

Naturism *is* happening in London

Naturist activities *do* occur in London, a city of 7.5 million people. The launch of *The London Question* project by the **Naturist Action Group** (NAG) through *H&E* in November 2010 stimulated a flurry of naturist action in the capital. Many naturists shared NAG's concern that little formal naturism existed, and have suggested to us 27 park and open space sites worth investigating.

H&E readers may know that NAG is an internet-based naturist group, which has supporters, rather than a formal paid-up membership. Over 60 NAG supporters have helped *The London Question*, including checking out potential locations. Eighteen were checked by end of August 2012 and action was planned on nine more. Part of our strategy is to hold small-scale mixed-group naturist activities in Hampstead Heath (and elsewhere) to give a 'proof of concept'. NAG will then be able to use this in future discussions with authorities.

We found a great variety of social activities in London's large public Parks. During 2012, however, large-scale events and promotions included those for the Olympics in several key London open spaces. As mentioned in *H&E* this, coupled with the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, meant a heavy workload for police and security services. It also left little space for new very public naturist events.

NAG decided to defer naturist activities in Hyde Park until after the summer. Work has continued on *The London Question* elsewhere. The site checking identified four sites where discreet naturism can take place. This is in addition to Ham Common, popular with gay naturists, and the Men's Pond changing room at Hampstead Heath, which is very cramped. Female naturists may like to contact us at naturistactiongroup.org to help NAG explore naturist opportunities at the separate Ladies Pond in Hampstead Heath.

One naked activity in London clearly demonstrates public acceptance of nudity. That is the very successful *London World Naked Bike Ride*, held with up to 1,000 participants in June each year. NAG has keenly supported WNBR events in the UK and I shall discuss that further below.

Swimming

Naturists use 'social media' to organise spontaneous naturist activities, through networks such as Facebook groups. A good example was the evening Skinny Dip on 11 August, when 18 naturists took part at The Mixed Pond on Hampstead Heath. Happily, this was a mixed-sex group and no problems occurred at the event. From it a new Internet group *Secret Swims around London* has been formed. A second Swim took place in Wimbledon Park on 1 September; a good demonstration of the 'flash mob' concept promoted by NAG.

Naturist swimming in central London has been boosted in other ways. British Naturism opened a new weekly Naked Swim at the University of London in Malet Street. It is now run under the banner *Naturist London* and planned to restart on 23 September. Activities of this new body can be found at www.naturistlondon.org.uk. It is to be hoped that this will become a vibrant focus for London BN members.

NAG has also explored possible swim venues in Hackney. Sadly, they did not work out. We continue our ambition to hold naked swims in The Serpentine in Hyde Park. A link-up with *Secret Swims around London* may help this to happen.

Another positive development has been the ongoing BN restructuring. All of London is now in a new BN London & South East region. Again, use of the Internet makes it easier for BN members to link with each other. Through *Naturist London* a naturist camping weekend in Sussex was planned for early September. Also Annette planned to start a Naturist Yoga Class in south London in September.

Naturist facilities costs money

It may not need saying, but providing naturist facilities does cost money. To do so commercially in London is expensive. It is a few years now since *Cinema in the Buff* held its last London cinema event. Sadly, it did not attract enough naturists to encourage the Greenwich cinema owner to repeat the novel idea. Since NAG launched *The London Question* it is pleasing to record that an additional naturist B+B, with day visit facilities, has opened in East London. Details of these premises can be found through the *Naturist Accommodation UK* website naco.org.uk.

To make a venue pay needs a lot of naturist visitors. *Elixir Health Club* www.elixir-of-life.com at Alexandra Palace in north London is one naturist venue, and for many years *Rio's* in Kentish Town www.rios.co.uk has held naturist only nights. Elsewhere are naturist gay saunas, swingers nights, and *Starkers Night Club* operates in Shoreditch. However, some of these events are unlikely to appeal to mainstream naturists.

Outside of central London there is one naturist Club within the M25 ring. *The Naturist Foundation* www.naturistfoundation.org noted for its annual Jazz Festival is at Orpington. London naturists also have access, within 10 miles of the M25, to many naturist Clubs and Swims. Details of these can be found in the Listings pages, both in this magazine and elsewhere.

Is London unique?

Why is it so hard to have open-air naturism within London? The very successful *London World Naked Bike Ride* attracts up to 1,000 participants in June each year. Organised by just a handful of volunteers, some of whom are naturists, WNBR is a protest against oil-dependency and for safe cycling, rather than a specifically naturist event. Various WNBR events in UK cities do attract a huge number of naturists, and London is no exception.

As the *London WNBR* moves through streets packed with spectators (think Olympic bike races) it receives a good public response. The downside is that, the assembly area where naked people prepare before the ride starts, attracts many voyeurs and male pests with mobile phone cameras. Naked flesh is common in advertising, yet the sight of it live, female in particular, appears to bring out ulterior motives in some lonely men.

The London WNBR '*organising collective*' are working on more measures to combat this problem in future years. One answer has been the introduction of WNBR 'feeder rides'. In 2011 there was one from Sibson in west London and in 2012 a feeder ride from south London. NAG had hoped to run a WNBR 2012 feeder ride from Hampstead Heath in north London, but this is now planned for June 2013.

Other countries do not have such a problem with naturism. In September 2011 NAG ran a fact-finding trip to the Bavarian city of Munich in German. Naturism is accepted in Munich's parks and on the city's river Isar, as reported previously in *H&E*. The *Englischer Garten* is world famous for its naturist area. Nudity in saunas is the norm in Munchen city council's eight leisure centres, and a lot of money was spent upgrading the large municipal naturist area at *Dantebad Leisure Centre* in early 2011.

Sue Ireland is the Director of Open Spaces for the City Corporation of London, and the senior officer responsible for the running of Hampstead Heath. When I discussed with Sue, in mid-2010, the use of Hampstead Heath by naturists and quoted Munich, Sue said that some countries have a different legal context. We found that Bavaria has a special law permitting naturism, signed in 1942 by one Heinrich Himmler. Three reports from the Munich mission are on the NAG website.

“Prudification” of society

There is also what Malcolm Boura of BN aptly describes as '*the prudification of society*'. Concern about paedophilia in society has led to the bureaucratic mess of the Criminal Records Bureau. The CRB checking process can now make many volunteer activities difficult. The print media operate double standards on issues of nudity and morality (*see H&E September 2012*) and religious right groups are pressing the Government for TV and Internet censorship on nudity and naturism.

Fear, perhaps groundless, of upsetting Muslims and other faith groups has led to restrictions on what is permitted in public spaces and places in many cities. Clearly, any society needs to have sensible rules and standards. The ludicrous situation of Steve Gough, imprisoned repeatedly in Scotland for not wearing clothes, and several UK court cases against innocent naturists, have to be borne in mind when planning naturist action. That is why NAG produced its leaflet *You and the Law*, published by H&E in summer of 2010, and set up its *Nudity and the police* project.

That NAG project gathers evidence about how individual police officers appear to act in an arbitrary way. To help naturists attending court cases NAG has a leaflet with guidance on writing reports of the proceedings. Often the nudity provisions in the *Sexual Offences Act 2003* seem to be disregarded. The objective of the *Nudity and the police* project is to collect evidence of this, so that NAG can influence the drawing up at national level of proper and sensible police guidelines on public nudity. In turn that will help naturists in London.

Successful action by naturists

You will understand why NAG is moving cautiously on *The London Question*. We have stimulated a tremendous amount of action and much more naturist activity is now happening in the capital. We know that major parks are incredibly well used, with little room for naturism. We have identified some less-used open spaces that may be more suited to naturism.

NAG has found that the moral and economic climate is presently not right for making a big fuss and drawing public attention to open space naturism. Our initial aim, to get London local authorities to accept naturism in public spaces and leisure facilities, may take a little while yet to achieve. NAG regularly reviews and assesses its activities. In September NAG supporters, not just from London, were invited to do this with us over a weekend entitled: *The future of Naturism*, held at Spielplatz near St. Albans.

NAG believes it has a valid concept, which needs the right tactics by naturists and the right climate of public attitude. All the NAG documents referred to here can be found at naturistactiongroup.org. H&E readers, and naturists everywhere, can help influence the public to adopt positive attitudes towards nudity. Through doing this we can all help in the work of *The London Question*.

John Paine September 2012

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