coronation Gardens for the dancing. It used to cost us a massive sum, threepence to get in, it was a concrete floor and we used to dance to records. From what I remember it used to have a wooden surround around it half way up so that you could see.

I can always remember they used to play Andy Williams' Canadian Sunset. My friend said she thought they always used to play 'Who's taking you home tonight?' as the last record, because obviously it was the same set of records they played each week.

Betty Smith

From the 1950's to the Millennium

I don't know whether anybody has mentioned here, but at the time of the Coronation, the present Queen's Coronation, it was all illuminated and decorated. Only lighting, you know, just lighting. It amazes me of course that years ago.... I mean now if anything happens we are taking photographs all the way round, but nobody seems to have ever taken a photograph.

Ted Gross

I can still remember what the seats looked like, you know long benches, painted green, heavy with scrolls at the end, which could probably sit four people along there. Now outside the Vestry Museum there's a top of a column or part of a column. Well that stood there at the end of Coronation Gardens.

Thelma Wolfe

By July 1954 the temporary hutments were vacant and the Council made plans to clear the site. It was resolved that once the land was cleared it would again be used as tennis courts. Tenders were sought to reinstate the tennis courts. In January 1956 it was estimated that this would cost £9,000, and by February the Government had agreed to pay £2,745 in compensation. By April 1957 the estimated costs had risen to £10,000 and a part loan was sought. It is unclear from the Minutes when the tennis courts were finally completed.

The Gardens were still being used for public and political meetings as well as increasingly for entertainment.

We went on duty there several times during elections. We had some quite lively election meetings at the Coronation Gardens. That's during the time that Reg Sorensen was the Member of Parliament for West Leyton, when we were West Leyton. Nowadays of course at election times it's very, very rare to have a political meeting as such, but at that particular time you could always rely on a full house as you might say. Of course he had a terrific following locally, Reg Sorensen, he was quite an important person as far as the people of the town were concerned. I suppose one of the reasons we, being local Government employees and at the Town Hall, were rather more involved in those things than probably other people.

Ted Gross

The Rev. Reginald Sorensen was Labour Member of Parliament for Leyton from 1950 to 1964. He had first been elected for the former Leyton West seat in 1929. He was popular with his constituents. After the 1964 General Election he was offered a Life Peerage in order to make way for Patrick Gordon Walker who had failed to get elected partly as the result of a virulent racist campaign in Smethwick, West Midlands. In the bye election in January 1965 Gordon Walker was again defeated by the narrow margin of 205 votes.

In 1956 Coronation Gardens' neighbours, Leyton Orient Football Club, applied for planning permission to develop part of their stadium. During this period the offices were housed in a temporary structure on the Coronation Grounds extension. In November 1955 it was listed that Leyton Orient had applied for continued free use of the tennis courts in the winter months for heading practice, which was passed. There was additional use of a more social nature.

The Orient really brought us closer to Coronation Gardens - with the old bandstand, not quite as it is now. Whether they did it during the war or after the war, they had, where folks used to sit round the bandstand in the old days, they covered it in, round, if you can understand, and they used to let that out to organisations for different things. The Orient used to have it for socials on Saturday evenings probably two or three times a year, during the football season. We used to help to run them, so you had to go, didn't you!

Back in those days, it was like music, you'd have a three or four piece band there. There'd be a pianist to start off with, and probably a saxophone, might be a violin player, and drums, of course - not so much guitars in those days, that all came along later. (We'd dance) the waltz and the foxtrot, one or two other things, the rumba. Bear in mind it wasn't a parquet floor or anything like that, it was just concrete you was dancing round.

Well, we would charge a fee, and I tell you something else, an attraction, probably it's the same now, in these days, was a bar, a buffet and a bar, now, we had a small club room in the football ground, you'd get say thirty or forty people in there at the most, and we had a licence there. Well, we could transfer our licence for one evening, for the Saturday evening, across to the bandstand. Then hard work came, trundling the drink and what have you from the football ground over to the bandstand, and we could set up a bar there. So that was a good attraction. Let's face it, we had to trundle it over there, but it wasn't too far to take it. We used to have some good evenings there.

You'd get the players there as guests. Some of our lady members would cut sandwiches and that. You'd either charge an entry fee to get in there and then charge a price for the refreshment. That was a better way of doing it, because if you put the price on the entrance fee, including sandwiches, that put the price up, you see, and some turned their nose up and said, "I'm not paying that". But if you made a smaller charge to get in there, and once they'd bought their drinks and sandwiches, and what have you, it was more attractive. So that's what we used to do.

We'd probably get perhaps a hundred, a hundred and fifty in there. Time limit, eleven (pm), used to start about eight (pm). Football socials went on for years, we were involved for fifteen years (in the fifties and early sixties).

Stan Gimson



Throughout the 1950's and 1960's there was a wide range of entertainment put on at Coronation Gardens. This included the Borough of Leyton Show in the 1950s, popular music concerts in the 1960s, as well as the traditional band shows. Sporting activities and special activities in the Extension also came into their own in this period.

We used to set up, fix up on the Friday evening all the equipment and stuff for the fete on the Saturdays. Well I can say I never knew of things such as fetes in the Coronation Gardens, I think if ever there was anything we went over to the top half of the children's playground, because all the functions since the War seem to, what they call the Coronation Gardens Extension, they used to happen there. We used to go and set up for the Leyton Charities Fete and things over in the Coronation Gardens.

Ted Gross

And I was on the Parks and Open Spaces Committee. When they had the refreshments place we'd send out the tenders for the people to come and run the place - it wasn't run by the Council, it was run by people. We used to go in there a lot. There were the tennis courts there. It was quite a busy area. And then of course they put the football up afterwards, you know, the lights.... the open-air football. But when you come to think of it, there was the Coronation Gardens and the extension and the football and the other place. It was quite a big area so that if you could do something about it you've got a lot to play with.

Eleanor Bartram

They'd have stalls there, lots of voluntary organisations in the Borough, a separate day to the carnival. They still do it, each Mayor, each year, has a fund that they nominate, and the money collected went towards (charity). I can remember one year, it poured with rain while we were there, and if you'd got a stall and you'd dressed it with crepe paper and it starts to rain, the colour comes out the paper, disaster, the same as it is now, same sort of thing. We used to sell some of our badges and things.

Stan Gimson

They had people like the local Women's Guild making cakes, competitions, and flowers and chickens, and all that sort of things. But I remember the circuses down there, I was fascinated by them, and how big they seemed. But when I go down there now, I thought, how did they? I mean there was some big circuses down there, every animal you could think of under the sun. I remember, my brother and I used to really go, go and see them put the tent up. Then, it used to be on a Saturday when it finished and they packed up and went. We used to go down on Sunday morning, and it was all gone except the ring was still there. We'd go and stand in the ring, and imagine what was going on around us. I must have been, well, ten, twelve, around about that time. As I say, we used the park a lot. Swings, we were always down there, and the Coronation Gardens, we always used to walk through and look at the pond.

Rob Baldock

Well, that was when we had the Borough Show - a very great event. We had all the stalls and the flower show. And we had Lonnie Donegan and his skiffle group. That was before he became really famous - I don't think he'd go to an event like that now! Anyway, it was a wonderful time and the women's section of the Leyton Labour Party did all the refreshments. There used to be a big hut there, a big tent-covered iron shed. They supplied us with the big teapots and the big boilers and we had loads of people there. Eventually when we went home, my two daughters and myself, we were walking on our ankles, we'd had such a busy time! And then we had Billie Whitelaw, to open the Show (that was another show). I'll always remember because we had to give her £100 in an

envelope, and it was an awful lot of money in those days.

(It was) in the extension at the back, because of the shelter that was there. It did happen to rain on that night and of course every time it rained everybody came in and we were selling refreshments and we really did well.

Of course I can remember most of it because I had this caravan which was all fitted out with this home-safety things because there was no home safety committee on the Council. People just came in and I looked and I had lots of leaflets and things for people to see how many accidents there were in the home. So that was one part of it. And then there was a big marquee with all the flowers and things in there - well just the usual sort of thing that there is in the Borough Show. It was quite a big event. It's a pity we can't have something like that again, because it does attract the people.

When I was on the Old People's Welfare we used to take part but I don't know what the fete day is like now. We used to go when I lived in Leyton. There were quite a few stalls and things there, but of course it wasn't very convenient for cars because you couldn't park along there. Those roads off there were very busy, so there weren't many (places for) people to park, so there would have to be some arrangements made about parking, wouldn't there?

They used to always start the Carnival from there, from the side, which for a number of years we took part, we sat on the Carnival Committee. Used to parade all round Leyton and finish up at the Green Man, where they did the judging of the floats.

Eleanor Bartram

I think from time to time there were things like circuses held in there. I can remember a tent going up at some time. That would have been in the swings park, because the park stretched where the swings and the slides were. There was a green bit further down where the boys played football. I think I can remember tents going up down there from time to time, but I don't think I ever went into anything there.

Brenda Jones

What I remember most is the children's Happy Holidays. In Leyton, we started the Happy Holidays with Percy Ratcliff, who was the Entertainment Manager at that time. I will always remember very well the first day - it was absolute chaos in the Coronation Gardens - because there were so many children, and all the mothers with their children of the Show - Rogina Bully's Show. They all wanted to come in all together so that all the children, all the mothers and all the entertainers were all coming in together. I think I had a bottle of aspirins for the first week! Anyway, after a while we sorted them out and we got the mothers to line up separately with their children and then we arranged the children in the Show. It wasn't graded, the seats in there - they all were sitting on the level so we had to sort out all the big children and make them go to the back which they didn't like - and all the little children in the front. But we had some very good shows in there, and some very good dancing schools, and eventually we managed to get ourselves a cup of tea there. But of course it was all voluntary at that time.

Eleanor Bartram

Then I remember what is now the bandstand used to be a building. We used to do dance shows there because I used to belong to a dancing academy and I remember getting changed underneath in the changing rooms and doing dances.

And on Saturday mornings during the summer there was some kind of scheme because I remember what would now be a playleader or youth worker. I remember going down there and he used to organise activities. I remember him saying, "Would you like to have a dance here?" By then I would have been twelve or eleven.

Terri Hallet

One of the casualties in popular music tastes around the late 1950s and early 1960s was the Leyton Silver Band.

Oh yes I think the bands went on, might have been going on to about 1960. I wouldn't be able to tell you exactly because (my father) had to give up from ill health.

Thelma Wolfe



To take its place was 'pop music'. The pavilion with the bandstand in the middle became a popular venue. In the late 1960s nationally famous bands were playing at Coronation Gardens - well not that nationally famous. Bands were ranked into 'A' and 'B'. 'A' bands played at Leyton Baths further up Leyton High Road. Coronation Gardens was left with the rest. The enclosed addition to the bandstand was used for these events.

Oh no, it was closed in. The original bandstand was still there, and you had like a concrete perimeter, with like a tongue and groove at the bottom with windows and a very large roof on top of the bandstand roof. The actual bandstand that is there now was the actual stage, so it was like a circle, but you couldn't get round the back because that's where the bands came in, it was more or less like a horseshoe shape, it was very good, the atmosphere was very good.

Yes, mostly in the summer when Leyton Baths - they used to alternate - Leyton Baths was in the

winter, when the swimming was shut, and then Coronation Gardens was in the summer when the swimming was open. They used to board out the Leyton Baths, the whole swimming area was boarded out, and that was used as a dance area.

They had secondary bands there, Downliners Set played there quite a lot, Freddie and the Dreamers, complete with cans of emulsion paint that he would throw over the audience if you booed him too much, Johnny Kydd and the Pirates, and Screaming Lord Sutch used to jump out of a coffin, it was really good. It's something I'm glad I was a part of. The kids today haven't got a clue what went on, they'd love to have been there. There were seats all the way around the edge, but mostly it was dancing. There was a small cloakroom and ladies and gents. I think there was a soft refreshment bar, definitely no alcohol, but on the corner of Huxley Road there was the good old offie where everybody used to frequent, and get, you know, what you shouldn't get!

Round about seven thirty. You used to queue up and wait and you'd hear the bands tune up. You're trying to look through the windows to see what was going on and then the doors would open and in you would go. I think it went on till ten, quarter past, half past ten at the latest, when you were sort of chucked out, and there'd be an interval half way through. You'd get a secondary band on first of all, like a warm-up session. Then you'd have an interval when the lights'd go up, and everybody'd say, "Oh look, there's so and so." And you'd all meet, then the lights'd go down and the big band would come on. You'd all stand round the bandstand, as they do now, but there wasn't the screaming and fighting that goes on today.

They'd come in from areas, say Stratford, depending on the band, if there was a band say from Plaistow, you'd get a lot of people from Plaistow, or Hackney, or Stratford. But yes, there were a few from Stratford and Hackney that frequented there as well. Mainly Leyton, Leytonstone, Chingford, Walthamstow, and they would travel down on their scooters, Vespas and GSs, with their parka coats and badges.

If Johnny Kydd and the Pirates were there, then you would get a few rockers there, but they kept to their side, and we kept to our side. It was good clean fun. I'm not saying we were angels; there was the occasional time when the police were called to stop a fracas or whatever. But on the whole, not like now, yeah, there'd be a few punches, and that would be it, and they would keep to their various sides the next week. But there'd never be knives and what goes on today, it just didn't happen. I think we valued life too much, and I think the police were a lot harder, you were frightened of the police then, today they're not, they don't give a damn. They had like bouncers there, you know, a couple of heavy guys on the door, and just a couple around, and if there was problems, they would come over and sort it out.

The Jive, French twist, it was individual dancing not so energetic as Chubby Checker and the twist, a little bit more sophisticated, you just danced all round your handbag, it was, yes, a little bit more sophisticated, a little bit more upmarket as they'd say now. There was the Locomotion, Little Eva, and you'd do that in a train I mean a bit like the hokey-cokey, but a little bit more civilised, and three or four of you to start off, and you'd end up with half of Coronation Gardens doing it, and you'd go outside, and you'd come back in, and then stand there and go, "Oh, no, here they come again".

Carole Brookes

I spoke to my brother concerning the Rolling Stones. He said he saw them down the Coronation Gardens, but they cancelled it, it was stopped, because the amount of people that was down there and the danger of it falling down. It was being held up with like pillars, it was like pillars inside. The

amount of people in there, with crushing, could knock them down, so they stopped the concert.

Rob Baldock

The Stones played at Leyton Baths, they never, ever played there. I've got a friend who lives just round the corner from there and has been to every Stones concert in the world, he lives almost on Coronation Gardens, ... Leyton Baths. And my sister went as well.

Terri Hallet

No, you got the bandstand down there. As you see the bandstand that was how it was, and built from it, was this sloping roof which I think some people called "the cattle sheds". They had dances down there, and it was held up by pillars. As I say, he went down there and he said the Rolling Stones were down there, and then he said, it could have been the Swinging Blue Jeans, so it's quite possible. They didn't appear down there, but they appeared at the Leyton Baths. It could have been the Swinging Blue Jeans, but I never saw them, only at Leyton Baths, so I can't comment any more on that.

Rob Baldock

There were toilets I think, underneath, and there was that green wire or ridged fencing, all the way round the bottom of it and then there were gaps or like an alleyway, and that went - I think down to toilets. There must have been a toilet in there. And you could go down one of these alleyways to the changing rooms which were underneath the pavilion, and that's when we did our dance show, I remember getting changed down there. I remember small windows; it was very, very dark. I don't remember the inside of it very much at all. We used to do a lot of dancing, all over the place at Lloyd Park and everywhere,

I remember being there when I was 11 because I gained another dress from my sister. There was a man who was organising activities and, "Would we like to have a dance?" It seemed like a very big area. Lots of the boys were running around and pulling chairs out and being silly. He was sitting on the table saying, "Shall we have a dance?"

We had a dance, what they would call a disco down there, and the older girls bullying us, and some of them going outside and smoking. I remember feeling quite uncomfortable because of these older girls. I was small, and I probably looked very silly in my sister's dress and I remember them commenting on that, and not wanting to go back. (One of them) was about 13 or 14 - she was big and she had a leather jacket on. I think I didn't go back.

Terri Hallet

I think that was for about two or three years. Then for some reason it just closed down. I can't remember why. It was still there but the venue wasn't there, you didn't go dancing there anymore. I don't know if the licence was lost or what really happened. I've been back recently and it's now just the original bandstand, the outer perimeter is not there anymore.

Carole Brooks

The post war enclosure to the bandstand was pulled down it is said by the Leyton Fire Brigade in the 1970's. Being made mostly of wood it is likely it did not pass the fire regulations. Whilst a unique entertainment venue was lost, it did bring the original features of the bandstand back into view. There was also the educational role of the Gardens

Later on, after I'd trained to teach, I worked at Newport Junior School. We often walked the children to the park from time to time, so they could look at things that were there. That would have been about -well - I was at Newport from 1956-58, I taught there for those two years, so it would have been in that time. I've had very large classes in those days, of course, but we did walk them, we didn't have buses to take us anywhere, we used to walk them to the swimming baths as well as walk them to wherever we went. Occasionally we would just walk down to the park, because even then, parents didn't really take their children to the park that much.

We would probably have done some nature study or some work on it when we came back. We'd pick up leaves, look at flowers. We wouldn't pick flowers, obviously, we wouldn't dare do that, we'd pick up leaves and fruits, you know, sycamore and things. Autumn time would have been the time for going, because it was very hard to find a variety of leaves at that back end of Leyton, really, because even the children who had gardens wouldn't have had a variety of trees in there. I don't really remember all that much about the trees in the park but there must have been some variety, I think it was the flowers that attracted me more than the trees, but perhaps as a child the colourful side of it would do, wouldn't it?

Brenda Jones

The school had a daffodil competition, and I was on the Leyton Gardens Guild with Mr Black at the time, who was the President. He also had a little thing in the front of the park in that front grass bit, but I don't know if that's still there. And Fred Week had another one on the other side. The schoolchildren used to come in and buy a bulb from the teacher - about 6d I think it was then, or 3d or something - then we used to go round to the schools and judge so many. Then we used to bring them to the Coronation Gardens, all of them, and we used to bring the children into the Coronation Gardens with so many. Then we used to choose the winners there of the daffodil competition

Eleanor Bartram

Yes, always as kids, we always used to go through the Coronation Gardens, what used to attract me was the pond in there, which I think is still there. I remember going to, when I was at school, during the six weeks' holiday, we used to get a Happy Holidays sheet, and on that sheet was various things going on in Leyton and Leytonstone that you could go down to, and I can remember my brother and I took my young sister down the Coronation Gardens to a dancing show, which wasn't really our sort of thing, Happy Holidays it was called.

The only other thing I can remember in the Coronation Gardens was that they had in the late sixties, sixties, early sixties, there was a motorcycle show, probably about '63, '64, there was a motorcycle show. I remember the bikes were up on the bandstand as they are now, and in where the seats were, they took the seats away. There was all like, different motorcycle clubs were there, and I think the star of the show was a guy, or a chap that had raced in Russia, and his bikes were on. Who he was I've never known to this day.

Going back to the park, the swing rec. as we used to call it, there used to be lots of circuses down there, quite big circuses. Another thing that was quite good, the Borough of Leyton Show. They had all these marquees up, you never see them today like, in each tent there'd be like the Horticultural Society. I know I was a young boy, but I found it interesting, there was all different things going on in different marquees.

Rob Baldock

Then of course at Christmas we used to put a Christmas tree in the front of Coronation Gardens and decorative lighting. I know we continued to do this thing after the merger (into Waltham Forest in 1965), but in recent years I think that because of cost cutting I think they basically now just provide an illuminated Christmas tree, but I don't think they put a general display of Christmas lighting on.

Ted Gross

The open spaces of the gardens became a haven when illness struck in the neighbourhood.

Well, in the block of flats that I was in, somebody had whooping cough. I was so scared for my two that I used to meet them from school in Farmer Road and take them down to Coronation Gardens. There was entertainment for children in the back of the Coronation Gardens. There were things for them to play on, so we used to take them down there after school. But it was used a lot, the back of the Coronation Gardens, but whether it is now so much because of the traffic. Well it's a bit awkward to get to for children. You couldn't let little children go on their own because if they came from the other side of the road, they've got to cross the road and then across Oliver Road, which is a very busy road. I don't know if there's a crossing there now. When Ruckholt School was there, there was a crossing there.

Eleanor Bartram



The open spaces of the gardens were also somewhere where people could talk.

I remember when I was working there at Mitchell (George Mitchell School in Farmer Road, Leyton), I had to go to the Town Hall one day, I went with one of the senior staff and we sat in the Gardens and talked, because evidently he wanted to talk to me about his family and his personal things. That's the last time I've been in there, was to sit there and talk like that.

Thelma Wolfe

Apart from the addition of the enclosed extension to the bandstand the physical layout of the Gardens changed little over the years. There were some additions like the wisteria pergola near the frontage probably built in 1950 and the public toilets added in the late 1940's near to the bandstand and the dance pavilion (a space was provided at the west end in the original plans in 1902). At some stage, probably after the Second World War, an ornamental pool with a waterfall was constructed on the Buckingham Road boundary. This brought back links with the eighteenth century water gardens (see Appendix 2).

The last time I saw the pond it wasn't very nice. It was very beautiful and the water fell, I don't know if it does... It used to come down in a cascade and the goldfish in it were absolutely enormous, they were really, really large. We used to spend a long time just looking at the pond. The last time I saw it, it was very green and not cared for. It was always beautifully clear with lots of lilies.

Terri Hallet

One feature that did not survive was the "Alexander" water fountain.

When Waltham Forest took over they knocked it down, I don't know how they got permission to knock it down, because it was a Memorial to Alexander, the printers. There's a stationers on the corner of Lyttelton Road, and they lived at the print shop over the top.

When Waltham Forest took over. I thought, I wonder what they're going to do with that, what they're going to put there, but they just knocked it down, but I can't see how they got permission to knock it down, because if there's any Alexander family left about, they could have kicked up a hue and cry. There's only one of them killed in the First World War, but they made a hell of a lot of fuss about it, but there was thousands, millions, lost, wasn't there.

Kenneth Hurry

One member of staff, Mr Mason, the Park Superintendent even had a memorial tablet erected to him in a raised flower bed by the bandstand. He retired in 1969 and it was erected in the 1970s. It was subsequently removed in the 1990s in connection with the refurbishment of the bandstand.

Mr Mason, I think, he was the Park Superintendent. He had his office up the Town Hall with all the other officials. There is a seat in there to his memory, I think it's by the bandstand, If you walk from Lyttelton Road, Lyttelton Road keeps cropping up, doesn't it - through to Buckingham Road, I think, by the bandstand on the right hand side there's a seat in memory of Mr Mason the Park Superintendent, you know. I never knew him. The family knew him like, 'cause Dad, and Tom, my uncle Tom, he knew a lot more - well Tom was on the Bench, grandpa was on the Bench, and Tom was a Ratepayers - vote for the Ratepayers sort of thing, in those days, and that's something that's gone defunct, isn't it, so he knew them all up at the Town Hall,

Kenneth Hurry

Mr Hurry's grandfather was on the Council Sub Committee that oversaw the laying out of the Gardens in 1901. One survivor of pre war inactivity was the restroom, which also contained the park keeper's room to the rear.

My strongest memory of it is the ladies rest room, and it had really nice wicker chairs and tables. We'd spend hours and hours playing in there. I think it's still there. I think there was one for gentlemen, there was the attendant and then the ladies' rest room. There were really old women in

there and we used to sit and talk to them. There was myself and my two friends, who were twins. This would be – I was born in 1952 so this would be – 1957 onwards, because when I was 5 or 6 I was allowed to go down to the park and I wasn't allowed to go any further.

The park keeper used to come and check and after a while because we weren't naughty – I don't know if you had vandalism then – he just used to leave us to it – and we used to spend hours and hours playing in there.

(It was) very dark and the colour of the wood outside was how I remember it. There were windows at the front, I think they were very small paned windows and the door, which was half-glazed, but again small panes. Oblong or even square. There was a window at the back and I think I am right in saying that there was reading material in there. Now I thought that they might be Lloyd loom but my mother says that they weren't, they were wicker chairs, you know the substantial ones you could imagine from the fifties, they were quite substantial with nice curved sides. All the furniture was dark and there was a table - there were at least six chairs I think, there might have been eight, or more, but there were certainly six, because we used to play this game moving around them when there was nobody else in there.

The table which was dark, was also wicker, had a base part, where the reading material was kept. And these seriously old women used to sit in there and tell us about all sorts of things and chat to us, and ask us who we were and we got to know quite a lot of them.

There was one old woman who had a stick and I used to talk to her and she was really grumpy and she didn't want us in there, and she just got used to us and accepted us. But the park keeper would throw us out if people objected. It was a rest room, but it was always done very nicely because he'd checked us out and knew we weren't into being naughty. There was a very clear convention that we had to behave in a certain way and we adhered to that and we spent a lot of time just sitting and talking and shifting from chair to chair. He wouldn't let boys in there - my brother came down there, or the twins' brother and they were thrown out.

I started going in there when I was about 5, around 1957, if we were out playing and it rained we went in there and look at the rain through the window. It smelt nice, it had its own smell - I always knew where I was - familiar and secure.

The women always had hats. Some were solitary and some were in twos, and they always had white or grey hair. And I always believed they were very, very old they were like my nan to me, my great nan, and a lot of them had sticks or they would arrive together, arm in arm, in that frail way. I remember the woman with the stick had a pale blue coat and I was impressed with that, because women in my family wore dark colours. I was impressed that she had a blue and this white hat and these white curls underneath it.

They used to ask about my life, what we were doing, what our names were and how old we were, where we lived and things like that. It was a nice relationship - that very young and very old, it was pleasant.

Terri Hallet

The building, closed for some time, has been demolished as part of the redevelopment of the gardens.

The Present

The other day I was down there, about two weeks ago, I parked the car outside of Coronation Gardens, and I could hear somebody playing the saxophone, and when I looked, there was a guy on his own, on the bandstand, practising with his saxophone.

Rob Baldock

But, actually, we didn't use the potential of that garden like we could have done, like they are using it now, because I've seen people over there now with three or four children sitting on the grass allowing them to play ball, and running around. There's children over there with skates, which is so totally alien. You stand there and you think we could have done that when we were children but we weren't allowed to.

Mrs Lewis

Local government suffered ongoing funding cuts throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century. Many non-statutory services were closed down or sold off. Parks suffer a less dramatic fate in that it would be politically impossible to sell them for building land or similar use. In any case there is legislation that makes it very difficult to dispose of designated park land. Their demise is more insidious and subtle. Funding is less and less available, so maintenance suffers. Often the shrubs and flowers continue to be relatively well tended. It is the fixed items like bandstands and railings that start to look their age if nothing is done.

This is what was happening to Coronation Gardens. The bandstand in particular suffered from the lack of care brought about by lack of funds. Peeling paint and rust chips all added to the feeling of neglect. The toilet block had been closed but not demolished and was an even bigger eyesore. Fortunately in 1997 the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded Waltham Forest Council a grant to conduct a feasibility study on restoring the gardens.

Consultation with local people was undertaken to find out what type of park they wanted. Most people wanted to keep the existing features of the Gardens. One option that was rejected was to move the park boundary back from the High Road frontage to create a piazza. As a result of the consultation a full bid was submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund to restore the Gardens to something like their former glory. In the meantime the railings were repaired and restored. The railings to the frontage had been replaced in the 1950s with an entirely inappropriate design and needed replacing. This work was undertaken in 1998.

The bandstand was restored in 1999. This required re-roofing, replacement of the ornate balusters removed when the wooden pavilion was built around the bandstand, reconstruction of the brick base and the installation of down lighters in the ceiling.

As part of the millennium celebrations within Waltham Forest a replacement for the Alexander memorial fountain, which had been removed by the 1950s, was erected in the same spot within the Gardens. It is surrounded by a white concrete pool and railings to attempt as near a match to the original as possible.

If somebody was going to spend something, it would be really nice to see the pond restored. The water was really relaxing; we spent loads of time just watching it. The pond was always very beautifully

tended and very, very clear and the park keeper used to feed the fish. The fish used to come to him, and it was just really nice. I remember going back, after I had moved out of the area, and I couldn't believe it - the algae. The lilies and everything were just lovely.

Terri Hallet



Reflections

It wasn't a place where there was a lot of activity. They were more or less all sitting around, you know. All the elderly people, and a lot of mad dogs on leads, because you weren't allowed to take a dog off a lead. They'd take their dogs out and go in there for a sit down and a talk.

Mrs Clay

Well I think it must have been very important, and it probably helped to be a foundation for me and a background for me, and a great influence. It must have been. Thinking now of what it could have been like to have been further away in the middle of, well between Leytonstone and Leyton and not being near. Because we were free to go there, it was just that little road between Windsor Road down to the Gardens where the gates were. It went straight across, you had to go around the bandstand and out the other side. So I must have done it hundreds of times, there was that freedom of all that space. There was the football ground as well on the right, which was space. You are just not conscious of all this, but I think I still like, when I was looking for a house I had to have space and distance to look at. It must have made a great impression.

Thelma Wolfe

We came back to live in Leyton, to St Mary's Road in 1930 and it was on a Saturday when we moved back up here, I think in November time and it was really murky and foggy. The first impression I had of the district of course was walking out on the Sunday morning into the Coronation Gardens. I was very impressed by it at the time and it was well used of course in those days. People would go there on a Sunday and sit around on the seats and meet people there. It was always well tended; it was very colourful, plenty of flowers about and shrubs. It was quite an important place.

Ted Gross

Well they were very quiet and peaceful them days. I had a chance to go in the little bus to take me there in my wheelchair to show me, but I couldn't go that day and I was ever so upset because I used to love Coronation Gardens. It was so lovely and clean and peaceful, and they used to have a nice Park Attendant, you know, to watch that you didn't throw bits and pieces about and all that. Used to have lovely plays and that in the centre and we used to stand outside the railings and could see because it only had a top on it and you could listen and see what was going on. They had all seats all round inside.

Mrs Clay

I missed it when we moved to South Woodford when I had children, because there was no park there that you could just walk to and sit. That was such an easy thing to do in the Coronation Gardens, just to go with your family and sit and the children could run about, free to run about without any inhibition. You know, you actually need a park and that is very, very important.

Thelma Wolfe

The Future

The award of National Lottery funding has led to plans being drawn up to restore and develop the Gardens. The following improvements are to be made to the Gardens: -

- Soft landscape restoration of the flower beds
- Repairing the footpath system and returning the surface to a bonded gravel appearance
- Creating circular railing, hedge and tree planting around the bandstand with additional seating.
- Refurbishment of the wisteria pergola erected in the early 1950s including complete replacement of the timbers.



- Major works to replace the rather down at heel wooden rest room building with a new brick built building with the park keeper's room as well as toilets and a vending machine room for light refreshments.
- A new feature to be developed is a maze within the rose garden area. Mazes were a feature of Elizabethan gardens therefore developing a link with the original gardens at the time of Sir William Hicks [see Appendix 2]
- The fishpond, which has particularly suffered from neglect, although not original, is to be completely refurbished.
- The installation of interpretive signs throughout the Gardens.
- Installation of CCTV. Vandalism has always been a problem. Sadly soon after the bandstand was refurbished damage was done to one of the balusters. It is hoped that CCTV will prevent much of the present petty vandalism.

It is hoped to complete this by May 2003, taking a much-loved local park into its third millennium.



Appendix I

Early History of the Site

Geology of South Leyton

The surface geology of Leyton is very simple consisting of fluvial gravel and loam, the Valley Drift. In the area of Coronation Gardens, in the flood plain of the River Lea, these clays and gravel come together. As illustrated by the recent survey work carried out during the development of the new stand at Leyton Orient Football Club where the foundations of the stand are partly in clay and partly in gravel. The gravel is known as the Taplow gravel terrace of the River Lea. Coronation Gardens appear to be purely located on clay.

In the 1925 trial bores made by the Leyton Council on Ruckholt Road and Mortuary Road showed that the flood plain gravel in this area is masked by a thin bed of alluvium which is no more than 6.5 feet thick. Below the Valley Drift is the London Clay, which comes to the surface in Leyton. Below the London Clay are a series of clayey and sandy beds known as the Woolwich Beds and Thanet Sands, which in turn lie above marine limestone, Chalk, (at a depth of 150-230 feet).

Early evidence of human activity

Amongst the gravel, Palaeolithic flint implements have been found indicating very early settlement in the area and these gravel areas are now prioritised by English Heritage as requiring archaeological investigation whenever the opportunity arises. Recent excavations and trial trenches in the area have in fact shed little light on the early settlement. The Oliver Close excavation produced a limited number of Bronze Age finds with the suggestion of a possible burial ring whilst the excavation on Vicarage Road in 1997 only produced 18th to modern day finds. In 1978 during the excavation on Church Road some remains dating to the 3rd to 5th Century AD were found which tied in with other Roman remains that had been recorded since the 17th Century suggested some Roman occupation in this area.

The River Lea itself has produced evidence of Viking and Anglo-Saxon presence especially during the excavations of the reservoirs in Walthamstow.

Medieval development

The manor of Ruckholt lay in the south and south east of Leyton Parish and included Leytonstone. In 1066 'Leintuna' was held by Swein the Swarthy as a manor and three hides, worth 20s and, by 1086, it was held in demesne by Peter de Valognes, worth 40s. In 1195 Richard I confirmed the gift of the land by Gunnore de Valognes to Haliwell Priory. In 1201 Gunnore and her husband, Robert Fitz Walter bought some land in Leyton from the priory and also at this date the wood of Ruckholt (rook wood) was mentioned. After several changes of hand it was not until c1284 the manor was first recorded as Rocholte Hall when William de Bumpstead gave the manor to Sir Richard de la Vache. It continued to change hands and in 1485 the land was given to the crown up on the death of Sir Richard at the Battle of Bosworth. The Crown gave the manor of Ruckholt to Sir John Risley.

Post-Medieval development

A house was in existence by 1257, and by 1284 it was known as Ruckholt Manor. Henry Parvishe is said to have rebuilt the house, a fair feat as he bought the house in 1592 and died in 1593, and this is probably the house listed in 1594 in Norden's 'Description of Essex' among houses of note. A 1719 reference to the old house 'which stood near the now house' suggests that Parvishe's house was built on a new site and ancient entrenchment's still visible in 1803, including a moated circular embankment, probably marked the medieval house. With the death of Henry Parvishe the manor passed to his daughter, Elizabeth, who married Michael Hicks, secretary to Lord Burleigh.

Ruckholt Manor and its associations with the Hicks family

When Michael Hicks married Elizabeth Colston in 1594 he began his association with Ruckholt Manor. Michael Hicks was a government official who served the Queen's most important minister and leading courtier, William Cecil, Lord Burleigh. As Cecil's patronage secretary, Michael Hicks not only had considerable influence on the award of profitable appointments but also became acquainted with many of the most important people at Elizabeth's court. His wife's family, the Colstons, lived nearby in Walthamstow, as did his fellow secretary, Henry Maynard. Michael and his wife, Elizabeth, often entertained them and other important Essex neighbours. Other courtiers who Hicks knew and could have visited him at Leyton include Sir Walter Raleigh, the Earl of Shrewsbury and Robert Cecil.

It appears he quickly took in hand the development of the gardens and their surroundings. We know he laid out a bowling green, which was probably the first bowling green in Leyton and that he loved to invite fellow enthusiasts to come and play there.

We cannot be sure exactly how Ruckholt's gardens were designed, but correspondence at the time reflects that when Hicks first moved to Leyton he refers to the work he was undertaking on 'the bowling alley and the walks' and to 'the patterns you desire'. It therefore seems clear that he took expert advice when carrying out the work. Hicks, whilst working for the Cecils, would have known some of the finest examples of Tudor gardening anywhere in Britain. He would also have been able to consult a family friend, Sir Francis Bacon, who wrote one of the most influential contemporary essays on the subject entitled 'On Gardening' and was a frequent visitor to Ruckholt.

The early eighteenth century map of the area by John Rocques gives a general sense of its layout, though it may have been slightly remodelled towards the end of the previous century. Michael Hicks' letters and other evidence tell us that apricots and grapes were grown in the garden. A contemporary portrait of one of Michael's grandsons, painted at Leyton, shows part of the garden in the background. One of the Hicks family described the setting as follows:

' The terrace on which the boy stands is flagged in black and white, and from an opening in the balustrade a path goes to white wooden gates between red brick pillars. On either side of the pillars are tall clipped hedges; over them looms a grove of trees. In the midst of the path near the terrace is a fountain in two tiers, and a stone Cupid with a bow stands on the topmost basin. Around the fountain and down the path as far as the gates are grouped

square beds with box edges and small clipped trees, about two feet high, at each corner.'

Queen Elizabeth I visits Ruckholt Manor

Queen Elizabeth travelled around the country extensively during her reign. She visited her nobility and leading officials taking with her a vast retinue of courtiers and servants. On such 'progresses' she could both show herself to her subjects and reinforce the loyalty of her nobles. In 1597 William Hicks arranged, after much negotiation, a visit by Queen Elizabeth I to Ruckholt Manor. By the time Queen Elizabeth I came to Leyton on 17th August 1597 she would have viewed a recently redesigned Tudor house with elaborate gardens and water features and an imposing tree lined entrance drive leading from the present High Road.

When Elizabeth visited Michael Hicks, there was some doubt whether Ruckholt was grand enough to host a visit being 'scant of lodgings and offices' for the Queen's followers. But this problem was overcome and Hicks' wife was advised not to worry about accommodation, but to present the Queen with '..a fine waistcoat or fine ruff or like thing.'

In the end the Queen's stay of two nights was only a partial success. Elizabeth I liked the house and its surroundings and praised Elizabeth Hicks, her hostess, but Michael, who had hoped to be knighted by the Queen, was overwhelmed by the importance of the occasion and became tongue tied. He wrote to a friend later, 'the resplendence of her Majesty's royal presence and princely aspect did on a sudden so daunt all my senses and dazzle my eyes, as for the time, I had use neither of speech nor memory.' Thus the eloquent speech he had planned was a failure and the dances, masques and other performances could not compensate.

We cannot be sure of the sort of activities the Queen would have engaged in whilst she was at Ruckholt. We know that dances, masques and other performances were a common feature of the calendar and can be fairly sure that the Queen would have walked in the gardens. If she walked to St Mary's Church during her stay she would have crossed the present Coronation Gardens, using the footbridge over the Phillebrook, which ran along the northern side of the present park. She may also have been invited to play bowls, as Michael was an enthusiastic player as were many of his neighbours. Michael also enjoyed music, playing backgammon, hunted and competed at archery, as well as taking an interest in natural history, so there need have been no shortage of entertainment. He was even known to have written some rather scandalous verses to the Queen which apparently amused her so we can reasonably assume that it was a lively couple of days.

After Queen Elizabeth's death there was a further royal visit by James I on 16th June 1604, shortly after which Michael Hicks was knighted. Michael Hicks died at Ruckholt on 15 August 1611, aged 68, and the fine monument to him in St Mary's Church, Leyton, with its outstanding life size sculptured figure can still be seen. In fact the monuments in this church clearly show the Hicks' family association with Ruckholt Manor.

In 1659 Evelyn, on a visit, described Ruckholt Manor as 'a melancholy old house surrounded by trees and rooks', even though he was provided with a great feast and good company. Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, during his visit at the time of the plague in September 1665 wrote that it was a 'good seat..... let run to ruin' and was highly critical of the house,

gardens and food.

After Michael's death Charles II visited the house in 1670 on the way to a hunting trip in Epping Forest and Sir William Hicks' sons, William and Michael, were knighted. Sir William Hicks, who inherited the house in 1680, encased the house in brick.

18th and 19th Century development

A 1721 plan shows the house as a half H shaped plan and between 1721 and 1728 Benjamin Collyer altered the landscape, which included an ornamental island in the Phillebrook. Between 1742 and 1744 William Barton converted the manor into a public breakfast house and for about six years it was popular with the gentry who were entertained with music on Monday mornings during the summer whilst banquets, spectacular shows and other less reputable activities also took place. Between 1755 and 1757 the house was pulled down and the materials sold. A farmhouse was in existence by 1777 with farm buildings lying just south of the site of the manor house, and the farm covered 180 acres. Between 1889 and 1891 the house became a cottage hospital and was demolished in 1891 to make way for a new school.

For a large part of the Victorian era this area of Leyton contained watercress beds. It is unclear when they were exactly founded. From local reminiscences recorded by Bren Kennedy in the 1930s the old watercress beds were on either side of the High Road and partly covered the area now occupied by Coronation Gardens. The part that covered the Garden's area was owned by a Mr Rayner. However, looking at 1860's maps, it is clear the bed on the east side of the High Road was present but on the west side there were only little pools.

In the land deeds of 1878, a map clearly shows the watercress beds on the opposite side of the High Road to where Coronation Gardens is today. The deeds for 1879 for the same plot of land show the development of Huxley Road and probable remnants of the watercress beds. It is not clear when all the beds went out of use but they had been developed over by the end of the Victorian era.

Appendix 2 Early History of Gardens and Parks

A Brief History of Renaissance Gardens and Parks

Francis Bacon, in his 'Essay on Gardens', records that: 'God Almighty first planted a garden: and indeed it is the purest of human pleasures. It is the greatest refreshment of the spirits of man: without which, buildings and Palaces are but gross handy works: and a man shall ever see, that when ages grow to civility and elegance, men come to build stately, sooner than to garden finely, as if gardening were the greater perfection.'

During the Tudor and Elizabethan periods a person's position and wealth was indicated by their home, not only the building but also the surrounding land. The gardens became expressions of not only the wealth of the owner but also a show of bringing order to nature. Some owners also tried to mirror the universe through the use of statues, buildings and plants. However, not all viewed gardens so well. The puritans believed that gardens could be bad, not only as Adam sinned in a garden, but also that Jesus was betrayed in one and soon a negative analogy evolved from gardens, for example the root of all evil. It is not clear whether their belief of sin was followed to a great degree but it is clear that many tried to return to paradise through the management of nature.

This management of nature often took the form of producing a regular layout, usually using rectangular, square or circular designs. It also didn't end with plants. Many gardens developed through creating man made hills, pits and water courses, the latter containing fish and wildlife. There were also purpose built areas for relaxation, as well as performance areas whilst the gardens were protected by fencing or thick hedging and access was very limited, mainly only to the guests of the landowner.

A major renaissance development was also the large and varied flower beds. In Medieval England the number of plants available were limited and many were often grown in pots. With the influx of new plants from overseas gardeners, they were soon planted extensively whilst orchards also rapidly developed. However, there was misunderstanding about insects and how they affected plants and, for example, the earthworm was initially seen as harmful.

During the medieval period the park was an area, often wooded, that was enclosed and maintained for hunting. Access was very limited and trespassers were dealt with harshly. These parks were usually owned and managed by the Crown or the Church. After the medieval period large numbers of these parks ceased, many on the dissolution of the monasteries, and were replaced by small farm holdings. However, during the renaissance period some of the parks grew rapidly. The parks mirrored how the ruling elite saw themselves, mainly by demarcating the social boundaries through a physical means. In fact the means of hunting altered and became more formalised as shown by the accounts of Elizabeth I and James I where the prey was no longer chased but rounded up and driven in front of a stand from where the aristocracy would shoot. However, towards the end of the period the park was viewed as contrived and after the Civil War attitudes changed and many of the parks were destroyed or laid out in the more formal French manner.

It was during this renaissance time that this area of Leyton, now partly occupied by Coronation Gardens, was first laid out.

A Brief History of Urban Parks

It is clear that many of today's urban parks developed from the civic pride of Victorian and Edwardian councillors. There was an increasing need to show that the local governments were providing for all forms of welfare for their residents. This included provision for the intellect (libraries and museums etc.) and health (swimming pools and parks etc.). The parks provided ranged in size, style and development. Britain was the first country to develop Municipal Urban Parks with the first one opening in Manchester in 1846, being financed through public subscriptions. As the Victorian period developed more and more philanthropists and industrialists provided the funds to develop parks.

Many of the first parks were on the fringes of the urban development and were fairly large, in the region of 12 acres, but as time went on parks were developed in the centre of towns and usually covered around 4 acres. Many of these urban parks were influenced by the work of Humphry Repton in the 18th Century, which included winding walks to disguise the limits of the park and division of the parks into discrete areas of different character and use. Parks were developed on all forms of land ranging from existing greens and commons, to reclaimed industrial sites with the location often influencing the size, shape and nature of the park. However, nearly all had the same aims. They were designed to provide a range of landscapes and to accommodate the largest number of people possible, both physically and through provision of multi-purpose uses. By the end of the Victorian era a further emphasis had been placed on parks, they were to provide sports facilities usually to include a bowling green and tennis courts.

A major change of park design occurred during this period. When the wealthy wanted a garden, they employed one of the limited number of landscape architects or garden designers. Many of these architects designed the early urban parks but it soon became clear to many councils that a way to save costs was to allow the borough engineers, surveyors or gardeners to design the parks or at least have a major input into the projects.

It is impossible to fully assess the importance of these urban parks. Their functions are many and over the last century or so since they have developed many parks have changed their uses, layout etc. The affections of the local populations to these parks also varies from borough to borough and town to town whilst the care of the gardens and parks has varied leaving many well managed but probably an equal number under financed and under staffed. One thing that is clear is that unlike the predecessors to these parks, which were elitist, these urban parks are an integral part of the local society and still provide not only an important leisure facility but also a focal point for many communities.

Sources

Most of the source material is contained within Vestry House Museum. The Minute books of Leyton Urban District later Borough Council are the greatest source of information about how the Gardens were developed and managed over the years. For the pre history again Vestry House Museum's Archives supplied maps and other information. The History of Leyton by Bren Kennedy supplied a lot of the earlier source material.