TOOTING COMMON 1987 PHOTOGRAPHIC SURVEY

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Initiated by Wandsworth Council and managed by Enable Leisure and Culture.
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In 1987 the Wandsworth Borough Council Leisure and Amenity Services Department commissioned their landscape section to produce a management plan for Tooting Common. The purpose was to examine all the problems, conflicts and potentials within the Common and propose a 10-year management and development plan. The outcome was a written report and a series of appendices containing supporting information and illustrative material, including the ground-based photographic survey of Tooting Common contained within this document. The survey carried out produced an accurate and comprehensive record of the Common as it existed in 1987.

In its original form the survey was contained within two bound photographic albums which were kept for many years in the Parks Office in Battersea Park only accessible to staff. This unique record is now publicly available for future study and reference in the form of this digital interactive document.

Description of the digitising process

Working with each album required careful handling, opening out and expanding each frame to reveal a wider visual perspective of the documented sites. We considered that in some ways, the albums have their own logic, demanding the reader to follow its principles of organisation and formation. Both albums favour a linear presentation but there are moments when the assemblage of images resists an ordered reading and clear organisation through both the positioning and absence of photographic material on the page. For example, possible slippages in the archival and storage methods may account for missing images. In this instance the notable gaps and imperfections were retained, reflected on and intentionally embraced throughout this process in order to conserve the albums historical quality.

We considered tactically how best to produce a digital document, contemplating the most responsible methods for converting objects, originally presented in an analogue medium, in a way that protects their original expressive classification. In the initial stages we worked methodically but responded instinctively to each page's subtle transitions, preserving how an image attempts to capture the extent to which the Common exists beyond the confines of the photograph itself. For example, this can be seen in the authors application of Sellotape which carefully stitches the Common back together and expands your perspective of the site. We made the decision to preserve the frequent gaps in the albums as there is no found record of this being an intentional decision by the

photographer. This gave us the ability to rethink the album through its initial form of organisation and logic into the resulting digital formation. By privileging the flow and form of the album and its overall structure, the images below allow the reader to observe and compare the changes in its physical form instead of viewing an individual stagnant frame.

How to use the document

This document provides a continuous, undisrupted passage through the albums content, and we considered the action of scrolling over clicking as the most effective way for the reader to explore this archive. The photographs are in numerical order, numbered according to the original author with each location identified on the map below. Alongside digitising these albums, we produced an additional explorative feature, an interactive map, that provides easy access to locate specific imagery. Two large pocket maps, originally enclosed behind the front cover of these albums, have been gently unfolded and utilised as a digital navigation tool for both manoeuvring your way through the document and for geographical reference. Note that the map is orientated with North facing in the right direction as opposed to the top of the page and so may require the user to readjust their perspective. The red dots scattered over these maps are paired to each site and by clicking on these dots the reader can be carried through to the documented site. This feature provides an interactive means to engage with the material below.

Given these considerations we hope that this document can be seen as a resourceful reflection on the recording process of green space in an urban context.

Condition of care

Some might perceive this document as simply a collection of photographs, easily discarded and no longer required for future study or current environmental affairs. As mentioned previously, a number of photographs are absent from the material, an important omission with which one can begin to identify the condition of care for this object and posit the question of why gaps in this archival material may exist. Poor storage perhaps? Or simply a lack of interest in an analogue method of enquiry in contrast to today's formative methods of interpretation. Either way these absences and abrasions to some of the photographs can usefully articulate the condition in which the albums have been preserved and thus provide an example of its historical value.

This document therefore considers this recent history of the Tooting Common Photographic Survey as a broader tool for examining green space within an urban context and some might consider that preserving this archive, as we have done, provides an index and resource for evolving attitudes surrounding green space management.

Authorship

The purpose of the album was to accompany the original Tooting Common management plan, as in 1987 you couldn't insert photos into text easily. This provided a way to refer to issues being raised or discussed through a visual format.

It would be fair to speculate that the same person or group of people responsible for publishing the management plan also authored these photographs, and may likely have been an internal council team of landscape architects or similar. With this in mind, given the notable discontinuity and quality of the images we can assume the photographic process was carried out by non-specialists. Considering the scale and proportion of each image we can observe that the material has a somewhat local quality, standard 6 x 4'' photographs, suggesting the author employed the services of a local photographic developer. This was a large development project, one that carries a sense of personal labour and perhaps acts as a historical reflection on the organisational practices of public environmental services and departments throughout this period. Interestingly, readers might observe a seasonal change towards the end of the document accompanied by slight changes in layout and numbering, suggesting a change in authorship across seasons.

Taking into consideration or acknowledging the movement of unfolding each frame we added a pair of hands on occasion for scale to assist the readers perspective and as a reminder of the documentation process - asserting our own authorship. The original document provides us with an example of multiple perspectives of the Common that have been constructed through imagery. We considered how this can act as a valuable reminder for us today, that these sites are not passive, and that each visitor enjoys autonomy in this active space, authoring their own survey and expanding their own unique perspective of the Common by simply visiting.

This document offers a unique record of progress for today's readership and offers a form of comparative analysis to the Common in the present day.

Sophie Chamberlain on behalf of Tooting Common Heritage Project.

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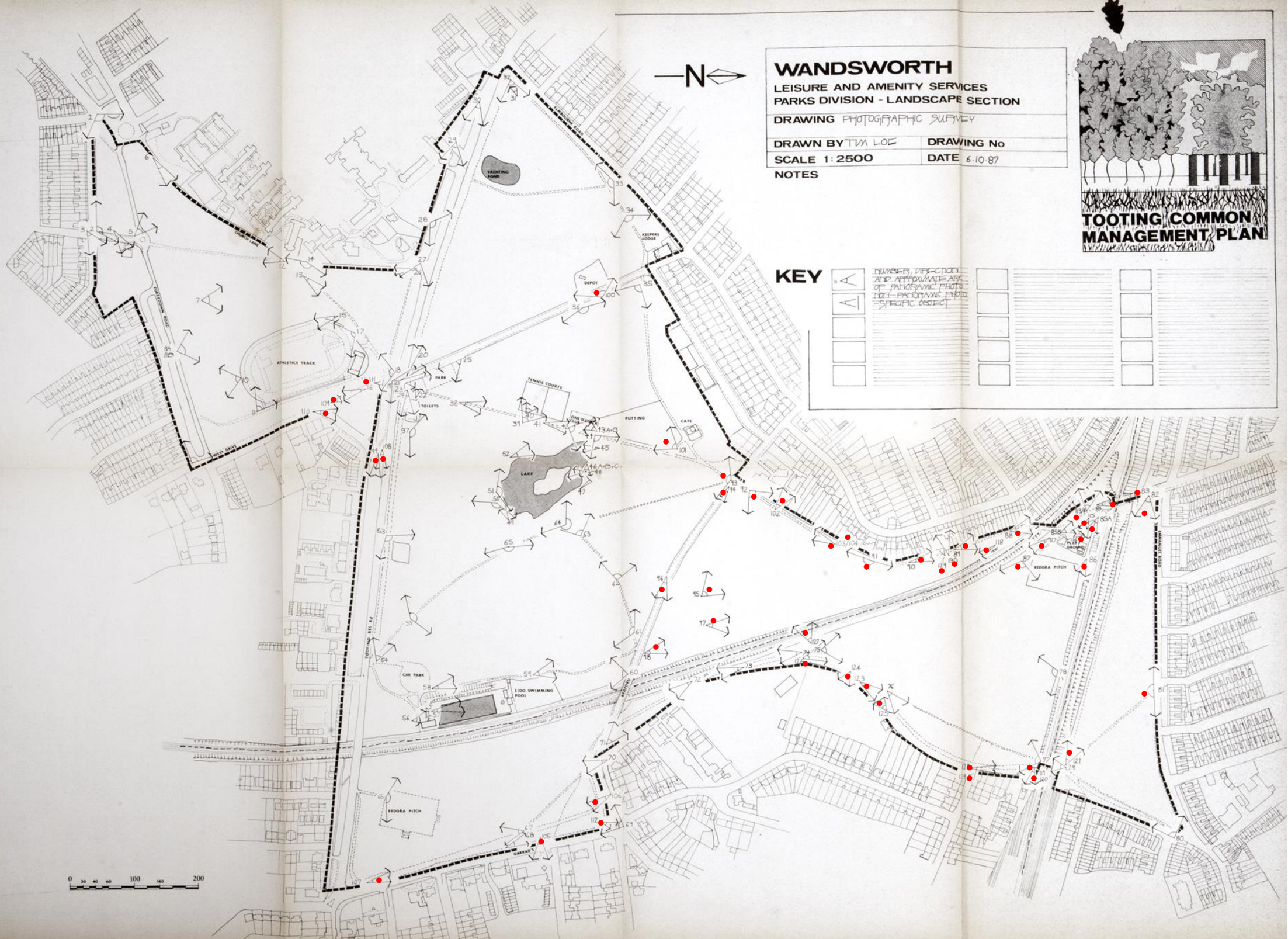
TOOTING COMMON
MANAGEMENT PLAN
TOOTING COMMON PHOTOGRAPHIC
SURVEY No 81–130
MARCH 87/AUGUST 87
TIM LOE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NOTES
TOOTING COMMON MANAGEMENT PLAN
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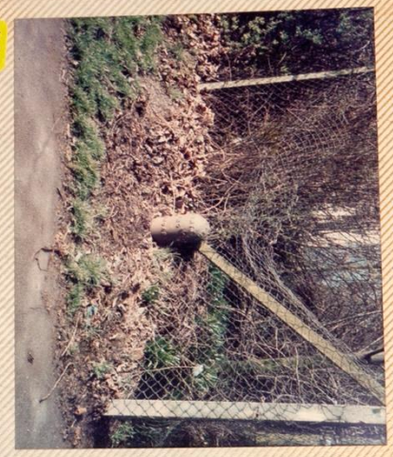

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BIN B

BIN A

BENCH B

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BIN B

BIN A

BENCH B

BENCH C

BENCH B

BENCH A

P.T.O

Listed below are notable changes to the Common and passing observations gathered from current parks service and biodiversity staff.

Album 2 historical observations

91. Bedford Hill Field is now an area of long neutral grassland and no longer a sports pitch.

101. View of the former putting green looking from the café down towards the playground.

105. Interesting building on the edge of the common…unknown.

119. Drewsted cottage with much more vegetation showing today.

BIN A&B from 1987. Today's bins benefit from sturdier construction and larger capacity.

Bench 3. Artwork on benches.