London’s only urban beach opens

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In Edwardian times, families from across the capital descended on 'Margate Sands' in Bishops Park every summer.

Now, Hammersmith & Fulham (H&F) Council, with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and Big Lottery Fund (BIG) under their Parks for People scheme, have recreated that special seaside atmosphere.

The work is part of a £8million improvement programme to Bishops Park and the adjoining grounds of Fulham Palace, the former home of the Bishop of London. The council has received £3.65million from HLF and BIG to help pay for the project.

The new facilities were opened by the outgoing Leader of Hammersmith & Fulham Council, Cllr Stephen Greenhalgh, together with the Bishop of London, the Right Reverend and Right Honourable Richard Chartres, the Mayor of the borough, Cllr Frances Stainton and Wesley Kerr, Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund London Committee.

Cllr Greg Smith, cabinet member for residents' services said: “With summer approaching, local residents will be pleased to know that they no longer need get on an aeroplane or head to the coast if they wish to lie on a beach! Providing top quality, beautiful parks and open spaces is one of this council’s number one priorities and I am delighted to see the amazing transformation that has occurred here at Bishops Park and Fulham Palace.

The park and palace grounds are of huge historic importance to the borough and these exciting improvements see them reaffirmed as jewels in the Hammersmith & Fulham crown. With summer approaching, I look forward to seeing hundreds of people using this fantastic new facility.”

Bishops Park beach opened in 1903. During the Second World War the venue fell into disrepair and by 1949 it was considered such a safety hazard it was closed.

As well as the urban beach, the council has also restored the park’s ornamental lake, created three major play areas and refurbished the café.

At Fulham Palace, the former home of the Bishop of London, the council has excavated a 95-yard stretch of what historians believe is the longest medieval moat in England.

The Gothic Lodge, vinery and potting sheds have also been restored and the stables converted to a new education facility.

Wesley Kerr, Chairman of the HLF London Committee said on behalf of HLF and BIG: “Bishops Park and the neighbouring grounds of Fulham Palace - on a spectacularly beautiful but secluded reach of the River Thames - are among the most historic landscapes in the country. The Heritage Lottery Fund is delighted that our investment helps make them destination green spaces for local people and Londoners to enjoy, complementing our support for restoring the remarkable Tudor/Georgian Bishops palace.

When the Bishops of London passed the park to the people of Fulham in the late 19th century it soon became a model public park, and from the 1970s the Palace itself and its unique 16th-century walled garden - site of many new plant introductions- also became accessible.

This sensitive and imaginative restoration, enabled by £3.65 million from HLF has brought back part of Europe's longest moat, restored listed outbuildings, enhanced rare trees in the arboretum, created superb new play, education and growing spaces, and enabled training for volunteers and horticultural apprentices. This genius of a place can become an exemplar for managing and sustaining stunning urban parks for everybody and is one of eight re-openings in London this year of parks supported by HLF, part of the biggest programme of park restoration since Victorian times."

The newly refurbished Bishops Park will be playing host to a special Hammersmith & Fulham Diamond Jubilee Celebration event on Sunday 3 June, from 11am to 7pm. The event will feature a big screen, vintage funfair, food and bar outlets, live and recorded music, local talent performances and much more. A similar event will take place at the same time at Furnival Gardens, Hammersmith.

The Friends of Bishops Park have recently published a book entitled, The *History of Bishops Park : A Peoples Park*. The book is available from the Friends of Bishops Park, 54 Langthorne Street, SW6 6JY. It costs £14.95 with free delivery within the boroughs of Hammersmith & Fulham, Richmond and Wandsworth. Please add £3.95 for postage elsewhere. The book is also available at the Museum bookshop, Fulham Palace; Fulham FC shops; and Nomad Books, Fulham Road.

Notes for editors

The lead consultants and landscape architects for the improvement project were Chris Blandford Associates.

The Parks for People programme uses Lottery funds to support the regeneration, conservation and increased enjoyment of public parks. The programme aims to improve the local environment and put parks firmly back at the heart of community life. In England the two Lottery Funds have been working in partnership since 2006 to deliver a £150m investment in public parks.

The Big Lottery Fund (BIG), the largest distributor of National Lottery good cause funding, is responsible for giving out 40% of the money raised for good causes by the National Lottery. BIG is committed to bringing real improvements to communities and the lives of people most in need and has been rolling out grants to health, education, environment and charitable causes across the UK. Since June 2004 BIG has awarded over £4.4bn. Visit the Big Lottery Fund website.