

Central Park

- A Hundred Years



DARTFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

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introduction

Central Park celebrated its one hundredth anniversary on 7 June 2005, having been opened to the public for the first time on that day in 1905. It is Dartford's largest recreation ground. Central Park has seen many changes and additions over the years but it is still open 'for the enjoyment of the inhabitants of Dartford' as its donor, Lieutenant-Colonel C.N. Kidd, intended all those years ago.



history of Central Park

The origins of Central Park date back to 1903 when Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Newman Kidd J.P. offered five acres (two hectares) of meadows to the town to be used as an area of recreation. This was sited approximately in the centre of the park as we know it, and was entered from Lowfield Street.



Plaque commemorating the donation of the original Central Recreation Ground.

Lieutenant-Colonel Kidd believed that the Recreation Ground could be self-supporting if the Council was to charge admission for entertainment on 12-13 days a year. If the Council did not want to accept the gift, he was prepared to hand over a cheque representing the value of the land instead, to be spent for the good of the townsfolk.



View of lily pond in Bank House extension, looking south towards original Central Recreation Ground, 1917

Fortunately the Dartford Urban District Council accepted the gift of land and in June 1905 the Central Recreation Ground, as it was then called, was ceremonially opened to the public. The procession led from outside the Council's offices above Martin's Bank

(now Barclays Bank), Lowfield Street, along to the park entrance in Lowfield Street where Lieutenant-Colonel Kidd was presented with a silver key to unlock the gates. The Dartford Volunteer Silver Band performed a selection in the bandstand. This was followed by speeches which many people in the audience could not hear. That evening a complimentary dinner was held at the Bull Hotel in honour of Lieutenant-Colonel Kidd.



Band stand in Central Recreation Ground, prior to 1910

The park was enclosed by iron railings and included broad paths and grassed areas, with plants and shrubs planted at various locations. In addition to the bandstand, facilities included a renovated football grandstand, a shelter and public conveniences.

In 1906 the old town pump, originally sited in the High Street, was placed in the Recreation Ground where it stood until 1953.



The old town pump which stood in Central Park from 1906 until 1953

In 1910 Bank House on the High Street was converted into Council Offices and much of its garden, complete with ornamental pond, was added to the Central Recreation Ground, with access from the High Street along an alleyway.

In 1915 the Council purchased 16 acres (6.5 hectares) of meadows bordering the River Darent and stretching southwards to the area now covered by the running track. This area, known as the Central Park Extension, first opened to the public in May 1916 but closed about one month later due to lack of staff. It opened again in 1921, having gained a lake. In 1927 it was closed again, levelled and reseeded with grass before opening for good in May 1931.



German field gun presented to Dartford in 1919 by the Australian government

During the First World War a military camp, mostly consisting of tents, was set up in the park. In 1919 two German field guns were put on display in the park; one presented by the Royal West Kent Regiment and the other by the Australian government in thanks for the hospitality extended to their soldiers at the Orchard Hospital. The guns were donated for scrap in 1940 to help the war effort during the Second World War. A First World War tank is also said to have been displayed here but was removed in the 1930s.

In May 1922 the war memorial, surmounted by the statue of a British soldier, was unveiled. The following year one of the stone arches from the medieval town bridge was rebuilt across a small stream in the park where it remains to this day, although the stream now runs underground.



Part of medieval town bridge, rebuilt in Central Park in 1923

In 1926 Market Street was constructed through part of the grounds behind Bank House in order to give greater access to the park and library.

In 1927, 16 year old Lawrence Hills, who went on to found the Henry Doubleday Research Association (the leading organic gardening society in Britain), started his gardening career with some voluntary work in Central Park.

In 1928 the base of a gateway from a Roman Villa in Farningham was reconstructed using original materials. A path was also laid, using Roman cobbles from the foot of East Hill. The gateway is still in place but most of the cobbles were removed in 1968.

In the late 1920s the market bell and its supporting structure, which had stood at the High Street entrance to the park, were re-erected at the boundary of the Extension and the original 1905 Recreation Ground. Unfortunately the bell was stolen in 1965.

In March 1933 the Dartford Harriers began their long association with Central Park when the Council agreed to mark out a grass track for them at the southern end of the park.

From 1936 Central Park became the annual venue for a fund-raising carnival for the Livingstone Cottage

Hospital. This was the origin of the Dartford Festival which is still held annually in Central Park.

In July 1937 a scheme to build a very large Municipal Building in Central Park, near the Library, was dropped due to public objection. In the same year a bowling green and a children's paddling pool appeared.



The market bell and gates were moved to Central Park in the late 1920s

In 1938 the Princes Road entrance to the park was constructed. Also in 1938 public air raid trenches were dug near the Lowfield Street entrance. The following year they were concreted and turfed over to give extra protection and comfort.

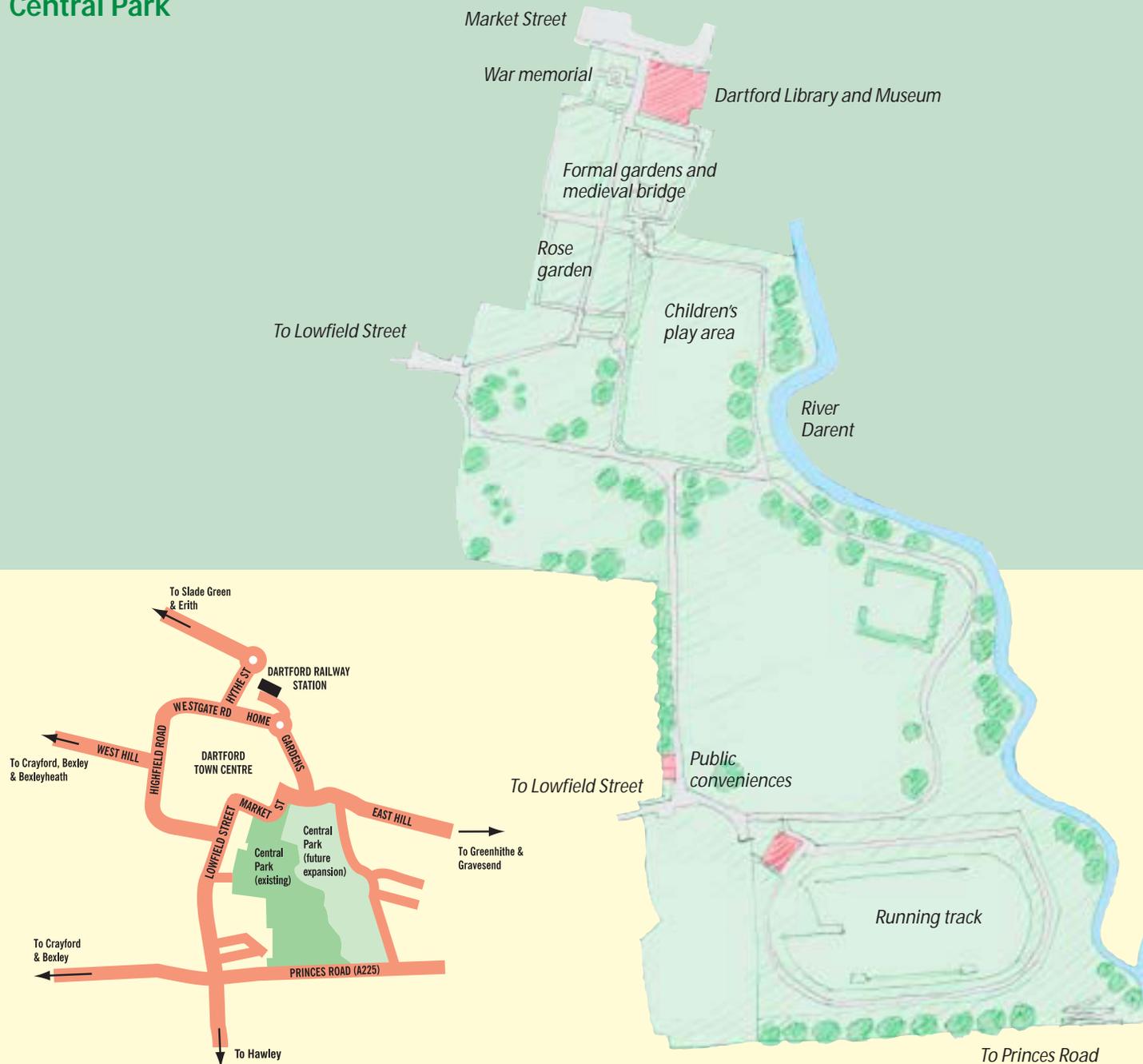
In 1939 land was acquired next to the park for building the first of several greenhouses.

During the Second World War, the Government ordered that one of the footpaths in the park should be specially coated to render it less visible to enemy aircraft. At this time the park was often used by American and Canadian servicemen as a venue for playing baseball.

In 1949 an open air stage was created on the island of the paddling pool. In the 1950s a white concrete stage was built nearer to the Library but was demolished for safety reasons in 1979.

(continued after Central Park map)

Central Park



history of Central Park (continued)

In the 1950s a carpet bed was constructed on which floral displays could be laid out to mark various events or anniversaries. This is still done today.



Floral carpet bed, Central Park, 1967

In July 1960 a special garden for the use of blind people was paid for by Dartford and District Round Table. The Dartford Harriers' grass running track was replaced in 1968 by a cinder track.



Garden for the Blind, opened in 1960

During the early 1970s all of the ornamental ponds had to be filled in due to seepage problems.

In 1984 Zola Budd ran her first UK race at the Central Park running track. Money gained by the Dartford Harriers from selling coverage rights to the media was put towards an all-weather synthetic running track which was laid in 1987.

A new children's play area opened in May 1996.

Central Park faces an interesting future and the surrounding debate has shown that it truly plays a 'central' part in the life of the people of Dartford.

life story of Lieutenant-Colonel CN Kidd

Charles Newman Kidd was born in 1845 and served his apprenticeship at Messrs Holmes and Styles Medway Brewery in Maidstone. He came to Dartford in 1868 when he purchased the Miskin family brewery, renaming it Kidd's Steam Brewery. This stood on the site now occupied by the Co-operative Supermarket in Hythe Street.



*Lieutenant-
Colonel Charles
Newman Kidd*

Soon after arriving in Dartford, he showed an interest in the local government of the town. In 1870 he was elected to the Local Board of Health (the nearest equivalent to the Council at that time). In 1882 he was elected chairman of the Local Board and was re-elected year after year. Even when the Local Board was superseded by Dartford Urban District Council in 1894, Kidd continued to be elected as chairman every year until his retirement in 1903.

He was also Chairman of the local bench of magistrates and this led to the strange situation of a man who owned a brewery and numerous public houses fining or even sentencing people to hard labour for drunkenness!

In addition to his brewery, between 1886 and 1903 Kidd also owned a brick-making business in Shepherds Lane. This was situated in the area now

life story of Lieutenant-Colonel CN Kidd

occupied by Sullivan Close, between Somerset Road and Christchurch Road. In 1904 Kidd donated an adjoining plot of land for the building of Christ Church.

Kidd was a member of the Dartford Volunteer Rifle Corps (a forerunner of the Territorial Army) and was commander of the Corps from 1872 until 1884. In that year he was promoted from Captain to Major and, at some point in the next four years, to Lieutenant-Colonel. When he donated the land for Central Park, he also gave an adjoining piece of land to the Corps for a purpose-built drill hall.



Drill Hall, Central Park

Lieutenant-Colonel Kidd died at his home, West Hill House (now the Masonic Hall), on Friday 5th October 1917, aged 72. His funeral service took place in Holy Trinity Church on Monday 8th and he was then buried in the East Hill Cemetery on the Brent.

Central Park today

Central Park comprises some 27 acres (11 hectares) ranging from formal gardens near to the Town Centre, through ornamental areas to informal open space at the southern end towards Princes Road. The River Darent runs along the eastern boundary.

Each summer at least 45,000 plants are used to create colourful bedding displays. These formal gardens are complimented by a newly redesigned rose garden and pergola which will prove to be quite spectacular. Central Park has a large children's playground which is extremely popular with local children and visitors alike.

The informal areas of the park include large stretches of grass, junior football pitches and walks by the river. The southern end is home to the Dartford Harriers running track and pavilion. Central Park hosts numerous events, particularly in summer, including the popular Dartford Festival weekend in July. There are public conveniences and a small car park near the Cranford Road entrance at the southern end of the park (next to Fairfield Pool), and conveniences just outside the park in Market Street. Central Park is monitored by CCTV. For further information, telephone the Civic Centre.



The rose garden

getting here

The main entrance to Central Park is in Market Street, next to the Museum and Library building.

BY FOOT: The Market Street entrance to Central Park is a one minute walk from the High Street. Pedestrian access is also available from Lowfield Street, Cranford Road and Princes Road.

BY CAR: Any of the Town Centre car parks are a short walk from the main entrance to Central Park in Market Street. Limited parking is available at the Cranford Road entrance.

BY RAIL: *Web: www.nationalrail.co.uk* Dartford is served by trains from various London stations: Charing Cross, Cannon Street, Waterloo East, London Bridge and Victoria. The North Kent Line also runs from Dartford to the Medway towns and the Kent Coast. Central Park is a 10 minute walk from Dartford Station.

BY TAXI: For any visitors arriving by rail, there is a taxi rank outside Dartford Station.

BY BUS: *www.arriva.co.uk/southerncounties*

expansion of Central Park

In the year of its centenary, Central Park is set to double in size as a result of the purchase of neighbouring Acacia Hall and its grounds by Dartford Borough Council from the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline. This will increase the size of Central Park from 27 acres (11 hectares) to 50 acres (20.25 hectares) with the River Darent as a central feature. This is the largest addition of land ever to be made to Central Park and means that the park will now be ten times the size of Lieutenant-Colonel Kidd's original donation 100 years before.

Plans for the enlarged park include creating riverside footpaths, opening up the current GlaxoSmithKline sports and social facilities and increasing access to the park for surrounding residents.

The new area includes the site of Dartford Roman Villa, a modest farmstead occupied in the second – third century AD. This was excavated fully in 1979 before being reburied beneath playing fields.

The new area also includes the site of a corn mill, first mentioned in 1216, where the modern Acacia Hall now stands. The mill, known since the mid-18th century as Colyer's Mill, passed through the hands of several owners, being rebuilt in the process, until Sidney Keyes, the maker of Daren flour, vacated the premises. It was then leased with the adjoining mansion house and grounds in 1898 to Messrs Burroughs, Wellcome & Co. who adapted the premises as a Social Club and Institute for the use of their employees. The company purchased the site in 1924. The mill building burned down in 1962 but the ground floor was saved and reused for part of the current building.

In 1896 many members of Dartford Urban District Council favoured purchasing Acacia Hall and its grounds but the opportunity was missed. Over 100 years later that goal has finally been achieved.

Period photographs are courtesy of Dartford Library (Local Studies Collection) and Dartford Borough Museum (Shepherd Collection).

Cover photo: Central Park in the early 1930s



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