

## **The Latest News from the Friends of Hyde Park & Kensington Gardens**



***From Sue Price  
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Even though it is now November and we are well into Autumn, on the occasional warm sunny day both Parks are still packed with visitors. The Serpentine is covered with small boats – pumping the pedals or pulling on the oars, the cafés doing a roaring trade with tables full and the Serpentine bridge is three deep with pedestrians (all on the East pavement) admiring the view. Regular readers of this column will remember that this is the protected view towards Westminster.

The playgrounds are heaving, with a deli-counter ticket system in place for the Princess Diana playground, and the Santander Cycles showing, statistically, that the cycle stations in our two Parks are the most used in the whole of London (more on this later).

Our fears? In my last piece some of the worries which I wrote about proved to be unfounded, some were resolved by the weather, and many by advanced warning, proactive management by the police and the Parks maintenance teams all working together and at a cost of course.

## **“Water Fights”**

Once or twice this spring and summer the “water fights” which turned into riots in 2016 looked as though they were building up again. The first, in April, was broken up as soon as the sun went down and it got very cold. It was closely monitored by police in the air and on the ground.

Again, over the summer there were signs on social media that another gathering might be on the horizon, but thankfully it came to nothing thanks to rather cold wet weather. Our Parks managers must live in fear of a long hot summer. Police and Parks management have worked closely together.

## **Swedish Midsummer 24 June**

Following much emailing and letter writing throughout the winter, both to the Swedish Ambassador and to Swedes in London website about this event which has unfortunately turned into an annual unofficial fixture in Hyde Park, Friends’ trustees decided that a visit was necessary.

The crowds gather from mid-morning and this time there were two complete shifts of police and police vehicles in attendance throughout the day, as was a team of park litter pickers and a large litter collecting lorry.

The weather was not brilliant, a bit cool and damp. Policing was proactive and stopped tents and sound systems being set up and the litter picking continued non-stop. Groups were given plastic sacks for their rubbish before they got completely legless and this more or less worked.

The hardworking Friends’ trustees joined the fun at about 8 pm with a bottle of Absolut, some tot glasses and snacks. However, overall we did not blend very well. I would estimate that at about that time, there were hundreds rather than thousands of people and although the amount of rubbish lying around was bad, the Hyde Park litter picking team never stopped working and as a result there was no rubbish left for the next morning’s staff. There was a double shift of police in attendance at all times and this resulted in no arrests this year. There was no need for ambulances to attend this year either. Once again we have to thank the weather and the input from other agencies, but at what cost to the Parks and police budgets? The Police presence presumably meant them not working in some other part of London and certainly the litter pickers couldn’t cover other areas of Hyde Park on that Saturday in June. What also worried me was the sight of a number of obviously non Swedish men chatting up very drunk pretty young Swedish girls.

## **London Food Festival Night Market**

Our fears for this turned out to be groundless. To remind regular readers of this column, up to 15,000 visitors at a time were expected on Perks Field for 12 days in June. This time we can't say that cool, wet weather deterred customers because the weather during that period was gloriously hot and dry.

Visitors did not flock in, litter in Kensington Gardens – none, and the experience for the writer and family on an early Sunday evening was most enjoyable. Delicious food, no queues, plenty of places to sit, very pleasant friendly punters, constant tidying, and another member reports super luxury loos. I would estimate that, when I went, there were less than a thousand people present who were all having a nice time, especially the large groups of Notting Hill teenagers, whose Mums and Dads with them were paying for everything.

**Take Nothing Away.....**I mean stealing things rather than your rubbish which, of course, would be very good to have removed.

Unfortunately, with the very luxurious planting in both Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, there seems to be a “steal to order” movement out there. As soon as new bedding is in place, masses of plants are dug up and stolen. Why don’t any of us spot people with bulging carrier bags? Despite many appeals for even a vague description, these thieves come and go apparently without being noticed by anybody. A mystery – and a very annoying one at that.

## **Cycling in the Parks**

This subject is still a source of annoyance at the least and danger and serious crime at the other end of the scale.

Regular Kensington Gardens visitors will have noticed on Mount Walk the rumble strips designed to slow the commuting cyclists who use this route in their thousands during rush hours.

After an outcry from the vociferous cycling lobby, the already low rumble strips were lowered even further. Friendly cyclists have reported to us that these are now no deterrent to speed at all, and that the previous height was not a safety problem. However some “I’ve got my rights” cyclists have chosen to avoid even these small speed controls and cycle for quite a long way along the grass beside the path. Masses of long strips have been worn away to mud, entirely by these cyclists.

During the spring and early summer the long-suffering Kensington Gardens managers repaired the lot and put in little barriers to protect the newly repaired areas. They told me that they were confident that cyclists were decent people and once they saw what had happened, would learn to respect and enjoy the Park without damaging it.

The barriers were removed, the hundreds of metres of newly repaired turf once more on view alongside Mount Walk and the result? See for yourself, or don't look if you want to retain any faith in decent human nature.

And then to the more dangerous behaviour patterns, particularly from Santander cycles. The robberies of these bikes from tourists continue, as does their use as a means of robbing unknowing visitors walking along using their phones.

And in between there are the cyclists (particularly Santander users) who cycle wherever they want to, on any path, menacing and threatening anybody on foot and with no regard for safety of either humans or pets.

The very large majority of visitors to the Parks are on foot and many are elderly people enjoying walking exercise on what should be safe paths. Unfortunately these are the people who are the least pushy and media savvy, and take the brunt of the aggressive behaviour.

There is a very new Cycle Superhighway across the Parks, costing many millions. Please cyclists – use it!

## **Success Stories**

We'll move onto some positive things.

The major events (British Summer Time Concerts and BBC2 Live and Proms in the Park) took place in Hyde Park in the Parade Ground area.

The first, over a ten day period, was managed well albeit with heightened security. Roads around the Parks were completely closed for the days of the concerts and there was an increased level of searches in place.

Particularly enjoyable, and good to see, were the free mid-week events open to all and enjoyed by thousands of visitors. Full marks to the event organisers for laying on an attractive programme for this mid-week crowd which costs them nothing. There were fewer than ten noise complaints and crime levels (mostly pickpocket type offences) were low.

BBC2 Live and Proms took place over one weekend, so no mid-week entertainment applied in this case. Weather was not so good for these two concerts, but the massive crowds were not put off from bringing in their very complicated picnics, although the bottle rules were interesting

Allowed?.....Plastic Only (and I “enjoyed” my first ever plastic bottle of white wine) or wine boxes, a limited number of drinks in cans, but Champagne or similar was fine because they are in a reinforced bottle, which cannot easily be smashed and used as a weapon.

Once again, Parks roads were closed all day, and the searches (particularly because of the picnics) were complicated.

## Celebrations!

Let's celebrate two very good things.

Members of the Friends will be in the know and may have visited the nursery in Hyde Park. It is not open to the public and is well hidden but provides all the plants needed for the Central London Parks, Richmond Park and the flowerbeds outside Buckingham Palace . The staff at the nursery, having struggled for many years with buildings which were well past their sell-by date, are now preparing to move into a state of the art, football pitch sized nursery built during the last year on the same hidden site, at a cost of about £5million.

A lucky group of our members had a preview earlier in September and marveled at the technology, the size, and, although the nursery is not completely finished, the 25,000 plants which had just been moved in and were occupying one tiny corner. We were certainly the first visitors apart from HRH Prince Charles who came in mid-July. We are looking forward to returning next year when there really will be banks of plants on display ready for their departure to “flower London”.

And to finish with a flourish: His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, Patron, launched the new Royal Parks Charity during a visit to Hyde Park and at a mid-morning reception in a garden in the Park in mid-July. He was driven round in a carriage by two of the Parks oldest Shire horses, was introduced to apprentices at the Nursery, looked at and discussed tree health with a Ranger and then met the police and all of us volunteers who are connected in any way with the Royal Parks.

I was pleased to introduce to him several other Royal Parks Chairmen who joined us on the morning and he was both interested in and supportive of the efforts of the Friends Groups.

It was a beautiful morning, the Park was looking its best and the Prince was particularly interested in the Wild Flower areas of the garden. It was altogether a very happy occasion and a notable way to launch the new Royal Parks Charity.