

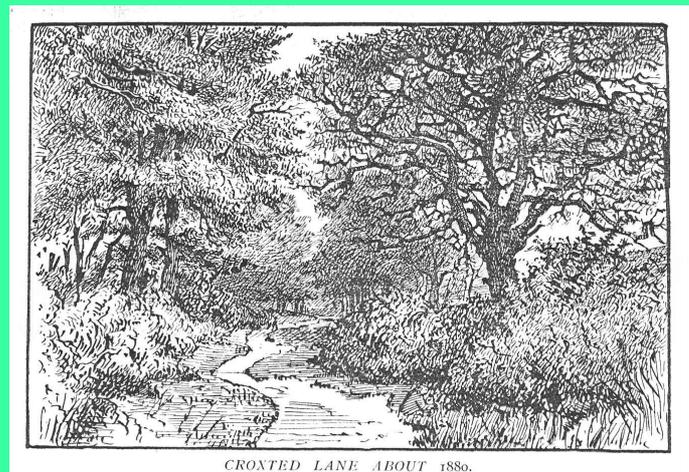


## I. The setting.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw massive growth of cities, with adjacent areas of fields or woodland swallowed by urbanisation. Economic pressures continue to favour infill of London's public open spaces, although various bodies, including the London Wildlife Trust and the Trust for Urban Ecology, have secured areas, including swathes of land bordering discontinued railway lines, as ecological refuges. These and other wooded areas link up through wildlife corridors (albeit not unbroken). The project at Belair Park contributes to restoring local biodiversity, and reinforces the network of wildlife corridors.

Left: Oblique view from a plane approaching Heathrow in the early morning. It stretches from Loughborough Junction at the bottom, though Herne Hill and Dulwich to Crystal Palace and beyond. Belair Park, set at around 30 m O.D., on early Tertiary deposits, lies just below centre.

The rural character of the area in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is illustrated by this drawing from Allan M. Galer's (1890) *"Norwood & Dulwich Past and Present."* The Park is part of the grounds of a mansion built in 1785. An ornamental lake with clay base, designed in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to resemble a river, is fed by the ground waters of the local River Effra. The western margin of the grounds was cut by the railway in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and West Dulwich Station (then known as Knight's Hill Station) was opened in 1856. The drawing shows Croxted Lane (Croxted Road), on the west side of the Railway Embankment.



CROXTED LANE ABOUT 1880.



The main feature of *"College Place,"* was a mansion with Palladian influences. The original plan was modified by architectural additions (no longer surviving). The name was later changed to *"Belair."* The grounds enjoyed a period as a working farm (with ornamental wallabies and peacocks), before being leased to the local council in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. During the 1960s, a fire destroyed much of the house, which was re-built, and also the grounds, having served as closed sports facilities, were opened as a public park.



Left: Chart of Belair Park from London Borough of Southwark notice board.

Above: Satellite view of Belair Park and environs. © Google Maps 2012.

The lake is the central feature of the Park, flanked by lawns and playing fields. The *Google Maps* view shows how belts of tree cover extend beyond the Park into surrounding areas. Note that the railway margin adjoins tree and shrub cover in ample back gardens. Fields immediately to the north of the Park are sports grounds. Within the Park, tree cover around the lake links through marginal hedgerows to the railway embankment.

A wildlife project was initiated, with an uncertain future, in the mid-1980s. Lake margin and island habitats were created. A formal Friends of Belair Park, with a commitment to promote biodiversity, in November 1993. *New Leaf*, which launched a botanical garden at West Dulwich railway station in 2009, provides a work force to assist with wildlife management. Hedgerow trees have been planted at various times along the Park's railway and north western margins, most recently with generous financial input from the Dulwich Society. The latter were opened officially in 2010 as a contribution to the International Year of Biodiversity. The best established wildlife area in the Park, beside the lake on its eastern flank, is denoted on the notice board by a three-petaled symbol. Here, in the early 1990s, trees were planted in a line parallel to the tree-fringed lakeside. This expanded zone of tree cover has developed into a narrow woodland/broad hedgerow environment. To the north, a wetland area, fringed by an apparently self-seeded row of trees, mostly willows, includes seasonally wet environments. Together, the Woodland and Wetland areas comprise the Lakeside Wildlife Walk.

Below: A section of the Lakeside Wildlife Walk, looking from the east towards the lake. June 21, 2011.

