

Tunnel vision causes a stink...

Plans are afoot to construct a 24-mile long system of sewage pipes to prevent nearly 40 tonnes of sewage spilling into the River Thames each year. Whilst the vast majority of Londoners accept the need for the Thames Tunnel or 'super sewer', thousands are arguing it shouldn't be at the expense of some of the capital's most beloved green spaces. **Emma Abbott** delves deeper...

Every year more than 39 million tonnes of raw sewage pours into the River Thames. According to Thames Water it's enough to fill the Royal Albert Hall 450 times. The problem isn't new. Since the year 2000, Thames Water (TW) and others have been investigating the best solution to clean up England's longest river. The plan? To build two new tunnels 24 miles long and running 75m beneath the river.

Destruction/construction

Work on the tunnel is due to start in three years. The system will intercept the combined sewer overflows (CSO) along the Thames Tideway, store sewage and then pump it out at a controlled rate for treatment. Few doubt the new system is a necessary addition to the current ancient and overloaded sewer infrastructure. The system is failing EU directives and putting the government at risk of being heavily fined in the European Court of Justice.

When complete, the super sewer's construction will be a triumph of engineering, ranking alongside the construction of the underground, Crossrail or Channel Tunnel. The cost of this remarkable feat of engineering is estimated to be £3.6 billion.

But many are arguing that the social and environmental costs will be much higher: Resident groups and conservationists are kicking up a stink, complaining the works will take over public parks and protected areas for years, reduce the values of homes and leave a legacy of ugly concrete shafts, service buildings, smells and 24-hour noise.

Brownfield NOT greenfield

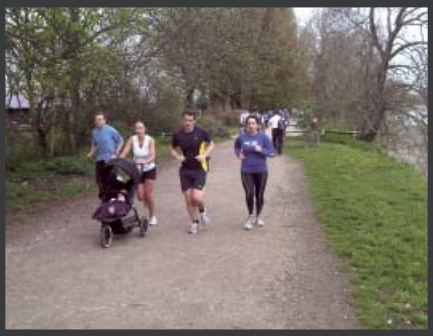
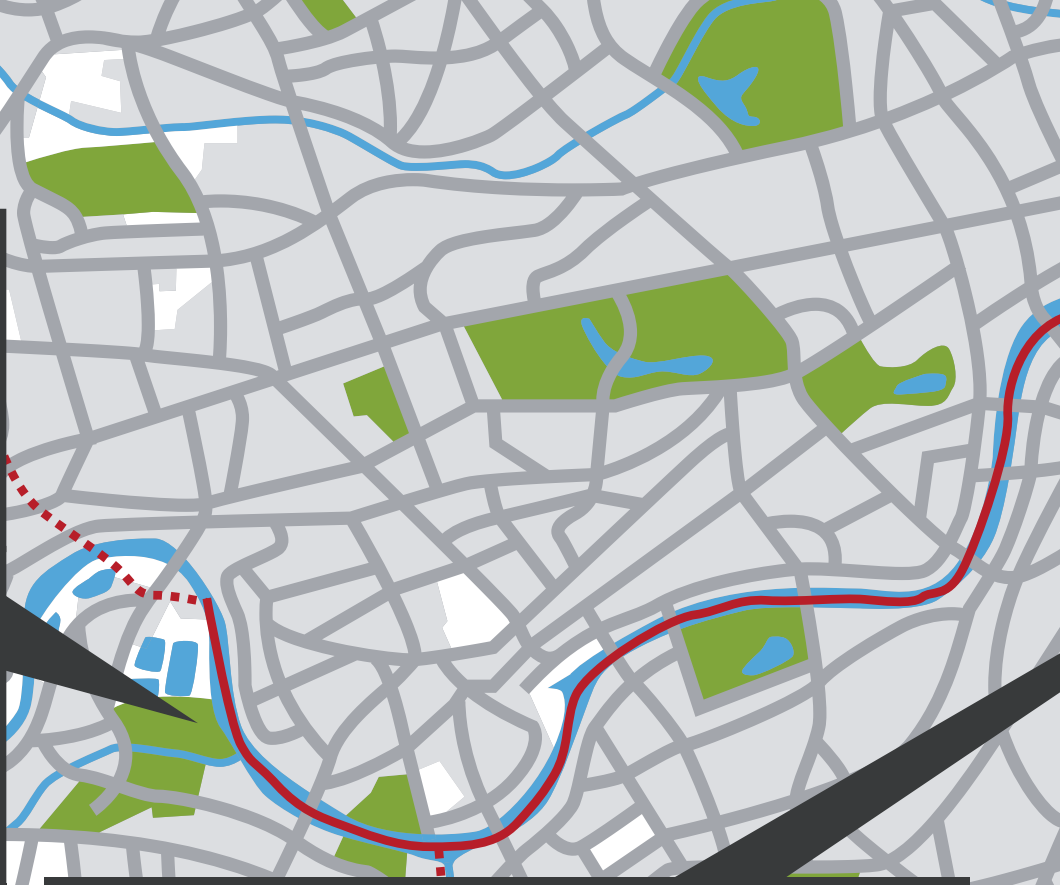
Three parks are in the frame: At the eastern end of the Thames are King's Stairs Gardens in Southwark and King Edward VII Memorial Park in Shadwell. To the west, Barn Elms playing fields and towpath, which is located between Barnes and Putney.

Objectors are calling for TW to use brownfield sites rather than green. The water company claims it is doing all it can to reduce the need to use greenfield sites, but says it will be difficult to avoid these green spaces.

"We support the need to clean up the Thames, but oppose the use of Barn Elms – or any greenfield land as a site," explains Sian Baxter of pressure group STOPtheSHAFT – Putney & Barnes.

"At Barn Elms, nature truly sits alongside people and people of all ages come from far and wide to use this space. It must be valued and appreciated."

TW, says Sian, failed to understand the impact construction work would have. Approximately 1500 people live within 500m of the site and the Barn Elms pitches are used by over ten schools and clubs for football, rugby, cricket and hockey. There is also a netball and tennis court, a gym, a running track and a boathouse. Construction

**BARN ELMS****KING'S STAIRS GARDEN**

work would also threaten the ancient and protected Black Poplars which line the towpath – an immensely important area. A Sustrans cycle route, it is the first step into the countryside for thousands of families, runners, cyclists and ramblers. But not only are the fields and towpath threatened, river activities could become impossible due to the building of a large jetty for industrial river traffic. This is the busiest stretch of the Thames for water activities and is used each year for the world-famous Head of the River Race and Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race.

STOPtheSHAFT has the backing of a number of bodies and organisations, including Wandsworth Council. Edward Lister, council leader, says: "It's no surprise that the plan to sink a main drive shaft at Barn Elms has generated such strong feelings locally.

"It's not that the council is against improving river water quality – we just think that at Barn Elms the cure is worse than the disease. The council won't stand by while hugely important green open spaces are put at risk."

A stone's throw from the playing fields is the 42ha London Wetland Centre – deemed by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) as the best

urban wildlife site in Europe.

General manager Martin Senior comments: "Over the past few decades great progress has been made towards cleaning up the River Thames, with huge benefits to people and wildlife. Proposals that can deliver further improvements to the river's quality would be supported in principle by WWT. The Thames Tunnel has been proposed as a project to deliver that, and therefore is important to consider from all perspectives."

However, the Trust is now in discussion with Thames Water about the implications of its proposals: "We are particularly mindful of the impact on wildlife, the people who visit the London Wetland Centre and the local community. We look forward to seeing how Thames Water responds to the concerns raised by ourselves and others in the initial public consultation."

Heading east

Down the Thames, between the City and the Isle of Dogs, is Green Flag Award winner King Edward VII Memorial Park (KEMP). Thames Water is planning to close a section of the park for at least three and a half years, cutting off the Thames Path

and destroying the wildflower habitat and mature trees. It is the only riverside park between Tower Hill and the Isle of Dogs, meaning locals will have to drive or use public transport to go to parks and open spaces in other wards, such as Mile End.

Emma Dunsire is vice chair of the SaveKEMP group. She explains: "King Edward VII Memorial Park is the only park in our area. It is the heart of not one, but four, Tower Hamlets' wards: Shadwell, Wapping, Limehouse and Stepney. It is an award winning park with a beautiful wildflower reserve and mature vegetation.

"At present the park is well-used by the community all year round. It provides an oasis in an area where green spaces are scarce. Schools rely on it for their sports' days; religious festivals and charity events take place there. It promotes healthy living, especially for young people, and provides a safe environment for all. It would be a scandal if Thames Water were to be allowed to get away with destroying a conservation area and taking away one of the few green areas where children can safely play."

Across the river is King's Stairs Gardens (KSG), also known locally as Park 2000. In 1998, Lottery funding led to its refurbishment, and in 2002



KING EDWARD MEMORIAL PARK FORESHORE



a children's playground was built. Despite this relatively new addition, it is a space steeped in history. King Edward II is said to have used the stairs in the park to access his nearby manor house, and The Jubilee Stone was unveiled by Their Royal Highnesses The Earl and Countess of Wessex on 5 July 2002 to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. It replaced an earlier stone unveiled by The Queen on the occasion of her Silver Jubilee in 1977.

Roger Bilder is spokesperson for the Save KSG group: "King's Stairs Gardens is much used by local residents of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe. Most dwellings in the area are flats – both social and private housing – and few have gardens, so King's Stairs Gardens fills that need for many.

"It's a popular children's play area and local schools use the park for nature studies, exercise and play. Elderly people appreciate the quiet character of the park. It is much used by dog walkers and unlike Southwark Park it does not close after dark. It is an integral part of the Thames Path and the new Jubilee Greenway and is a popular route for walkers, joggers and cyclists.

"As one of the very few riverside parks in

central London, with unparalleled river views and close to several sites and buildings of historical interest, it is much used by tourists and visitors, as well as locals."

Putting the 'action' in group

Thames Water claims that at various stages in the planning process many other green spaces were considered as locations for constructing access tunnels and associated service buildings, and the number of these has been reduced from 45 in the original plan. The offering of this information is seen by many as a suggestion that residents should be grateful that it is only three parks – it could have been many more.

All three groups believe that TW has not done enough to consider alternative sites and are critical of the selection methodology. "The worst 'offence' is the site selection," says Dunsire. "We have very obvious industrial plants and brownfield sites just across the road from the park and these were never even considered. The general feeling among our supporters is that Thames Water picked 'option' sites they knew they could not use to make it easy for themselves to get away with their plans in the park foreshore."

Bilder agrees: "It took us some time to extract the site selection methodology documents from Thames Water. We found their methodology flawed in several respects. For example, although they had undertaken not to demolish housing for this project, they rejected out of hand any brownfield sites that had planning permission for residential development, arguing that by the time tunnelling work was due to start in 2013, housing would be built. Naturally, the owners of such land hurried to obtain planning permission even when they had no immediate plans to develop.

"Furthermore, Thames Water did not keep abreast of the changing situation. Especially in these recessionary times, development plans get shelved or abandoned, even where there is planning permission, and sites become available. Thames Water did not appear to stay in touch with changing circumstances once they had rejected a site. The company ruled out certain sites for various reasons, for example the proximity of a school or a church or residences, but did not apply the same criteria to other sites."

The groups have each identified and recommend brownfield sites to TW. These investigations have taken a great deal of resources – the campaigns' founders had to move quickly to acquire the necessary technical knowledge.

At Barn Elms, STOPtheSHAFT supporters have identified a number of separate brownfield sites which present a feasible solution if combined. The group is also asking TW to consider drilling in both directions from the Tideway Walk, effectively reducing the number of drive shafts from three to two.



▲ View across the Thames from King's Stairs Gardens. © Save King's Stairs Gardens Action Group

▼ Campaigners turn out in force for a SaveKEMP protest. © SaveKEMP Action Group



A change in the tunnelling plan is also supported by Save KSG. The group says that driving the tunnels in the opposite direction to that planned would drastically reduce the waste that would need to be removed at KSG and would, therefore, make an alternative site away from the river far more viable, opening up many potential brownfield sites.

Artist's impression or artistic licence?

In its proposal, TW claims it is committed to restoring spaces upon completion of the works, stating: "We want to leave things in a better state than when we found it."

This doesn't wash with the campaigners. Dunsire responds: "How could they restore or improve the park? The view would be gone, there would be a permanent road across the park right where our wildflower reserve is now, the green areas would be compromised, the soil compacted by years of heavy machinery traffic, the trees felled. The wildlife in the park will be driven away by the noise and

the lighting during and after construction.

"The park could not be restored because the awful legacy of industrial ventilation buildings would prevent people from using it, but also discourage the wild animals from coming back and it would take years to reinstate the vegetation."

Roger Bilder is equally sceptical: "Thames Water said they would reinstate the park and produced an artist's impression showing how King's Stairs Gardens would look after the work was complete. This showed the company intended to construct, as permanent structures, a 45-foot sewage venting tower, a three-storey service building and a significant area of hard-standing for their vehicles. The drawing did not show any access road which would presumably be necessary. So the park would not be returned back to its original state.

"The playground and much of the green open space would be reinstated, although the company did not explain how long it would take for replacement trees to grow into their present mature condition, nor how disturbed wildlife would be encouraged back after seven years."

Counting the costs

"In the affected green spaces, they can't really deliver on their promise; it is likely that these sites will never again be as good as they were," says David Tibbatts of GreenSpace.

"The precautionary principle, widely established in conservation fields should apply; the burden of proof that these developments will not cause harm to these spaces should lie with those proposing to take the action.

"The problem is that green spaces are increasingly seen as the solution in events such as these; plenty of space to work, easy access and cheap. The concerns of residents are perhaps aligned with a general feeling that this kind of use and abuse of parks represents a potential thin end of the wedge; each abuse of public space providing justification for the next."

Part of the reason for this mindset, argues Tibbatts, may be the way in which parks are valued or, rather, not properly valued. Many local authorities still provide a nominal asset value for green spaces at £1.

Using CABE's model, two parks that might traditionally carry the nominal £1 value were shown to be worth over £50m for one and over £100m for the other, and this was said to be an underestimation as it did not include the cost of designing a landscape; its biodiversity value; its value as a way of mitigating the effects of climate change, such as flooding, and various other aspects of value that parks can bring to communities. It is possible, for instance, to put a direct use value on the leisure activities that take place in these spaces in relation to their likely cost if purchased from another leisure provider such as a gym, or an indoor children's pay to play facility.

Using this approach, the parks system in Boston, USA has been shown to have an annual value of in excess of \$354m (£217m), or \$70,000 (£43,000) per acre.

"Thames Water might not be so keen to take a park out of use for several years if it had to compensate communities for their loss calculated in this way," suggests Tibbatts.

Light at the end of the tunnel?

In February, TW purchased Chambers Wharf in Bermondsey – the alternative site identified by Save KSG. The general feeling is that TW is at least regularly engaging with residents and listening to their fears. "Chambers Wharf is now in the frame and is, Thames Water tell us, much more suitable for their needs," explains Bilder. "I suspect in some minds Chambers is a done deal, but we've seen how campaigns and changing circumstances can alter things. The company is still keeping King's Stairs Gardens as an option, and not looking at any other alternatives apart from Chambers, so our park is still at risk."

Head of project at Thames Water, Phil Stride,

is not able to give any assurances as yet – the company is keeping its options open. Stride says: "I must stress that this does not mean that we have discounted King's Stairs Gardens as a possible construction site for the Thames Tunnel. Our action is a prudent, responsible measure to make sure we are able to take forward whichever site proves to be the most appropriate, following our detailed process for identifying the most suitable sites."

To the west, TW is now investigating a brownfield site at Carnworth as an alternative to Barn Elms. Sian Baxter concludes: "This site is far more appropriate on many levels, but nothing is certain and STOPtheSHAFT will continue to fight until Barn Elms is safe."

There's little doubt the campaigns have gathered pace in the past six months, attracting a great deal of attention and support. The outcry has once again demonstrated that people care a great deal about their green, public spaces and that they are willing to fight tooth and nail to protect them.

Among those pledging their allegiance to the 'brownfield not greenfield' cause are: David Bellamy OBE, Jim Fitzpatrick MP, Simon Hughes, MP, comedian Lee Hurst, Mayor Boris Johnson, rower Steve O'Connor, Annie Lennox OBE, Kenny Lynch, Alistair McGowan, Dame Helen Mirren, sailor Nick Price, Anneka Rice, Sir Patrick Stewart and Delia Smith, who denounced the plans as "quite simply idiotic."

But the last word has to go to Stepney-born actor; writer and director Steven Berkoff, who has this to say: "Whilst progress marches on with the inevitable need for infrastructure development, we must also sometimes stop to recognise and appreciate elements of our communities which provide countless other benefits, less easily measured. Parks and green spaces are critically important, especially in cities; we should value them and appreciate the havens they provide us with – so necessary in providing a contrast to a sterile concrete landscape.

"We should be spending money to create more green spaces, instead of seeking ways to remove them or alter them beyond all recognition. We should be investing in the well-being of residents of communities, in the first instance by listening to their needs and desires for their own environments, and valuing parks such as this which have taken years to establish."

It will not be known whether the three parks are safe until September at the earliest, when TW will publish the second part of its consultation. Until then, all we can do is postulate...will those fighting to save some of London's most precious parks be sold down the river? Or will they come up smelling of roses?

Let's pray it's the latter:



▲ Residents of all ages and backgrounds descend on City Hall in March to make their feelings known. © SaveKEMP Action Group

▼ King's Stairs Gardens last autumn (front cover image). © Joe Reid

Thames Water's recent consultation report states:

- Since the consultation, Thames Water has announced that sites south of Carnworth Road in Fulham are being considered as a potential alternative major shaft site.
- Thames Water has announced it has purchased Chambers Wharf in Bermondsey, which will be considered as a potential alternative to King's Stairs Gardens.
- Thames Water still believes the King Edward Memorial Park foreshore is the most appropriate site because it avoids the need for a large work site in the park, reduces the impact upon nearby residents and allows the Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) which is directly under the park to be connected to the tunnel. This is one of the largest sewer overflows which discharges 780,000 tonnes of sewage into the river each year on average. All concerns raised will be taken into account as the project is developed, including working to reduce or remove the proposed ventilation column and associated machinery for this site.



Find out more...

Thames Tunnel Consultation/Thames Water
www.thamestunnelconsultation.co.uk

The Environment Agency
www.environment-agency.gov.uk

SaveKEMP
www.savekemp.com

Save King's Stairs Gardens
www.saveksg.com

STOPtheSHAFT – Putney & Barnes
www.stoptheshaft.org

What do you think of the plans? Write to the editor: editorial@green-places.co.uk.