

10 YEARS ON: IS THERE A LASTING LEGACY?

WE VISITED THE **QUEEN ELIZABETH OLYMPIC PARK** AHEAD OF THE FOUR-DAY JUBILEE WEEKEND TO DISCOVER FOR OURSELVES THE LEGACY OF THIS ICONIC PARKLAND

It will undoubtedly go down as one of the greatest moments in British sporting history. In just 44 minutes, Jessica Ennis-Hill, Greg Rutherford and Mo Farah each won a gold medal in front of a rapturous home crowd at the London 2012 Olympics. The unforgettable moment has since been known as Super Saturday.

These gold medals were three of a whopping 29 that Team GB won that year and were part of a 65-medal total. Those who were on the edge of their seat watching as Greg Rutherford leaped for victory might find it difficult to believe that his feet landed in the winning spot in the long jump an entire decade ago.

Lasting for around four weeks, Team GB's performance in the London Olympics and Paralympic Games of 2012 continues to bring a sense of pride to Brits nationwide. But this is not the only legacy of these Games.

Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London at the time of London's successful bid to host the Games in 2005, admitted he did not bid for the Olympics for the sport. "I bid for the Olympics because it's the only way to get the billions ▶



of pounds out of the Government to develop the East End – to clean the soil, put in the infrastructure and build the housing.”

His plan worked. Stratford was transformed into a state-of-the-art venue for the Games, but most importantly with a plan to turn it into the largest urban park to have been created in the UK for around 150 years once the closing ceremony had taken place. There were bold

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promises of regenerating this area of East London, with new homes, many of which would be affordable, and a robust landscape that would be a welcoming environment for both people and wildlife.

Ten years on from the Games, has the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP) achieved its desired legacy? And what could the next decade have in store?

First, let’s rewind to before £9bn was spent on bringing the Olympic Games to London. One of the most iconic structures in Stratford was ‘Fridge Mountain’, a 20ft-tall tower of white goods, sitting atop a 200-acre brownfield site. It was a “waste ground,” says Christopher James, contract manager at idverde, which maintains the majority of the QEOP. Christopher was on the site in early 2011 working for a different



contractor before joining The Landscape Group (which won the initial bid and has since been acquired by idverde). He’s been involved in the park ever since; when it first started maintaining the park in 2013 throughout the ‘Transformation’ phase to when it took over the maintenance of the whole park from 1 April 2014, and to now when idverde is looking to re-tender, as the green service provider’s “flagship contract” contract comes to a close.

Ahead of the Games themselves in July 2012, the site was cleared, and 14 venues were created, as well as 20km of new roads, 13km of tunnels, 26 bridges and 80ha of parkland. Once the Paralympic Games – in which ParalympicsGB had celebrated reaching third

on the medal table – had come to a close, an 18-month programme began to transform the 560-acre site. It was to become a green hub for East London, for both the existing residents and also for new residents, with plans for five new neighbourhoods in the area.

The more naturalistic north of the Park opened first, exactly one year after the Olympics first began on 27 July, and the more formal south of the park – which includes Piet Oudolf’s prairie-style Pleasure Gardens – opened the following year, in April 2014. “The Games were definitely important for the area, but the redevelopment and the park itself has been really good for the local economy and visitors and it’s put East London on the map,” says Christopher.

And it’s ongoing too. As with any park, the site is evolving. “Some of the planting regimes that you can see are changing because it had to be wonderful from July through to September in 2012, but obviously that then has to be changed over time for the longer term,” explains Neal Glucksmann-Smith, who volunteered to help with the Games in 2012, then led community-guided tours of the park, and is now customer services and volunteer duty manager. “There’s a legacy, and it’s a legacy that’s been maintained”

Sitting in the park, at the Change Please café in the north of the park, it’s difficult to argue against there being a legacy, at least in terms of how the park is used. People of all ages are sitting at the café – there’s a teenager and her dad playing table tennis and a group



taking part in a mobility class. There are cyclists, runners and dog walkers – all on a day when the weather is unpredictable.

It took a while after the Games closed to attract people to the park, though. The London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC), which inherited the park in 2012 from the Olympic Development Authority, had to work hard to reach out to the communities around the park and further afield to let them know that the park was no longer ticketed to enter; that it was free and for everyone to use.

Its efforts paid off, and the visitors to the park are gradually growing and changing, says Peter Tudor, director of operations and venues at the QEOP. It's no longer just about visitors either, but residents too, as the planned neighbourhoods are at various stages in their development. The first neighbourhood, Cheltenham Manor, is nearing completion and welcomed its first residents in 2015. East Wick is under construction, with Sweetwater soon to be, and East Village has had residents since 2013.

On top of residents, the construction of a new 'culture and education district' where the water polo arena used to be is bringing in big names such as the BBC, Sadler's Wells and the V&A, as well University College London and UAL's London College of Fashion. Spread across three sites, it is set to bring an additional 1.5 million visitors to the park, create more than 2,500 jobs and generate £1.5bn for the local economy.

There are the entertainment aspects of the site too, such as the London Stadium and a new concert venue. "Just last week, ABBA opened their arena down in south park; that will bring 3,000 people a day, sometimes 6,000 people a day, for the next two or three years, we hope. But then eventually, we'll build more homes there. So, the evolution will carry on. On the other hand, East Bank will bring a night-time economy that we don't really have yet," explains Peter.

"But really, it is all about a space to come and relax and kick a ball about, enjoy the park and the landscape, which was already here, and that was the big surprise of 2012; for people who had a ticket, you came in and there was this gorgeous park as well.

"But one we've added to. We have the Blossom Garden behind us, which is the commemorative area for after the pandemic.



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For everybody local, especially as it's mostly flats around here, this was the place to come and get your exercise and soak up the fresh air. So, although our visitor numbers drastically reduced during the pandemic, there were plenty of people here every day.”

The QEOP is into its third masterplan now, explains Dr Phil Askew, director of landscape and placemaking at Peabody, who was brought on board in 2009, when the design process “had really just been kicked off” with LDA

Design and Hargreaves Associates. The first masterplan covered the construction for the Games and the second looked at the ‘Transformation’ – two-year phase post-Games.

So, the park has always been designed with a legacy in mind; in fact, 75p of every pound was spent on the legacy, says Phil. “We worked with some extraordinary people like Nigel Dunnett and James Hitchmough, soil scientist Tim O'Hare and many others to get it right.

“The park was really trying to set out some ▶



new principles or approaches particularly given climate change, and it has been a leader in that respect.”

Part of the legacy plans was to use the new landscape to improve the biodiversity of the area. Its current Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) runs for five years up to 2024, and is currently being put in place by Thomas Bellamy, who has been seconded to idverde from the RSPB for the last year as part of a business partnership.

It’s a tricky site, though. “It is relatively difficult to make it entirely amazing for biodiversity as it has a strict planting plan and not all the plants are as good as they could be for biodiversity, so in areas where we’re not allowed to change the planting plan, or make

improvements, we have to prioritise other areas.”

For instance, Thomas is working on a bank for the bombardier beetle, one of the scarcest invertebrates in the UK and a brownfield specialist which thrives in post-industrial areas. “Brownfield sites are largely being cleared up and built upon, so their habitat is shrinking, but a population was found here in 2014 and again in 2019, so we’re building a specific habitat to try to improve their populations on the park.”

Whilst some of the planting might not be encouraging wildlife, the wildflowers are attracting the bees; there of 47 species of bees using the park, including species that are on the UK BAP, such as the small scabious-mining bee – which has one of the strongest

populations in London – as well as the brown-banded carder bee too.

“It shows that you can have biodiversity successes within an urban setting. They get nearly 12 million visitors a year and they’ve still got UK BAP species visiting the park, so it can be done. . .It’s a relatively young park, so it can only go from strength to strength, really.”

Biodiversity and sustainability are one of the priority themes put in place by the LLDC, says Peter Tudor, as well as economic benefits for the local people by encouraging all the employers around the park to recruit locally. Another important focus is on accessibility; with the 2012 Games and Paralympics being the most accessible ever, it was important to make the park as accessible as possible too.

The fourth priority theme is quality design.

“There were lots of design moves made on a landscape scale, particularly the bowl which is from [the Timber Lodge] to Alfred’s Field, which can contain water in a flood event. That’s taken 4,000 homes out of flood risk further up the Lea Valley,” says Ruth Holmes, design principal at LLDC. “It’s such an enormous scale, there are little bits of it that can be used at a more local level. . .

“It makes a massive difference having a park of this scale in this part of London – when you look at the map of indices of deprivation, and access to public open space and public open space on a scale, there was a massive hole in this part of London. There’s West Ham Park and you’ve got the Lea Valley, but you’ve got to go quite far to get to those potentially, and of scale. It was a genius idea to make sure it was here.”

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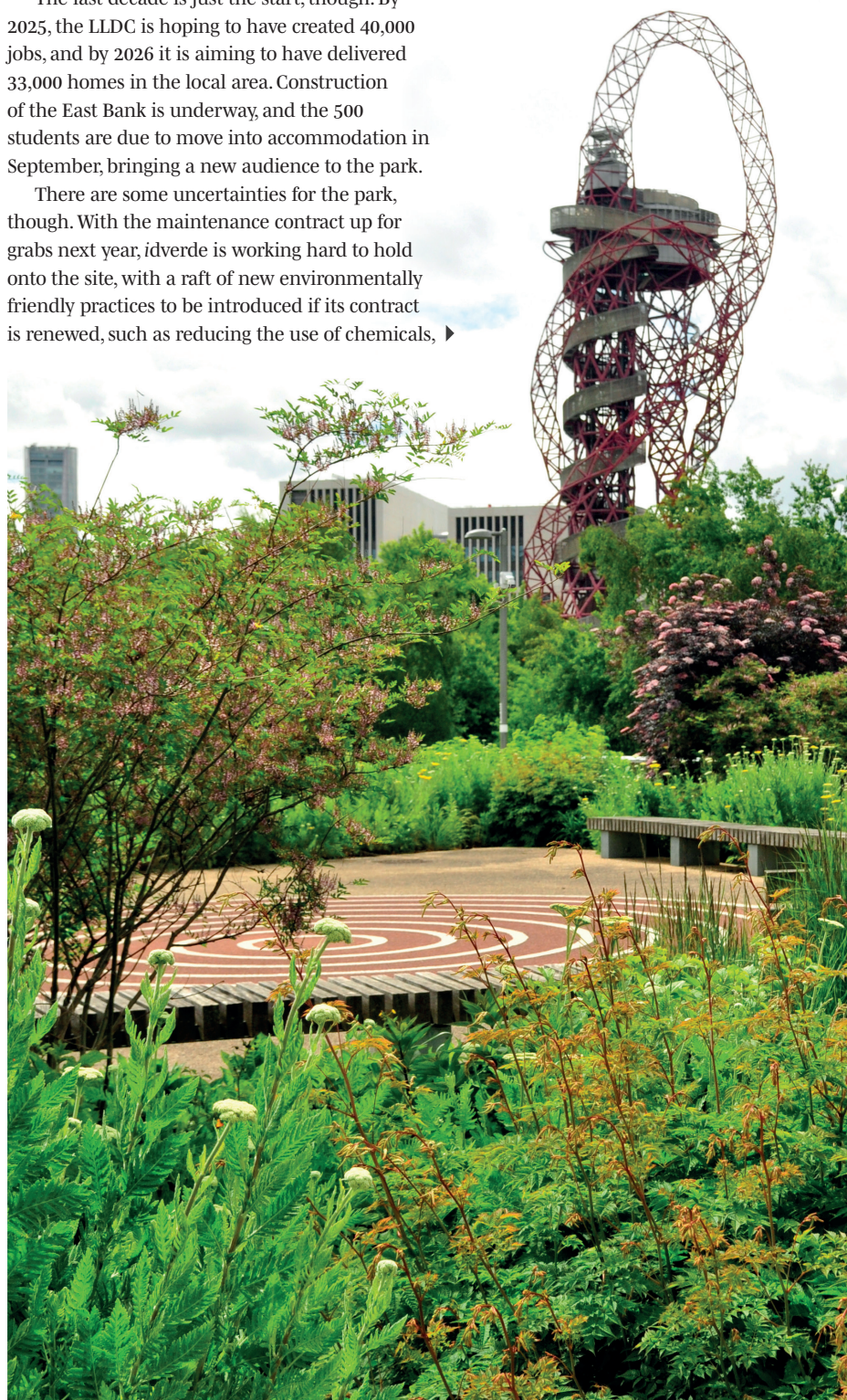
Mark Skinner was brought up in Stratford. He’s seen the area go from an industrial site to today’s QEOP. He started working on the Park with The Landscape Group after the Games and is now a grounds maintenance operative and apprentice, studying for his Level 2 in horticulture. He says the park is the perfect place to undertake training. “It took me a while to get into it as I had a lack of confidence, but management encouraged me to do the course and it’s made my confidence go sky high. We have got everything here to help us through and learning out here is a massive help as well; we’ve got such a wide range of plants and species.”

Fellow apprentice Konstantia Kyriklidou is also undertaking her Level 2. She worked on the Olympic Park back in Greece and is thrilled to be working on the QEOP. “it’s a national park in the heart of London; people from around the world come here and they ask about the Olympic Park and what it was

like before and the plants – it’s amazing. It has created a healthy habitat for wildlife in 10 years.”

The last decade is just the start, though. By 2025, the LLDC is hoping to have created 40,000 jobs, and by 2026 it is aiming to have delivered 33,000 homes in the local area. Construction of the East Bank is underway, and the 500 students are due to move into accommodation in September, bringing a new audience to the park.

There are some uncertainties for the park, though. With the maintenance contract up for grabs next year, idverde is working hard to hold onto the site, with a raft of new environmentally friendly practices to be introduced if its contract is renewed, such as reducing the use of chemicals, ▶



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introducing more electric vehicles and exploring the use of battery-powered kit.

“When all the contracts and the tenders were officially put out for the park before the Games, the park wasn’t finished, so it was difficult for The Landscape Group at the time to put in a comprehensive bid for the park... We’ll now have a better idea of what’s here on the park, so there will be a more structured contract that we will work against if we’re lucky enough to win again next year,” says Chris.

It’s not just a new green service provider that could bring change to the park. The LLDC was never meant to run the site permanently, and there will be a point where the future of the management of the park has to be decided, with the potential of splitting the park into the management of the four London boroughs it covers: Newham, Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Waltham Forest, though Neal says this could harm the legacy. “Having the whole park managed by one entity makes it consistent. I hope that it is still maintained by one entity as it moves forward.”

There are likely to be aspects of the LLDC’s promises which people could argue have not been delivered, and parts of the park’s development which have caused controversy, but it’s hard to argue against the QEOP having a legacy. Ruth Holmes says there’s bit of a “halo effect on us doing spectacularly well in the Olympics”, and that is perhaps true. But a walk through the park would convince most that the Olympic Games in 2012 was just the start of an impressive evolution of a land that was once known for a pile of white goods.

Photographs ©Paul Scott/Front Elevation

About Front Elevation

Front Elevation celebrated its 10th year in business photographing buildings and urban landscaping projects in and around London in 2011. Urban landscaping photographer Paul Scott has assisted many clients with BALI Award-winning submissions and has showcased amazing schemes in the capital, including of course The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. frontelevation.co.uk