# How stewardship and history make London’s parks feel like private escapes



I have long returned, repeatedly and for stretches of months at a time, to London’s parks, and those visits have shaped how I remember the city. Writing from the vantage of many summers and roughly three to four full years spent there over the past eight decades, the author recalls a particular intimacy with Hampstead Heath and Regent’s Park: large, carefully tended green lungs that feel both cultivated and generous. He is candid about the limits of that familiarity, however, noting he has seldom walked parks in London’s lower‑income neighbourhoods and so deliberately avoids generalising about the city’s entire network of green spaces.

That caution about generalisation sits alongside an observation about how parks are paid for and managed. The author describes London’s green places as supported by a mix of local authority budgets, government grants, charitable bodies and private donations. By contrast, Central Park in New York is an instructive example of a different model: the Central Park Conservancy, a private non‑profit, manages the park under contract with the city and raises much of its multi‑million dollar operating budget through donations and an endowment, a stewardship arrangement the Conservancy itself describes as a public–private partnership. Meanwhile, New York City’s Department of Parks & Recreation remains the mayoral agency entrusted with a far broader portfolio of open space across the five boroughs.

Those institutional differences help explain some of the sensory contrasts the author highlights. He notes that London’s share of green space — including parks, gardens and private green areas — is often said to be roughly half the city’s area, whereas New York City’s public green space is commonly cited at around 14 per cent of its land. That greater proportion in London, coupled with the city’s wealth of smaller squares and neighbourhood gardens, means its green spaces are generally more evenly distributed and, in the author’s experience, less prone to the weekend crowding seen in Central Park or Washington Square Park.

The character of central London’s royal parks is described vividly in the recollection and confirmed by the park authorities. St James’s Park, tightly hemmed by Buckingham Palace and the seat of ceremonial London, is famous for its pelicans — birds first recorded there after a sixteenth‑century gift and still routinely fed on the central lake — which Royal Parks says are a long‑standing and much‑loved attraction. Green Park is compact and quietly formal, a green carpet between Buckingham Palace and Hyde Park that Royal Parks describes as a place for swift, restorative retreats. Hyde Park, the largest of the royal parks, contains lakes, memorials and the long‑running tradition of Speaker’s Corner, while bordering Kensington Gardens, where the Serpentine Galleries stage free contemporary art exhibitions and an annual architectural pavilion that brings a seasonal burst of cultural life to the lawns.

Hampstead Heath, the park the author knows best, receives a particularly detailed and affectionate portrait. He recalls walking from Parliament Hill — the Heath’s high point where kites are flown — through wild woodlands and flowered meadows to Kenwood House on the northern edge, with its old‑master pictures and tended garden displays. Those impressions are matched by official descriptions: the City of London Corporation, which manages the Heath, describes it as a vast, varied space of woodlands, meadows, ponds and recreational facilities including bathing ponds, a lido, cricket grounds and running tracks spread across roughly 320 hectares (some 790–800 acres).

Putting these pieces together suggests two linked truths. First, governance shapes experience: where parks benefit from a dedicated, well‑resourced steward — whether public, private or a hybrid — maintenance, programming and restoration are easier to sustain. The Conservancy points to its fundraising model and governance documents as the reason Central Park can support a large, professionally retained ground team and capital programme; New York’s municipal parks department, for its part, emphasises the scale and diversity of the public estate it runs across the whole city. Second, supply and distribution matter: London’s mosaic of large commons, royal parks and countless smaller squares creates a sense of openness and frequent access that the author finds distinct from his memories of New York’s denser, intensely used central parks.

The recollection is at once personal and circumspect. The author’s strongest memories are of particular places and seasons — the Heath’s mixture of the untamed and the managed, the quiet of Green Park’s avenues, the cultural pulse of the Serpentine — and he repeatedly acknowledges the limits of a life spent mostly in particular neighbourhoods. He does not claim that every green patch in London enjoys the same attention; rather, his piece reads as an invitation to appreciate the city’s variety and to recognise the real differences that funding, history and local governance make to how parks feel and function.

For anyone curious to explore further, the official pages for Royal Parks and the City of London set out the histories and practical details of the royal parks, the Serpentine Galleries and Hampstead Heath; the Central Park Conservancy and New York City Parks similarly publish governance, budgetary and stewardship information that helps explain why different cities’ parks work the way they do. Together, they underline the simple but stubborn truth in the author’s memories: well‑managed green space can feel like a private escape even when it is open to everyone.

### 📌 Reference Map:

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://theberkshireedge.com/leonard-quart-memories-of-hampstead-heath-and-other-london-parks/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://theberkshireedge.com/leonard-quart-memories-of-hampstead-heath-and-other-london-parks/), [[5]](https://www.centralparknyc.org/governance), [[6]](https://www2.nycgovparks.org/about)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://theberkshireedge.com/leonard-quart-memories-of-hampstead-heath-and-other-london-parks/), [[6]](https://www2.nycgovparks.org/about)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://theberkshireedge.com/leonard-quart-memories-of-hampstead-heath-and-other-london-parks/), [[2]](https://www.royalparks.org.uk/visit/parks/st-jamess-park/pelicans-st-jamess-park), [[3]](https://www.royalparks.org.uk/visit/parks/green-park), [[4]](https://www.royalparks.org.uk/visit/parks/kensington-gardens/serpentine-galleries)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://theberkshireedge.com/leonard-quart-memories-of-hampstead-heath-and-other-london-parks/), [[7]](https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/hampstead-heath)
* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://www.centralparknyc.org/governance), [[6]](https://www2.nycgovparks.org/about), [[1]](https://theberkshireedge.com/leonard-quart-memories-of-hampstead-heath-and-other-london-parks/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://theberkshireedge.com/leonard-quart-memories-of-hampstead-heath-and-other-london-parks/), [[7]](https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/hampstead-heath)
* Paragraph 8 – [[2]](https://www.royalparks.org.uk/visit/parks/st-jamess-park/pelicans-st-jamess-park), [[3]](https://www.royalparks.org.uk/visit/parks/green-park), [[4]](https://www.royalparks.org.uk/visit/parks/kensington-gardens/serpentine-galleries), [[5]](https://www.centralparknyc.org/governance), [[7]](https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/hampstead-heath)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://theberkshireedge.com/leonard-quart-memories-of-hampstead-heath-and-other-london-parks/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.royalparks.org.uk/visit/parks/st-jamess-park/pelicans-st-jamess-park> - The Royal Parks page on St James’s Park describes the park’s famous pelicans, a long-standing attraction introduced in 1664 as a gift from the Russian ambassador. It explains their habitat on the central lake, daily feeding times, and how pelicans often bask on the rocks and interact with visitors. The page outlines care practices, historical background and conservation considerations, emphasising their role in the park’s character. It includes practical visitor information such as viewing locations and behaviour guidance, and offers context about St James’s Park within the chain of Royal Parks adjacent to Buckingham Palace and Whitehall, particularly noted history.
3. <https://www.royalparks.org.uk/visit/parks/green-park> - The Royal Parks’ Green Park page introduces The Green Park as a tranquil royal park situated between Buckingham Palace and Hyde Park, measuring approximately 19 hectares (47 acres). It highlights the park’s mature tree avenues, open lawns and minimal formal flowerbeds, noting its historical enclosure by Charles II and its role as a peaceful retreat close to central ceremonial sites. The page provides visitor information including opening hours, paths, memorials such as the Canada and Bomber Command memorials, and accessibility details. It emphasises the Park’s quiet character, suitability for relaxation and its place within the chain of London Royal Parks.
4. <https://www.royalparks.org.uk/visit/parks/kensington-gardens/serpentine-galleries> - The Royal Parks’ Serpentine Galleries page summarises the Serpentine’s two contemporary art galleries located in Kensington Gardens and their history since 1970. It explains the South Gallery’s origins as a tea-room and the North Gallery’s role, outlines the annual architectural Pavilion commission on the lawn, and notes regular exhibition programming across art, architecture and public engagement. The page confirms that general admission is free, provides visiting times, accessibility and visitor facilities, and highlights the Galleries’ educational and community projects. It situates the Serpentine within Kensington Gardens and describes its cultural significance as a free contemporary art venue in central London.
5. <https://www.centralparknyc.org/governance> - The Central Park Conservancy governance page explains the Conservancy’s role as the private, non-profit organisation that manages Central Park under a contract with New York City and NYC Parks. It summarises governance documents, annual reports and financial statements, and notes the Conservancy’s responsibility for park maintenance, restoration projects and raising the park’s multi‑million dollar operating budget through donations and an endowment. The page details the Conservancy’s stewardship, accountability structures and links to audited reports, emphasising the public‑private partnership model that has allowed extensive investment, staffing and conservation work since the Conservancy assumed park management duties in the late 1990s, notably.
6. <https://www2.nycgovparks.org/about> - The New York City Department of Parks & Recreation ‘About’ page outlines that the agency is steward of more than 30,000 acres of land, representing 14 per cent of New York City. It lists the department’s responsibilities, including management of over 5,000 properties, playgrounds, athletic fields, pools, beaches and historic sites, plus stewardship of street trees and monuments. The page describes Parks as a mayoral agency, names core services and programmes, and highlights community recreation, conservation and cultural events. It situates Parks as a provider of public open space and recreational facilities across the five boroughs, with emphasis on accessibility.
7. <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/hampstead-heath> - The City of London’s Hampstead Heath page presents the Heath as a large, diverse open space managed by the City of London Corporation, describing its habitats, wildlife and recreational facilities. It notes features such as Parliament Hill with panoramic city views, the Parliament Hill Lido, three bathing ponds, running track, playgrounds, cricket ground, tennis courts and café facilities. The page explains walks, conservation work, volunteer opportunities and swimming booking information, and highlights the Heath’s role in biodiversity with woodlands, meadows and ponds across roughly 320 hectares (about 790 acres). It gives contact details and guidance for visitors and donors today.