

Waterlow Park – a kitchen garden for the gardenless?

Ceridwen Roberts, Friends of Waterlow Park

Buzz readers will be familiar with Sir Sidney Waterlow's legacy of "a garden for the gardenless" but may not know this has taken a new turn with the very successful establishment, this year, of a Community Kitchen Garden.

As Pam Cooper's lovely book about the Park shows, the original house had its own extensive kitchen garden, crucial to support a large household, but the very large area had been turned into ordinary parkland many years before. One small section, however, had been identified by the Friends of Waterlow Park as just the right area to re-instate a kitchen garden. In 2005 it had a brief life as an allotment site to remind park users of the "digging for victory" campaign of the Second World War. It was not intended to have a continuing life, but FoWP had a vision and was determined to press on.

Complications set in when it was discovered that the soil was contaminated. The level was not higher than that found in some London gardens, but it was deemed unfit for growing produce. The solution was to have raised beds filled with fresh, uncontaminated soil. Regular checks at five year periods should mean that there will be no risks from eating vegetables and fruit grown there.

Key to the realisation of FoWP's vision was the role Camden Council played. The Park is managed by Camden (its trustees) and the new Head of Parks, Shaun Kiddell, took this project on enthusiastically. Plans were drawn up by Camden Parks staff with representatives from the Friends and the British Conservation Trust Volunteers.

Finally, work started on the site in January 2011. Difficulties included a sloping site, a lot of mud, bad weather and heavy clay soil. The volunteers worked very hard and, within three months, ten raised beds had been erected. During the same period, local community organisations were invited to submit applications to manage one of these plots. The organisations selected included two schools, one mental health unit, a dementia organization, FoWO, HiCAN and three local gardening groups.

Planting began in May and on a lovely summer day, with young plants already thriving, the Community Kitchen Garden was officially opened by Tulip Siddiq, Camden Cabinet member for Culture. Throughout the summer, the plots produced healthy vegetables and flowers. Each group decided what to grow and when to harvest. While the hot weather lasted, watering was essential and groups helped each other out with this sometimes arduous task.

Surrounded by the original, high, yew hedge, the garden has a quiet and 'secret' feeling. One new mother was seen feeding her baby there and many park visitors enjoy sitting in this peaceful spot. The common parts of the garden are beautifully laid out and, in summer, the borders dance with a profusion of wild flowers.

Waterlow's Kitchen Garden has been a tremendous success. The harmonious partnership between Camden council workers and the community groups has made this an outstanding exercise in community development and collective working. Everyone involved has taken great pleasure from the work and the garden. We know it will continue to grow and give pleasure next season. Do come and see it and watch its progress on our website www.waterlow.park.org.uk