

# PEOPLE'S PARKS

## VICTORIAN URBAN PUBLIC PARKS IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Paul Elliott

Most British towns and cities gained at least one public park between 1830 and 1914, and the West Midland region is fortunate in having some of the most striking examples which were as much part of the new urban culture as libraries, museums, galleries and public baths. Some were designed by leading landscape gardeners such as John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843), John Gibson (1815-75), William Barron (1805-91) and Thomas Mawson (1861-1933), but many others were designed by borough engineers, nurserymen, architects and committee members, sometimes after public competitions.

The majority of these parks were – or became – fully public supported by local government, but a number were semi-public ventures funded through subscriptions and entrance fees. Others were created and managed by private companies. Some impetus came from civic rivalries and emulation, with towns competing to show off the best designs and demonstrate their urbanity, civic pride and sophistication.

Wealthy landowners, industrialists and manufacturers provided some support, as did working-class agitators and middle-class rational recreationists although there remained considerable middle-class opposition to the idea of free parks managed and supported by local councils. Whilst the nineteenth century was the great age of urban park development, there was some continuity from earlier periods with common lands often being enclosed and landscaped as public parks and sometimes garden cemeteries serving as public walks. The character of West Midland parks changed during the century with the formation of local recreation grounds and



Engraving of John Claudius Loudon, by an unknown artist, 1845.

provision of a wider range of facilities for sports and other activities.

### Public Health and Rational Recreation

The formation of public urban parks was partly a response to urban expansion and industrialisation and particularly concerns about public health, mortality rates and the loss of access to green spaces experienced by the working class. This was most evident in larger cities such as Manchester or Birmingham, but also in other industrial and manufacturing towns such as Wolverhampton, Walsall and Derby.

Whilst its immediate impact should not be exaggerated, the report of

the Parliamentary Select Committee on Public Walks (1833) helped to encourage urban park development by articulating concerns about public health, lack of exercise and the need for what was regarded as forms of 'rational recreation' which would discourage the labouring population from engaging in 'immoral'

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pursuits such as drinking and gambling and forms of popular entertainment such as wakes, fairs and street football.

## Botanical Gardens and Arboretums

The first urban semi-public parks in the region were either pleasure gardens that had survived and adapted from the Georgian era such as Vauxhall Gardens in Ashted, or botanical gardens and arboretums. Two of these were nationally significant because of their association with John Claudius Loudon (1783–1843), the leading early *nineteenth-century* landscape gardener and garden writer, author of the exhaustively comprehensive *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* and editor of the popular *Gardener's Magazine*, who had married the novelist Jane Webb (1807–1858), daughter of Thomas Webb, a wealthy manufacturer from Edgbaston. Jane Loudon subsequently became an authority on gardening in her own right.

For the Birmingham Botanical and Horticultural Society, J. C. Loudon designed a park and range of circular and conical glasshouses at Edgbaston on land leased from Lord George Calthorpe, intended to accommodate the varied demands of leisure, rational recreation and scientific botany and opened in 1832. Alongside their systematic labelled beds, botanical gardens such as that at Birmingham depended upon income from donations, subscriptions and entrance fees to survive and therefore had to provide as many eye-catching features as possible, such as rare exotic plants.

The Birmingham Botanical Gardens excluded most of the working class, however, because of the cost of subscriptions and entrance fees, although penny admission charges were introduced in 1844 (complete with restricted access and extra policing).

Whilst only part of Loudon's Birmingham plan was adopted (without the circular glass houses to his intense irritation), his design for the Derby Arboretum in partnership with the donor Joseph Strutt was fully realised. Opening in 1840, the Derby Arboretum was a transitional institution between botanical society gardens and public parks and epitomised Loudon's 'gardenesque' principle and rational recreational objectives, featuring over a thousand different kinds of trees and shrubs labelled and placed upon a series of specially formed earth mounds with lodges and refreshment rooms.

Supported like the Birmingham Botanical Gardens by donations, subscriptions and entrance fees, following Strutt's instructions, the park was opened free to the public for two days per week, and became tremendously popular, holding special anniversary events with balloon launches, fireworks and circus acts attended by tens of thousands, for example, which provided much-needed annual replenishment for the coffers until it was eventually acquired by the corporation in 1882.



Derby Arboretum Anniversary Festival, *London Illustrated News*, 8 July 1854.

Collection of the author

## Birmingham's Public Parks

Despite the formation of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens and the fact that a Birmingham Parks Act was passed in 1854 allowing the council to borrow up to £30,000 and utilise the rates to pay for new parks, and a campaign during the 1840s and 1850s, it was not until Adderley Park opened in 1856 that the public had free access to a significant urban green space in the town. As Carl Chinn has shown, Birmingham parks campaigners were responding to continuing industrialisation and urban expansion which saw the town population grow to 233,000 by 1851, and were inspired by developments elsewhere.

A series of reports provided stark evidence of the poor sanitation, living standards and health of many housed in cramped courts, whilst in 1844 Alderman Joseph Horatio Cutler called for public parks and open spaces for the health, amusement and recreation of Birmingham's inhabitants. Parks campaigns were led by individuals from across the religious and political divide, including Tory Anglican landowner Charles Bowyer Adderley MP of Hams Hall, Warwickshire, the Nonconformist preacher Rev. George Dawson and industrialists, manufacturers and traders such as Joseph Sturge and Samuel Beale.

Working-class groups played a large part too, using established networks, holding public meetings and utilising the newspapers.

The process took some years because of opposition to the idea of higher local rates led by individuals such as Alderman Joseph Allday, and fears amongst both Tories and Liberals that too much local government intervention would discourage patronage and charitable benefaction. The process was also prolonged by the complexity of local administration with responsibilities split between improvement commissions, councils and other bodies.

Despite having an offer of land for a park rebuffed by the council in 1855, Adderley pressed on and Saltley Park was opened the following year with support from a Working Man's Park Association which managed it until 1862 when the council took over and the name was changed to Adderley Park. After Lord Frederick Gough Calthorpe of Perry Hall's initial offer of land for a public park was also rejected in 1853, he too pressed on, providing the site for Calthorpe Park (1857) which was designed, laid out and planted by the corporation and fully acquired from the family in 1871.

Following the opening of Aston Park in 1858, other Victorian park foundations included Cannon Hill Park (1873), donated by Louisa Ryland, a local benefactor from an industrial family, and Handsworth Park (originally Victoria Park) opened in 1888 by the local Board of Sanitation to a design by Richard Hartland Vertegens of Chad Valley Nurseries in Edgbaston.

The design and planting of these public parks took advantage of existing features and combined formal elements such as fountains and geometric paths with the prevalent picturesque natural style with winding paths, water courses and tree planting, as John Gibson's plan for Cannon Hill exemplifies. Public buildings were also included or subsequently added, including refreshment rooms, bandstands and even museums and libraries, as at Adderley Park.

## Wolverhampton, Worcester and Walsall

Elsewhere in the region, new urban parks took various forms. West Park, Wolverhampton was opened in 1881 and designed by Richard Hartland Vertegens who had won the competition held by the corporation in 1879. His design was inspired by the work of Jean-Charles Alphand and his assistant Edouard André, which had become known through William Robinson's *Parks and Gardens of Paris* (1878) and André's own design for Sefton Park, Liverpool. West Park blended picturesque naturalism with formalism, featuring sinuous paths lined with trees and shrubs providing screening and carefully contrived vistas.

At Worcester and Walsall, two public parks were developed by private companies, one eventually becoming a success whilst the

other failed to attract enough support. The 25-acre Worcester Pleasure Gardens opened by the Worcester Public Pleasure Grounds Company in 1859, were designed by leading Victorian landscape gardener William Barron of Borrowash, Derbyshire.

However, despite attractions including a glass pavilion, central fountain, picturesque promenades, flower beds, an elm avenue and special events such as firework and gymnastic displays, support from the church and corporation and thousands of visitors, it experienced severe difficulties and was liquidated in 1865 with debts of £6,000. When the council proposed taking over the park for the good of all classes using £6,000 from the rates and a gift of £5,000 from William Ward, the first Earl of Dudley, the proposals were narrowly defeated in a referendum.

Whilst the Walsall Arboretum (1874) established by the Walsall Arboretum and Lake Company likewise proved unviable as a commercial concern, despite various attractions and special events, it eventually survived. Formed partly on a former quarry, the Arboretum featured two enlarged lakes complete with a steamer for pleasure cruises (from 1878) called *The Lady of the Lake*, whilst other features included lodges, a boathouse, bandstand,



Calthorpe Park, one of Birmingham's first public parks, was laid out in 1857. Postcard, Raphael Tuck & Sons 1906.

Photo © Birmingham Museums Trust

summerhouses, tree-lined promenades and spaces for various sporting activities.

Visitor numbers were not, however, as great as expected despite the introduction of a new cycle track, and bad weather and flooding caused further problems for the Company, which was dissolved in 1877. After a period under the management of local businessmen, the Arboretum was leased by the corporation for three years from 1881 and then fully acquired by them and opened as a new 'people's park' in 1884.

Significant improvements were made over the next twenty years which included a major extension, a new bridge, outdoor gym (1892), bandstand (1899) and pavilion (1902), whilst the illuminations every October became one of the most important annual attractions in the town.

## Spa Towns

Some places in the region, such as spas and resort towns, had special requirements for urban green spaces. Whilst the Georgians had been passionate enthusiasts for taking the waters, there was a renaissance of spa going and resort development during the nineteenth century. Part of the attraction of spas such as Buxton, Matlock, Malvern and Leamington Spa was the proximity of beautiful countryside such as the Malvern Hills and Peak but each

also incorporated many specially designed, landscaped and planted public gardens. The winter gardens provided colour and shelter all year round.

At Buxton, Joseph Paxton's protégé Edward Milner designed an extensive park adjoining the winter gardens with serpentine river walks and lake planted with numerous trees and shrubs, especially evergreens whose gaseous emanations were believed to have health-giving properties.

At Leamington Spa between the 1880s and the First World War, the borough engineer and surveyor William Louis de Normanville (1843-1928) designed and planted a whole series of walks and green spaces along the river Leam, including Victoria Park (1898), the York Promenade and Mill Gardens. He also undertook waterworks, constructed bridges and improved pump rooms and swimming baths.

## Hanley

It was recognised that public-park developments could help to transform urban areas and mitigate some of the effects of industrialisation. A good example of the latter is Hanley Park, now in Stoke-on-Trent, designed by Thomas Mawson (1861-1933), one of the leading landscape gardeners of the period, after he had won a competition staged by the corporation in 1890.

Covered with mine shafts, spoil banks and clay pits filled with pottery debris and bisected by the North Stafford Canal, the bleak

125-acre site chosen for the park appeared to be very unpromising, with the prevalent industrial chemicals and smoke restricting what trees and plants would succeed in the area. However, with considerable local support, Mawson rose to the challenge, taking on many unemployed male workers to do the groundwork (some of whom were employed more permanently) and he was credited by the town's inhabitants for having transformed 'such a desolate wilderness into a green oasis'.

Using trees, he screened surrounding industries such as the Caulden Works to the west from the park interior, forming a lake with rockwork and cascades constructed of 'Pulhamite' rock by James Pulham and Company, and creating terraces and a series of curved walks. Features such as the conservatory winter garden designed by Dan Gibson, lodges, a pavilion, boathouses, seats, shelters and terraces were deliberately incorporated partly to mask the limitations of the site which featured in Mawson's major study *Civic Art: Studies in Town Planning, Parks, Boulevards and Open Spaces* (London, 1911).

## Management and Control

By the early 1900s, public parks and recreation grounds had become a fully accepted part of West Midland municipal provision managed by park keepers backed up by bye laws, regulations, park committees, police patrols and corporations.



William R Griffith, Proposed Layout of the Arboretum, Walsall, c.1871



First laid out in 1831, the Jephson Gardens were originally part of the informal walks alongside the River Leam, in Leamington Spa. Postcard, Raphael Tuck & Sons.

The indefatigable Thomas Everton, for example, the first superintendent of the Walsall Arboretum under corporation control, initiated a major programme of tree planting in the park and around the town, introduced botanical labels for individual improvement and education and patrolled the parks, forking and confiscating balls that had strayed on the shrubbery and putting walking sticks through bicycle wheels.

Nevertheless, there was considerable variation in how parks were established and managed, and also much resistance to excessive regulation and control, whilst gardeners and parks committees had to deal with problems including crime, vandalism, smoke damage and arguments, whilst reconciling sometimes conflicting usage demands.

Considerable attention to local factors is required to explain the character and success of particular parks and disagreements concerning funding, access and usage meant that some schemes attracted considerable controversy, had to be much altered or failed completely. As the failure of the Worcester Arboretum Pleasure Grounds referendum suggests, it is too simplistic to see supporters of public funding as progressive 'goodies' and their opponents as

miserly 'baddies', at least until the civic conception of municipal government exemplified by Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham became established.

## Legacies

Public parks served different functions depending upon the social and economic character of particular places. Whilst many visitors came to socialise or mix with other classes, participate in civic events, enjoy the picturesque colours and planting, or delight in annual festivities such as the Walsall Arboretum illuminations, others took advantage of sports facilities and other provision including libraries, museums and baths.

With their innumerable special events from temperance band concerts to pageants and horticultural exhibitions, colourful displays of carpet bedding and floral clocks and social mix of visitors, West Midland Victorian public parks became (and remain) one of the glories of modern urban living, which each generation has a responsibility to cherish, preserve and adapt. ●

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### Further Reading

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