

Victoria Park, E3: AN UNOFFICIAL GUIDEBOOK TO AN EAST LONDON SPACE
By Kieran Mahon

The following four chapters were taken from the unofficial guidebook, *Victoria Park, E3* (fig. 59). The booklet, which plays with experiential and exploratory ways of writing local history, fulfilled in part the requirements for a master's degree in Architectural History at University College London. The project aimed to communicate the space and history of the park through a practice called *site-writing*. Site-writing responds to and sets up a critical position with a chosen site by implementing creative research methodologies and conveying ideas by describing and evoking.

1. Bonner Hall Gate, Lodge & Fields (fig. 60)

It is an average weekend in mid-March, 2010. The conditions are dry and sunny with white clouds being blown quickly across the blue sky by a cold easterly wind.¹ I have decided to take my usual Sunday afternoon walk around the park, like hundreds of others who are privileged enough to know about this large green oasis in London's East End.

The starting point for our walk today is Bonner Hall Gate, originally designed as the official entrance to the park in 1845. This gate stands at the end of Approach Road, a broad, straight, spacious avenue originally designed by the park's architect, James Pennethorne (JP), to draw the more 'respectable' families to the area. The gate was named after the former residence of Bishop Edmund Bonner who, during the reign of Queen Mary, was infamously responsible for burning many heretics at the stake, so I hear. To the right of the gate, there was once a beautiful Tudor-style lodge, designed by JP, destroyed by enemy action on 19th March, 1941. The space is now overlooked by functional medium-rise tower blocks, one of which I visited for a party after Field Day in August 2008 where three good, drunk friends listened to bad techno.² The idea

of the lodge, however, still exists on paper: original plans for it are located in the London Metropolitan Archives.³

II. A Torn Piece of Paper (fig. 61)

As I cross the threshold of the park, a gust of wind blows a piece of paper towards me. The handwritten text catches my interest. It looks old and has been torn from an exercise book. It is headed: *Notes on Walter Benjamin (JR seminar 'TP/PT')*. I have recently listened to an interesting episode of 'In Our Time' on the Frankfurt School that Benjamin was part of.⁴ I read:

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) – German cultural critic who looked at how history is written and understood in the present.

Today think about Benjamin's allegorical method which focuses on the use of the image or written extract as an 'amorphous fragment', rather than an 'organic totality', where an ambiguity or multiplicity of meaning can be produced. This could apply to text as well as image. Use your own material – photos, videos, notes – as well as archival traces to combine layers of fragmentation.

Benjamin's allegorical concept has three stages:

1. Isolate an element as a fragment and remove that fragment from its context (rather like this piece of paper you read from);

2. Combine various isolated fragments to create meanings other than those derived from the fragments' locations;

3. Embrace this process as melancholic. Through extraction, the allegorist draws the 'life' out of the assembled objects.

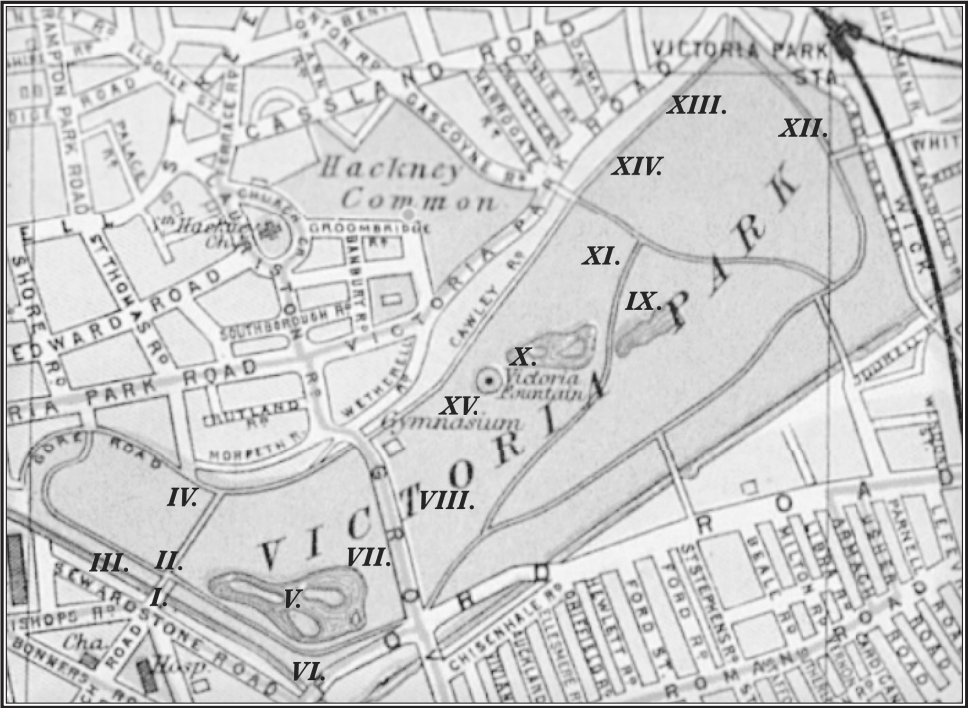
Benjamin's major, unfinished, work, the Arcades Project, was concerned with the rise and fall of the Parisian arcade and draws heavily upon the idea of the fragment. Between 1927 and 1939 he gathered text extracts, other people's quotes as well as material objects such as mannequins and dust. Find lost representations of the object within historical newspaper articles and pieces of archival ephemera and insert them into a personal narrative exploring an urban space, such as a nearby shopping centre, cemetery or park. The

1. Prevailing easterlies: many cities have their poorer neighbourhoods to the east – smoke, smells and pollution tend to drift in that direction, causing the more affluent classes to move westwards.

2. Field Day is one of many music festivals to be held in Victoria Park throughout the summer and aims to create a village fête atmosphere. <http://fielddayfestivals.com/>

3. Splendid, colourful architectural plans of the original lodge can be found at the London Metropolitan Archives: MBW/OW/vv/8.

4. The enlightening discussion can be listened to at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/B00PR54S> [accessed 27/04/10].



59. Victoria Park, E3: the sixteen roman numerals indicate the original sixteen chapter locations of the Guidebook
(DESIGN KIERAN MAHON)

combination of fragment and reflection can interrupt and confuse the reader, forcing them to consider why they are reading this in the first place.⁵

vi. Moorish Shelter (fig. 62)

I walk eastwards around the south of the lake and stop at the park's Pavilion Café. I once had lunch here with a dearly missed friend; her smile is etched in the park's fabric as much as my memory.

Look south-west towards Cricketer's Gate and the Old Ford Lock. You can superimpose the Moorish Shelter onto that corner of the park: a wide, shallow brick structure with twisting, fluted columns of terracotta holding up eleven arches. Blue and white tiles lined the alcoves inside.

Whilst I contemplate the Hispanic-Moorish charm of the shelter, a gentleman approaches me, silhouetted by the light sky:

- I miss the shelter a little bit too. Do you mind if I join you?

Slightly bemused, I agree. I look at the man's face as he sits down. He has an uncanny resemblance to photos I have seen of JP; the effect is helped by the fact he is dressed eccentrically in Victorian clothes. I smile and ask:

- Are you enjoying the park today?

- Yes, I do believe I am although it is, of course, difficult to remain uncritical when exploring one's own work.

I am not sure if he is mad, joking or both, but I continue the conversation regardless:

- In what way exactly is it your own work?

- Well, in 1840 I was already engaged in street improvements near here as official architect to the Office of Woods and Forests. Joseph Hume, the then radical MP for Middlesex and member of the Select Committee on Metropolitan Improvements, knew this and asked me to research into possible sites for a public park in the vicinity.

He speaks so fluently and with such assurance, that I am compelled to continue the surreal conversation.

- Possible sites? So Victoria Park might have been located somewhere else?

- Yes, I find few things have been entirely inevitable in history: there can always be other

ways. I identified two possibilities, where we are now and a much larger site south of here. The latter was closer to the docks and consequently nearer to the majority of the East End's population – places such as Wapping, Stepney and Whitechapel and the like. My preference was for this second option. It possessed more topographical interest – the undulating ground would have provided a greater picturesque beauty than this present site. The ground here was originally entirely flat, full of graveyards and brick pits – but it had no factories and only a few small houses on it, which made the land cheaper to buy. Like much Victorian planning, financial concerns dictated the development of its form. Of course I made do with what I had, but what you see today is far from the land's 'natural' state.'

I am enchanted by this man's imagination and want to see what else he can fabricate:

- Is it true that you originally wanted houses within the park, as your mentor John Nash had done in Regent's Park?

- Yes, indeed. But I soon realised Regent's Park had worked because it was located in West London. I wanted to build houses in Victoria Park in order to raise funds. Unfortunately, none of London's affluent classes wanted anything to do with the terra incognita of the East End, so the plan was not carried out. I changed my strategy: I requested money in order to develop broad avenues that would connect the park to the city and the docks. Some of these schemes were started but were not finished in the correct manner. These arteries would have brought greater accessibility and interest to the park as they would have afforded good aspects of it from a distance – the park still remains relatively concealed today. In the end different builders built speculatively around the park, mainly for the upper-lower classes. This largely accounts for the variety of houses which surround the park today – a far cry from the uniformity and grandeur of Regent's Park.

- The park has its own character though – I prefer its modest utility to some of the affectation found in the West End.

- Yes, you are perhaps right. The park is still popular and well used today. That is an important aspect when judging the park's legacy and success.⁶ (fig. 63)

5. Notes based on Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (Padstow: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008), pp.75–83.

6. Conversation based on Geoffrey Tyack, *Sir James Pennethorne and the making of Victorian London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.87–98; Charles Poulsen, *Victoria Park* (London: Journeyman Press, 1976).

ix. Old English Garden (fig. 64)

At the wooded heart of the eastern end of the park there are various small attractions: a model boating lake; a playground featuring fast metal slides; tennis courts and a bowling green. I bypass all of these and visit the secluded Old English Garden. Take a seat on the bench: the combination of fresh air and the warm sunshine work effectively as a sedative. I fall into a light sleep whilst studying the simple geometric shapes of grass, elliptical topiary and box hedges.

It is often the case, I find, that the last thing you see or think about you end up dreaming about. This is a case in point. In my dream I am joined by a Katja Grillner, an architect and academic based in Sweden who writes, amongst other things, about the philosophical nature of eighteenth-century gardens and parks and how their character has developed and shifted over time. In her PhD thesis, 'Ramble, linger, gaze - dialogues from the landscape garden', Grillner uses a fictional dialogue between herself and two eighteenth-century garden writers to construct an imaginary space of the landscape garden. The work sets up a site of discourse and places it in the here and now of our own imagination. Such thinking is fluid and having recently read her writing, it trickles into an unusually lucid dream:

I want to know if she would agree with my interpretation of the park (having previously come to the conclusion that she would, my subconscious happily co-operates):

- *Is it right to see Victoria Park as a place of philosophical possibility, Dr. Grillner, or is that imposing a meaning that was never intended?*

- *I believe you can see this park as a place of philosophical possibility, yes. The private garden, from where our present day public parks have developed, has had a long history as a philosophical site. Withdrawn from the world it was a site for contemplation and its physical structure offered order to which reflections could be easily attached. The early classical idea of a garden was infused with the double meaning of a green space and philosophical system: a botanical garden ordered the world of plants; a philosophical one ordered understanding of the world. The garden we are*

talking in now is not the most advanced example of this, but still offers a convenient contrast to the less formal aspects of the park: such as the unordered groups of trees or the gently undulating, open spaces. So in this respect you can see Victoria Park sharing this philosophical tradition.

She responds in a considered, even way with a slight Scandinavian lilt.

- *Are these 'less formal' aspects of the park what you might call the landscape model of the garden? Would Victoria Park fall into this category?*

- *The landscape garden makes a radical break from the early-modern model. The object of understanding (the Divine order) is now inseparable from the medium (the landscape). Nature is presented as the ideal landscape itself and aspects of human life are presented in the scenes of the garden. There is no evident order to its structure and understanding of the garden can no longer arrive from a single perspective. Along with this greater concern for the 'natural' environment, a wide range of subjects are also introduced for the visitor's imagination to reflect upon: in the 'unboundable' and sublime prospect the Divine is presented; at the ruin the idea of a past is evoked. The visitor in this way can imagine him or herself as part of an historical continuity, while at the same time lamenting the absence of past life. Victoria Park might not have such elements so obviously as other landscape parks but it could be argued that there are traces of them in the 'ruins' of the alcoves, the pagoda before it was taken down, and even in the atmospheric perspective of the larger open spaces...⁷*

- Ha ha!

- ha haaa!

- I'll catch you!

- No you won't. I'll catch you!

My theoretical nap is interrupted by two young children screaming loudly with delight, ecstatically jumping over the small hedges. I gauge my surroundings and reflect on my short oneiric conversation and Grillner's categories of early-modern and Romantic landscape. Although Victoria Park has elements of both, I think it must fall closer to the Romantic model. But it perhaps should also be seen in its own category: a nineteenth-century urban park. The park, encouraged by

7. This fictional and speculative conversation is based on Katja Grillner, 'Writing and landscape - setting the scenes for critical reflection', *The Journal of Architecture*, Vol. 8, No.2, pp.239-249.



60. *The starting point for our walk today is Bonner Hall Gate, originally designed as the official entrance to the park in 1845*
(PHOTOGRAPH KIERAN MAHON)

61. *As I cross the threshold of the park, a gust of wind blows a piece of paper towards me*
(PHOTOGRAPH KIERAN MAHON)

62. *Look south-west towards Cricketer's Gate and the Old Ford Lock.
You can superimpose the Moorish Shelter onto that corner of the park:
a wide, shallow brick structure with twisting, fluted columns of terracotta holding up eleven arches*
(PHOTOGRAPH KIERAN MAHON)



No. 1. Boating Lake
and Boat House,
Victoria Park.



63. In terms of visitors it was certainly a success;
by the late 1850s about 60-70,000 people were visiting it each Sunday
(COURTESY PHILIP MERNICK)

64. I fall into a light sleep whilst studying the simple geometric shapes of grass, elliptical topiary and box hedge
(PHOTOGRAPH KIERAN MAHON)

JP from an early stage, was designed to be entwined into the rapidly expanding fabric of Victorian London. This is the extra layer: a surrounding urban back-drop that is absorbed in distraction. It is the man-made structures emerging from behind the trees in the distance that gives the nineteenth-century park a particularly modern backdrop, blurring the Classical and Romantic typologies.

MORDEN COLLEGE, BLACKHEATH: A HOME FOR 'ELDERLY AND DECAYED' MERCHANTS

By Barbara McGee

Morden College is neither in Morden nor is it an educational institution but a historic almshouse situated on a fourteen-acre site at the south-eastern edge of Blackheath. The College was founded in 1695 by Sir John Morden as a home for 'elderly and decayed' merchants, the only almshouse in England that was built specifically for such gentlemen.¹ This article concerns this main site, although Morden College also owns and maintains several other properties in south-east London.

John Morden (1623-1708) was the son of George Morden, a goldsmith and freeman of the City of London. He was born in the parish of St Bride, Fleet Street less than a year before his father's death. At the age of twenty John was apprenticed to the merchant Sir William Soame with whom he had a family connection as his mother Anne was a Soame by birth.² Sir William held positions with both the Levant Company, as a Company Assistant, and the East India Company, as a Committee Member.³ These two illustrious companies would come to play their part in the history of Morden College. At Soame's behest, John Morden travelled to the Middle East; he lived and traded in Aleppo, Syria on behalf of the Levant or 'Turkey' Company.⁴ Many merchants made their fortunes in trading

centres like Aleppo, one such being Morden's fellow merchant Mr Pentlow of Smyrna, who left an estate worth £20,000 at his death in 1677, the equivalent of £1.5 million today.⁵

Morden had returned to London by 1660 and within two years he married Susan Bland (1638-1721), the daughter of a wealthy Suffolk wool merchant, her dowry enhancing Morden's fortune as well as his social and business status. Through this connection he joined a leading group of Puritan merchants and Whig parliamentarians, and also joined the Boards of both the East India and the Levant Companies. In 1669 the Mordens purchased the estate of Wricklemarsh in the parish of Charlton, only a short journey from the City and the London docks, paying £4,200 for two hundred acres of parkland and a mansion.⁶

John Morden was knighted in May 1688 by James II. Many tales circulated over the years to account for the philanthropy of the Mordens. Most versions refer to a period in Sir John's life when he was left in straightened circumstances. One version of the story is that in 1660, when he was on the point of returning to London, he loaded his own personal goods onto three English merchant ships, which set out on a trading voyage before returning to their home port. When Morden himself arrived in London to await the delivery of his valuable cargo, the ships failed to materialise as expected and he had to resign himself to a period of poverty. Many months later his despair turned to joy when the ships finally docked with his 'fair' fortune.⁷ However, there are other less fanciful factors that may have influenced the founding of Morden College. In 1693, just two years before the building of the almshouses commenced at Blackheath, Sir John had become a Trustee of Bromley College, an almshouse founded in 1671 by the Bishop of Rochester for widows of poor clergy.⁸ His role as Trustee and the fact that he and Lady Susan were a Puritan but wealthy childless couple may well have influenced the decision to make the endowment, to benefit:

1. Patrick Joyce, *Patronage and Poverty in Merchant Society, The History of Morden College Blackheath* (Henley-on-Thames, Gresham Books, 1982), p.1.

2. Thomas Frank Green, *Morden College, Blackheath, Being the Tenth Monograph of the London Survey Committee* (London, Printed for the Committee by Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd., 1916), p.26.

3. Morden College, *A Brief Guide*, Seventh Edition 2006, p.5.

4. Edward Wedlake Brayley, *The Beauties of England and Wales, or Delineations Topographical, Historical and Descriptive of Each County, Vol. VII, Kent* (London, Vernor, Hood and Sharpe etc., 1808), p.515.

5. Alfred Cecil Wood, *A History of the Levant Company* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1964), p.248.

6. Joyce, *op. cit.*, p.4.

7. Green, *op. cit.*, p.29.

8. Joyce, *op. cit.*, p.6.