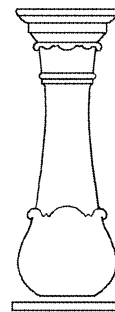


VALENTINES PARK CONSERVATIONISTS NEWSLETTER

Honorary Vice Presidents: Ted Fawcett OBE, Mike Gapes MP



www.valentinespark.org.uk

Issue no. 29, November 2009

A symbol of the park ...



American Grey Squirrel
(*Sciurus carolinensis*)
by Margaret Elvin

Farewell!

On Saturday 12 September 2009 the VPC held an Extraordinary General Meeting, during which it was decided that as several committee members were standing down and no other members wished to take their place, the Conservationists could no longer continue.

This was a difficult and sad decision to take, but the outgoing committee was determined that the VPC should end cheerfully, so on Sunday 11 October many members attended an enjoyable early evening party in Valentines Mansion.

Dinah Mullineux and Janet Plimmer provided an excellent buffet, Stephen Smith presented an entertaining illustrated talk and informal quiz on the influences that shaped Valentines, VPC member Barbara White arranged for a clarinet quartet to play a selection of standards and show tunes, and VPC vice-president Mike Gapes, Valentines Project Director Nigel Burch and park manager Simon Litt each made short speeches. We were pleased that Mike, Nigel and Simon could attend, as their support, help and advice over the years has been invaluable, and we thank them very much.

Then, over the weekend of 24 and 25 October, several members took part in our Going Down South planting project. On the Saturday we planted species native to the southern hemisphere in beds near the lower Perth Road gates. And on the Sunday we and Simon Litt were joined by the Mayor, Councillor Chan and Mayoress Mrs Chan, our vice-president and Ilford South MP Mike Gapes, Ilford North MP Lee Scott, and cabinet member Councillor Alan Weinberg, who all, in a jolly little 'topping out' ceremony, spread the final spadefuls of earth around the eucalyptus trees which form a focal point of the planting scheme.

We are pleased that some of the work of the VPC will continue through the Friends of Valentines Mansion, who will be setting up a gardening group which some VPC committee members should be joining. And the VPC's gardening sessions in the park will still run on the last Saturday of each month.

Meanwhile, this seems a good time to review some of the VPC's activities over the past ten years, using extracts from past newsletters, beginning with the very first article from the very first issue:

Dear members

Back in the summer a few of us decided to set up a group that would actually get its hands dirty and plant bulbs or trees in the park, or sometimes meet for a guided walk. We talked through some of the ideas each of us had, and adopted the following objectives:

- i) To bring together those sharing a common interest in Valentines Park. These interests may include the horticultural, aboricultural, ecological, educational and social development of the park.
- ii) To enhance the park's historic landscape as an attractive and healthy environment for people and wildlife, this being attained by giving voluntary practical assistance to the park's authorities.
- iii) To promote the park as a resource for the multicultural community of Redbridge.

Stephen Smith
January 1999

The VPC's initial plan was to hold two Saturday morning gardening sessions in the grounds near the mansion and one guided tour of the park every three months. This report shows how the first morning's work in the Old English Garden not only set the pattern for many future gardening sessions, but also began the VPC's role of campaigning for improvements to be made in conjunction with Redbridge council:

Old English Garden remedial work

On 27 February a group of 12 volunteers, led by Stephen, carried out some serious tidying up in the Old English Garden. Paths were weeded and raked; beds were aerated; and dead and burnt-out climbers and shrubs were removed from the central area around the wrought iron support. This support is in need of repair before the ground can be replanted. An estimate for this work has been obtained and given to the council officer with responsibility for it.

Finally, cuttings from the original box hedge were taken and these are now being propagated at Capel Manor and Gunnersbury horticultural sites for us to use at a later date.

The age range of the group of volunteers was varied and the walled garden was a wonderfully peaceful place to be for two hours on a Saturday morning. I am certain everyone enjoyed themselves and we look forward to the next work session.

Rita Coleman
April 1999

The VPC's tree walks were always popular, as Stephen Smith's extensive knowledge and enthusiasm gave many people a new appreciation of the specimens in the

park and the history behind their planting. Here Stephen reviews one of the early tours:

July tree walk

On 30 July we celebrated some of Ilford's best specimens in a tour of the park. The longevity of trees makes them as important to our cultural heritage as the buildings or monuments left by our predecessors, and the aim of the walk was to look at the use of trees in the designed landscape of our park.

We began our tour with the mulberries, which looked beautiful, and were planted here as much for their fruit as the picturesque effect they have on the lawn. We moved quickly on (as quickly as a group of about 50 people can move) to see one of the highlights of Valentines, the cedar in the American Gardens. Herbert Lockwood reminded us that it was considered one of the largest in England when this part of the park came into public ownership in 1907.

Our next stop was the ancient field maple on the boundary with the golf course. This hedgerow tree probably predates the mansion and must be one of the oldest in the park. The trees in the Glade were next on our list, many of them dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. Though some of them are becoming difficult to view, the pines and the planes make some fine groups of specimens.

Our last port of call was the century-old avenue of horse chestnuts near Melbourne gate. Amongst these are two much older pollarded oaks, giving us a layer of history dating from the time Ilford was under forest law.

Stephen Smith
September 2000

Within months of its formation, the VPC was increasing its range of activities, and in October 1999 promoted the first of many bird-watching walks led by Peter Hopkins. Peter also wrote some witty and informative articles for the VPCN, including this one about a certain winter visitor:

Valentino the Mediterranean Gull

Those of you who have been kind enough to join me on a winter bird-walk may have seen Valentino the Mediterranean Gull, a winter holiday-maker here for the fifth year.

When I say this is his fifth year, he could have been coming for much longer. I first saw him as an adult bird in 2000, but as these gulls can live for twenty-odd years, he could know the park better than me. You might ask why 'he'? Well, it all has to do with comparing certain feathers' length with other certain feathers' length (alright, don't doze off!).

The Med Gull has a scientific name, *Larus melanocephalus*, which is from the Greek for black-headed gull or seabird. You may be thinking we already have a Black-headed Gull, and we have: *Larus ridibundus*, which means 'laughing gull', and to further complicate things there's another one actually called a Laughing Gull, which we don't get. Get it?

Now in breeding plumage, the Black-headed Gull has a brown head, but the Med has a beautiful jet-black head, the colour of which is just coming through now and will be almost complete when he packs off.

The upperpart, or back, is a much paler silvery grey and the wings have no discernable dark feathers. This means that when the bird is at rest its rear is totally white, unlike the Black-headed Gull. This is the easiest way to spot one. If you see one in flight, the underwing is snow-white and the wings are shorter and not as pointed as the Black's. He also has a heavier bill, which is blood-red with a black band just before the tip, and red legs - a bit like my summer plumage!

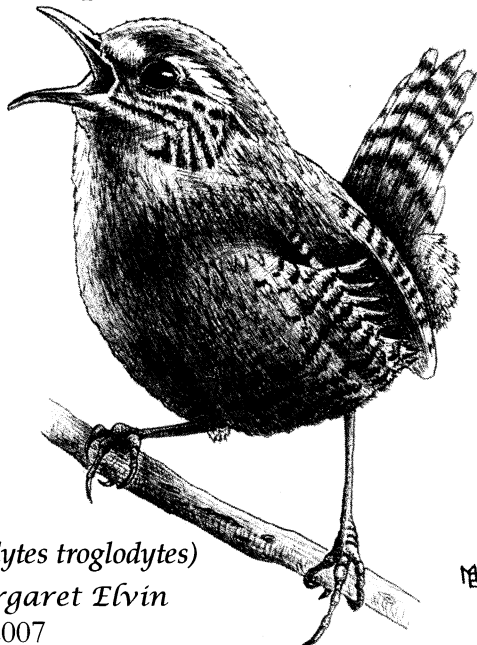
Like any Latin lover, ours likes a bit of jewellery. On his left leg he sports a metal ring, alas too small to read, and on his right a green plastic ring with the registration 3CM6. All we know so far is that he was marked in Calais. He could summer in the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, Yugoslavia, or anywhere in between.

I hope he's still around when you read this. If not, you'll have to wait until next October (about the 20th) to see him near the island end of the Boating Lake or on Melbourne Field (he really is that reliable - like all men!)

Peter Hopkins
March 2004

PS: Valentino indeed returned, on 16 October 2004.

Seen in the park ...



Wren
(*Troglodytes troglodytes*)
by Margaret Elvin
March 2007

Our autumn planting projects

- 2001: **The Big Dig**
Restoring the mansion's east border, using a Regency-period planting scheme
- 2002: **A Splash of Spring Colour**
Bulb planting around the mansion
- 2003: **Planting in and around the mansion's conservatory bed**
- 2004: **Hedge the Edge**
Planting a native species hedge in front of the mansion, by the Emerson Road railings
- 2006: **Planting a Pathway**
Bulb planting beside the old golf field and under the mulberry trees near the mansion
- 2008: **Going Down South**
Planting southern hemisphere species by the lower Perth Road gates

Our autumn projects normally took place on two mornings over one weekend. They were social occasions which attracted more members than the monthly Saturday morning gardening sessions, and usually ended with a 'topping out' ceremony attended by councillors and MPs, followed by Dinah's and Janet's refreshments in the mansion. This report on the progress of our largest project - the Big Dig - is also a reminder that we were at all times working in a historic environment:

Progress of the Big Dig

The first weekend of digging, in fine autumn weather on 8 and 9 September, enabled us to double-dig about one third of the area designated for replanting, on the east side of Valentines Mansion.

Our vice-president, Mike Gapes MP, kindly assisted in opening the first trench, and at the time of writing 21 people have participated in digging relays. So far, excavations have yielded archaeology such as pieces of pottery, ornate ironwork, a 1918 penny, and the walls of the conservatory boiler room.

Very surprisingly, another room, extending under the mansion, was discovered by contractors removing a concrete slab which was thought to be merely the base of the old fire escape. Nigel Burch and Jim Hetherington, the borough conservation officer, peered down the hole created by the removal of the concrete, and were puzzled to see at least one room not shown on any known plans of the mansion.

Their investigations are continuing inside the mansion, but meanwhile, if anybody can shed light on the existence of this room (or rooms?), please contact us.

Christine Fairfax
October 2001

Valentines Park goes global!

Earlier this year we set up a website providing information about Valentines Park and the work we are doing to restore its gardens and features. The website has proved very popular, with typically over 100 visits each month. And they've come from all over the world - our site has been visited by people from the UK, America, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, South Africa, Spain and Sweden - and that's just in the last three months! Not bad for a local conservation group.

Most interesting though, has been the many e-mails and phone calls we've received from people who used to live in Ilford and remember Valentines Park with great affection. We have accumulated many messages of support and some fascinating reminiscences which all add to our picture of the park and the part it played - and continues to play - in the lives of residents.

David Lane
October 2001

Some interesting articles were produced by Janet and John Plimmer, following conversations with 100-year old Alfred Taylor, who worked at the park from 1943 to 1967, and Frank Brean, who was head gardener in the 1960s and 70s, and who also provided Janet and John with documents from his time at Valentines. Janet also wrote a series of articles on the trees of Valentines Park. This piece concerns two of the best-known plantings, the first still very much with us, the second sadly but necessarily lost in the recent restoration:

The trees of Valentines Park IV

Two fruiting trees are of interest. The mulberry (*Morus niger*) is situated near the mansion. It is native to central Asia - where it is widely cultivated for its fruit - and naturalised in southern Europe.

Our specimen is an interesting example of natural reproduction, as it has a spreading habit, and has rooted where its branches have drooped down and touched the ground, so that the old original trunk is now surrounded by rooted branches. These still crop heavily, the dark purple fruits being much enjoyed by starlings, blackbirds and climbing children!

There is also a fig (*Ficus carica*) growing over the grotto shelter on the south side of the canal. The fig is thought to be native to an area ranging from Afghanistan to Syria, and is parthenocarpic - that is, it will develop fruit without fertilisation, so that even single trees can be grown for fruit.

The fig in Valentines is a variety known as Brown Turkey, and cropped every year (though the fruits

only ripened in favourable summers), until it had to be severely cut back when a survey of the grotto's structure was carried out.

Janet Plimmer
July 2003

A few years later, another Valentines tree proved to be of interest:

The Venerable Field Maple

Towards the end of October 2008 I noticed a small item in the Evening Standard publicising a competition, being run by the charity Trees for Cities, to find the 'Great Trees of London'.

Julie Bradley and I decided that we should enter the Valentines Maple, which I have a special liking for as it's often overlooked as just another tree, less impressive than the more visually striking Cedar of Lebanon nearby.

Julie photographed the maple and we entered it as the VPC's 'Great Tree', together with a brief description and what we knew of its history. It was probably planted on the Valentines estate in the 17th century.

To our great surprise and satisfaction Trees for Cities informed us that the Valentines Maple was one of the 20 winning trees.

By now an award plaque should have reached Peter Marshall, Redbridge council's Arboricultural Officer, who assures us that a suitable plaque-planting ceremony will take place for the 'Venerable Valentines Maple'.

Peter Knight
March 2009

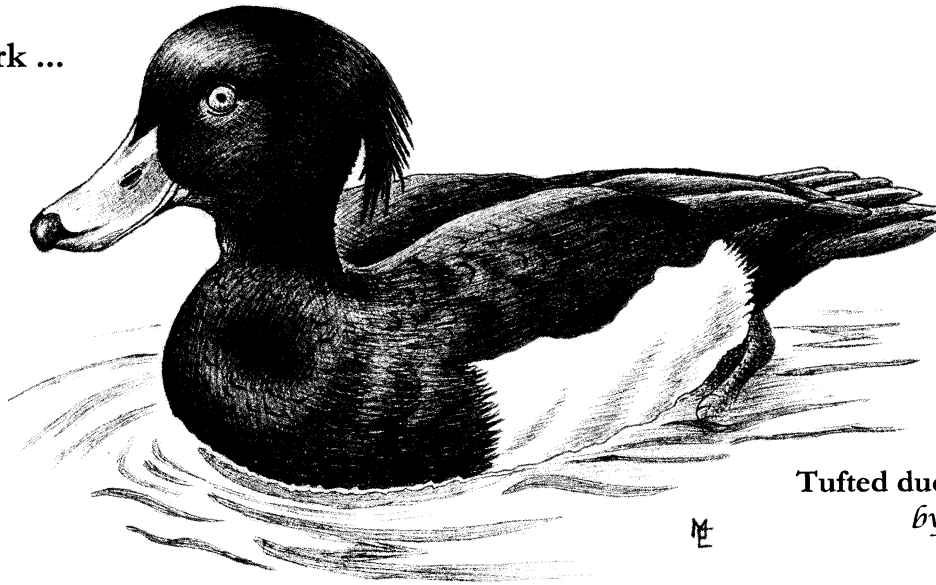
Grown in the park ...



Vitis - Grape Vine

by Margaret Elvin
Nov 2003

Seen in the park ...



Tufted duck (*Aythya fuligula*)
by Margaret Elvin
March 2009

Our coach trips

- 2003: Audley End
- 2004: Colchester and Beth Chatto Gardens
- 2005: Mottisfont Abbey and Gardens
- 2006: Saffron Walden and the Wimpole Estate
- 2007: Blenheim Palace
- 2008: Guildford and Polesden Lacey
- 2009: Royal Tunbridge Wells and Penshurst Place

Colchester and Beth Chatto Gardens

We were very lucky with good weather for our day out in July. Colchester offered so much to do and see that a whole day could have been happily spent visiting places such as the castle, market, Roman ruins, museums, and the lovely Castle Park by the river.

The afternoon spent at Beth Chatto Gardens was a delight, with the different types of garden - such as water, woodland and gravel - offering something of interest to everyone. At every turn there was something to catch the eye and examine, and many of us brought plants from the nursery. Our thanks to chairman Stephen Smith for being on hand to give advice and answer our many queries - a great bonus.

Dinah Mullineux

Many thanks to Dinah and Janet for again organising an enjoyable coach trip. The pairing of Colchester with Beth Chatto Gardens was an inspired choice, as visiting two very different locations in one day provided variety, yet a horticultural theme was maintained by visiting the park and gardens surrounding the city's castle museum. Here, lush, well-maintained beds and borders showed what can be done by a local authority, given the will. We can only hope that Valentines may one day approach such standards, once the Heritage Lottery Fund money is put to use.

Karen Lane
November 2004

Redbridge council began bidding for a Heritage Lottery Fund award to pay for the park's restoration in autumn 2001. The HLF granted an award of £3 million in summer 2004, and restoration work began in January 2007. Throughout these years, and beyond, the VPC committee regularly met council officers to discuss plans and proposals for the park:

Council liaison

Our liaison meetings with the council have continued to be both productive and informative. The VPC has commented on plans for the park's landscaping, including the tree strategy, restoration of the waterways and islands, and the repair and restoration of the walls, dovecote and other structures in the area by the mansion. The meetings are now very much about the details of the park's restoration - an encouraging sign that work should be starting soon.

At the last liaison meeting, we were able to put some of our ideas and views directly to Richard Hannay from Land Use Consultants, who will be overseeing the restoration work. This meeting was especially useful as it gave everyone a chance to debate and discuss in some detail plans for different parts of the park. The willingness of everyone to listen to other views and, more importantly, change their own was very encouraging and good for the park.

As the start of the park's restoration work gets closer and things start to happen in the 'real' Valentines of trees, shrubs, lakes and grottoes, rather than the 'virtual' Valentines of reports, maps and plans, we hope to provide more practical input to the restoration process. We shall be keeping a watchful eye on developments in the park during the next few months to make sure work is carried out as planned - and if it isn't, we'll make sure the council know!

David Lane
July 2006

The VPC ran fund-raising events at the mansion as well as activities in the park. For example:

Jazz at the mansion

Toe-tapping, finger-clicking, joint-jumping jazz was the order of the night when Who Else For Jazz? returned to the mansion in January for their second concert. A capacity crowd - we could have sold many more tickets if the mansion had the space - enjoyed almost two hours of swing and Duke Ellington standards - not to mention some extremely suspect jokes!

A fantastic support act - Dinah, Janet, Jenny and John - made sure the audience, the band and all those involved in organising the event were well supplied with food and drink.

Add Christine's decorations, which created a pleasantly seedy jazz club atmosphere, and it's no surprise that everyone went home whistling or humming their favourite tunes - a sure sign of a good musical evening. And with over £200 raised for our restoration work, this was a good evening for the park too.

David Lane
March 2004

Another Antarctic afternoon

The illustrated talk on the Antarctic, given by Roger Slade on his return to Valentines Mansion last November, was much appreciated by a capacity audience.

Roger's magnificent scenic photographs were atmospheric and informative. We saw how snow covered mountains reflect the muted orange glow of a partial sunset, while icebergs, in a range of dazzling pure blues, are eroded into amazing shapes by the wind and sea.

Roger mentioned past explorers of Antarctica, and moves by a charity to conserve their crumbling huts and other historic sites. Among pictures of the continent's permanent inhabitants - the birds and seals - was a superb image of an albatross, gliding over the waves with great wings outstretched. Roger explained how albatrosses will follow ships for miles, but how difficult it was, on a rolling boat, to achieve that one perfect image of the moving bird.

Many thanks to all those involved in making the afternoon a success: Dinah, Janet and the team for refreshments, Nigel Burch for allowing us use of the rooms, those who prepared them, and Roger for his educational and entertaining presentation.

Margaret Elvin
March 2007

The VPC stall

We regularly ran our fund-raising stall at our events at the mansion, our AGMs, and at the Redbridge Green Fair and Valentines Mansion May Fair. Our best-sellers were always the notelets featuring Margaret Elvin's exquisite plant and wildlife illustrations, and Sally Reed's excellent colour-photo greetings cards. We are therefore very grateful to Margaret and Sally for allowing the VPC to profit from their artwork.

We are still considering a new outlet for Margaret's notelets, but you can now buy Sally's cards in the Valentines Mansion shop, or from her stall at the May and Green Fairs. You can also order cards directly from Sally, on (020) 8478

Readers' reminiscences about the park were always welcome. The greatest number of VPCN articles on any one aspect of the park's past arose from the following query, which was partly answered some years later:

Valentines' forgotten feature

I recently attended an interesting talk about the park, given by Christine Fairfax at the Goodmayes Methodist Church. In one of the photograph albums that she brought along was a photo of the stream with its stepped concrete sides, where my brother and I used to catch 'tiddlers', and which flowed from the children's model yacht pond to the big boating lake.

This photo reminded me that on the stream's south side, amongst the trees, there had once been a narrow gauge children's railway, which ran parallel to the stream.

I was born in 1939 and lived in Chepstow Crescent, Newbury Park. Some three or four times a year I walked with my parents and elder brother to Valentines Park on a Sunday afternoon. On one particular visit we were excited at the prospect of riding on the new 'stream' train. This must have been sometime in the late 1940s, as the Second World War had ended and I was still at primary school.

However, I recall being disappointed with the ride as the track was straight and not very long - perhaps only 100 yards. The train left from near the boating lake, ran to the other end of the track and then reversed, with just a couple of toots of its whistle.

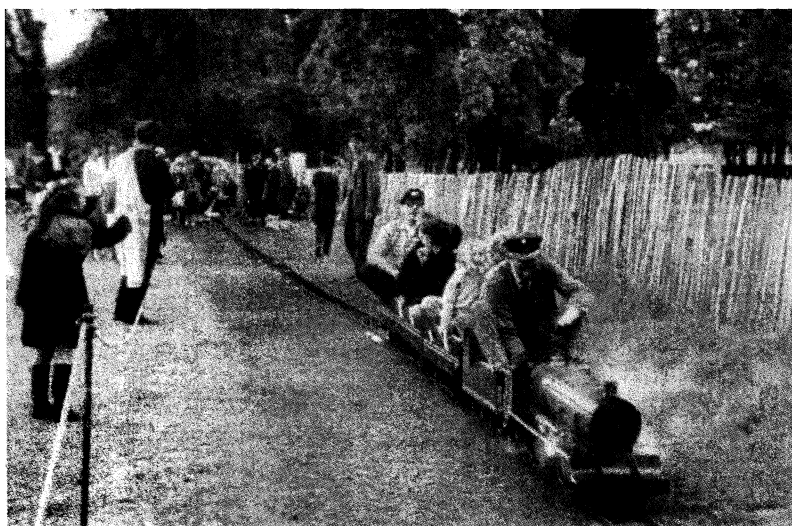
I remember walking in the area some years later, when I was in my late teens or early twenties, and seeing the tracks still in the grass.

Peter J Butt

Does anyone else remember this railway, or have any more information about it? - Ed.

July 2003

Valentines miniature railway



Following the correspondence in past newsletters, concerning when and where the miniature railway ran in the park, and what it looked like, VPC member Christine Fairfax sent me a letter she'd received from David Neal, which included the photograph above. I subsequently contacted David, who supplied the following information:

The picture was taken on 6 June 1964. The track was laid along the north side of Melbourne Field, near the Cranbrook. On the other side of the fence (since replaced by a tall hedge) is a path - now partly allocated to cyclists - and beyond that the stream. The train ran during a Corroboree held by the Ilford West District Scouts over the weekend of 6/7 June 1964, although it was not part of the scout activities. I also remember seeing the track in the grass at other times, without the train.

Many thanks to David (and Christine) for at last providing visual proof of the railway's existence - Ed.

March 2007

Guest speakers at our AGMs

2000: Margaret Stewart

The Rose Gardens of Paris

2001: David Lane

Ilford's Last Victorian: the life of Mrs Sarah Ingleby

2002: Georgina Green

Charles Raymond and His Garden

2003: Stephen Smith

Valentines in Living Memory

2004: James Wisdom

Restoring Gunnersbury Park

2005: Stephen Smith

Proposals for the park's restoration

2006: Gary Meeds

Restoration using the Heritage Lottery Fund award

2007: Stephen Smith

The Gardens of the Grosvenor Estate

2008: Jim Buttress

The Royal Parks

2009: Simon Litt

The Valentines of the Future

The Friends of Valentines Mansion

The VPC was often jointly involved with its 'sister' group, the Friends of Valentines Mansion, in organising events, such as our Hedge the Edge weekend and January 2005 jazz concert, when the Friends provided the catering. We in turn took part in their coffee mornings and 'Victorian Valentines' day, when VPC members gave gardening demonstrations and guided tours of the grounds near the mansion. And we were always invited to run our merchandise stall at the Friends' May Fairs.

VPC members also attended walks, talks, entertainments and coach trips organised by the Friends, and vice-versa. The two groups publicised each others' events in their newsletters, and we are grateful to Georgina Green for including VPC information in the Friends' newsletter when I took a break from producing the VPCN.

Lastly, it's welcome news that the Friends are planning to set up a gardening section, so that the expertise and knowledge that the VPC has built up over the years can be put to good use in any future projects that the group may run.

Karen Lane

Finally, this piece from our last regular newsletter shows that as long as there is work to be done in the park, and people willing to do it, the spirit of the VPC will live on:

Clearing the Boating Lake, 16 April 2009

With the engineers finishing the Boating Lake work near the island, the water rising and no sign of any litter being removed, my friend Ian and I decided it needed sorting out.

After contacting several people who were hopeful prospects for assisting us, I had another volunteer in Tom. So the three of us met, Ian slipped into recently purchased waders, and we proceeded.

We began on the Cowling Shelter side of the lake and worked our way back to the bank by the wishing well. Four rusty litter bins and approximately 15 bags' worth of various bottles, cans and plastic bags came out.

Moving back to the water near the Boathouse, we saw some strange flat snails (which later research told us were Ramshead snails), a large dead carp, and additional cans and bottles. A shopping trolley proved too much even for Ian and we had to leave it in situ. But our intrepid wader-wearer managed with Tom's help to remove two large and heavy commemorative benches (or bits of them), a very smelly dead duck, assorted Yellow Pages and a headless Buddha.

By this time we were on the Ilford town side of the lake and time was getting on, so we had to regrettably leave the job unfinished. However it was satisfying to see the pile of rubbish that came out, even though we were all soaked.

Julie Bradley
June 2009

Committee members

Stephen Smith: Chairman 1999-2009, *and:*

Paul Coleman: Treasurer 1999-2000

James Edgoose: Membership 1999-2000

Ujitha de Zoysa: Newsletter Editor 1999-2000

Rita Coleman: Press Officer 1999-2001

Christine Fairfax: Secretary 1999-2006

Gill Faul: Treasurer 2000-2009

Margaret Elvin: Membership 2000-2009

Dinah Mullineux: Committee 2000-2002,
Catering & Social 2002-2009

David Lane: Webmaster 2000-09, Press & Publicity
2001-03, Council Liaison 2005-2007

John Plimmer: Committee 2001-2008

Janet Plimmer: Committee 2001-2005,
Catering & Social 2005-2009

Julie Bradley: Committee 2002-03, Press & Publicity
2003-07, Secretary & Council Liaison 2007-2009

Peter Knight: Gardening Co-ordinator 2006-2009

Many thanks to ...

Everyone who has contributed to the VPCN in the past. I would like to have included many more articles in this issue, had time and expenses allowed.

And last but not least ...

A big thank you to all our members. The VPC could not have run all the activities and achieved all that it has done without your loyal support, encouragement, interest and involvement.

The VPC autumn planting project team, 24 October 2009. Taken by Karen Lane.

