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Diary Day 9 - Peckham Rye Park

After a very wet and chilly month of May, June has given us consistently warm sunny days so far. We are continuing our "park perambulations" and, having the entire capital to choose from, there is no shortage of places to visit, although recently we have kept to the south, to keep travelling to a minimum. We went to Peckham Rye Park which is in the London Borough of Southwark. The name originally derives from peak meaning hill, and ham meaning homestead. The River Peck which used to flow freely through the area is thought to have been named after the original village. The word Rye comes from an old English word for watercourse.

Although our aim is to spend our time in green and pleasant surroundings, there are always the train and bus journeys to get through. That is a different type of entertainment for us, and I like seeing the back end of London from the train window or from the top deck of the bus. Starting off in the suburbs, we get to see the ends of all the gardens that back onto the railway line, some neat, some rubbishy, and many with tall evergreen trees to block the view and noise of the trains. On the bus I find it fascinating to see all the unusual road names, reflecting people, places, topographical features or, with the more modern ones, variations on a chosen theme. House names are quite entertaining and it seems that many of them are designed to improve the appearance of the address on the envelope, and thus the desirability and saleability of the house.

We arrived at our destination with the day getting hotter by the minute and we walked fairly briskly over the wide common to the park. People were lying around on the grass soaking up the sun, but we were more eager to reach the shade and leave the heat and surrounding traffic. We walked to the small lake at the east end of the park. As we approached the low railings that surround the water, we became the instant focus of attention from all the park pigeons who, up until that moment, had been lazing around, preening and either wooing or escaping from each other. Some of the ducks remained in their sleeping poses, but with enough energy to open one eye at intervals to check on safety and the possibility of food.

We went round the lake and at the far end we saw a lone black carp fish, well protected by the murkiness of the green water and later on a grey carp with orange tones, a little more visible when he came near the surface. More ducks were snoozing on the banks, also opening one eye as we passed by. Reactions tend to be different if one pauses and hesitates, as that is generally the signal that something will be forthcoming from the bag. So, photos are taken quickly so as not to disappoint the waterfowl and disturb their repose.

Diary Day 9 - Peckham Rye Park

We moved on to the Sexby Garden, an ornamental area named after the London County Council's Chief Officer of Parks, circa 1907. It is laid out in geometric shapes with straight paths and pergolas, and a small fountain pool. The beds are packed with large herbaceous plants and shrubs, but I did get itchy fingers when I saw the amount of weeds they were competing with. But as all the clumps of plants are large, robust and well-established, clearly they can hold their own against the weeds and do not need to be fussed over. The long pergolas are covered in mature wisteria, with a very sweet perfume, especially the one tangled branch that was hanging down at face height, ready to accost the unwary visitor who is busy looking to the right or left. We found a shaded seat in a corner and watched a robin fly from one singing perch to another and back, several times. A small dunnock came quietly hopping by along the path, totally unconcerned by our presence. An inquisitive squirrel came up to us but a quick noisy scrape of my foot on the paving sent him on his way.

We wandered on to the woodland area, cut through by a little stream emerging from drainage pipes between the rocks. Here we saw another black carp lazily roaming around the large pool, and lots of tiddlers in the shallows. Finally we came back to the lake and walked around it again in the reverse direction. The pigeon area now had a heron standing guard by the water's edge, and an irritated crow sitting on a branch above him. Several times the crow dive-bombed the heron, who ducked his head down but did not leave. The crow finally gave up and strode off in a huff.

On the other side of the lake, beyond its perimeter path, is a little trickle of a stream that is all that can be seen of the River Peck, flowing along a tree root lined channel under the trees. At the edge of the park it disappears into a culvert, later joining Earl's Sluice which empties into the Thames at Deptford Wharf. Many of London's old rivers are lost to sight, diverted into sewers and drainage culverts, but this one at least gets to be in the open for a short stretch, on its way to the Thames. Thoughts of cool trickling watercourses were very welcome on the rather warm bus and train journeys home. (919 words)