
Park of Ages

FAR MORE THAN JUST AN URBAN RETREAT, HYDE PARK IS A LIVING ARCHIVE OF BRITISH CULTURE AND HISTORY

AMANDA FOREMAN

THERE ARE EIGHT ROYAL PARKS IN LONDON, but only one so exceeds its original purpose as to inhabit a place in the consciousness of Great Britain. To walk through Hyde Park is to become immersed in a visual encyclopedia containing the cultural records of two millennia. Despite the changes wrought by time, the park remains one of the most important repositories of national identity. Here, along avenues of ancient trees, among monuments to the great and the lost, in the landmarks built by previous generations, survive the tangible memories of Britain's past. Though not always obvious or easily decoded, their effect on every passerby is nonetheless profound, a reminder that no exact line divides history from the present: our perception of each forms and shapes the other.

The boundaries of Hyde Park did not happen by accident. The lanes of traffic thundering past Speakers' Corner, in the northeastern part of the park, grew out of two Roman roads that intersected near the stream called the Eya-burn (the Tyburn). One, the Via Trinobantia, crossed from the south to the east coast of England, enabling the swift movement of centurions during times of English rebellion. Today the road takes shoppers from Bayswater to Oxford Street, the harsh trumpets of war replaced with the siren call of commerce. Heading in the other direction from Edgware Road to Park Lane was Watling Street, one of the longest and most important communication routes in Roman Britain. On this road in 61 A.D., Suetonius decisively crushed Queen Boudica and her ill-equipped army of Iceni and Trinovantes tribesmen, leaving Londinium and all of southern England under Roman rule for the next 400 years.

Amanda Foreman is the author of *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* and *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War*, one of *The New York Times's 10 Best Books of 2011*. She is the recipient of the *Whitbread Award for Biography* and the *Fletcher Pratt Award for Civil War History*.

A thousand acres of forest and marshland lay between the River Thames in the south, the Via Trinobantia in the north, the Tyburn River in the east, and a small stream called the Westbourne in the west. The self-contained nature of the land was expressed in its Anglo-Saxon name, Eia, meaning island. Prized for its excellent hunting grounds and proximity to London, the Manorship of Eia passed through several Anglo-Saxon owners until the Norman Conquest in 1066. William I seized Eia and conveyed it to one of his Norman supporters, Geoffrey de Mandeville. The transition of ownership made little difference to the surrounding villages and settlements until Mandeville became fearful that the life everlasting promised in the Bible would be of the wrong kind unless he made the proper amends. And so, around the time of the Domesday Book, the great survey of much of England and Wales completed in 1086, the manor of Eia was divided into three smaller manors: Neyte, Ebury (also spelled Eabury), and Hyde. The manors of Neyte and Hyde—more than 600 acres—became the property of the Benedictine monks at Westminster Abbey.

Speakers' Corner, shown here in 1944, attracts orators of varying skill. Lenin once spoke there, as did Marx and Orwell.



Untroubled by the plagues, wars, and rebellions of medieval England, the monks enjoyed a bucolic idyll within the confines of Hyde Manor, cultivating some parts for crops and leaving the rest as a game reserve for wild boar and deer. The chief interruptions to their peace were the riotous processions—always on a Monday—from the walls of London to the crossroads at the village of Tyburn, where criminals and religious martyrs were taken to be hanged. Elaborate rituals of pain and torture accompanied these executions. Before they were publicly displayed, prisoners were often disemboweled, then burned alive. But over time, the gore and eviscerations receded even as the spectacles grew in popularity, taking on a carnival-like atmosphere. Hanging days became public holidays; 14,000 spectators might turn out to watch an ordinary criminal, though for someone particularly notorious the number could swell to more than 100,000. It became customary for the condemned to give speeches before they met their death. Gradually yet ineluctably the right for speakers to say whatever they wished on this tiny corner of England was established.

In 1536 the monks were troubled no more by the grisly proceedings adjacent to their property. Henry VIII forced the abbot of Westminster to relinquish Hyde Manor in exchange for a less prosperous estate in Berkshire, some 60 miles away. Hyde became a royal park, wooden fences keeping the deer in and the poachers out. Members of the royal court could enjoy the park, but the public had little access to it until 1620, when James I opened certain areas to “well dressed persons.” In 1637 his son, Charles I, officially opened Hyde Park to the public. At 600 acres the park was smaller than it had been, and wilder than under its Benedictine occupation. Only a few bridleways and ponds broke up the monotony of grass and woods. But it had one great attraction, known as the Ring. This was a circular carriage drive, built near a marsh that would one day become the Serpentine lake. Foreigners were baffled by its attraction to wealthy Londoners. As an anonymous Frenchman living in England in the 17th century noted:

They take their rides in a coach in an open field where there is a circle, not very large, enclosed by rails. There the coaches drive slowly round, some in one direction, others the opposite way, which, seen from a distance, produces a rather pretty effect, and proves clearly that they only come there in order to see and to be seen. Hence it follows that this promenade, even in the midst of summer, is deserted the moment night begins to fall, that is to say, just at the time when there would be some real pleasure in enjoying the fresh air. Then everybody retires, because the principal attraction of the place is gone.

The Ring emptied of its riders once the quarrels between the Parliamentarians (the Roundheads) and the Royalists (the Cavaliers) turned into deadly conflict. At the beginning of the Civil War in 1642, the king’s troops marched and paraded around the



park. By 1648 the cavalry regiments stationed there answered only to Oliver Cromwell. When peace resumed in 1651, the country's Puritan victors could see no good use for the park and plenty of reasons to suspect its bad influence on public morals. Parliament ordered its sale in three lots, raising a total of £17,000 (the equivalent of roughly £130,000 today). Londoners who had become used to frequenting the park whenever they liked were outraged at being charged a toll for entry. In April 1653 the diarist John Evelyn complained bitterly after his carriage was stopped at the gate. "I went to take the aire in Hide Park," he wrote. "When every coach was made to pay a shilling, and every horse sixpence, by the sordid fellow who had purchased it of the State."

Traffic around the Ring did not cease, however, during Cromwell's protectorate. Even Cromwell was not averse to showing off his driving skills, although his enthusiasm waned after his horses bolted and he was dragged along the ground for a considerable distance. But the park's popularity remained at a low ebb until the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. Within weeks of his return to London, the Ring was once again teeming with carriages and riders—many of them women wearing a daring new fashion known as the riding habit, consisting of hat, skirt, and tailored shirt and jacket. Soldiers filled the park, but this time to participate in royal parades and military pageants. The public also returned, simply to enjoy the fresh air and freedom of open space. The lowly

During Queen Victoria's reign, Londoners flocked to the Serpentine to bathe, and as shown in this lithograph, do a little nighttime skating.

naval clerk and inveterate diarist Samuel Pepys records how, in the summer of 1660, he went "with Mr. Moor and Creed to Hyde Park, by coach, and saw a fine foot-race three times round the Park, between an Irishman and Crow, that was once my Lord Claypole's footman." A horserace was promised to follow soon afterward, so

Pepys and his friends stayed to watch. Unable to afford the price of syllabub, a dessert drink made with cream and alcohol, Pepys settled for "milk from a red cow" sold by a pretty milkmaid. Shortly after Pepys's visit, Cromwell himself received the Hyde Park treatment reserved for criminals and traitors. More than two years after his death in 1658, his corpse was exhumed and symbolically hanged at Tyburn, after which his body was thrown



ISTOCKPHOTO

into a gravel pit and his head stuck on a pike outside Westminster Abbey, where it remained until 1685.

Charles II ordered the boundaries of the park to be set in brick and the deer restocked, but otherwise he remained true to his father's wishes. His promise to keep the park open to the public was tested almost immediately. Only five years after the king's restoration, London was ravaged by plague. Thousands abandoned their homes, setting up temporary dwellings in Hyde Park's woods in the vain hope that the scourge would not reach them there. Refugee camps occupied the park until the last vestiges of the plague disappeared in the Great Fire of London in 1666. Then, as quickly as the tents and mud dwellings vanished, the idlers, strutters, and oglers reappeared at the Ring. Pepys resumed his wistful jaunts to the park to watch and envy the aristocracy. Finally, in 1669 he became the proud possessor of his own coach. Pepys had closely supervised its construction, insisting on extra coats of varnish to "make it more and more yellow." At last, on May Day 1669, he made his first appearance at the Ring. Mrs. Pepys accompanied him, looking

extraordinary fine with her flowered tabby gown that she made two years ago, now laced exceeding pretty, and indeed was fine all over, and mighty earnest to go; though the day was very lowering; and she would have me put on my fine suit, which I did. And so anon, we went alone through the town with our new liveries of serge and the horses' manes and tails tied with red ribbons, and the standards gilt with varnish, that people did mightily look upon us; and the truth is I did not see any coach more pretty, though more gay than ours.

Unfortunately, Pepys's dreams of glory were dashed by the weather. He found the park "full of Coaches, but dusty, and windy, and cold, and now and then a little dribbling of rain; and what made it worse, there were so many hackney coaches as spoiled the sight of the gentlemen's, and so we had little pleasure." On their way home they stopped to drink a cup of syllabub, which cheered them up considerably.

.....

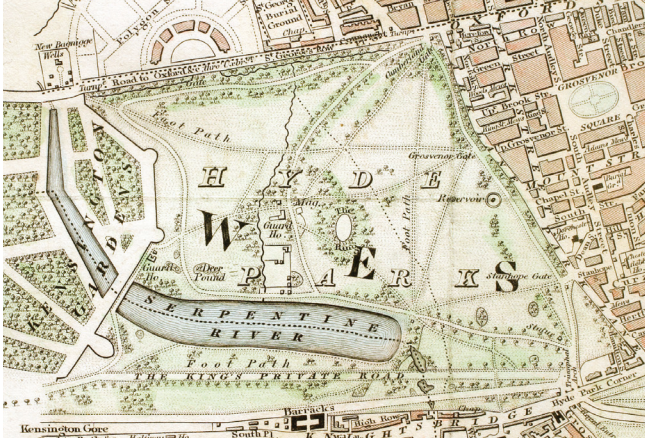
A CENTURY AND A HALF LATER, Pepys's favorite haunt had all but disappeared. Though the Ring was once "celebrated in old novels and plays," wrote a journalist in the *Original* magazine in 1835, no physical marker or tribute to its popularity remained. After consulting some old maps, the writer decided that the Ring was "still traceable round a clump of trees near the foot-barracks." Here, he told readers, "used to assemble all the fashion of the day." The Ring's slow demise began in the 1690s when King William and Queen Mary moved out of London on account of his asthma and went to live in Kensington Palace, on the western edge of the park. The king's daily commute into

town posed few problems in the morning, but at night the unlit road became the haunt of gangs and highwaymen. William ordered a new route, wide enough to accommodate three carriages driving abreast, to be constructed through Hyde Park. The way was lit with 300 oil lamps in winter—the first illuminated highway in England—and patrolled by guards until 11 P.M. The new road was called, aptly, the King’s Road or La Route du Roi (French being commonly spoken by the aristocracy). London argot corrupted the French to Rod-du-Ro and finally Rotten Row.

Naturally, wherever the king went, the aristocracy was sure to follow. The presence of so much finery corralled along a single road attracted yet more thieves and gunmen. Once in a great while a highwayman would be captured and punished at Tyburn, including the notorious (and wildly popular) “Gentleman Jack” Sheppard, who was hanged before a crowd of 200,000 on November 16, 1724. Four years later, John Gay immortalized Jack’s life and death in *The Beggar’s Opera*. “Since laws were made, for every degree, / To curb vice in others, as well as in me,” sings Sheppard’s character, renamed Captain Macheath, “I wonder we han’t better company / Upon Tyburn Tree.” Despite the opera’s success with the public (it rescued Gay from bankruptcy), Londoners demanded more rather than fewer safeguards around Hyde Park. The ban on masks and hackney carriages within the park’s grounds was more rigorously enforced—on the assumption that the owners of privately owned vehicles were too wealthy to go robbing one another.

In 1730 Queen Caroline, the sorely tried wife of George II, decided that Hyde Park would be better served by a program of beautification than by yet more guards. The queen inspired a new approach to landscape, one that allowed for graceful curves and natural bends rather than the straight delineations of the Dutch style. On her orders, the ponds that had once supplied the monks of Westminster Abbey with fresh wildfowl were joined together and transformed into the Serpentine. As Caroline’s plans took shape, she became increasingly ambitious in her scope. She separated almost 300 acres from Hyde Park through the ingenious construction of a ditch (a ha-ha in modern parlance) and renamed the area Kensington Gardens. There she added the Round Pond, where toy boats and greedy ducks have converged ever since, the picturesque Long Water, and the architectural gem Queen Caroline’s Temple. Enraptured by the success of her own changes, she tentatively asked Prime Minister Robert Walpole what it would cost to take back the parks into royal ownership. “Only three crowns, ma’am,” he is said to have replied, meaning those of England, Scotland, and Ireland.

The improvements to Hyde Park did not meet all Queen Caroline’s expectations. For a while, violence in the area soared rather than diminished. Dueling there became so endemic that it permeated London’s literary and social culture. In 1751 readers breathlessly followed the fortunes of Captain Booth, the hero of Henry Fielding’s *Amelia*, who was forced to defend his honor in Hyde Park at “that place which may be properly called



Two depictions of Hyde Park: a map made in 1833 by the English cartographer William Schmollinger and an aerial photo from 2011

the field of blood, being that part, a little to the left of the ring, which heroes have chosen for the scene of their exit out of this world.” After a fierce sword fight, “Booth ran the colonel through the body and threw him on the ground, at the same time possessing himself of the colonel’s sword.” In reality, pistols were more common than swords. In 1763, John Wilkes, a radical MP and campaigner for press freedom, received the following challenge from a political opponent: “I desire that you may meet me in Hyde Park immediately, with a brace of pistols each, to determine our difference. I shall go to the ring in Hyde Park, with my pistols so concealed that nobody may see them; and I will wait in expectation of you for one hour.” Wilkes survived a bullet to his abdomen and went on to champion the cause of American independence. Over the next few decades the roster of duelists expanded to include a lord chancellor, a foreign secretary, two prime ministers (including William Pitt the Younger), the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and Lady Almeria Braddock, who called a Mrs. Elphinstone to account following a disparaging comment about her age.

The character of Hyde Park changed only when social attitudes to violence in general became less tolerant. Toward the end of the 18th century, the public hangings at Tyburn came to be regarded as an unsavory relic of the past. James Boswell, the biographer of Dr. Johnson, roundly condemned the practice after he witnessed the hanging of Paul Lewis, a former naval officer turned highwayman. Lewis struck him as too attractive a man to die in so degrading a manner. He “was a genteel, spirited young fellow,” recorded Boswell in his London diary. “He was just a Macheath.” Nevertheless, Boswell went to Hyde Park:

My curiosity to see the melancholy spectacle of the executions was so strong that I could not resist it, although I was sensible that I would suffer much from it. In my younger years I had read in the *Lives of the Convicts* so much about Tyburn that I had

a sort of horrid eagerness to be there. I also wished to see the last behaviour of Paul Lewis, the handsome fellow whom I had seen the day before. Accordingly I took Captain Temple with me, and he and I got upon a scaffold very near the fatal tree, so that we could clearly see all the dismal scene. There was a most prodigious crowd of spectators. I was most terribly shocked, and thrown into a very deep melancholy.

The last public hanging at Tyburn took place on November 3, 1783. Among the final roster of criminals to be executed that year was William Wynne Ryland, a successful engraver who was caught forging a bill of sale to the East India Company. The poet William Blake had refused to be apprenticed to him, telling his father that the man “looks as if he will live to be hanged.” But after Ryland’s death Blake wrote hauntingly in “Jerusalem” of “Tyburn’s fatal tree”: “Bending across the road of Oxford Street; it from Hyde Park / To Tyburn’s deathful shades, admits the wandering souls / Of multitudes who die from Earth.” By the time Blake had completed the printing and engraving of his epic poem, it was not only public hangings that had fallen from favor. The last known duel at Hyde Park took place in 1817 between two anonymous gentlemen who were carried off the field, both wounded but alive.

By the Regency era, society divided its time between riding in the mornings along Rotten Row and driving around the park in the evening. These outings were far more than an elegant constitutional among friends and acquaintances. The park was one of the few places where men and women could mingle freely, and therefore one of the most socially fraught venues in London. Until 1816 Beau Brummell ruled mercilessly as the sole arbiter of male fashion. “All the world watched Brummell to imitate him,” recalled the memoirist Captain Gronow. To greet Brummell in the park and receive a raised eyebrow, or worse, was to be humiliated for the season. Few mourned the sartorial tyrant when he fled England to escape his creditors, but English male attire was never again so inventive or interesting. Women, too, were judged and appraised by their peers each time they appeared in the park. As the ambitious Becky Sharp discovers in William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, her powers of attraction are no match against the merciless patronesses of Rotten Row. “When Lady de la Mole, who had ridden a score of times by Becky’s side at Brussels, met Mrs. Crawley’s open carriage in Hyde Park, her Ladyship was quite blind, and could not in the least recognize her former friend.” But once Becky acquires Lord Steyne as her “protector,” she discovers that the rules of the park are idiosyncratic in their application. His Highness the Prince of Peterwaradin compliments her “in the Ring of Hyde Park with a profound salute of the hat,” which leads to an invitation to the French embassy, and after that to the great houses of Mayfair. And so, “In a word, she was admitted to be among the ‘best’ people.”

For those who could not or dared not sample the air at Rotten Row, the park under George IV offered a host of new buildings and improvements to enjoy. The king was

determined to give Londoners a park that rivaled any of its European counterparts. New trees were planted and the surviving deer removed. The roads and tracks were widened; Charles II's brick walls were replaced by railings; the Serpentine received its iconic stone bridge by John Rennie; and Decimus Burton added a swath of grandeur with his arches, screens, and lodges at all the major entrances to the park. Speakers' Corner acquired new significance with the addition of John Nash's Marble Arch, and Hyde Park Corner achieved infamy with Sir Richard Westmacott's 18-foot bronze statue depicting a naked Achilles—the first nude statue erected in England since the departure of the Romans. The statue had been cast from the cannons captured at Waterloo and Salamanca and paid for by British women as a tribute to the Duke of Wellington. The organizers, however, had not thought to interrogate the sculptor over his intentions regarding Achilles' anatomy, and a fig leaf was soon added. So began the time-honored practice among the English of commissioning public art only to be outraged by it afterward.

Hyde Park became safer after Sir Robert Peel established the Metropolitan Police Force in 1829. By Queen Victoria's reign a person could walk across the park at sunrise without fear of harassment, as the novelist Anthony Trollope was accustomed to do every day before work. Bathers and boaters frequented the Serpentine, confident in the knowledge that the volunteers of the Humane Society were on hand to rescue anyone in difficulty. People seeking sanctuary from the noisy world could wander through the newly created Dell or along one of the more secluded pathways to the north of the park. Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* thinks of the park in much the same way as his living counterparts do now—as a place where he can go to clear his head, and though he cannot quite do so, the fault isn't with his surroundings:

He passed into Hyde Park, now silent and deserted, and increased his rate of walking as if in the hope of leaving his thoughts behind. They crowded upon him more thickly, however, now there were no passing objects to attract his attention; and the one idea was always uppermost, that some stroke of ill-fortune must have occurred so calamitous in its nature that all were fearful of disclosing it to him. The old question arose again and again—What could it be? Nicholas walked till he was weary, but was not one bit the wiser; and indeed he came out of the Park at last a great deal more confused and perplexed than when he went in.

George IV's elegant park railings remained intact until July 1866, when the commissioner of police attempted to bar the Reform League, established to support universal male suffrage, from holding a rally. It was an act of folly by the authorities; public protests had been common since the 1820s. Undeterred by the locked gates at Marble Arch or the presence of uniformed constables, 200,000 protesters surged forward in continuous waves. "Breach after breach was made," reported *The Times*, "the stonework, together with the rail-

ings, yielding easily to the pressure of the crowd.” A year later, the Reform League brought 50,000 protesters into the park. The police summoned the Horse Guards for assistance, but this time the only real violence was to the flowerbeds and the home secretary’s ego. More public confrontations followed until the government caved in and accepted that Speakers’ Corner commanded a special position in the body politic of the country.

On October 15, 1872, *The Times* announced the government’s change of heart: “The Commissioners of Works have caused to be erected in Hyde Park, at exactly 150 yards distance from the so-called ‘Reformers’ Tree,’ a granite pedestal and iron standard, surmounted by a board, to mark the spot where it shall be lawful (and there only) to hold public meetings.” Parliament was sanctioning the right to congregate rather than the right to speak freely, but it became popular tradition that both had been established. Since then, self-expression at Speakers’ Corner has appeared in all its guises, from the studied rhetoric of George Orwell to a sealed white bag containing a silent (but protesting) John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

Today, Speakers’ Corner serves a far deeper purpose than its history would suggest. Virginia Woolf saw the park in general, and Speakers’ Corner in particular, as an invisible anchor, mooring an uncertain present to the indelible past. In her last novel, *The Years*, seemingly insignificant experiences, such as walking through Speakers’ Corner, enable the Partiger family to link what they have left behind with what they have become:

They were near the bald rubbed space where the speakers congregate. Meetings were in full swing. Groups had gathered round the different orators. Mounted on their platforms, or sometimes only on boxes, the speakers were holding forth. The voices became louder, louder and louder as they approached. ...

“What about this chap?” said Martin. Here was a large man, banging on the rail of his platform.

“Fellow citizens!” he was shouting. They stopped. The crowd of loafers, errand-boys and nursemaids gaped up at him with their mouths falling open and their eyes gazing blankly. ...

“Joostice and liberty,” said Martin, repeating his words, as the fist thumped on the railing. ... They strolled on.

In our time the park has new gardens to enjoy, new memorials to mourn over, and new ways of congregating. Rotten Row is no longer the fashionable destination it once was; Speakers’ Corner is more a curiosity than an agent of social change. The Serpentine is too warm for ice skating anymore; the famous pet cemetery has been closed for many years. Yet Hyde Park is still a living archive of Britain’s collective memory. It resonates across all time because it has a life separate from its physical existence, in art and in literature, and in the rituals of remembrance and celebration that unite the nation. ●