

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

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The Fight to Create Gillespie Park

Franc David, committee member of Friends of Gillespie Park



Back in 1981, Gillespie Park was a disused coal-wagon shunting railway yard. Islington Council took it over on a ten-year lease from British Rail, and local people and children undertook landscaping and planting to begin to turn it into something else.

In 1987 British Rail was encouraged to sell it off by Sir Nicholas Ridley, the then Secretary of State for the Environment. There were different suggestions for the use of this land: the Council wanted it mainly for social housing with a 'village green' at the centre.

A local group, the Gillespie Park and Sidings Campaign Group was set up to save the area as a park. They had support from local Islington Councillors, from MP Jeremy Corbyn, from the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) and CPRE (Campaign for the Protection of Rural England), and from celebrities like David Attenborough and David Bellamy. Petitions were organised and articles written for the national and local press.

Festivals raises awareness of the park amongst local people. In 1988,

scientists discovered the presence there of a rare grass, the Gillespie Fescue, and this also helped to ensure its preservation.

As a result of the Gillespie Park and Sidings Group's continuing campaign, a compromise deal was finally agreed by the Council with British Rail for seven acres of the park to remain as such, and six acres to become social housing - now Quill Street estate - with a small area for allotments. The new park was handed over to Islington Council in perpetuity.

The Fight to Create Gillespie Park

Continued from page 1...



In September 1993, the Islington Ecology Centre was opened at the site to provide a resource centre for nature education and information, and for community use.

Sue Jandy was one of the original residents active in saving the coal-yard as a park. She has for many years been Chair of the Friends of Gillespie Park. Other long-serving committee members include Pat Tuson, Chris Ashby, and Diane Burridge who were all also active in saving the park. The Friends of Gillespie Park meet regularly and organise an Annual General Meeting and other events throughout the year, notably a Spring Festival and an Apple Day in October, in liaison with Islington's Conservation Team.

Gillespie Park is open during daylight hours except when there is an Arsenal home match. The main entrance is at 191 Drayton Park. There is also access via steps adjacent to the bus stop on Seven Sisters Road under the bridge, from Quill Street, and from an entrance next to Stephens Ink estate on Gillespie Road.

The Park with the Ecology Centre have won many awards over the years, and it kept its Green Flag designation again last year. Islington Council and local people now truly treasure this park and will always be grateful to those who fought such a long and hard campaign to save it for all of us.

Web-links to find out more:

Gillespie Park and Ecology Centre (Islington Council)
www.islington.gov.uk/physical-activity-parks-and-trees/nature-reserves/gillespie-park-and-ecology-centre

Greenspace Information for Greater London CIC
www.gigl.org.uk/sinc/m098/
 Gillespie Park Wikipedia:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gillespie_Park
 Friends of Gillespie Park:
www.friendsofgillespiepark.co.uk/



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Red Kites over Islington

By GILL SHEPHERD



Red kites have been spotted in Canonbury and Hackney. And a pair were seen over Finsbury Park not so long ago. They have become common in the Chilterns and along the M40 and it seems a few have followed the road back into London. They are spectacular, with their reddish plumage, five-foot wingspan, and deeply forked tails.

Once they were as much a London bird as sparrows are. The streets of Shakespeare's capital were full of red kites. The birds were scavengers, never short of a meal at a time when people threw out their rubbish into the street. Shakespeare clearly hated them, having Macduff call Macbeth a 'hell-kite' for killing his whole family 'in one fell swoop.' And having King Lear refer to his daughter Goneril as a 'detested kite.'

But gradually improving public hygiene and waste-disposal robbed the red kite of its niche in London, and the last London sighting was in the mid-19th century – until this last year.

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Editor: Gill Shepherd

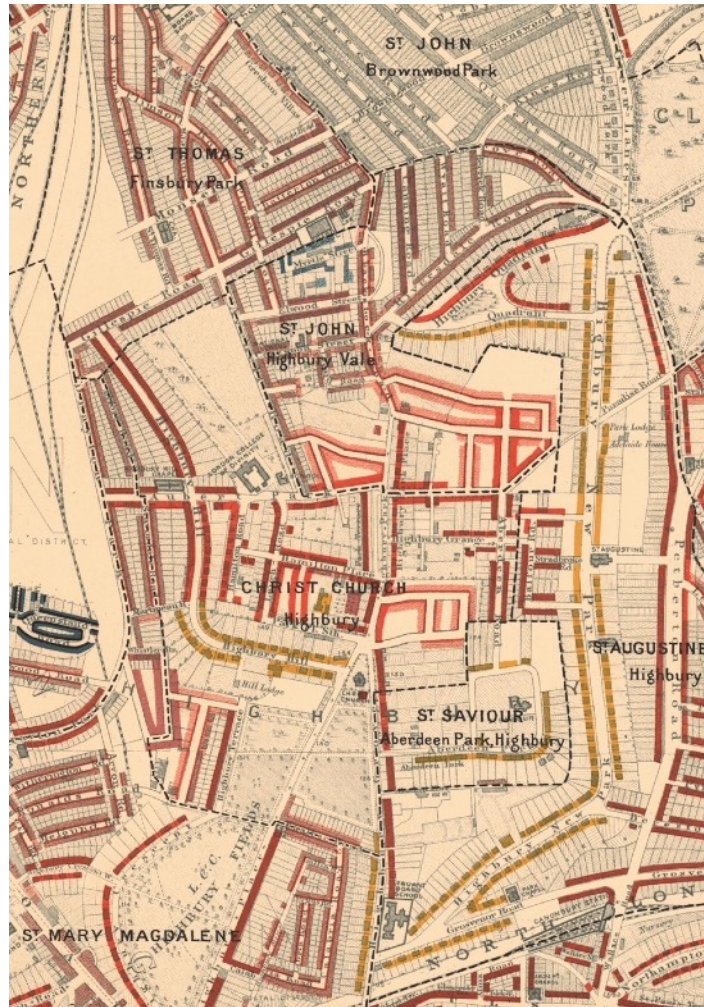
Layout: Susana Liveras

Published by the HCA

Charles Booth's Groundbreaking Study of London Poverty in the Nineteenth Century

By SARAH POTTER

Life and Labour of the People in London (1902-3, 17 vols.) was the culmination of Charles Booth's investigation into poverty in London which began in 1886. A socialist leader had claimed that 25% of London's population was poor, which Booth questioned. His first research was undertaken in Tower Hamlets, a poor area of East London, where he found in fact that 35% of households in the area were in poverty. His method was to contact the School Visitors, who had to contact every household in an area and assess its income, to judge whether the parents could contribute to their child's education. This was not then always free, although it was compulsory.



The School Visitors were asked to share their knowledge of every household with Booth's own investigators. This method was later extended to the whole of London, and Booth's overall conclusion presented in the final *Life and Labour* volumes was that over 30% of Londoners were living in poverty at that time.

Charles Booth's London Poverty Maps, Thames and Hudson, 2019

As well as providing a deep understanding of how different

sources of income, circumstances and housing contributed to a life of poverty, a fascinating feature of Booth's work was the poverty maps of London streets, which became widely known at the time, and have now been republished. These enable us to examine the streets of different areas of London and to assess change and continuity in their circumstances.

Findings about the Highbury area

Highbury was included in Booth's Northern District of London, which is prefaced in the 2019 publication with the comment, presumably by one of

Booth's investigators, that the rich were leaving the district in search of the green fields they used to find locally, while the poor were finding cheaper housing in Walthamstow, with cheap fares available on the Great Eastern Railway. Their places were being taken by a middle class.

The street map of our area shows many roads coloured red, indicating middle class and well to do, with the top of Highbury Hill, and Highbury New Park, yellow for the upper middle class. Mauve indicates a mixed area where some were comfortable and some poor, and this accounted largely for the areas from Gillespie Road north to Finsbury Park and beyond.

A small area coloured dark blue for the lowest class of very poor people is marked on the map in the streets around the old Queensland Road. Dark blue stood for, 'very poor, casual, chronic want'. Just north of the Seven Sisters' Road was the most notorious street in the whole area, Campbell Road. It was coloured black for 'vicious, semi-criminal', and comprised densely packed tenements, reputedly full of thieves and prostitutes. (The road ceased to exist in 1952).

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Highbury Fields: the Current State of Play

By SUE GEE, RICHARD SMITH, PETER THOMPSON, AND CAROLINE RUSSELL

The general state of the Fields

A few months ago, a group of residents gathered outside the old Oasis café to meet Bhupesh Thapa, Central Assistant Parks Manager. We talked to him frankly about our many continuing concerns, and then walked together round the two top Fields. One of those attending, who has lived in Highbury for some thirty-five years, said he had never seen the Fields in such a poor state. There was general agreement.

We asked about funding, and commercial letting of the Fields. The Burberry event (which raised £30,000) has resulted in expenditure on low Black Bow fencing round three corners; two picnic tables, rubberised paths to tennis courts 5, 6, 7 and 8, and new sandpit/water facilities in the playground. Bulb planting, scarifying, and reseeding will take place soon within those fenced areas, we hope.



Other income includes £20,000 from the Fun Fair.

Overall, the Council's Greenspace budget for maintaining all Islington's parks is £800,000. Yet still, as we walked round, we saw neglect and decay: poor drainage on paths and

Fields; post-and-chicken-wire fencing left fallen in the grass; the planters on Highbury Crescent full of dead plants; corners and verges still bald; thistles still choking a sapling and spreading fast. Dead plants are left uncut all around: they are to be cut back shortly. Bhupesh listened attentively and defended his own view that grass and plants are ecologically better left uncut. However, he did note that the verge opposite Highbury Terrace had sprouted plentiful, fresh new grass after mowing.

The proposed new building on the site of the Oasis café and other improvements

The much-loved Oasis Cafe itself was closed in May 2024, despite the protests of many local people that the long-standing owner should be allowed one last summer there. Only too predictably the buildings in this area (caretaker's house, bandstand, and café) will not now be demolished until the summer of 2025, the aim being to have the new building in place by summer 2026. Council governance and procurement

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Highbury Fields..

Continued from page 4...

processes have taken more time than expected. The council will ensure that Church Path, and the Fields themselves, can be safely used throughout the construction period. At the same time, some new bins will then be installed to replace the current aging ones, and pedestrian priority signage for Church Path will be put into place to encourage more considerate and careful cycling by cyclists passing through.

The road through the Fields

More recently, the extensive consultation process about uses for the portion of Highbury Crescent that cuts the Fields in two has also reached a conclusion. The one-time road has been split lengthwise to allow both a cycle path on the north side and a relaxation area with some seating and benches on the south side facing the sun and the main field. Rain garden areas will also be created, to help to deal with run-off. (see map page 4).



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'I'm Still Standing' by Richard Smith (Troubadour 2024)

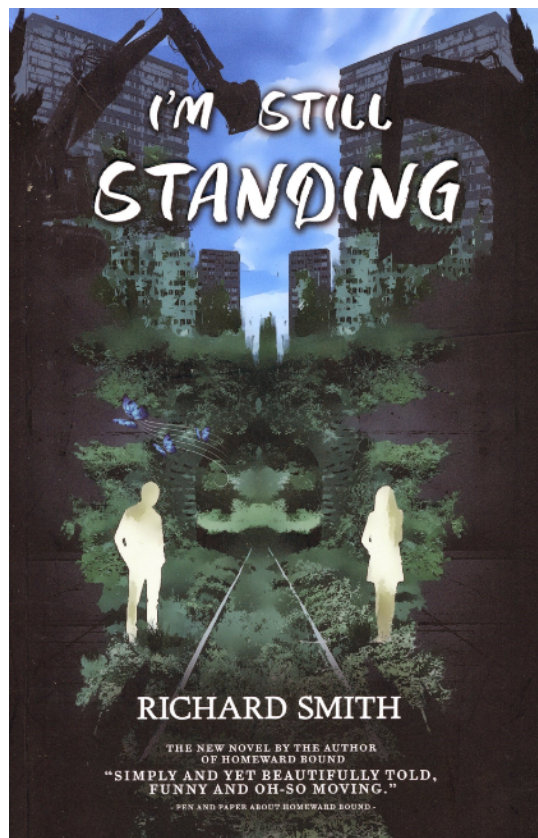
By GILL SHEPHERD

This page turner of a novel, like the author's previous 'Homeward Bound' is almost as much about the music of a particular era as it is about characters and plot. It is, of course, named for Elton John's 1983 triumphant anthem.

This novel is set in 1989 and brings vividly to life both the music of that period, and the era's embryonic struggles with environmental issues. Against this hybrid backdrop two individuals, from very different backgrounds, slowly find their way towards one another with a little help from a wise retired biology schoolteacher who can see that, despite glaring apparent differences, they care a lot about the same things - and each other.

The author has lived in Highbury for many years, and, as far as the environmental battles which face the two are concerned, local readers will recognise a thinly disguised account of the fight for the creation of Gillespie Park (a short history of which is to be found elsewhere in this newsletter).

The book captures both the frustration and the exhilaration of fighting big business, seen through two very different pairs of eyes. It also documents lovingly the way in which a shared commitment to the same cause can bring very different people into alignment in the end.



Richard Smith has a sharp ear for dialogue, and a dry witty turn of phrase, and the book is a pleasure to read. A QR code at the front leads straight to a Spotify list of all the music referenced in the novel.

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'Whatever it takes, A Story of Family Survival' Elaine Lordan 2007 (Ebury Press)

Reviewed by BECKY MARSTON

In sharp contrast to the 19th-century middle-class Highbury autobiography by Molly Hughes, reviewed in the last newsletter, comes this much tougher autobiography a century later. It was written by one-time EastEnders star, Elaine Lordan ('Lynne Slater')

Her later chapters detail the tragic and saddening aspects of her life, but the earlier ones deal with her upbringing in Highbury 100 years on from Molly.

Elaine says: "All my life I've lived in Islington, and if that makes you think of trendy media types swanning about in posh houses, think again." She describes the grander of the houses as carved into flats, with as many crammed in as landlords could manage, causing them to become shabby and run

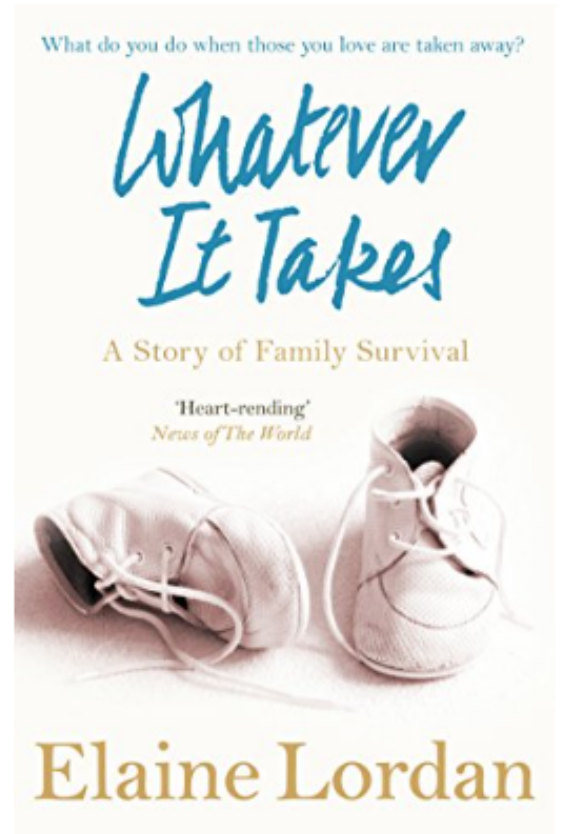
down, and part of a landscape that contained real poverty, and rough estates with no-go areas. Not that the child Elaine noticed these things, as part of a loving family with a father in steady work.

She herself lived in one of those grander houses, number 6 at the top of Highbury Hill, backing on to the Fields. Inside was not grand though, her family's two-bedroomed flat was shared by her parents and her sister, who had to share the bathroom and toilet with others in the house. House conversions in those days were of the rough partitioned kind. Housing stock in the late Victorian period was often designed for families with servants, but as time went by it ceased to be inhabited in that way as economic conditions failed to keep pace with property developers' hopes.

Fifty years ago, Highbury Fields had a pool (though it was an outdoor one in those days), a cafe, as now, and a children's play park, although it has lost its pitch and putt course.

As to shops, Godfrey's the butcher's was there, with a jolly figure outside sporting a straw hat and red and white apron. Godfrey's has had that prop longer than some of us have lived here, though 'Frankie' is now to be found at Godfrey's depot at Finsbury Park.

Elaine recalls primary school at Drayton Park, and Highbury Hill



school, which turned from a Grammar to a Comprehensive the year she started. But her real launching point was Anna Scher's famous theatre school for children, which in the 1970s used to hold Saturday classes in the wooden structure on Highbury Fields opposite the cafe. This establishment launched the acting careers of many of the best-known names in East Enders' long run, including Gillian Taylforth, Pauline Quirke, Kathy Burke and the popstar actors Martin and Gary Kemp.

Elaine writes in her book that she had moved house only twice in her whole life, remaining in Highbury throughout. As she puts it, 'There's a real village feeling about Highbury even today - it's got character.'



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Keeping the high street alive

By GILL SHEPHERD



Why are our high streets struggling?

High streets matter very much for the life of local communities, and yet they often seem close to collapse. In the past five years 6000 High St shops have closed, and one in seven High Street premises lie vacant. Online shopping now accounts for close to a third of all retail sales and in the new age of hybrid working, the lunch-break and the afterwork drink are fading into the past. But this is only part of the story. We have not taken the active measures that governments in Germany, France, and Italy have made to retain butchers, bakers, and greengrocers.

Among many of the factors which have caused the situation in the UK, the most important is that over the past 25 years, governments have steadily shifted the burden of local taxes from houses to businesses. Three years ago, a British Retail Consortium survey showed that 85% of high street shops regarded

business rates as the critical variable for their survival. While a householder might pay £2000 a year in council taxes, the shop next door might be paying 10 times that. Why the variation? Well, shops do not have a vote, while householders do.

Other woes derive from the fact that, in 2013, the Cameron government conceded that offices, shops and other commercial buildings could be turned into homes by builders without necessarily needing planning permission. This at a time when onerous housebuilding targets were being laid on local councils.

Keeping it local

In France, with twice as many independent high street retailers as Britain, local mayors have far more power to shape outcomes. They can oversee and control changes of ownership and use, and local communities benefit.

In Britain, local councils lack these rights, and decision-making power has been excessively concentrated at the centre, along with the money councils need to function. Just last month we heard that seven London boroughs have had to apply for emergency funding in order the stave off bankruptcy.

The Policy changes we need

The current government talks about devolution and about giving more power to local councils and to mayors. We urgently need to see this happen, if vibrant high streets are not to become a distant memory.

(This article draws on data provided by Simon Jenkins in the Guardian, 14-9-2023)

Islington On Foot



Since last year there has been a new walking map of Islington, available on your computer or smartphone at <https://footways.london/islington>

Its goal is to make walking more attractive by giving you a chance to enjoy green spaces and interesting sights, in quiet streets. The digital map highlights features as you go such as pubs, streets full of independent shops and cafés and some fine buildings.

The initiative now covers much of London, so you can roam on out of Islington if you choose, as well.

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Arsenal in the Community

By RICHARD SMITH

Islington is home to one of a handful of London's men only, private members' clubs. Women form no part of this group that meets once a week to chat and socialise – and to play walking football. For this is a prostate cancer group, funded by the *UCLH Cancer Fund*, teaming up with *Arsenal in the Community* (a part of Arsenal football club).

'Having prostate cancer is an emotional journey. This is a marvellous group,' says Richard, who helped found it. 'It's a confidential, free space for support.' Conversation over tea and coffee ranges across sport, music and intimate details of cancer treatment. Nothing is off-limits. 'You might start shy, but you soon open up' explains Des. 'Talking about what you've been through, what you're still going through.'

Then it's off to the indoor football pitch for an hour of walking football. 'There's nothing out there like this, it's unique,' says Roger. 'It's therapeutic, uplifting.' Like many of the members, Roger is in his early sixties. But the age of group members ranges from early fifties to early eighties. Like all cancers, prostate cancer is no respecter of age, ethnicity or status.

What makes prostate cancer challenging is it just creeps up. Most men don't seek help, denying symptoms even when they show. Or there are no early warning signs at all. Only when a friend was diagnosed did Roger think he should check himself, 'just in case'. He asked his GP for a blood test (known as a PSA), available to all men over fifty. The results were not certain, so he had an MRI scan too. The tests were positive, and now he's had treatment and is recovering.



David has a similar story. 'Mine was detected by mistake,' he observes. 'I'm glad it was caught, but I wish I'd had the test earlier.'

That's the one piece of advice the entire group gives to men over fifty: 'don't wait until the last moment before seeking help'.

You don't have to be a keen football player. Des tells of a member who'd never kicked a ball in his life. Level of skill doesn't matter either. Dave, Arsenal in the Community's professional football coach is on hand. 'Games are just about fun and helping to keep fit,' he says. 'No one has an ego'.



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Arsenal in the community..

Continued from page 8...

'I'd never had a proper lesson until this,' Roger confirms enthusiastically. 'It's a breath of fresh air. I look forward to it.'

Looking forward is what these men are all doing, helped by the openness and camaraderie they enjoy in the group. But the highlight is the football. No other support group offers anything like it. And when the football is over, it's down to the Tollington, in an atmosphere where fears and anxieties can be unburdened, and where positivity flourishes. According to David,

everyone sharing the same cancer can make conversation much easier than responding to the usual, 'How are you?' offered by concerned friends and family.

Joining the group only comes after an introduction through hospital specialists, but in the year or so it has been in existence, it has helped over seventy members. So what name do they give those who come to the Arsenal Hub every week? Arsenal call it their 'Stride On' project. Richard has a different answer. 'My wife calls us "the Cancer Conquerors".'

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stokenewingtonearlymusic.org.uk/upcoming-concerts

The Website for Arsenal's neighbours

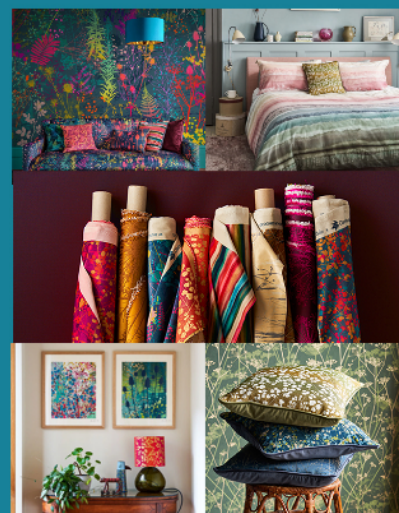
<https://www.arsenal.com/the-club/local-residents-news>

Don't forget that Arsenal football club has created a website specially for us, its local neighbours.

Because those of us living near the stadium have to pay for RingGo electronic parking permits for our visitors on match days, it is essential that we know when **all** relevant matches are going to be. These days this does not just include the men's matches but the increasingly frequent women's matches and all other fixtures.

Parking limitations and the need for parking permits comes into play as soon as an event is expected to have an audience of 10,000 or more.

We are lucky enough to have an Arsenal employee with the explicit task of keeping this website up-to-date for us, so please do use it!



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