



A CONCISE HISTORY OF OUR GREAT BRITISH PUBLIC PARKS

PAUL RABBITTS

The Arts Society Fylde

Lowther Pavilion Theatre

5 February 2025 at 2.00pm

Welcome to the first lecture of 2025 - and if you need an hour away from storms with names, elusive economic growth and troubling news from around the world, this is probably it: an expert giving us an insight into the history of one of our greatest institutions - the Public Park.

On his first visit to The Arts Society Fylde, Dr Paul Rabbitts challenges what, if anything, we know about the parks we have all enjoyed at some time in our lives. Dr Rabbitts promises to draw out the origins of parks, from the great Royal Parks to the Pleasure Gardens of the eighteenth century and on to their Victorian heyday. He aims to show what makes a great park, its 'parkitecture' as he calls it, with examples of lodges, lakes, bandstands, fountains, lidos, palm houses and wonderful floral displays. The decline in the middle years of the last century was followed by a revival that has led to a major shift in interest in our parks: once again we are very much in love with them. Locally, we have Stanley Park, Lowther Gardens and Ashton Gardens - and will surely look at them afresh after Dr Rabbitts' introduction to the history of parks from across the country - not forgetting, we feel sure, the role that the north-west of England played in creating parks at public expense. The first of these - Birkenhead Park (1847) - is, in the words of Historic England, "a landmark in the history of public parks" and with direct influence on the design of Central Park in New York, no less.

PAUL RABBITTS

Dr Rabbitts graduated at Sheffield with a BA Honours in Geography followed by a Masters Degree in Landscape Architecture at Edinburgh. He gained a PhD at the University of East Anglia on the subject of music and entertainment in public parks from the 1830s onwards. Paul is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, a Member of the Chartered Institute of Horticulture and chair and a founder member of the Parks Management Association. He is a qualified landscape architect and celebrated parks and open spaces manager and has worked for several local authorities across the UK, from Carlisle, to Middlesbrough, via Watford and across to Southend-on-Sea; he is currently Head of Parks at the City of Norwich. Paul is a passionate advocate for public parks and, in particular, the Victorian and Edwardian bandstand and is a prolific author on the subject. He is a member of the Parks Working Group of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. His first of now 39 books was published in 2011 on the iconic bandstand and was followed rapidly by books on the Royal Parks, Great British Parks and 'Parkitecture', Grinling Gibbons and Sir Christopher Wren. His most recent book is 'People's Parks - The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain.' A leading expert on bandstands, he has been asked to assist in localised restoration projects nationwide and has been a regular and popular speaker on bandstands and public parks for many years.



SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Parks - The Design and Development of Public Parks in Britain, Paul Rabbitts, Hudson, 2023
A Thing in Disguise - The Visionary Life of Joseph Paxton, Kate Colquhoun, Fourth Estate, 2003
Birkenhead Park - The People's Garden and an English Masterpiece, Robert Lee, Historic England 2023
Park Life - Around the World in 50 Parks, Tom Chesshyre, Summersdale, 2021