

KENNINGTON PARK

Executions

From the 17th century, if not before, the south western corner of the common was selected as the South London site of public execution. The first execution recorded is of Sarah Elston, who was burnt alive for murdering her husband in 1678. The most infamous of the executions was the execution for treason of nine Catholic members of the Manchester Regiment, Jacobites, who were hung, drawn and quartered on Wednesday July 30th 1746. The last person to be executed was a fraudster from Camberwell Green by the name of Badger, hanged in 1799.

Methodism

Large crowds were attracted to many brilliant radical orators. The most famous of these was John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who addressed as many as 50,000 people on Kennington Common around 1739.

Chartism: The World's first national labour movement

The 1832 Reform Act gave the middle class the vote but left the working class, who had agitated in favour of the bill, still entirely disenfranchised. The basic political demands, which had been the elements of radical discourse for some time, were then drawn up as a six point 'Charter'. Presented as a new Magna Carta, by 1838 it was supported by almost every working class group across Britain and rapidly became the basis of the world's first national labour movement.

The people who supported it were Chartists. This was not a small active party with a large passive membership but a movement which deeply affected every aspect of people's lives. It was an inclusive organisation with women's groups and popular leaders who included Catholics, Protestants and Freethinkers. Irish, West Indian and Asian people were also prominent. Chartist meetings had a carnival like atmosphere, probably sometimes like a contemporary free festival at others with a neo-religious ceremonial being preceded by hymn singing and processions. There was a Chartist culture which had its own christening and funeral rituals and its own songs.

The main political strategies of Chartism became the petition and the monster rally. The petition also grew to be a monster and assumed the status of an unofficial referendum. The monster rallies were a show of

strength which also gave the participants a direct sense of community. By 1848 Chartism had built up a head of steam. The petition for The Charter had grown huge, by then it had between three and six million signatures depending on which side you choose to believe. A carriage, bedecked with garlands, was needed to transport it. Parliament was to be presented with this petition, for the third time, after a major rally on Kennington Common on 10 April 1848.

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CHARTIST DEMONSTRATION!!

“PEACE and ORDER” is our MOTTO!

TO THE WORKING MEN OF LONDON.

Fellow Men,—The Press having misrepresented and vilified us and our intentions, the Demonstration Committee therefore consider it to be their duty to state that the grievances of us (the Working Classes) are deep and our demands just. We and our families are pining in misery, want, and starvation! We demand a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work! We are the slaves of capital—we demand protection to our labour. We are political serfs—we demand to be free. We therefore invite all well disposed to join in our peaceful procession on

MONDAY NEXT, April 10,

As it is for the good of all that we seek to remove the evils under which we groan.

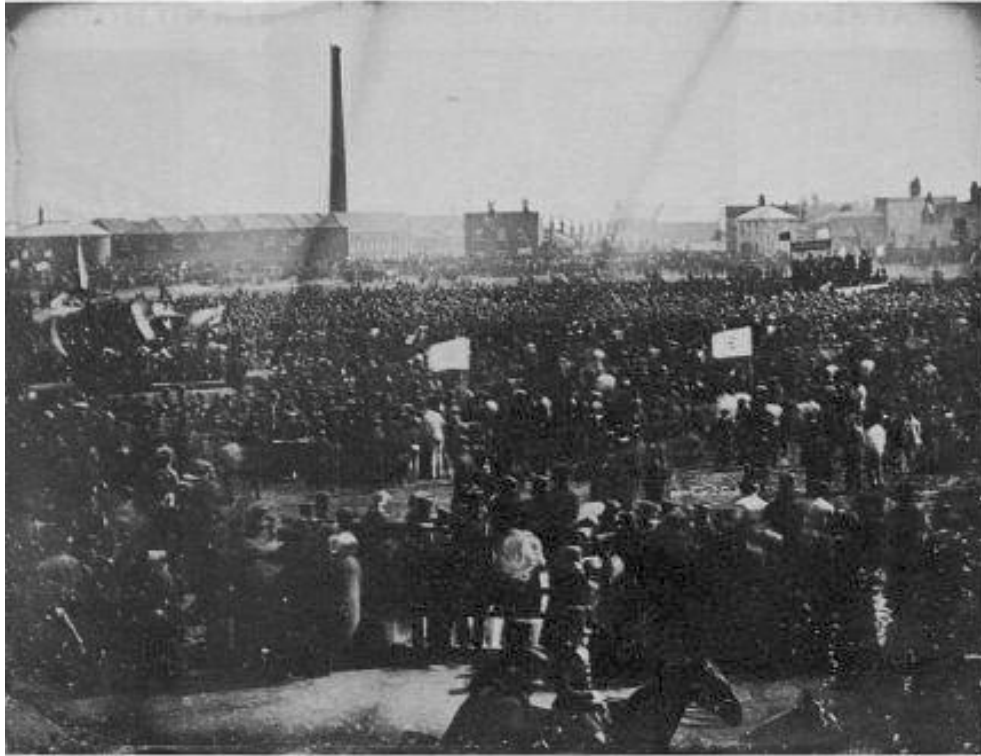
The following are the places of Meeting of THE CHARTISTS, THE TRADES, THE IRISH CONFEDERATE & REPEAL BODIES:

East Division on Stepney Green at 8 o’clock; City and Finsbury Division on Clerkenwell Green at 9 o’clock; West Division in Russell Square at 9 o’clock; and the South Division in Peckham Fields at 9 o’clock, and proceed from thence to Kennington Common.

Signed on behalf of the Committee, JOHN ARNOTT, Sec.

Wm. Hickman, Printer, 5, Edward Street, Hoxton Road.

William Kilburn, an early portrait photographer, took daguerreotype plates of the rally from a vantage point from the top of The Horns. These were the first ever photographic representation of a large crowd. One of the photos is reproduced below.



The most recent Kennington Park rally (see photo below) followed a “Walk of Witness” in March 2007, commemorating 200 years since the Act of Parliament which abolished the slave trade.

The photo on the left is of those walking to Kennington Park from Holy Trinity Church, Clapham.

“The Clapham Sect”, led by William Wilberforce and others, worshipped at Holy Trinity and played a major part in the campaign to end British involvement in slavery.



Enclosure of the common

Soon after the great Chartist rally a committee of local worthies was set up and found ready support from the Prince of Wales. By 1852 they had already got the requisite bill through Parliament and Kennington Common was 'enclosed' - its status as an ancient commons was reduced to that of a Royal Park, presumably to deter further rebellious gatherings. The planting and construction of the park which forms the familiar pattern we know today was largely completed by 1854.

The Common was occupied, fenced and closely guarded. Not only was the perimeter fenced but so was the grass and the shrubberies. The remaining paths were patrolled by guards administered by H.M. Royal Commissioners. It stayed under direct control of the Royal Family until it was taken over by the Metropolitan Board of Works (soon to become the London County Council) in 1887.

The First Red London Bus

Kennington Park was the destination for the world's first motorised double-decker bus. It ran from Victoria to Kennington in 1899 ... and of course it was red.

World Wars

In the early C20th the Horns Tavern had become a major social centre with a large assembly rooms to the rear and further back along Kennington road at least one brothel. (The house 'of ill repute' still stands now dwarfed by the adjacent Red Devil Storage Co.) The Horns was said to be the favourite haunt of Charlie Chaplin's profligate father. At one time the young Charlie lived in poor lodgings overlooking the north of the park in Kennington Park Place. The park may have been where he and his friends would imitate their music hall heroes and practice their silly walks. In his autobiography he tells us that he met his first girlfriend in the park.

The Horns, a key social centre whose life would have flowed naturally into the park and energised it, was partly destroyed by a bomb in World War 2. The remains were demolished in the 1960s and replaced with the formidable dark concrete of the Social Security block. Since the original tavern was destroyed, the bawdy spirit of the Horns seems to have migrated north to the White Bear with its theatre club and bohemian/crusty reputation.

The people of Lambeth suffered terribly in the Second World War - Over two thousand five hundred bombs decimated the borough. The park was the site of communal shallow trench-style air-raid shelters. On 15th October 1941 these suffered a direct hit and at least 46 bodies were

recovered. See www.vauxhallandkennington.org.uk/bombing.shtml for more detailed information.