



The Hidden History of Oasis



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Children's Venture

Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee

Introduction

Oasis Children's Venture is a charity providing play and social and educational opportunities for children and young people in and around the London Borough of Lambeth.

It manages three sites in the Stockwell area: a go-karting track, a cycle and active play centre and a nature garden. Oasis also provides local children with the chance to enjoy holidays outside of London, a tradition maintained since its earliest days.

The Go-karting Project was Oasis' first full-time enterprise, beginning in the late 1970's in a disused plot on Priory Grove when staff would lay down temporary tracks of old tyres for evening races. Since then, it has become a permanent track, complete with workshop and an indoor games area. The Cycle Project grew out of 'Bike Night,' a weekly event originally held

on the go-karting track, and has since taken over the Larkhall Adventure Playground just over the road. Until recently, Oasis also maintained the Thessaly Playspace off Wandsworth Road, a community garden and playground which hosted many events during the charity's time there.

The Oasis Children's Nature Garden, founded as the Allen Edwards Oasis, began life in 1983. Rumoured to be a World War II bombsite, it had, since the war, provided temporary homes for people displaced by bombing. When those residents were eventually rehoused, their 'prefab' homes were removed and the site was surrounded with corrugated iron – and left as wasteland.

Together with the neighbouring Allen Edwards School, Oasis arts worker and volunteer coordinator, Stan Langley,

“A fox has been seen several times in the garden which is extraordinary in such a high density urban area.”

The 1983 Oasis Annual Report demonstrating how times can change



reclaimed the land for community use. A grant from the GLC paid for a new fence and the delivery of a mobile home to serve as a classroom. A Community Industry team cleared the area of debris and, in National Tree Week during November 1983, 200 shrubs were planted by local children helped by Widow Twankey from that year's Lambeth Christmas Panto.

The following year fruit and vegetables were grown for the first time at the garden, together with the building of a pond in June, which triggered an invasion of frogs (much to local children's delight) and a butterfly garden was also established. A hedgerow was planted along the garden's Studley Road boundary and, once again, National Tree Planting Week saw the involvement of another pantomime character, this time in the shape of Aladdin.

The Nature Garden has developed continually since those formative days and now boasts a diverse range of habitats, from the woodland nature trail and picnic area complete with birdhide, to a cottage garden, wild flower meadow and tropical greenhouses and is now recognised as a 'Site of Borough Importance for Conservation.'



**“The pigeon is
spinning
And pecking and
searching
For lots and
Lots of oats.”**

a poem in response to the new
Nature Garden by Robert D who,
in 1984, was aged 7

Oasis Timeline



the 1970s



the 1980s



the 1990s



21st Century Oasis

the 1970s

Oasis first appeared in 1972, as a support group for the Stewarts Road Adventure Playground. Andrew Sawdon (long-standing member, now President of Oasis) recalls the 1970s as a period of declining youth provision in Lambeth (Stewarts Road was one of the few examples in the Stockwell area), but also that it was “an era when there was quite a lot of feeling about improving, providing children’s play facilities and that’s where there was a great focus of community action and activity. New estates had been built without any proper playspaces on them – people wanted activities for their kids. There were enthusiastic people who wanted to get involved in providing these sorts

AN old time village fair is to be staged at Larkhall Park off Larkhall-lane by a fairground enthusiast.

He is Mr. R. G. Beavan, a civil servant, previously in the cinema industry and who has also been in West End shows and designed theatre scenery.

Mr. Beavan said, “I wanted to stage this festival because of the lack of entertainment in South London, particularly Stockwell.

1972: South London Press

Thanks to the drive and commitment of its founders, Oasis developed from modest beginnings into a champion of youth provision in the Stockwell area and sowed the seeds for future activities for children throughout Lambeth.

of things themselves – a form of community action.”

In 1977 Oasis began to employ playleaders to promote holiday schemes on local estates. By 1980, each school holiday on the Springfield Estate saw a playscheme set up and organised by residents. In 1978 Thessaly Playspace was established. Once a small “estate” of prefabs were removed it reverted to a wasteland, used for fly tipping and little else. A subcommittee of the Oasis group decided to put this derelict land to better use and set about clearing the site.

Zed Rodgers was one of the first people employed by Oasis as a sports leader and is widely credited as the founder of the Go-karting Project. Despite a background in sports such as lacrosse, he found that local youngsters were far more interested in playing football and began training a group of children from the Studley Estate. Sessions were held on a disused playground next to the school on Priory Grove, but before long Zed found another use for the space. Where this idea came from remains unclear, but Oasis acquired an old, motorized go-kart and, being mechanically minded, Zed managed to get the thing working. Creating makeshift tracks from tyres

borrowed each night from the nearby Larkhall Adventure Playground, he and the other staff began to race the kart on the old school space. According to Zed, as soon as the children saw what was going on they were “hooked” and, before long, the Oasis Go-karting Project was in full swing.

“... as unemployment increases and the future for young people looks more and more glum then Oasis may offer a small light in the darkness.”

- *Outgoing Chairman, Jaffe Jeffers, in the 1979-80 Oasis Annual Report*

Queenie's Bench

Between the Nature Garden’s meadow and vegetable plots sits Queenie’s Bench. It was named in honour of Queenie Moncrieff, who is seen by many as the early driving force behind Oasis. During its formative years, she served as Chair and later continued as Vice-Chair. She remained on the Management Committee until her death. A sturdy horse chestnut tree also stands in the corner of the meadow, planted in her memory.

Upon her retirement from the Oasis Chair, her successor, Andrew Sawdon, wrote of her as “a pillar of the community locally, working for such a variety of causes, working in good times as bad.”



Children today, enjoying Queenie's Bench

the 1980s

During a decade which at first appeared grim for Britain's young people, with government housing cuts and rising unemployment, Oasis nevertheless flourished. The Go-karting Project became established

1980

- Oasis helps to overcome the temporary closures of Stewarts Road Adventure Playground and Patmore Youth Club and provides a course training local residents to run playschemes. With Jefe Jeffers stepping down, Queenie Moncrieff assumes the role of Oasis Chairperson.



1980: Oasis children on holiday at Sayers Croft

- In June, the Oasis Go-karting Project is featured in *South London Press*.

1981

- Oasis receives funding to guarantee staff for the Go-karting Project until 1984. Meanwhile, in November, Baroness Philips, the Lord Lieutenant of London, learns about karting while presenting Oasis with a cheque to finance go-karts for children with disabilities. The Go-karting Project is believed to be the only full-time project of its type in the UK.



1982: Prepared for potholing at Cwm Kesty

1982

- In June, the Go-karting Project is invited to set up a track in Battersea Park for Capital Radio's Venture Day. The track is visited by HRH Prince Charles, whom Zed Rodgers recalls being very interested, down-to-earth and very frustrated at having worn a suit to a karting event. This year also sees the introduction of Oasis' first accessible go-kart for disabled children, which is enthusiastically received by youngsters from all over Lambeth.

- Stan Langley is recruited to develop arts in the Oasis area with plans to create a community garden on the derelict Larkhall Lane site adjacent to Allen Edwards School. Ideas for the site include an orchard, an eco-pond, hen-house, allotments, flower-beds and a raised section for disabled children.

- Queenie Moncrieff retires as Chair of Oasis to become Vice-Chair and is replaced by Andrew Sawdon. Zed Rodgers also departs after what feels like a year of 24/7 go-karting to become a drama student. He later goes on to become a radio presenter and one of Denmark's foremost DJ's!



1983: August, Larkhall Festival

1983

- The Allen Edwards Oasis is born! The GLC donates a mobile home to serve as a classroom (as it does to this day) and the site is cleared of refuse and cinders by a Community Industry team.

- The Go-karting Project is featured on Thames TV's *Freetime* programme, the first of several appearances by Oasis sites on television, and Oasis organises the Larkhall Children's Festival, a day of assorted activities and entertainments featuring clowns, jugglers, trampolining,

and Stockwell saw the emergence of the Allen Edwards Oasis, together with new projects such as the Camel Club and Bike Night.

pony riding, music and arts and crafts. Many children make their own *Superman* outfits for the event.



1984: Larkhall Festival Procession

- An estimated 2,000 children let off some steam with Oasis' Inflatables Project, which is aimed at bringing bouncy castles to sites and events throughout Lambeth.

1984

- Oasis wins a Shell "Better Britain" Achievement Award for its work in transforming the Nature Garden site and August sees another Larkhall Children's Festival, this time featuring a procession around Stockwell and Larkhall led by London's Town Crier complete with floats and stiltwalkers, plus a display by the Landsdowne Karate Club.

"Fatima the Fantastic Fire-eater ran out of paraffin so we had to rush down to a local garage to buy some and one of the Chinese boxers broke his hand chopping a brick in half."

- *The 1984 Oasis Annual Report*

1985

- Three goslings are successfully hatched at the Nature Garden, ushering in a stream of visitors during their ten week stay. Almost fully grown, the young geese are returned to Surrey Docks City Farm in Rotherhithe.



1985: Larkhall Festival, a member of the Honda Imps in action

- The Nature Garden is visited by pupils from seven local schools during the academic year and the BBC schools programme *Zig-Zag* features children from Allen Edwards School on a "mini-beast" hunt in the garden. Work begins on the construction of pathways accessible to wheelchair users.

- On August 30th, the third Larkhall Festival organised by Oasis features motorbike stunts by the Honda Imps aged 16 and under, displays and races by the Harrington BMX Trick Team and Bus Stop Theatre's circus skills. Vauxhall City farm provides donkey rides and other animal attractions and there is music from the Ricki De Cairos Youth Steel Band and Steel 'n Skin.

1986

- Stan Langley departs Oasis, remembered not only as the Nature Garden's founder, but also by children as "a very special gorilla at the Larkhall Festival." In October, the Oasis Camel Club begins, offering children the opportunity of regular weekend trips to a variety of UK locations with longer trips offered during school holidays.



1987: Path in the Nature Garden

1988

- There is more construction work at the Nature Garden with a new ramp fitted to the classroom together with an accessible toilet. During National Wild Flower Week, local children plant the beginnings of the Nature Garden's meadow in an area with poor soil. Other events this year include Environmental Study Week during which children build bird boxes and a bark mulch path, plus a Fun Week at Thessaly Playspace featuring a waterslide and inflatables. The kart track also hosts filming for an episode of Thames TV's *The Bill*.



1988: Clearing the path

1989

- David Eckhold, former senior playleader at Larkhall Adventure Playground, runs a new, weekly bike club at the kart track. This marks the beginning of "Bike Night," which will eventually develop into a fully fledged

project in its own right. The following year also sees the start of girls-only karting sessions and holidays.



1989: Plant Day

- The Nature Garden gets its first full-time Environmental Worker in the shape of Laurence Pinturault, who once appeared on the television series *An English Woman and Her Garden*. Andrew Sawdon recalls that "she wasn't English, but she was too good to miss for this programme. She had an allotment, rode a big, powerful motorbike and did bonsai trees and kickboxing."

Oasis children enjoyed lots of different holidays during the 1980s. After one of several camping trips to Cwm Kesty in Wales, one of the children remarked,

"Don't London Stink! I think I prefer the smell of cow pats. Let's go back." There were other holidays at Sayers Croft Rural Centre and Tanners Hatch in Surrey and in the Forest of Dean which children in awe. Camel Club activities included a medieval banquet at St. Briavel's Castle.



1989: Cleaning up Thessaly Playspace

"We moved into this area in 1989. I was really happy to find this Nature Garden, ventured over there and the children started going there and loved it. They really enjoyed going there, catching frogs and tadpoles and digging vegetables and the staff were so friendly and warm. It was a very nice experience for them."

- Mary Edwards, local resident and former Oasis Management Committee member

Stockwell Bus Garage

Designed by Adie, Button & Partners, Thomas Bilbow of the London Transport Executive and the engineer A. E. Beer, the garage was opened in 1952. It has a reinforced shell concrete roof supported by nine shallow arches and covers more than 73,000 square feet. At the time, it was the largest single span roof in Europe. Since 1988 it has been a Grade II listed building.



Stockwell Garage Interior

the 1990s

Despite occasional setbacks during the 90s, Oasis projects continued to grow and develop, reaching ever increasing numbers of children in and around Lambeth.

1990

- In February several hundred trees are planted in the garden by local children with the aid of the Mayor. The new Environmental Worker, Laurence Pinturault, begins a botanical survey of the site which finds over *three hundred and seventy species*.



1990: Summer Camp

1991

- Thanks to a new greenhouse, Oasis begins its Tropical Plants Project with a trip to Kew Gardens where the children learn about some of the world's different climates and their associated plants. As well as plants, the project also becomes home to some giant stick insects and is featured on a children's television programme about the environment.

- March 8th is International Women's Day and more than sixty girls and

young women are able to try go-karting for the first time at the Go-karting Project. The project also provides a "grass kart track" for the Larkhall Summer Fair, organised by Christchurch Vicarage.



1991: Oasis Girls Residential

1992

- This year the Allen Edwards Oasis is visited by nearly *two thousand* school children, while the garden also receives a grant to further improve wheelchair access. As well as established activities, such as pond-dipping and bird-watching, children learn about different wildlife habitats, seasonal cycles, tropical plants and environmental issues through papermaking and other forms of recycling. In October, Oasis is incorporated as a Private Limited Company but retains its charitable status.

1993

- The Environmental Project, now called the Oasis Children's Nature Garden, is threatened with closure after cuts in council funding. A campaign by local residents ends with a demonstration at Lambeth Townhall where local children are among those to speak on the Nature Garden's behalf. Requests for alternative funding are granted and the Nature Garden is saved! A further campaign later in the year, this time asking for permanent planning permission for the Go-karting Project, is also successful.



1992: Vauxhall City Farm Trip

"I was so scared they would close the Oasis, I had to get my message through. What I said I can't remember clearly, though I do remember it was written on the spot, and stated how ridiculous [it would be] to close the Oasis to replace it with a carpark."

- *Summer Tabbakha, then at school and an Oasis user, remembers speaking on the garden's behalf*

"The facility for local children is very important – afterschool and holidays. There have been a few occasions when Oasis has been threatened with closure and caused a furore in the neighbourhood."

- *Mary Edwards*



1993: Oasis children and staff at Lambeth Town Hall

- Photographs taken by children at the Nature Garden go on display at the Brixton Tate Library as part of the London Wildlife Week celebrations.

1994

- As well as holiday playschemes, the Nature Garden hosts a Latin American Children's Festival during the summer. Other activities include making musical instruments from scrap materials and workshops around tea-making with herbs found in the garden and tasting tropical fare such as sugar cane, cola nuts, mangoes, passion fruit and pineapples – with pineapples the clear winner !

- Many newly planted trees and shrubs make for a leafier Thessaly Playspace where nesting Blackbirds and Pigeons are joined by visiting Goldfinches and Robins. Thessaly gains a new mural to replace the one which was lost in 1991 courtesy of local artist Brian Barnes. The new mural is a history of the world's animals ranging from dinosaurs and sabre-tooth tigers to badgers and hedgehogs, lions and monkeys.



1994: Latin American Children's Festival

1995

- This year the Nature Garden is visited by more than 2,500 children; the Go-karting Project by over 2,300; Bike Night is attended by some 1,500 young riders; the Oasis Inflatables Project is accessed by another 2,600 children. That's almost *nine thousand children and young people*. Unfortunately, Oasis is again faced with council cuts.

An Open Day is held during which councillors are given a tour of all three sites. Again, support floods in from the local community, including letters to the council from concerned parents and children:

“Dear Councillor, please don’t close part of the Oasis because every one in my class likes the Oasis. I like looking at the frog spawn and looking in the greenhouse. Please give more money to the Oasis.”

- a letter from Sarah C, then of Herbert Morrison Primary School



1995: February, Battersea Park

1996

• Between April and October, the Nature Garden runs its first Lottery sponsored “Out of School Environmental Scheme,” providing children with access to garden activities on weekdays. The Saturday Nature Club also provides themed sessions including conservation, habitat

construction and a study of wildlife migration. Joanne Brown, leaving a teaching career to become more involved with environmental work, joins the Nature Garden as a playleader alongside Bridget Meadows, a nearby resident. Joanne recalls how Bridget’s lifestyle had involved “sustainability” long before it became fashionable. She, herself, will go on to become the coordinator of Oasis and, eventually, its Director.



1996: Summer Inflatables project, used by more than 2,600 children that year

• Events in 1996 include International Women’s Day in March, with young people helping to build a bike shed for Bike Night, a Recycling Day during May’s Environment Week and National Spring Clean Week. Also, this year, Oasis investigates taking over Larkhall Lane Adventure Playground and using it as a base for the Cycle Project.

1997

• The Oasis Children’s Nature Garden is once again visited by television crews, this time from both Carlton TV and the BBC, in response to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers’ new Natural Pioneers initiative.



1997: The Nature Garden classroom and cottage garden

1998

• New features in the Nature Garden include a birdhide overlooking the central picnic area and a “living” water feature which pumps water between ponds by means of wind and solar power. Meanwhile, David Eckhold, Bike Night’s founder, leaves Oasis for new pastures and the Go-karting Project faces a difficult year; decreased funding means the end of Girls Night as the project is reduced to a two day week. Nevertheless, 4,500 young people are still able to visit the track and, the following year, new funding from the National Lotteries Charities Board means a revived programme of activities across all of the Oasis projects.

Oasis continued to offer children opportunities to get away from London with frequent trips and holidays throughout the 1990s, such as a trip to “Aklowa” African village in Bishops Stortford where children were introduced to Ghanaian dance, drumming and cookery. Among many others, a Nature Awareness Holiday to Wales involved staying in cabins run entirely on sustainable power and there was a holiday for girls at the Chatsworth Centre, Swanage.



1998: Young cyclists

“The dinner was OK but not that nice. I missed my mum’s cooking. Nearly every day we went swimming and I liked the holiday, I really enjoyed it. I wished we could stay for two weeks and I liked the tuck shop.”

- one of the children reviews the food at Swanage

The Stockwell Memorial

The memorial, inaugurated in 1921, was built to honour those who fell during World War I. Today, it boasts a mural begun in 1998 by Brian Barnes, the artist also responsible for those at the Thessaly Playspace. In 2005, the memorial became a scene of controversy when, commissioned by the Stockwell Partnership, a portrait of Jean Charles de Menezes was added to the mural. Menezes, a Brazilian electrician living in London, was mistakenly shot and killed by police in Stockwell tube station on 22 July 2005.



Stockwell Memorial

21st Century Oasis

A vital and vibrant part of the fabric of Stockwell, Oasis continues to meet the challenges of the new millenium, its staff and committee members determined to further the cause of local children.

2000

- Having been granted council permission to take over the Larkhall Adventure Playground, Oasis sets about repairing the site and making it safe and is allowed to develop the playground for cycling activities – plans involve Marks Barfield Architects, designers of another notable Lambeth landmark – *The London Eye*.



2002: Children from Oasis perform at Larkhall Park during that year's festival

2002

- The year of Oasis' 30th birthday sees the Oasis Cycle Project take up residency at the Larkhall Adventure Playground. The new improved site also hosts the launch of Stockwell Urban II, or "Stockwell United." This £12 million initiative, part funded by the European Commission, is focused on the regeneration of Stockwell through distribution of grants for local projects.

- Oasis children take part in the revived festival held on Larkhall Park, including a performance in Samba inspired costumes led on stage by the Nature Garden's Jenny Hindmoor. The Park continues to host a Stockwell Festival event for the next three years.

2003

- Receipt of Urban II funding means increased staff for the various Oasis projects and a new Portuguese Playleader position is paid for by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The Go-karting Project begins to offer pedal-powered karting at the track, which proves especially popular with younger children, and Oasis celebrates the Portuguese Festival of São João in traditional style at the garden.



2003: Pedro Leitao de Sousa, then Portuguese speaking Play Worker, works the crowd on Portuguese Day

2004

- During the year over 4,000 children visit the Nature Garden which features a summer of environmental drama and performance with the Purple Broccoli theatre company and, once again, children from Oasis take part in the Stockwell Festival. Leah McNally leads a 10-week workshop with children, developing costumes based on the Mexican "Day of the Dead". Children from the Nature Garden lead the colourful parade with dancers including "Our Lady Pineapple," a tribute to Stockwell botanists, the Tradescants.



2005: Oasis Bonfire Night

2005

- Despite a temporary reduction in hours for staff across the projects, the Nature Garden continues to provide after school activities for most of the week, as well as Saturday sessions,

playschemes and half-term trips, and keeps up its tradition of educational workshops for visiting groups. Oasis children are also given the opportunity to showcase their talents in the Ashden Midsummer Evening art exhibition. The Under 5's group is also established one morning a week.



2006: The BBC's 21st Century Classroom project in the Nature Garden

2006

- Extensive work is carried out to the Nature Garden pond area and staff lead a series of volunteer evenings, offering locals the opportunity to both help with gardening and to learn new skills. In August, a team from the BBC's 21st Century Classroom project visits the garden over two days, working with the children to produce a short film about the garden and introducing them to a variety of electronic tools and media.

The John Tradescants

John Tradescant the elder was a 17th century botanist who collected exotic plants from Europe and North Africa together with samples brought from America. These, along with with other curiosities, were displayed in what became the first English museum to be opened to the public, The Ark in Stockwell. His son, John Tradescant the younger, traveled to Virginia where he encountered trees such as the Magnolia and Bald Cypress before introducing them to England upon his return.



Tradescant the Elder

In Closing

Oasis has been described as a “survivor” of another era – that of 1970’s activism. It has retained a drive to be active within the community, to sustain and improve the services it offers to children and young people in and around Lambeth.

The nature garden is a unique place, the only community garden in London dedicated to children. It has a strong sense of history and heritage and has continued to grow and develop over the years into a vital resource. It has brought a real sense of the seasons, of experiencing nature to thousands of children living in inner city London. Now in it’s 25th year the nature garden has become established, quite literally, as an Oasis within Lambeth.

If you would like to find out more about Oasis then please look at the Oasis website at oasisplay.org.uk or contact the main office on 020 7720 4276.



“I like it here and I have learnt about nature. I have more freedom. Doing lots of activities and I like helping out with healthy eating and growing vegetables.”

Leila age 9 yrs old.

A current member of Oasis Children’s Nature Garden 2007.

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Nature Garden opening times

Environmental play project

Tuesday - Friday 3.30pm - 5.30pm
Saturdays 10am - 3.30pm

Under 5's group

Friday mornings (seasonal)

Education workshops for school

Tuesday - Thursday, schools to
book in advance for session

Easter and Summer Playschemes

Open for children 10am - 12pm and 2pm - 4pm

Also open for groups to take part in focused
environmental workshops morning or afternoon.
Booking is essential - to make a booking call
the main office on 020 7720 4276.

Half Term Trips

Holidays or day trips to areas of natural interest.

Registered Office: 1 Aston House, Springfield Estate, Wandsworth Road, London SW8 4ER

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