

# The Queen's Gardens history

The provision of the original Town Hall Gardens was largely an accident of various circumstances in the mid eighteenth century, but that sequence of events is responsible for the gardens we have today in the centre of commercial Croydon.

In the mid 19th century Croydon was a thriving, rapidly expanding market town of around 20,000 people. The town was situated on the fringe of London and astride an old coaching route to the south coast. This key position attracted other forms of transport as they developed and Croydon Town Railway Station (West Croydon) opened in 1839 and East Croydon in 1841.

East Croydon was considered to far away from the commercial and shopping centre of Croydon so a branch line was opened terminating at Croydon Central in Katharine Street. The branch line was never very successful and after opening in January 1868 closed in November 1871.

This small section of railway did however succeed in bringing together under one ownership a large plot of land in the centre of the town which had previously belonged to numerous owners. This act started the subsequent moves which culminated in The Queens Gardens.

In 1884 the "High Street Improvement Committee" was formed. It aimed to widen the narrow High Street and tidy up the notorious Surrey Street area. Widening the High Street achieved both by demolishing building frontages and rebuilding anew. One of the frontages was the old Town Hall and it was decided to rebuilt a new one on a less valuable site away from the main road frontage.

The Central Station site was offered to the Council in 1889 and they proposed " the erection of Municipal Offices, Courts, a Police Station, Library and many other public purposes and yet leave a considerable margin of land which might be disposed of". No mention of an adjacent open space or garden was made at this time.

By 1891 a local architect was instructed to prepare alternative plans for the municipal complex. In October 1894 the Borough Engineer was asked to report "... on the laying and making up of Fell Road and to laying out the land and hollow..." no further mention or plans appear to have been made. However by November 1895 approval was given for tenders to be invited for "...enclosing the land...recently laid out as a garden."

The new Town Hall was opened on 19th May 1896 by the Prince of Wales and following this a banquet was held in a large marquee that had been erected in the Gardens below ground level.

The Town Hall Gardens seen today were the creation of a late-Victorian Borough Engineer and the Victorian aspect was retained when The Queens Gardens were planned.

With increased population and responsibilities the Town Hall by the 1930's could not accommodate all the Corporations Departments so a design competition was held in 1935 for an extension to existing buildings. The site was to be on the gardens which were to be relocated on the Fairfield site. The Second World War stopped all ideas of development but the post war period concentrated the problems anew. Proposals for a new municipal block as part of the Central Area Development Scheme were drawn up by 1956 and a garden was included from the beginning.

The site was bounded by Mint Walk, Park Lane, Fell Road and Friends Road. The construction was completed in 1968 and all the buildings on the garden site demolished after lengthy discussions. In keeping with the building a modern formal design was adopted for the garden with a central axis leading towards Katharine Street. From a horticultural point of view the garden was on the "wrong" side of the building because of the shade cast by the 18 storey block.

After the construction of Taberner House the Police Station was the only building left that fronted Mint Walk. In conjunction with other road alterations one end of the Walk was "stopped up" and the remaining portion served the Station. In 1980 when the Police Station was vacated and demolished the remaining road was removed and the area grassed over. When the Architect designed Taberner House he envisaged the two gardens being joined together. His scheme sought to marry together the Victorian aspect of the Town Hall Garden and the formal Taberner House Garden.

The new design for the Gardens anticipated a direct line of access with the lower Town Hall Gardens and a depression was created in a position where a change from high to low level could be achieved without further extensive damage to the grounds.

The transition of formal to informal matches the high and sunken levels keeping the gardens separate. The pool and fountain occupies the central point between the two.

The construction of the garden commenced in October 1982 and the final garden works were carried out in Spring 1983 and were completed for the Borough Centenary celebrations. The new gardens were opened by Queen Elizabeth II on 21st June 1983 when a small plinth was unveiled to commemorate the opening of The Queens Garden's.