

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

BETHNAL GREEN GARDENS

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Name:	BETHNAL GREEN GARDENS
County:	Greater London Authority
District:	Tower Hamlets (London Borough)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.528063 Longitude: -0.055859584 National Grid Reference: TQ 34960 82808, TQ 35039 82831 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001673 Date first listed: 03-Sep-2003

Details

Public garden of 1875, with a public garden designed by John James Sexby, 1894-5, both laid out on parts of Poor's Land, preserved from development in the C17.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1678 a 15.5 acre (c 6.25ha) 'Bethnal Green' was purchased by a group of neighbouring property owners to prevent it being developed. This land had been part of the unenclosed manorial common within the manor of Stepney (VCH 1998). The land was enclosed, leased for grazing, and the rent was then used to provide for poor families in Bethnal Green. In 1690, the Poor's Land Trust Deed was drawn up, which referred to the land, 'enclosed for the prevention of any new buildings thereon' (Copy of Trust Deed, c 1891). The deed covered three pieces of enclosed land to the east of the 'King's Highway' (now Cambridge Heath Road), and a small unenclosed piece to the west.

Following an appeal by His Majesty's Commissioners for Building New Churches in 1822, the Poor's Land trustees reluctantly agreed to sell half an acre (0.2ha) of land in the south-west corner of the northern enclosure. The church by Sir John Soane (now the Church of St John-on-Bethnal Green) was consecrated in 1828. In 1849 a further piece of land was sold for a vicarage, built in 1852. The vicarage was bombed during the Second World War and the land is now occupied by a C20 rectory and Tarrant House.

In 1868, The London Museum Site Act authorised the trustees to sell a further 4.5 acres (c 1.8ha) to the north of the church and vicarage for a proposed museum. A condition of the sale required that land not needed for the museum, 'be laid out and for ever maintained... as an ornamental garden' (Draft Conveyance, 1868), preserving the original object of the 1690 trust deed. The museum opened in 1872, and in 1875 Bethnal Green Museum Garden was opened on the south side of Museum Passage, which preserves the line of an ancient right of way across 'Bethnal Green'. The design of the garden is attributed to Archibald McIntyre (1828-87), the Superintendent of Victoria Park (qv, East London Advertiser, 1875). McIntyre had been gardener to the Earl of Clare at Mount Shannon, near Limerick, and was later foreman at Kew Gardens, and Superintendent of Greenwich Park. The garden was maintained by the government and was transferred to the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1887, and then to the LCC in 1888.

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Proposals to sell the remaining parts of the Poor's Land (which by then were being used as ornamental and kitchen gardens) for public building were opposed by the LCC, the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, and Bethnal Green Poor's Land Preservation Committee. As a result, the Charity Commissioners drew up a scheme, established by law in 1891, in which most of remaining land was sold to the LCC, 'provided that the said land be secured and permanently maintained... as a recreation ground accessible to the inhabitants of the said parish' (Sexby 1905). The sale was completed in 1892, plans approved in 1894, and the two gardens were opened in 1895: 6.5 acres (c 2.6ha) to the south of Roman Road (later reworked, and outside the area registered here), and a quarter of an acre (c 0.1ha) garden to the west of Cambridge Heath Road, both designed by John James Sexby, the LCC's Chief Officer of the Parks and Open Spaces Sub-Department, and author of *The Municipal Parks... of London* (1898, 2nd edn 1905). The two new gardens, together with the former Bethnal Green Museum Garden, were together known as Bethnal Green Gardens (LCC Minutes, 1893).

A small section in the south-west corner of Museum Gardens was lost in the late 1930s for the northern entrance to Bethnal Green tube station. Adjacent to this entrance, a public lavatory block was built by Bethnal Green Borough Council in 1959-60. As it was on Poor's Land, the LCC made the site available on an annual license.

The gardens remain (2003) in public use and are owned and maintained by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Bethnal Green Gardens are in three parts: Museum Gardens to the north; a garden to the west; and a garden to the south (2.6ha, outside the area registered here, with an additional area added after 1958). The two parts of Bethnal Green Gardens registered here (c 1.1ha) are situated on either side of Cambridge Heath Road (A107) in Bethnal Green, Tower Hamlets, c 700m south-west of Victoria Park (qv). The c 1ha Museum Gardens are laid out on level ground and are square in shape. They are bounded to the west by Cambridge Heath Road, to the north by Museum Passage, to the east by Victoria Park Square, and to the south by the Church of St John-on-Bethnal Green, the church hall, rectory, and Tarrant House. The gardens are enclosed to the west, north, and east by wrought-iron railings (original two-stage railings, 1904, with sections of post-Second World War single-stage replacements), mounted on granite plinth blocks (1904). The southern boundary has the original Sir John Soane railings along the churchyard boundary, and a stretch of chain-link fencing to the east alongside the boundary with the rectory and Tarrant House. The c 0.1ha level, roughly triangular garden to the west of Cambridge Heath Road is orientated north/south. It is bounded by Cambridge Heath Road to the east, Bethnal Green Road (A1209) to the south, the Bethnal Green Mission Church to the north, and Paradise Row to the west. The late C18 and C19 houses along Paradise Row (Nos 2-11 individually listed grade II, with their railings) overlook the gardens. The garden is enclosed by post-Second World War replacement railings mounted on late C19 granite plinth blocks.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES There are two entrances to Museum Gardens, one in the south-west corner from Cambridge Heath Road, through two-stage wrought-iron gates (LCC 1901-2, replacing the original wooden gates), and the other in the north-east corner from Victoria Park Square, through post-Second World War gates, replacing the 1901-2 LCC gates (themselves a replacement for the original late C19 wooden gates). There are two entrances to the west garden, one in the centre of the south side, from Bethnal Green Road, and the other at the northern end of the east side, from Cambridge Heath Road.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS The National Museum of Childhood Bethnal Green (part of the V&A) and Church of St John-on-Bethnal Green lie outside the area registered here but form a visual group with the gardens. The church (listed grade I) is situated on the junction of Cambridge Heath Road and Roman Road, to the south of Museum Gardens. The church was designed by Sir John Soane (1753-1837) in 1824-5, and restored by William Mundy in 1871, following a fire in 1870. The museum (listed grade II) is situated to the north of Museum Gardens, divided from them by Museum Passage along which stand four cast-iron lamp standards (LCC 1897, listed grade II). The museum, opened in 1872, consists of part of an 1855-6 pre-fabricated cast-and wrought-iron frame with red-brick walls designed by James Wild. In the forecourt of the museum is a mid C19 cast-iron statue of the Eagle Slayer (listed grade II), by John Bell.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The main entrance to Museum Gardens is near the south-west corner, with the public lavatories and entrance to Bethnal Green tube station to the south. A drinking fountain of 1903 stands c 5m from the entrance, at the meeting of the outer two of the three paths leading to the other entrance near the north-east corner. The outer

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paths curve close to the edge of the garden, one running north and then east, and the other east and then north, and the third curves north-east, slightly east of the centre of the garden. These paths (together with a fourth which also led north-east, but slightly west of the centre, and was removed between 1948 and 1960) follow their late C19 alignment and were presumably part of McIntyre's design. Between and around the paths are lawns, planted with specimen trees. Two heart-shaped island beds at the north-east end of the middle path, and an island bed alongside the eastern outer path, planted out with bedding schemes, and the north-west and north-east corner borders, mostly planted out with shrubs, all survive from the C19 scheme. The gardens are bordered to the west, east, and north by rows of C19 London plane trees. The row to the west is mirrored by a row in the west garden, forming an avenue along Cambridge Heath Road, and the north row in Museum Gardens is mirrored by a row in the ground immediately south of the museum, forming an avenue along Museum Passage. Along the southern boundary there are scattered trees and areas of shrubbery.

The west garden is laid to lawn on either side of the late C19 path which winds north from the southern entrance and then turns east at the northern end of the garden and leads to the north-east entrance. The northern end of the path was laid out in the late C19 as a T-junction but the small path and its associated entrance on the western boundary were removed in the C20. A row of London plane trees, planted c 1894-5, lines the east side of the garden and is underplanted with a shrubbery, on the site of a C19 shrubbery. There are trees along the west boundary, with shrubberies at the southern and northern ends of the west side and across the north end of the garden. The path is lined by benches and has two beds of roses along the west side.

REFERENCES

The London Museum Site Act (1868) *East London Advertiser*, 22 May 1875 H G C Allgood, *A History of Bethnal Green, From the Earliest Times to 1680*. To which is added an account of the Poor's Land Charity (1894), pp 302-9 J J Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens and Open Spaces of London* (1905 edn), pp 250-61 N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: London* (1952), pp 68-9 R Desmond, *Dictionary of British & Irish Botanists and Horticulturists* (1994), p 453 *Victoria History of the County of Middlesex XI*, (1998), pp 14, 162, 164-5

Maps J Gascoyne, *Survey of the Hamlet of Bethnal Green, 1703* (Facsimile published by London Topographical Society) W Mundy, *A Plan of Bethnal Green in the Parish of Bethnal Green, c 1868* copy of 1763 original (Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives) W Mundy, *A Plan of the Poor's Lands, 1868* (Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives) London County Council *Bethnal Green Gardens, 1896, surveyed 1890 and 1896* (LCC/MISC P/196), (LMA)

OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1870, published 1881 2nd edition revised 1893-4 3rd edition revised 1914

Illustrations Engraving of New Public Recreation Ground, Bethnal Green, published in *The Pictorial World*, 12 June 1875 (Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives)

Archival items Draft Conveyance from Poor's Land Trustees, 11 August 1868 (V&A Museum) Bethnal Green Poor's Land Copy of Trust Deed, c 1891, pp 3-15 (Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives) J J Sexby, 'Opening of Bethnal Green Gardens' 1895, pp 1-21 (Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives)

Additional information (research and cartographic material) supplied by Tom Ridge, Bethnal Green Campaign.

Description written: June 2003 Amended: September 2003 Register Inspector: CB Edited: October 2003

Legal

This garden or other land is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.