**Seb Coe:**

At our closing ceremony, we can say that these were games by everyone.

**Narrator:**

London 2012 was unquestionably one of our greatest summers, but it was never just about the sporting success of the Olympics and Paralympics. It was about leaving a lasting legacy for local people and an area of East London that had long been forgotten.

And nothing stands out more than the wide-open space of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park with its 560 acres.

**Dr Phil Askew, Project Lead, London 2012:**

My London Legacy is building the largest new urban park in London since the Victorian era.

**Matthew Wilson, Gardener’s Question Time:**

Decontaminating the soil from the blitz. The soil here is full of oil.

**James Williams, Head Groundsman, London Stadium**

I think we got to take a step back and remember how good the stadium is and what it's done for London.

**Narrator:**

This is my London Legacy, the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park podcast. And in this episode, we're focusing on the green spaces that make up this outstanding park, the Wildflower Meadows, Woodlands, Wetlands, and the West Ham pitch.

**Gardener’s Question Time:** Can you hear me?

**Narrator:**

And as a gardening institution broadcast from the London Stadium, we'll also hear about some of the hidden gems of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park 10 years on from the games that changed everything.

**Gardener’s Question Time:**

So nice to see. Thank you for your patience. So excited to be getting underway. We're thrilled, obviously, to be in this magnificent venue. Kathy Clugston, presenter of Radio Four's Gardeners Question Time, welcoming the audience to the London Stadium. When Danny Boyle’s opening ceremony created his green and pleasant land, few of us thought a decade later we'd be talking about the actual Wildlife Woods and Wetlands as part of legacy. Apart from the people behind the design and landscape of London 2012 and Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. In a moment we'll hear from the London Legacy development corporations, Ruth Lin Wong Holmes. But first, Dr. Phil Askew who was the project lead in the buildup to the games.

**Dr Phil Askew:**

In 2009, I was asked by John Hopkins, who was then the project sponsor for the Olympic Delivery Authority for the park, to come and giving him a give hand. So that was my introduction to something which then took over the rest of my life. I think the thing about this project in particular was that everything had to be done at once, almost. The stadium had to be built at the same time as the park, as all the other venues. And, of course in a normal construction project, you tried to do things sequentially so it's nice and tidy. So, I think at one time there were over 20,000 people working on that site.

**Narrator:**

Where did you get your ideas and your inspiration for what became your vision?

**Dr Phil Askew:**

I think the ideas and inspiration came from a number of sources. We wrote a very comprehensive brief for the park itself and to an extent that drew on two themes. One was the great sort of British history, if you like, of landscapes going all the way back to Capability Brown or Repton all the way up to the present time. But also recognizing that urban parks in cities needed to change the demands of people for health and wellbeing. The impact of climate change all had an effect upon how we think about green spaces in cities and still very much continue to do so, particularly after the last two years of the pandemic. So for example, key aspects were how could we make the park as bar diverse as possible, but also how can we make the park fit for purpose for the 21st century?

**Narrator:**

And how much were you thinking about six weeks in the summer of 2012 and how much were you thinking about 2012 for the generations in the future?

**Dr Phil Askew:**

Yeah. No, you're absolutely right. The legacy was the uppermost in our minds all the time. A really critical part of the design of the park was to ensure that what we built for games largely stayed there. Very different to other Olympic parks and other Olympic venues, which if they stayed at all, often had to be massively changed. So, we designed, for example, the North Park, the Wild Flower Meadows, the way that the River Lee works, cleaning up the River Lee, et cetera, very much to be as they would be permanently.

And indeed, I was there only a few days ago and they are as they were for games pretty much. It is fascinating to look back, we had three master plans for the park, one was for games, one was for what we called the transformation period, the two years post games, and the final one was for sort of almost where we are now in fact. And I think if you look back at those, there have been tweaks and changes, but in reality, they've largely stayed the same. And I think that's testament again to the planning and the thought that went into the whole process of putting the games and post games together.

**Narrator:**

Let me ask you a two-part question. On the 27th of July 2012, when we were all watching Danny Boyle's Green and Pleasant Land, which you must have been a huge fan of, of course. How proud were you on that night, first of all?

**Dr Phil Askew:**

Extraordinarily proud because what was fascinating for me was that we built the park largely in the two years just before games because we couldn't do too much beforehand. And I think what I was so proud of was that we had done something in a ridiculously short period of time, but we've done it well and everybody who had been to the park prior to opening ceremony was blown away by it. So I knew we were in for a fantastic experience and I knew we had a park, which when people came to it they were going to be amazed by.

**Narrator:**

10 years on. How proud are you of it now?

**Dr Phil Askew:**

I'm extraordinarily proud because it's still referenced as an example, as an exemplar of urban green space. I think it's influenced a huge amount of people post games in terms of how we think about places in cities, how we think about parks, green space, how we think about bar diversity, habitat creation. Amongst a few people, we were the first people to plant Dutch elm disease resistant elm trees in that park. They're looking great, they've grown really well. We're bringing the elm back into our sort of landscape, if you like, and that's something that disappeared many years ago. It set all sorts of precedents which people have then learned from and continue to do so.

**Ruth Lin Wong Holmes:**

I'm Ruth Lin Wong Holmes. I work for the London Legacy Development Corporation looking after the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park and I'm Design Principle for landscape and public realm. Games Time was incredible in terms of seeing how people interacted with the landscape and the planting and the amazing flowers that were there during Games Time. And then there was a sort of two years of having to transform the park into a public park. So, places that were temporary venues, like on the South Plaza, have been transformed into this amazing garden rooms with the P2 dwarf perennial planting. And then in the north of the park, which was always more ecological with all those venues disappearing, there's been this sort of amazing progression and development of the habitat there and then watch what species have been attracted by that.

**Narrator:**

And we're here at the London Stadium for the recording of Radio Falls Gardeners Question Time. Arguably, the heritage gardening program that everyone remembers from their childhood and growing up and their parents listening, who would've thought that in 2012 the Olympic stadium would be hosting Gardeners Question Time? It shows how far we've come.

**Ruth Lin Wong Holmes:**

I know. It's the most extraordinary and exciting thing for someone like me. I mean you are right, it's like the pinnacle of horticulture and knowledge about gardening here and naturally, a large athletics kind of sporting event to suddenly be linked to something like this is just fantastic. And there's so much to talk about just outside the stadium is the 2012 gardens that were here for the Games Time, which are just full of really interesting plant associations that have been really carefully designed and still delight the public.

**Narrator:**

What's the biggest challenge that you've had to deal with over the past decade?

**Ruth Lin Wong Holmes:**

I think it's understanding the park and how people use the park and what really delights them. And also understanding the planting we had was supposed to look spectacular for two weeks of the year, because obviously when we planted things, not all the species were available. And so we've had things which have worked which haven't worked. And so we've gently had to have a very sort of forensic way of looking at the planting. And we bring back James Hitchmough, Nigel Dunnett, and Sarah Price, who were the original designers quite regularly to say, "Well this was your vision, this is what's happening and can we do to extend the interest throughout the year?" And then also keeping an eye on the biodiversity and other sustainability commitments we made back in before 2012,

**Narrator:**

More and more people are coming to visit. We saw that during COVID times as well. And in the last podcast we talked about 40,000 jobs here within the next decade. With more and more people here, does that actually impact on the landscape and the wildlife and the flowers?

**Ruth Lin Wong Holmes:**

I think there's a certain amount of brilliance that there's a more diversity of people. People who were in the local area have suddenly discovered the park. Obviously with more people brings a bit more wear and tear and also the sort of understanding that some places can't take trampoline as much as others, particularly compaction around trees can affect trees. So yes, it's understanding how patterns of use change and what we need to do as park managers and landscape managers to kind of mitigate that effect.

**Narrator:**

And you forget you're in Central London. I mean we've got drilling going on, we've just had a plane fly over. It reminds you that we are in central London, effectively.

**Ruth Lin Wong Holmes:**

I know and that's what's the extraordinary thing. What you can see in terms of nature and wildlife in terms of the kingfishers, if you can see them flitting around, that flash of blue next to the waterways. You might see the most amazing red tail bumble bee on the park, or carder bumblebee. And for next few minutes you could be going off shopping. I was talking to someone from the London Wildlife Trust who spotted a weasel up by the Velodrome and we've had the Streaked Bombardier Beetle, which is a wonderful little beetle, incredibly rare, one of the red listed beetles, and that's why our biodiversity manager is putting up some habitat areas, particularly on the greenway, which is a very large walking route that goes along the side of the park, which is actually on top of a basil jet sewer. But it is an amazing kind of habitat corridor which has had the beetles spotted. So the habitat will go in specifically for that beetle but obviously has a huge amount of benefit for other species.

**Narrator:**

You said earlier about how proud you were about Gardner's Question Time being here and the fan of horticulture that you are, when you look at the London Stadium and you've seen, we'll hear from Jimmy later in the podcast, his green grass, do you look at it and go wow?

**Ruth Lin Wong Holmes:**

Oh, it's definitely a wow. The thing to get it to this high quality is just phenomenal, and it's just the incredible spectrum of horticulture. I mean, someone calculated about 65 different career routes you can go in horticulture, which can be high turf management of which this is exemplary.

**Narrator:**

Okay, I imagine you'd probably like to know who the panel are going to be today.

**Matthew Wilson:**

My name's Matthew Wilson. I am a garden landscape designer and a panelist on Radio Four's Gardeners Question Time. I was very lucky to do a series of features from the park and see how it all developed. So yeah, brilliant, amazing memories of that time.

**Narrator:**

And the fact that 10 years on there is legacy because there was so much talk and you'll know this from doing the radio programs before that, that legacy was so important to the bid and then the development but everyone was really skeptical about it.

**Matthew Wilson:**

Yes. Legacy was something that I think it was mentioned in every breath, actually. It wasn't a question of, we're doing this for 2012, what follows? Is kind of incidental. We are doing this for 2012 as the starting point in the journey for this park.

**Narrator:**

And it is an amazing green space and it's important that we see woodland, we see wildlife, we see the birds, the bees here.

**Matthew Wilson:**

Very much so. The way in which we feel about green space and the way in which green space makes us feel. If you've had a stressful time or life is getting on top of you or you just had a bad day at work, you immerse yourself in a green space and you're surrounded by wildlife, butterflies, bees, birds, et cetera. It's a game changer and it's the closest you can come to a sort of zen-like experience in the heart of a busy city, I think.

**Narrator:**

And do you notice that on Garden's Question Time, that there are more people who rediscovered this love for green space?

**Matthew Wilson:**

Very much so. I think it's very easy to think that we are, we're a program that answers practical questions about gardening and of course that is a big part of what we do. How do I keep slugs off my plants? Is a perennial question if you'll pardon the pun. But I think the motivation for people gardening is so much broader than that. There is so much more driving people to garden, and in particular over the last two years. People have come to gardening in a way that I think probably they haven't before and they've come with a very open mind and a lot of people have come into gardening without any prior experience, just a lot of enthusiasm.

**Narrator:**

How do you know when gardeners are excited? They wet their plants.

**Majika Sharbra:**

Hello, my name is Majika Sharbra and I am in Chobham Academy, near Olympic Park. It's a really beautiful park. It is constantly bustling with activities and opportunities of, I see many young people enjoying and especially little kids to older generation and everyone's having fun in every different weather. I usually come to Olympic Park during sunny weather, of course, and that's mainly one a weekend in like two, three weeks. It's very well maintained, I must say. The range of flowers are really beautiful and really extraordinary. Exquisite. Yes.

**Rafael:**

Hello, my name is Rafael. I'm from Chobham Academy. As I'm standing in the stadium, I can see why people come while to watch a football game. Favorite bit of the park is like the outdoor activities as in the outside gyms, the better gyms, and basketball places as well.

**Neal Glucksmann-Smith:**

I'm Neal Glucksmann-Smith. I'm one of the park champions. I've been volunteering at the park for over five years. I was a games maker in 2012. One of the highlights was basically walking across the park for a late shift and taking an hour and a half because you were taking people's photographs, interacting with the visitors. And I think London, it was a real buzz in London and it was a wonderful experience. A lot of people don't know what's here. They have different perceptions. Some worked on it and we've taken lots of people around who were part of the construction. A lot of school groups, a lot of focus on sustainability looking at the future. And I think they're amazed by what's here. They're amazed by the development. I've been to Sydney, I've been to Barcelona, I've been to Munich. You look at those places, they looked unloved and it's loved here.

I always say to them, "Have you noticed any rubbish?" And I say, "If you look after a place, people respect it." The South Park, very much more formal in terms of its planting and you've got the pleasure gardens where you had a huge, which was the South Plaza during 2012, and it's a series of outdoor rooms. And then you walk them down onto the Waterworks Riverside and you show them the gardens from the world. So, you've got the European garden, the North American garden, Southern Hemisphere, and when the trees starting to come out and then you go up to the Asian Garden, and you see this has all been planted out and things.

Then you've got the North Park and you go into the North Park more naturalistic. Sometimes you have to explain the fact that we've got meadow planting. It's not the fact that we've just let weeds grow. And then you take them to the hidden gem and I think the hidden gem is the Great British Garden and it's next to the River Lee. And if you sit down there it's quieter, or even on a windy day, it's more sheltered. Actually, when we've had people who actually live locally don't know about the Great British Garden and it's on the map.

**Narrator:**

And you've definitely helped put it there, Neal. One of our many park champions. And before Neal we heard from students at Chobham Academy, a school on sixth form based on Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

**Neal:**

Excited to be here. What a ridiculous venue to be doing gardeners Question Time. There's 70,000 seats here. What an honor.

**Narrator:**

The London Stadium, the centerpiece of London 2012, for its iconic opening ceremony and super Saturday. As well as stating athletics, rugby union, rugby league, baseball and concerts. It's now the home of West Ham United Football Club and it's hallowed green turf. The pitch measures 105 meters by 68. It's kept looking pristine by head groundsman, James Williams.

**James Williams:**

I've seen a lot of transition to the stadium. I've been here for five and a half years now, and I originally took the job up here. It was a building site. I think there was about three cranes within this stadium when I first moved here. I actually done my interview in Cafe Nero in Westfield because I couldn't get on site. From where it's come five and a half years ago it's an amazing venue to work at as well.

**Narrator:**

So tell us how you became a groundsman, because you used to play football yourself.

**James Williams:**

I did, yeah. So my love was for football. I started working at the Vetch Field, which was the old Swansea City Stadium. Then I found the love for preparing pitchers for professional athletes, learned more about the science, done four years of qualifications, went on to be a rugby groundsman, then the Liberty Stadium heard that I was leaving and decided to offer me a position, and then I got offered a position up here. I never knew anything other than Swansea, so I just took the leap of faith and moved up here. I love London, I love this stadium, I love the people I work here and I it's paid off.

**Narrator:**

You mentioned the science of grass.

**James Williams:**

Yeah.

**Narrator:**

It's something I've not heard before. Tell me about that.

**James Williams:**

So in regard to the pitch, not a lot of people know, but it's a million pound pitch. It's a sand-based construction and it's got 20 million fibers sewn into it. Whereas you see the science of the pitch, you go and do your qualifications, you learn about nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, they're the main parts of photosynthesis to keep this pitch going.

In regard to environment, our stadium is not the perfect place to grow grass. It suffocates the grass not having any air movement. As you can see around us, we've got artificial fans which create an artificial air movement within the stadium. A lot of science goes into a pitch. You wouldn't believe it. People just think we just walk up and down the pitch cutting grass every day. That is not the case. For instance, people say, "Oh, how often do you cut the grass?" Well, that determines on the groundsman and what products he puts down. So, there's a product which is a growth regulator and it can stop the grass from growing. And then when we managed to get it ready for the first game for West Ham, it was amazing, it was quality. It had its challenges, but the stadium has developed amazing.

**Narrator:**

Obviously, the stadium is part of this amazing Olympic park, and I would say your grass is probably the most manicured park of the whole park because there's so much wildlife and wild grass and wildflowers in the park.

**James Williams:**

Yes. Correct. Yeah. It's nice to see that they've kept the park the way it is because when I first come here, there was the park but there weren't many buildings around. It's nice to be able to keep looking at the park areas and I'm glad they've kept them there because it's great. I fetch my kids into work, they sit in the car and they take them straight into the park. I don't know how I'd keep them occupied if they didn't have that park.

**Narrator:**

Final question then. When you sit and watch West Ham play other teams, does it wind you up when the sliding tackles go in and the grass gets churned?

**James Williams:**

Not really because that's the part I enjoy, enjoy presenting the pitch to all these players worth around millions of pounds and seeing all the hard work you've put in for the week on TV. That that's the best part. And I think if they didn't play on it, I'd just have a garden.

**Narrator:**

This show is actually not going out till the 22nd of July and repeated on the 24th of July. And it's going to coincide with all the exciting stuff that's going on here.

**Narrator:**

A date for your diary for Gardener’s Question Time then, but also the huge celebrations planned for 10 years on. This is My London Legacy, The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park podcast. There's so much in store this summer, so for more information and to sign up for Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park updates, just go to 10yearson.queenelizabetholympicpark.co.uk. You can also share your memories on social media, #London2012, #passthebaton. And come and relive 2012, come and discover this glorious park again and all its hidden gems.