

# Turning the Corner

**Giles Worsley reveals a remarkable £20 million plan to transform traffic-choked Hyde Park Corner into an oasis of quiet, verdant calm**

**K**im Wilkie has a dream. He wants to sit watching the sunset, sipping a glass of wine — at Hyde Park Corner. To most people, this is about as bizarre a dream as you could imagine. Hyde Park Corner is, after all, choked with traffic from dawn to dusk, and for much of the night as well. But Wilkie is no traffic-jam fetishist. He is one of Britain's leading landscape designers and to him Hyde Park Corner, for all its current neglect, is key to the network of royal parks stretching from Whitehall to Kensington Palace that is London's glory. If he has his way, nature is about to reassert itself at Britain's most famous roundabout.

Like much of the gardens of Buckingham Palace, Hyde Park Corner was originally part of Green Park, a royal hunting park separated from Hyde Park by a road that since Saxon times had been one of the main approaches to

London. It was George III who isolated Hyde Park Corner by enclosing all the rest of Green Park west of Constitution Hill to form the gardens of the Queen's House (later Buckingham Palace). It was as a grand entrance to Buckingham Palace that Decimus Burton built the Wellington Arch in 1826, which remains the centrepiece to Hyde Park Corner.

The essentially rural character of Hyde Park Corner was shattered in 1860 when Victoria Station opened. It was transformed into a major road junction, and the first roundabout was created there in 1883 to cope with the traffic. At the same time, the Wellington Arch was moved from its original position facing Burton's Ionic screen beside Apsley House to the top of Constitution Hill.

The rise of traffic proved inexorable, and, by the end of the 19th century, Hyde Park Corner was an impenetrable mass of vehicles, any sense of

connection between Hyde Park and Green Park lost. Some attempt was made to recapture its original sylvan quality in the 1960s, when the current road system was laid out. Hyde Park Corner was reconfigured as a large green island, four acres in extent, grassed over and planted with trees. But the crudeness of the road engineering and the half-hearted landscaping made it no more than a glorified roundabout. With sordid and threatening underpasses as the only approach, Hyde Park Corner became a forgotten island.

It was when English Heritage was made responsible for the Wellington Arch that fresh thought was applied to Hyde Park Corner. One and a half million pounds was spent on repairing the arch, justified partly by a plan to open it up for visitors from later this month.

But was there much point opening the arch if its surroundings were so grim? Realising that Hyde Park Corner was a national embarrassment a steering party of all those involved was set up under English Heritage's lead. Kim Wilkie was commissioned to come up with a masterplan that set out what could be done. Its results are published here for the first time.

Wilkie argues that, at four acres, Hyde Park Corner is

and surfaces redesigned, the settings of the statues improved, perhaps even a café created at the north-west corner as part of a new entrance to the Underground.

The Australian High Commission has already suggested the wall of water could form the basis of a much-wanted memorial to the Australians killed in two world wars. The total cost, which also involves reducing the dual carriageway along the south side of Hyde Park to a single lane, would be about £20 million.

**T**he most expensive features would be remodeling the north-east and south-west corners at £11 million and alteration to the subways at £4.5 million, but work could be incremental. Restoring Hyde Park Corner, the traditional gateway to London, would be also an obvious candidate for the

Heritage Lottery Fund — were it not for the fund's bias against London projects and against projects to improve the public realm.

But, for Hyde Park Corner to be redeemed, it needs to be reconnected with what was park land to the south but which, since George III's enclosure, has been part of the gardens of Buckingham Palace. That sense of connection is currently destroyed by the heavy brick



**Breathing space:** how the remodelled Hyde Park Corner would look. A mound of earth planted with trees and shrubs would cut out much of the noise

quite large enough to generate its own sense of place, and that with careful remodelling and planting it could be pleasant to visit or pass through when walking across the parks. Already, the creation of pedestrian crossings at street level has made Hyde Park Corner much more accessible, but the whole effect could be transformed through careful earth moving, planting and resurfacing.

A feeling of enclosure could be created by subtly remodelling the natural fall of land. A raised mound of earth planted with trees and shrubs to the north-east, towards Piccadilly, would cut out much of the noise and traffic. A wall of water could have a similar effect at the south-west corner, towards Victoria. Trees and shrubs could be more densely planted, the paving

wall running around the gardens, but Wilkie's report suggests that this should be replaced by railings. Nothing would do more to transform this key area of London. Once again trees, not cars, would predominate. A drive round Hyde Park Corner would be one of crossing park land, not an inner-city roundabout.

There are hints from Buckingham Palace that the idea is being sympathetically considered. What more fitting gesture could there be to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee next year? Then, with Hyde Park Corner once more part of the Royal Parks, Wilkie will be able to relax, take a sip of that glass of wine, and enjoy watching the sun go down, with the roar of traffic reduced to a soothing murmur.

Pictures: DAVID GORDON



**Uninspiring:** after the £1.5 million repairs to Wellington Arch, it made sense to improve its grim surroundings