

Birkenhead Park Conservation Area

The international significance of Birkenhead Park is well established. When it was officially opened by Lord Morpeth on Easter Monday, 5th April 1847, it was the first public park to be established at public expense in the United Kingdom and, for that matter, in the world, at a time when even 'the great towns of Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds have at present no public park'. It was a revolutionary concept. Its development was authorised by an Act of Parliament (Birkenhead's Second Improvement Act of 1843) and it was designed explicitly and solely for public use. The landscaping and construction costs, estimated at over £103,000, were met entirely from public funds while the final cost of developing the park, as reported in the *Illustrated London News*, amounted to £127,775 (or £10,430,000 in 2014 prices), which represented an unprecedented level of public financial support for the provision of urban green space.

Birkenhead Park is universally acknowledged as the first publicly funded park in the world. It is recognised as one of the six most important parks in the world and one of Britain's gifts to urban civilisation. It served as the inspiration for Central Park, New York, and numerous other major parks in North America landscaped by Frederick Law Olmsted who visited Birkenhead Park for the first time in the summer of 1850. He was immensely impressed by what he saw. Birkenhead Park had been 'appropriated for ever to the public' and for the first time the 'privileges of the garden' would be 'enjoyed about equally by all classes'. The sweeping curves of the paths and driveways created a sense of intrigue and suspense, while offering visitors constantly vista to enjoy. In fact, the highly innovative plan with its 'sophisticated circulation system', 'exquisitely varying scenery', picturesque lakes, rural and ornamental bridges, rockery, sloping mounds, and serpentine walks, became 'one of the most instructive to study in Europe' and influenced directly the design of many other public parks in Britain, Continental Europe and North America. It can be regarded justifiably as an 'outstanding achievement', because it laid down key design principles which determined the development of urban parks for future generations.

It was (Sir) Joseph Paxton's most important and influential park design and until recently the only Grade I urban park in English Heritage's register. Paxton, who was then employed by the 6th Duke of Devonshire as his Head Gardener, was commissioned to design the park in August 1843 for which he was paid £800 (or £70,140 in 2014 prices). Many of the design principles which he implemented in Birkenhead Park were also adopted elsewhere, including Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow (1852), The People's Park, Halifax (1856), and Baxter Park, Dundee (1862-63), and Birkenhead Park was regarded by leading European landscape designers such as Adolph Alphand and Edouard André as a work of art where Paxton first developed his most important landscape ideas on a large scale.

The international reputation of Birkenhead Park also depended on the contribution of Edward Kemp (1817-91) in his role as its first 'fixed' superintendent from 1843 until his death, even if he was not retained on a full-time salaried basis from 1849 onwards. He fully recognised that Birkenhead Park had been designed by Paxton, but publicly explained that it had been 'formed by me, under his inspection', particularly because he had been given authority by the Improvement Committee 'to procure what plants are necessary for the Park'. According to Olmsted, the

general public often credited Kemp with the park's design and J. C. Niven, who was the curator of the Botanic Gardens in Hull, was unequivocal in praising Kemp's initiative in instigating 'a new era as regards public park design' and for creating a landscape which would stand 'as a lasting memorial to his good taste'. His experience in laying out Birkenhead Park had a lasting influence on his subsequent landscape plans for other public parks, including Newsham and Stanley Parks (Liverpool), Grosvenor Park (Chester), Hesketh Park (Southport), Congleton Park, Saltwell Park (Gateshead), and Queen's Park (Crewe). He remained convinced throughout his career of the importance of retaining 'moderate and consistent ornamentation' even in parks which were ostensibly provided for recreation and if the ornamental could be combined with the 'useful', then 'all the requirements' would be happily met.

Birkenhead Park is also internationally important for its architectural heritage, in particular the Grand Entrance and eight separate lodges which reflect different British building styles (Norman, Medieval, Italianate and Gothic) all of which are Grade II* or Grade II. John Robertson (1808/9-52), who had been John Claudius Loudon's principal draughtsman before 1840, was employed at that time in Paxton's drawing office, and he was directly involved in designing the Grand Entrance, the Roman Boathouse, the Italian Lodge, as well as the Norman Lodge East and Norman Lodge West. The young architect Lewis Hornblower (1823-79) who was appointed to 'Superintend the erection of the Lodges, the fencing and all Mechanical Work connected with the Park' also played an important role in designing the Grand Entrance and a number of the lodges. Subsequently, he developed a successful architectural practice in Liverpool and was responsible, together with the French landscape designer Edouard André, for the design and laying out of Sefton Park in Liverpool.

The sale of land surrounding the park for the building of high-class villas or 'Blocks of Houses' was intended to cover design and development costs. Unfortunately, because of the severe economic crisis in the late-1840s the sale of lots was a long, drawn-out process. But all the villas constructed in the first three decades following the opening of the park are of significant architectural importance. The earliest villas and semi-detached residences were generally built of buff sandstone with slate roofs and were subject to stringent building controls as far as design and the quality of workmanship were concerned. Other and later buildings are of red buff brick, with a mixture of slate and plain clay tile roofs. There is a mixture of sash and casement windows; many houses have elaborate porches and ornate doors, with decorative eaves and gables; the window surrounds are mostly of carved stone, but a number of houses have polychromatic brickwork and elegant chimneys. The earlier buildings benefited from generous plots, with plenty of space for the development of gardens which were intended to reflect the rustic or gardenesque design of the park. It is highly likely that Kemp was employed on a private basis to provide advice on their layout. As a result the park is surrounded by an impressive range of villas, both detached and semi-detached, which reflect predominantly Jacobean and Gothic styles. Currently, there are 42 Grade II* or Grade II listed buildings surrounding the park, including the Grand Entrance with its two adjoining lodges.

In a number of cases, the villas were designed by Walter Scott (c.1811-75). He had previously been employed as a building surveyor by the Commissioners for

the Improvement of Birkenhead and had designed a number of impressive private residences in Clifton Park, Birkenhead. He had a successful architectural practice on both sides of the River Mersey and was responsible for designing his own house ('The Gables', Palm Grove) and the Birkenhead Borough Hospital which was opened in Park Road North in 1864 and finally closed in 1982.

Birkenhead Park is a major heritage landmark of international significance, but it suffered from serious neglect and underfunding in the latter decades of the twentieth century. In 1976 the Friends of Birkenhead Park were founded in order to campaign for its conservation and improvement. Finally, in 2004 a major restoration programme (£11.3 million) was initiated. The original design, as laid down by Paxton, has been preserved virtually unaltered and the park can now be enjoyed in all its splendour. The Friends of Birkenhead Park continue to play an important role in raising the profile of the park, in collaboration with Council staff, and over £1 million has been raised since 2007 to support community involvement and heritage education, as well as developing the Edward Kemp Community Garden and Growing Area as a site for community allotments and training in horticultural and gardening skills. Birkenhead Park remains a focal point for landscape designers, architectural historians, and town-planners from around the world and plans are currently being developed to secure World Heritage Site status for the first publicly funded park ever created.