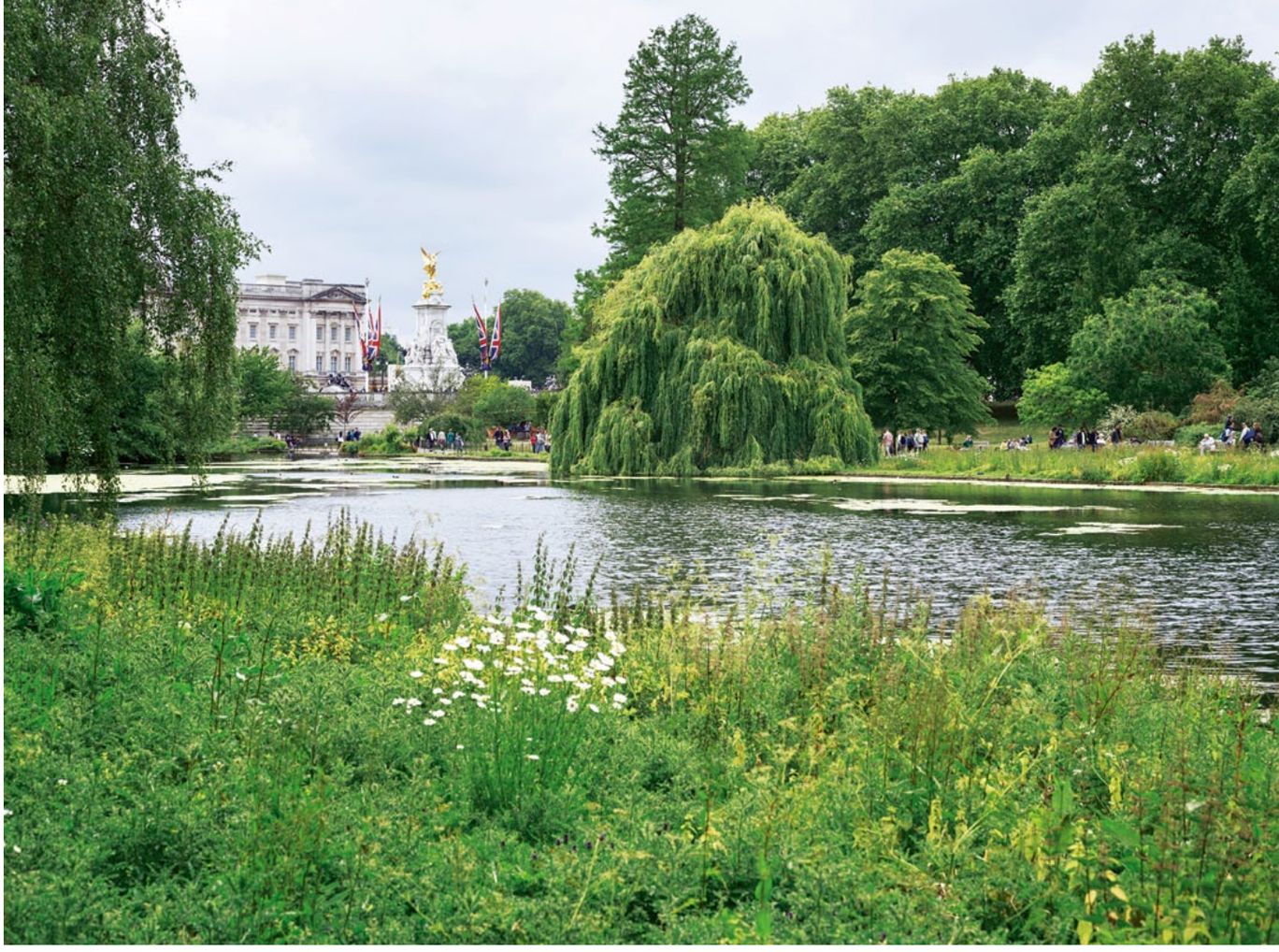
Scott Poulson (bowling) and son Arlo (far right, in white) mark their birthdays in Norwich's Eaton Park

Hitting it out of the park

Photographs by Simon Roberts

From a game of cricket to bandstands and boat ponds, all human life plays out in your local green space. What brings us here – and are they at risk? Keiron Pim takes a walk in Britain's parks



St James's, London, with Buckingham Palace and the Queen Victoria memorial in the distance. It is the oldest of the capital's eight royal parks

At 8.45am on a grey Saturday, having trudged through Norwich's Eaton Park to join a milling crowd of 500 people, it hits me that what I'm about to do is unwise. I am the kind of sedentary home-worker whose heart pummels his ribcage when he thinks of running for the bus, a former Sunday morning footballer whose only reason to sprint around a park is after a five-year-old daughter who has mastered her bicycle's pedals but not its brakes; and here I am surrounded by fit people, the sort who seem happy standing in a cool breeze wearing skimpy garments made of Lycra and polyester mesh.

After heading to the start line we're off, the crowd diverging within moments into a bounding vanguard with one eye on their fitness apps, and the rest of us experiencing that strange horizontal sinking as we move back towards our natural place in the hierarchy. In my experience, parks are better appreciated at a walking pace, but for now we must puff our way around a 5km course that I have compartmentalised into manageable stretches: from the skate park to the football pitches, to the model boat pond by the grand circular colonnaded pavilion, to the miniature railway and the rose garden, the playground, the cycle speedway, the pitch and putt. And repeat three and a half times.

This is Parkrun, one of many ways in which parks are now reasserting themselves as important civic spaces in a society where fewer people have jobs that keep them fit, or budgets that stretch to gym memberships. Every weekend tens of thousands of people all over Britain are doing this, or attending military-style boot camps, or working out at a growing number of outdoor gyms. Earlier this year the parish council at Stoke Gifford, near Bristol, controversially tried to charge Parkrun for using Little Stoke Park, a sign of the financial pressures that parks are under - despite the fact that many have lately been regenerated by national lottery money after decades of decline. Stoke Gifford's organisers preferred to close the run.

Rowntree Park in York was recently refurbished at a cost of £1.8m and is a well-loved place. On a sunny summer afternoon it looks impeccable, even though its position beside the river Ouse meant it lay beneath metres of water during last December's floods. The only blemish is the paths' coating of droppings from a resident flock of Canada geese - enough of a problem for the council to have erected signs requesting visitors not to feed them. Here on any given day you might find young children enjoying a forest school session, or adults engaged in tai chi, orienteering, volleyball or gardening, or a purposeful march along the paths in a Nordic walking group.

Joanna Ezekiel, 46, has recently taken up Nordic walking, but when I meet her she is sitting on a bench, happy to be distracted from reading War And Peace on her Kindle. A novelist, poet and Open University tutor, she tells me she values parks as a place to reflect or find inspiration. In 1993, she and her father saw Rachel Whiteread's House (a concrete cast of a Victorian terraced house) at Wennington Green in London's East End, when Ezekiel was working nearby as a newly qualified teacher. "I hadn't heard of it, but was absolutely fascinated by its startling and haunting presence on an ordinary east London green," she says. It inspired the plot of her young adult novel, The Inside-Out House.

Now that Ezekiel lives in York, Rowntree Park has become somewhere she can always find a peaceful spot to think or read. The park's cafe is run by the city's recently outsourced library service, though the bustling little space is, in the words of chief executive Fiona Williams, "more cafe than library". A knitting club meets there weekly, as do reading groups; there are Wordless Wednesdays, when people gather to read and work and anyone speaking louder than a whisper is asked to quieten down. »

Parks have long been a source of inspiration for artists and writers: all human life goes on within them, and they form the backdrop to experiences spanning the sublime, the exciting, the amusing and the tragic. Last month, for instance, a baby was allegedly abandoned in a park in Blackpool, and in east London a sunbather was run over by a council van; there was a heated debate over whether it was OK to lie in the park in your underwear, and Doncaster residents called for the reintroduction of park wardens after a series of assaults.

The old-fashioned parkie is rarely spotted these days, but the few remaining staff with decades of experience have good stories to tell. Chris Lines, who works for Liverpool city council, is no longer fazed by seeing dog-walkers joined by people with cats, ferrets or even deer on leads, but he was taken aback when a CCTV camera at Croxteth Hall Country Park showed what appeared to be a ghostly figure emerging from the bushes, "walking across the lawns and up the steps of the hall". Some say it's the spirit of the 7th Earl of Sefton, the hall's former owner, who died in 1972; others that it's a trick of the light. Lines tells me a ranger once excelled himself by spotting an ice-cream van and, on being told to verify the operator's name and check his permit, replying that there was no need as it was written on the vehicle: Mr Whippy.

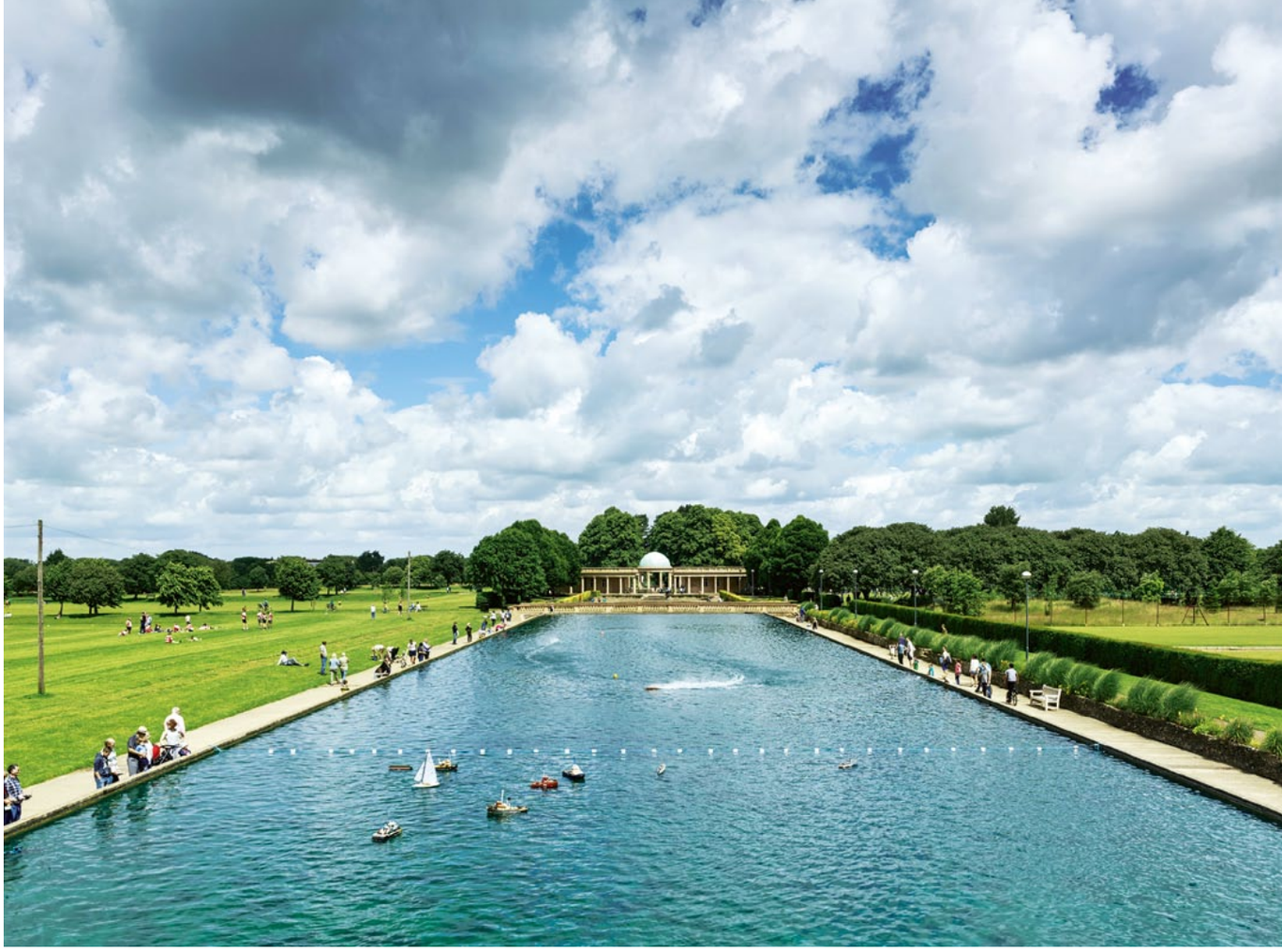
Chris Worman works for Rugby's parks service, though his voluntary role as a judge for Keep Britain Tidy's Green Flag awards takes him around the country. One of his favourite memories, he says, came just a few weeks ago: "In Rugby, the day after the European referendum, we had a Polish picnic in the park as a way of saying that, whatever Brexit means, they are still a part of our community. They're going to do it next year, too."

Stephen Beech has worked in parks and cemeteries for 49 years. Today he helps maintain Sheffield Botanical Gardens but previously he worked at the city's Endcliffe Park, where his duties included preparing the hire boats for the boating lake. There was a notorious swan, he says, "that didn't have a mate and got very aggressive". One day he and the head park-keeper were attacked: "It cornered us into the boatshed. We kept looking out through the cracks, and it stood there aggressively flapping its wings. We were stuck for 15 minutes until it decided it had had enough."

Back in York's Rowntree Park, I pass a dovecote and a fountain bearing a statue of the Roman god Mercury, before meeting Jane Blackwood, a lawyer who is pushing her baby son in his buggy. "I really love the fact the park's got a river running through it," she tells me. In the last couple of years, the Two Hoots floating ice-cream parlour, an old tugboat and ice-cream van skilfully blended, has become a distinctive sight chugging up the river to its mooring here. "I've had a few lovely sunny afternoons eating those ice-creams with my toddler on the riverbank," she says, "waving to the tourist boats while the »

Cawston Brass Band play Eaton Park's grand pavilion in Norwich

‘A lot of ice-cream vendors have come into conflict with their local parks. The big boys come in offering silly money’



Eaton Park model boat pond. Built in 1928, it holds almost a million gallons of water

baby snoozes in the pushchair. Nothing out of the ordinary, but pretty magical to me.”

The more conventional ice-cream van is a classic feature of any British park on a summer’s day, but even this now faces challenges. I’m told this by Maurice Murray, whose cheery attitude and charity fundraising have prompted the Ice Cream Alliance to name him its 2016 Mobiler of the Year (“mobiler” is the preferred term for someone selling ice-cream from a vehicle). Murray’s blue-and-white van is a familiar sight around the parks and streets of Fleetwood, Lancashire, chiming out Teddy Bears’ Picnic or, on days when Manchester City are playing, Blue Moon. He loves the job, but some ice-cream sellers who have pitches in parks are facing difficulties with the authorities, he explained. “I run a closed Facebook group for ice-cream mobilers and a lot of them have come into conflict with their local parks. We have one who’s been in his local park for 25 years and his local authority have decided to put [the pitch] out to tender. Then the big boys come in offering silly money - and when they start paying high rents, obviously they’ve got to get the money back. That’s when it goes from your local man who’s done it for 25 years and kept the prices low for local people, to prices that are inflated to maximise the profit. These are some of the problems that parks nowadays are having.”

Like Parkrun, this points towards the broader issue of how government cuts and councils’ finances are affecting Britain’s 27,000 public parks. The communities and local government select committee opened an inquiry into the subject last month, with written submissions welcome until 30 September. One person sure to contribute is Dave Morris, with whom I take a wander around Lordship Recreation Ground in north London. Here we see young men using the £100,000 outdoor gym (“Because local authorities now have responsibility for ill-health prevention strategies,” Morris explains), and a class of blue-jumpered schoolchildren studying nature by the pond.

Morris is part of the park’s not-for-profit co-operative management team. He is also chair of the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces and a battle-hardened campaigner who was one of the “McLibel Two”. With Helen Steel, he took on McDonald’s in a 20-year legal saga that, even if the fast-food chain ultimately won, damaged its reputation.

Over lunch at the straw-bale-built Hub building, which combines a cafe with rooms for yoga, dance and art classes, Morris argues that we’re in the middle of “a major crisis: there needs to be a massive public outcry in defence of the UK’s urban green spaces”. He cites a Heritage Lottery Fund report from 2014, which produced a bleak set of figures. It revealed that 86% of parks managers had seen budget cuts since 2010, and expected them to continue until 2017; 81% of council parks departments had lost skilled management staff, and 77% had lost frontline staff; 45% of local authorities were looking at selling their parks and green spaces or outsourcing their management. A follow-up report next month is expected to show further cuts.

Across London, Hammersmith and Fulham council thought it had found a solution. In 2013, the Conservative-run administration agreed to hand over around a third of Hammersmith Park to the private business Play Football, which would convert this publicly accessible land into paid-entry football pitches and run the centre under a 35-year lease. But after a Labour win in the May 2014 council election, and a noisy campaign of local opposition that went to judicial reviews funded by the writer Virginia Ironside, the centre opened this year in a very different form. “It’s been an amazing outcome,” Ironside tells me. “A much smaller area has been made »

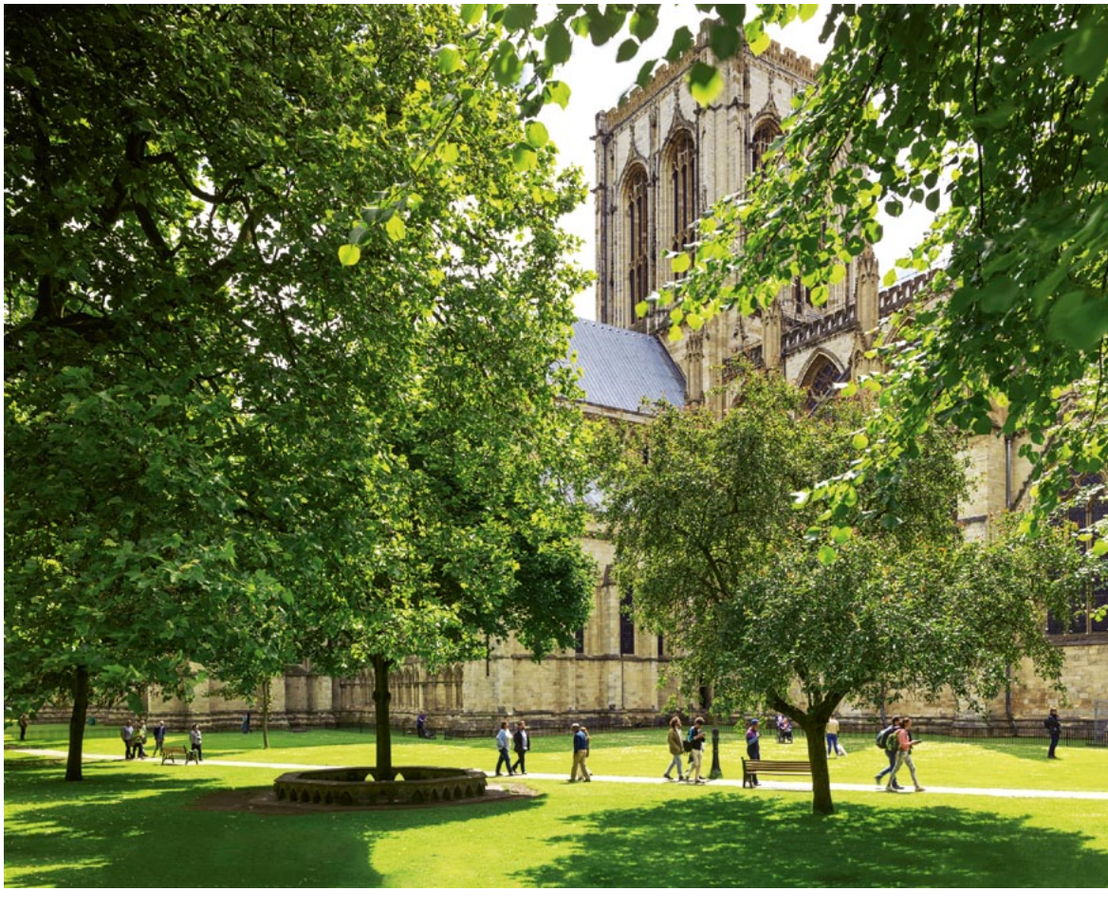
into football pitches. These are all owned by the council, which retained full ownership of the park with no leases involved. Play Football have a management contract for seven years, which is renewable or not, depending on how it goes."

Our parks have long been political spaces, a managed approximation of the rural in the midst of our towns and cities, and as such prey to conflicting intentions. Even their founding motivation had its flip side: when Victoria Park opened as London's first public park in 1845, it was a patrician gesture aimed at improving the health of the downtrodden, dock-working cockney proletariat; but its advocates also included those who wished to deter them from heading west to the fashionable parks of central London, bringing their diseases with them. (Likewise, Liverpool's beautiful Victorian parks were created not just to give workers respite from the industrial smoke and cholera-infested slums, but because their employers knew a healthier workforce would be more productive.)

The cultural historian Travis Elborough talks me through this as we walk around Victoria Park, often dubbed the "green lungs of the East End", which in recent years has seen £12m of investment. He locates the seeds of this change in the 1970s, when "the first generation of middle-class gentrifiers were buying a version of working-class community". There are still remnants of traditional London here, such as the Victoria Park Harriers and Tower Hamlets Athletics Club, or the old boys who take pride in racing their finely engineered miniature speedboats in the pond. But then there are two modern cafes (homemade sourdough bread and crab Benedict at one, Indian street food at the other) and a recently established croquet club whose website features Edwardian-garbed ironists inviting us to "cross mallets and bash balls whilst sipping Pimm's, munching cucumber sandwiches and discussing the relative merits of Sartre and Descartes".

As one of London's most popular green spaces, Victoria Park looks untouchable. Many more parks around Britain face a battle to remain intact, well-maintained and free of charge. Selling off parkland, transferring the management to corporate interests, "inappropriate development" and commercialisation - these are all strategies Dave Morris tells me he has seen authorities deploy. Even at the widely admired Lordship Rec, he and his colleagues faced a proposal last year from the council to build houses on a third of the land ("I'm glad to say they've now backed down"). Elsewhere, Morris says he is seeing "staffing decimated across the country", and "an increasing amount of large concerts, often at peak summer periods, causing disruption and damage". He mentions Finsbury Park's Wireless festival, which closes off a large area of land, and the fact that Wandsworth council has allowed Formula E racing at Battersea Park. (A council spokesman tells me that last month's event was the second and final »

A fundraising event in Eaton Park for the Palestinian charity SkatePal. Below: Dean's Park in York



Even on a busy Saturday morning there's no traffic to be heard, only children whooping and birdsong

The Japanese garden in Hammersmith Park, London. In the background, redevelopment continues at the former BBC Television Centre

one, and that £400,000 of the £2.85m it made will be ringfenced for the park; the remainder will fund essential services such as libraries.)

Similar tensions are playing out wherever you look. In Newcastle this spring there was uproar when the council considered – though later rejected – the adventure playground company Go Ape's proposal to convert a chunk of Heaton Park into a visitor attraction. Stockport residents were dismayed last year when councillors agreed to allow 70 houses to be built on two hectares of Reddish Vale Country Park. Unsurprisingly, it is the regions beyond London and south-east England that suffer most: according to the Heritage Lottery Fund report, Scotland, Wales and the north-west of England have the largest proportion of parks in decline.

So how ought we to be covering the costs? The Rethinking Parks project, run jointly in 2014-15 by the Big Lottery Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the charity Nesta, looked at 11 experimental approaches, publishing its results in February. One success was the Bristol ParkWork scheme, which saw 17 unemployed people given temporary maintenance roles in the city's parks: this led to seven later gaining jobs, while saving the council £27,000. Another was Burnley's Go to the Park, a "permaculture" project in which mowed lawns made way for wildflower meadows, and traditional Victorian planting schemes were changed into lower-maintenance ones featuring more perennials. This approach has saved the council nearly £70,000.

Until such ideas are widely established, it's hard to see beyond a short-term future of grinding attrition between cash-strapped councils and the 5,000-plus "friends" groups that campaign on their local park's behalf. And as Elborough, author of the recently published A Walk In The Park: The Life And Times Of A People's Institution, tells me, the tensions are older than you might imagine. Drinking a flat white by Victoria Park's duck pond, he explains that places such as Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens were commercial entities, like theme parks: you had to pay admission. The country's first public park, the Arboretum in Derby, opened in 1840 and charged for entry five days a week; last year its current manager, Michael McNaught, reluctantly floated the idea of reintroducing a fee for visitors from outside the city.

Victoria Park was designed by James Pennethorne, one of the "great tidy-uppers of London", Elborough points out. "The idea was that part of its construction would be paid for by the sale and development of luxury mansions or parkside villas. In the end that didn't really work, because the canal was a working canal and it's still the East End. But that, essentially, was one of the motors for its development – that you'd have these nice luxury homes and they would make the money." The Victorian model has in many ways returned: a few miles north of here, the Woodberry Down development boasts "luxury apartments" with a view over "acres of beautifully landscaped parkland".

Back in Eaton Park in Norwich, my heart is thudding as I lie collapsed on the grass, gazing at the clouds, moments after achieving my modest target of completing the course without stopping. My time is 26 minutes 15 seconds, which puts me in 246th place, the winner having finished nine minutes earlier. I am almost exactly average, but it feels good to have proved a touch fitter than I feared, to have felt a brief camaraderie with strangers as we coaxed each other over the line, and simply to have the opportunity of running around an elegant green space so large that even on a busy Saturday morning there's no city traffic to be heard, only children whooping from the playground, birdsong and runners panting. If our parks are a city's lungs, they are also a good part of its soul: we sell them at a higher price than any council's accountants could begin to imagine ●

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON ROBERTS FOR THE GUARDIAN