

Review: *Victoria Tower Gardens: The prehistory, creation and planned destruction of a London park* by Dorian Gerhold, 64pp, 71 illustrations, 2020; available from the author at 19 Montserrat Road, London SW15 2ED, price £12 inc p&p (dgerhold@hotmail.co.uk).

In January 2015 David Cameron accepted the recommendations of a Holocaust Commission suggesting the building of a Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre in London. In September 2016 the site in Victoria Tower Gardens, the triangle of grass with avenues of plane trees south of the Houses of Parliament, was chosen. In October 2017 the design competition was won by Adjaye and Ron Arad. The design of above-ground bronze fins and a below-ground education centre will affect the park and its facilities.

This proposal has been deeply controversial and in 2020 a Public Inquiry was decided upon. This lasted five weeks in October and November 2020. One unintended benefit of our present confined period is that the Inquiry was held online, and anybody could watch it; I did, for the final four days. It was an education.

Dorian Gerhold, in this angry attack on the scheme (the title says it all) lays out the history and archaeology of the site. Until the late 16th century, there was only the river bank south of the medieval Palace. Then until clearance in the 19th century, wharves and commercial buildings; a typical London Thames-side sequence. The present Gardens were created in two stages, the first prompted by the newspaper retailer W H Smith, MP. Its sandpit was a great success. There are now monuments in it: the Burghers of Calais by Rodin, a Gothic drinking fountain in memory of Thomas Buxton, a leader of the anti-slavery campaign, and Emmeline Pankhurst. They will be accommodated, and do not help any discussion.

I will not detail the often passionate arguments on both sides, so that this review is not accused of bias. I give one example of each. A great-grandmother said she supported the scheme 'as I am a Holocaust survivor and will not be here in a few weeks' time'. Rowan Williams said the scheme was wrong to juxtapose this monument (which all agree is worth doing, somewhere) with Westminster: anti-semitism bad, British democracy good. In excessively polite language between lawyers, arguments raged about whether there would be dangers from flooding or terrorists. By all accounts this was like no other Public Inquiry. We await the Inspector's decision, and then that of the Secretary of State (which could be different, as recently at Stonehenge).

The archaeology is actually a minor matter. Excavation, if the scheme goes ahead, will be straightforward, if on the expensive side. It is refreshing to note that both sides of the argument accepted the archaeological requirements without question; this might not have been the case 30 years ago. We have matured.

While we wait, Dorian Gerhold's slim book is recommended as another of his typically thorough studies of a patch of London topography, and especially as a souvenir of a passionate and contested dispute. What happens about the Holocaust Memorial is important for us and for generations to come.

John Schofield