

AMENITY

AS THE HOME OF GOVERNMENT, Westminster is no stranger to upheaval. But the recent dramatic shift in the makeup of Parliament has been matched by an equally radical change of horticultural thinking in the management of the area's prestigious parks and open spaces. London contains many open spaces for which Westminster City Council is responsible, ranging from high profile sites such as Berkeley Square to more modest plots of containers at traffic islands along the Harrow Road. At the beginning of the decade, all came under scrutiny with an eye to making Westminster a greener, cleaner place especially from a visitor's viewpoint. At the time, the situation was grim: shrub beds were overgrown and tired, mature trees created shading problems and needed attention, and a limited range of planting, suffered from a distinct lack of colour, texture and seasonal interest. Vandalism and abuse were also for rather traditional (and expensive)

similar to those enjoyed by cities such as Berlin. It also suggested creating green corridors along principal arteries of the City to link spaces; a programme of improvements to a list of sites, including wholesale improvements of soft landscaped areas; a complete tree survey and works strategy; and the adoption of a nature conservation strategy. The main thrust of the report was that a carefully co-ordinated approach was required if the City was ever to come to terms with and tackle its problems. To achieve this, a greening projects officer, John Wyatt, was appointed, to pull together the various threads of the report, to act as a link between the various departments and agencies, and to commission work. This work focused primarily on the priority sites and the shrub improvement programme, reflecting the political enthusiasm for more conspicuous measures, although popular opinion called for rather traditional (and expensive)

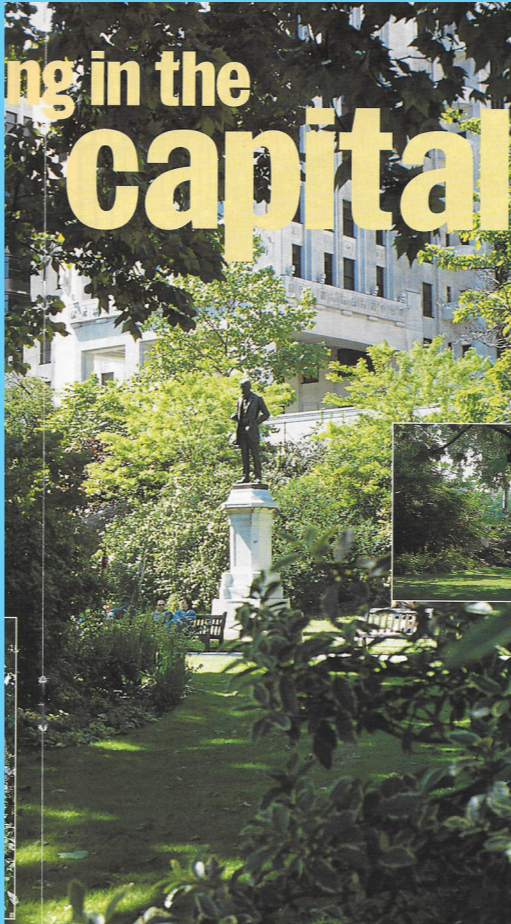
A radical overhaul of Westminster's green spaces is paying political and financial dividends for London's parks and gardens, writes Peter Sheard

The scope of the difficulties was widespread, affecting most of the area's open spaces to some degree; additionally, internal administrative structures and privatisation dissipated rather than focused efforts to correct the situation. It was against this background that Westminster appointed a consultant team led by Chris Blandford Associates to review the problems and recommend a wide range of actions. The subsequent report published in 1992, *Westminster's Green Spaces*, recommended a strategy for improvements under a number of headings, most importantly a greening strategy or structure plan for short, medium and long term improvements

Herbaceous perennials have been used to enliven areas of old plantings (right)



Investing in the capital



bedding methods to create impact. The initial effort targeted 11 sites in what Wyatt refers to as a "scatter-gun approach", with the £95,000 allocated out of the Capital Programme supplemented by other, more minor, maintenance sums.

Even though Westminster famously enjoys generous government subsidies, these are rapidly funnelled into programmes other than landscape. The green strategy was funded mainly from the council tax (traditionally low), sponsorship (sometimes high) and redirected moneys from parking receipts. As such, establishing financial realism for the works programme was one of the earliest achievements.

Horticulturally, the main objective behind the programme was to diversify the parks by "selective renewal and upgrading of shrubberies", replacing spent planting with a far more ambitious palette of materials. Herbaceous perennials and ferns, bulbs and exotic species were all used to increase visual impact. Out went the low maintenance, "tried and tested" range of amenity plants and in came experimentation, dramatic compositions of plants and bold drifts of single species.

The initial 1993/4 tranche of projects produced encouraging results, such as Park Lane Island and Hyde Park Corner, giving the rolling programme increased momentum. More ambitious and by implication, difficult sites were then selected.

Among these were the Victoria Embankment Gardens, which were laid out between 1870 and 1875. Extending from Blackfriars Bridge to Parliament, they effectively form a roof garden over the top of the District Line underground service and some major sewer lines. Their original Victorian lines are still evident, with abundant statuary and

The Savoy has a new view (above), while elsewhere new vistas have been created to highlight existing statuary (left)

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pleasant, sunny cafes, making them extremely popular. Much of the planting dates from 15 years ago when the gardens were refurbished in parallel with works to the Tube. By 1994, however, the gardens were declining, with overgrown shrub beds which were dull and monotonous and a general sense of melancholy.

Westminster's brief called for "very strong styles of planting design... with a greater emphasis on herbaceous perennials, annuals, grasses, roses and bulbs". Additionally the new planting design should open out new vistas to make "a strong visual impact for pedestrians and for vehicles outside the site". Garden designer Gillian Temple, based in Surrey, was appointed to the task. Her main design objective was to keep the best of what existed but get rid of years of rubbish revealed during extensive site surveys. Key views to cafes, statues and buildings were identified and structured into the planting design. The planting itself aimed to introduce a more romantic, picturesque style within the gardens with curves and textures, while the road-

side displayed a bolder approach, to be appreciated at speed. Many of the results were dramatic. Entrances were highlighted, with one displaying a bold combination of blue and gold prostrate junipers and cedars contrasted with softer lines of variegated *Arundinaria* fronted with *Leucothoe*. Another more northerly entrance has bold drifts of *Euphorbia* and *Nepeta*

Although overshadowed by future severe cost restraints, Westminster should be applauded for its bravery, imagination and long-sightedness

backed with *Cornus florida*, *Exocorda* and *Weigela*. Along softer lines, one of the most effective of the new openings in the old planting, near the Savoy Hotel, retains many of the existing rhododendrons and azaleas, contrasting them with *Astilbe*, *Hosta*, *Hemerocallis*, *Huechera* and *Euphorbia* to produce a delicate frame for the stunning new

Bold combinations of texture and colour have been used at park entrances (above)

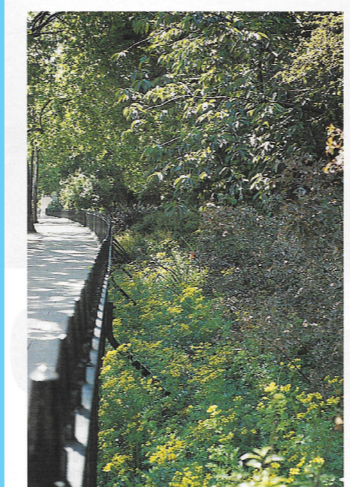
views both into and from the gardens. The previously defunct pool and memorial feature is now highlighted with a uncompromising grouping of *Filipendula*, *Astilbe* and *Primula japonica*. The neighbouring shrub bed mixes *Helleborus*, *Alchemilla* and *Doronicum* in front of *Hydrangea* dotted with existing camelias, backed by waving clumps of variegated cut leaved elder, *Eucalyptus* and *Phyllostachys*. The new planting is shown to best effect with the views of softly curving lines of herbaceous perennials highlighting the various features of the gardens. This impact all came at a relatively modest cost of £65,000 spread over a three year period. Many difficulties were encountered during the planting process, particularly the poor condition of the soil and the drying out problems of the site. There was also extreme reluctance to remove plants, even those clearly spent, and

adjacent occupiers such as the Savoy were extremely nervous of changing the sheltered nature of the gardens, thereby revealing the road, although this opinion altered as they actually saw the river. However the results are worth it: a whole swathe of garden now has shape and depth. Inside the gardens, the colours and textures of the new planting contrasts markedly with the screening shrubs opposite. The all-important views from the road are dramatically improved, lending the gardens a quality

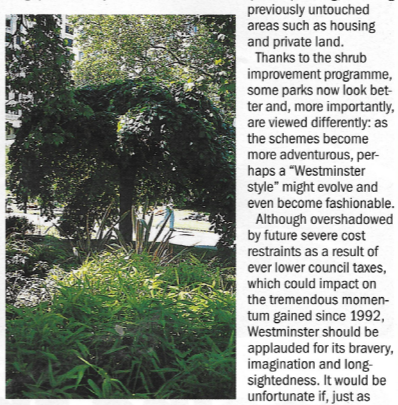
Overall, too much existing material has been kept, which compromises the design intent, while the inclusion of some bedding areas has not always been sympathetically handled. An initial problem which is improving is the standard of the maintenance: the increased complexity of the planting requires an increasingly committed maintenance regime, which has resulted in staff re-training programmes, so that long term aims of the design can be realised. However gaps obviously

As the green strategy has developed during the 90s, wider issues are now being addressed, such as promoting sustainability and biodiversity; greater public consultations to assess how demands on parks are changing; creating wildlife gardens and an arboretum in Paddington to act as educational assets; and an increase in the marketing of Westminster's green strategy to maximise sponsorship contributions, which totalled £180K last year. The green corridors concept is expanding, involving

Garden boundaries facing roads have been given more colour and life (below). Bold foliage combinations give light and colour to the retained weeping elm (right)



normally associated with intensively maintained private spaces. However, experimentation has its pros and cons. In some areas, planting struggles because tree works were not carried out; also, irrigation methods favour grass areas (still officially inaccessible), while failing to penetrate shrub areas, thereby retarding their establishment.



remain. As a whole, the gardens' revitalisation is understandable, while being introduced into the public green-space, the money should dry up. Within the City there are currently attempts to define the "green value" of Westminster's parks and open spaces, proving a direct monetary link between the quality of environment and the City's prosperity. Aside from such arithmetic exercises, it is worth noting that the most consistent concern expressed in park-user surveys is for more flowers and shrubs. These are major elements of Westminster's parks and gardens, the continuing quality of which will remain as a defining factor in maintaining London's status as a world class capital. Peter Sheard is a landscape architect and associate of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, London.