

# United in praise of The Defender of London

The heroism of Battle of Britain commander Sir Keith Park has gone unsung for too long, say Tony Benn and Lord Tebbit.



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A surprising number of people have never even hear of Sir Keith Park Photo: PA

## Tony Benn and Lord Tebbit

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### Comment

In a combined political career stretching to the best part of 100 years, the two of us have rarely agreed on anything. But on one issue we have discovered common ground – the need for a permanent memorial in London to Sir Keith Park, the Battle of Britain hero.

London is the city that he helped save and the Sir Keith Park Memorial Campaign is shortly to submit an application to the planning committee of Westminster City Council to erect a memorial statue to this great man. It is an application that we both fervently support because it would give long-overdue recognition to a man whose achievements have never been properly recognised in this country.

Even today, despite the efforts of the Sir Keith Park Memorial Campaign, a surprising number of people have never even heard of Park. But he

played as important a role as the great Admiral Lord Nelson, who dominates Trafalgar Square, in securing the freedom that we enjoy today. As Hitler's army gathered in the Channel ports in 1940 in preparation for his planned invasion of Britain, the Luftwaffe was fighting a battle for control of the skies over southern England. Hitler needed to achieve air supremacy for the invasion to go ahead and the only thing preventing him was the stubborn Royal Air Force.

Had we lost the Battle of Britain, Hitler would have been able to knock our country out of the war, either through a direct invasion or prolonged aerial bombardment. The consequences would have been horrific both for Britain and the wider free world.

Sir Keith was the unsung hero of the Battle of Britain. Commanding 11 Group Fighter Command, he was responsible for the defence of London and south-east England and his squadrons bore the brunt of the fighting. His role in the battle led the then Marshal of the RAF, Lord Tedder, to say after the war: "If ever any one man won the Battle of Britain, he did. I don't believe it is recognised how much this one man, with his leadership, his calm judgment and his skill, did to save not only this country, but the world."

Despite this accolade, the only official memorials to Park in Britain are two roads bearing his name: one near Biggin Hill Airport, a wartime fighter base, and one at RAF Uxbridge, where he was based during the battle. His bunker, which Churchill often visited, still exists.

Unbelievably, the only other memorial, preserved more by luck than judgment, is a steam engine that bears his name and is currently being restored. What made Sir Keith such a remarkable leader was the combination of his strategic acumen with tactical skills in co-ordinating the battle –together with his ability to inspire those under his command. He made great use of Fighter Command's innovative radar system; whenever they came over to attack our country, Sir Keith had fighters available to meet them. Even the Germans nicknamed him "The Defender of London".

Sir Keith's unacknowledged achievements are reason enough why Westminster City Council should grant permission for a permanent memorial to this great man. But there's another reason. In less than two years' time – September 2010 – we will be celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. This may be the last time a significant number of surviving veterans will be able to take part in the commemorations. What better time to celebrate and honour Sir Keith?

What we would like to see are the proposals which Boris Johnson has lent his weight to: a statue of Sir Keith erected for six months on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square followed by a permanent memorial nearby in Waterloo Place.

The statue has the support of the Park family, countless RAF officers, veterans, members of the public, politicians and commentators not just in

the UK but in New Zealand too, as well as elsewhere in the world.

The final decision now rests with Westminster City Council. Let's hope the council comes to the right conclusion.

*Information about the campaign to commemorate Sir Keith Park can be found at [www.sirkeithpark.com](http://www.sirkeithpark.com)*