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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

HANDSWORTH PARK (FORMERLY VICTORIA PARK)

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Name: HANDSWORTH PARK (FORMERLY VICTORIA PARK)

District: Birmingham (Metropolitan Authority)

Parish: Non Civil Parish

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.510756
Longitude: -1.9253267
National Grid Reference: SP 05165 90321
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II
List Entry Number: 1001473
Date first listed: 22-Aug-2000

Details

A late C19 public park designed by R H Vertegans and developed by Edwin Kenworthy, Borough Surveyor, with an extension of 1895 designed by Kenworthy.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Until 1911 when it was absorbed by Birmingham, Handsworth was an independent urban area in Staffordshire, which had originated as a large parish with scattered farms and cottages. The centre of the parish was St Mary's church, a structure of C13 origin; nearby, the Grove Brook was dammed to form fishponds (Parklands 1998). In 1761 Matthew Boulton leased the Soho estate immediately south of the parish boundary, and established a factory known as The Manufactory which flourished from c 1775 when he entered into partnership with James Watt, inventor of the condensing steam engine. These developments, coupled with the increasing prosperity of neighbouring Birmingham, ensured the expansion of Handsworth. In the early C19 this was a gradual process characterised by villa residences; from 1852 when the Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Dudley railway opened a station in the south of the parish Handsworth became a desirable residential suburb, residential development reaching a peak in the late C19. The Local Board considered the creation of a public park in 1882. Potential sites were investigated, and by 1886 negotiations were in hand with the trustees of the Heathfield Estate, the former home of James Watt, which it was hoped could be developed as a museum and park. Failure to reach agreement led the Board to consider The Grove Estate, which was acquired from the Birmingham and Midland Bank Ltd in April 1887 for £7500. The Grove Estate comprised some 20 acres (c 8ha) of mid and late C19 pleasure grounds and meadows associated with a villa built in 1780 by William Bratt, a Birmingham steel toy manufacturer (ibid). The property had been improved by various owners in the 1870s and early 1880s, and a sale catalogue of 1883 describes pleasure grounds comprising shrubberies, a tennis lawn, conservatory, vineries, aviaries, an aquarium and fishpond, and a kitchen garden.

Following the purchase of The Grove, R H Vertegans of the Chad Valley Nurseries, Edgbaston, was approached to provide a plan 'shewing the way in which he would recommend the committee to lay out and plant the [estate] as public pleasure grounds' (Local Board Minute 284). Vertegans had already laid out several parks and recreation grounds in and around Birmingham, including, in 1879-81, West Park, Wolverhampton (qv). At Handsworth, the new park incorporated The Grove and its gardens, the former walled garden and tennis lawn becoming a bowling green; a terrace walk and cricket ground were also provided (Birmingham Mail 1888). The planting of the park was undertaken by the Sheffield nursery of Fisher, Son and

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Sibray, and the completed park was opened on 20 June 1888, a year after Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee; by permission of the Queen, the park was known as Victoria Park. In the mid and late C20 the park has been known as Handsworth Park.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s additional parcels of adjoining land were acquired and added to the park, necessary alterations to Vertegans' plan being made by the Borough Surveyor, Edwin Kenworthy. In 1893 negotiations took place with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for the acquisition of glebe land to the east of the Soho, Handsworth and Perry Barr railway. The land, comprising a substantial rectory and pleasure grounds which included the remains of a moat and the site of an early manor house, was purchased in 1895 and laid out by the park staff under the supervision of Kenworthy. The rectory was demolished and a new lodge and lake constructed in 1897. In the same year more land was added to the western park, and a further, smaller lake constructed. The eastern park extension was opened to the public on 30 March 1898. The final addition to the park took place in 1901 when a strip of ground parallel to Hinstock Road was acquired; public baths immediately adjoining the park at the junction of Hinstock Road and Grove Lane were built on the site of Grove Farm in 1907. Some £28,000 was expended on the park between 1887 and the transfer of Handsworth to the City of Birmingham in 1911 (Dent 1916); from that year until 1961 control of the park rested with the City's Parks Committee. Various new structures and features were added to the park up to the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1939 iron railings and gates were removed for the war effort. By the early 1960s the park was in decline, and in 1967 The Grove, known since the early C20 as Park House, was demolished and replaced in 1976 by a sports centre. The Grove Lane public baths were demolished c 1990. Today (2000), Handsworth Park remains in municipal ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Handsworth Park is situated c 3km north-west of the centre of Birmingham, to the north of the A41 Soho Road, and to the west of the B4124 Hamstead Road. The c 24ha site is bounded to the east by the B4124 Hamstead Road, and to the south-east by the Victoria Jubilee Allotments, a group of late C19 allotment gardens which, along with the eastern park extension, were developed on former glebe land. The south-west boundary is formed by Holly Road, a late C19 residential street where a terrace with ornamental stone balconies and loggias overlooks the park. To the west the site is bounded by Grove Lane, while to the north-west the boundary is formed by Hinstock Road, an early C20 residential street with detached and semi-detached Arts and Crafts-style houses overlooking the park. To the north the site adjoins domestic premises and gardens on Church Lane, and to the north-east it adjoins the churchyard of St Mary's parish church. The churchyard was extended west in the late C19 on former glebe land, and the tree-lined paths within the extension take advantage of views across the park extension and lake, the boundary with the park being formed by a low retaining wall or ha-ha. In the late C19 and early C20 the park boundaries were marked by brick walls surmounted by railings; walls along Grove Lane were inherited from the earlier Grove estate, but were altered in 1896 (Parklands 1998). The railings were removed in 1939 for salvage, and today (2000) the low brick walls survive, together with lengths of late C20 metal safety railings on Hamstead Road. The site is crossed from north to south by the Soho, Handsworth and Perry Barr railway, which remains in use (2000), while the Handsworth Brook and the Grove Hill Brook flow through the site from west to east. The ground rises to the north, west, and south, and falls gently to the east. There are significant internal vistas in the western park which are in part framed by late C19 and early C20 domestic properties in the streets immediately adjoining the park. In the eastern park there are reciprocal views to and from the church and churchyard to the north-east; there are also views east to Hamstead Road. The Victoria Jubilee Allotments occupy high ground to the south-east, and the open space of the gardens and surrounding trees are significant for the setting of the site, and are connected by common historic origins.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Handsworth Park has principal entrances from Grove Lane to the west, and Hamstead Road to the east; there are further, secondary entrances from Holly Road to the south, Hinstock Road to the north-west, and Hamstead Road to the north-east. The Grove Lane entrance is situated c 160m north-east of the junction of Grove Lane with Holly Road and comprises a pair of mid C20 wrought-iron carriage gates supported on a pair of late C19 brick and stone piers surmounted by ornamentally carved stone ogee caps with foliated finials. To the south-west the carriage gates are flanked by a single wrought-iron pedestrian gate which is supported by a single, matching brick and stone pier. The entrance is adjoined by low brick quadrant walls which formerly supported late C19 cast-iron railings; these, together with the late C19 gates, were

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removed in 1939. The present Grove Street entrance was constructed in 1896 to designs by Edwin Kenworthy following the purchase of land to the north of the original park, and replaced an entrance inherited from the C19 grounds associated with The Grove. The Grove Lane entrance leads to a tarmac area from which further tarmac walks lead north-east to high ground adjacent to Hinstock Road and the cricket ground, east towards the west lake, and south-east towards Holly Road.

The Hamstead Road entrance, similar in design to the contemporary Grove Lane entrance, is situated c 190m south of the parish church and comprises a pair of mid C20 carriage gates supported on tall brick and stone piers with caps and finials matching those on Grove Lane. To each side the carriage gates are flanked by single pedestrian gates supported on matching brick and stone piers, beyond which low brick quadrant walls support late C20 safety railings replacing late C19 railings removed in 1939. The entrance leads to a broad tarmac walk which extends c 80m north-west between lawns with geometric beds for seasonal planting. The entrance was constructed to designs by Kenworthy in 1896 on the site of an existing entrance to the rectory, to allow access to the park extension. Elaborate wrought-iron gates donated by Colonel Wilkinson were removed in 1939. To the south-west of the gates, within the site, stands a two-storey brick, tile-hung and half-timbered lodge with a corner clock-tower turret rising above the porch. The lodge was constructed to designs by Kenworthy in 1897 on a site slightly to the south of the rectory, which had been demolished at about the time the glebe land was acquired for the park extension. A further entrance from Hamstead Road is situated c 150m north-west of the parish church. This is marked by low brick flanking walls and leads to a wide tarmac drive which descends gently south-west for c 190m between wide grass verges planted with specimen trees forming an informal avenue, to reach the body of the park extension. To the south this avenue is bounded by the wall enclosing the churchyard, and to the north by a railway cutting and the site of the mid C19 Handsworth Wood Station (closed mid C20). The drive, developed in 1897, made use of the route of an existing footpath (OS 1890) which crossed the railway on a footbridge c 240m north-west of the church; this bridge, leading to the west park, survives (2000).

The entrance from Holly Road is situated north of the junction of that road and Thornhill Road, some 300m south-east of the junction of Holly Road and Grove Lane, and comprises a pair of tall brick and stone piers similar to those at the Grove Lane and Hamstead Road entrances; the piers formerly supported late C19 wrought-iron gates. The Holly Road entrance was created in 1891 following the acquisition of land between the original park and the railway line to the east. The entrance and the adjacent low brick boundary wall were designed by Kenworthy in 1891; the walls were extended in 1893. The entrance leads to a wide, tree-lined tarmac walk which descends north-west into the western park; a further wide walk, today (2000) partly converted to car parking for the late C20 sports centre, extends c 270m west-north-west parallel to Holly Road. Trees and ornamental shrubs of various ages are planted along the boundary. This terraced 'Broad Walk' was initially laid out by Vertegans in 1888 and included geometric beds for seasonal planting; these do not survive. The Broad Walk affords significant views north across the western park.

The Hinstock Road entrance is situated opposite the junction of that road with Philip Victor Road. This simple entrance leads to a tarmac walk which borders a triangular area of grass planted with mature horse chestnuts, before joining the principal north walk. The Hinstock Road entrance was created c 1900 and existed in its present form by 1904 (OS).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The western park is situated on the north- and south-facing slopes of a valley formed by the Grove Brook, a tributary to the River Tame, which is dammed to form a small lake c 370m north of the Holly Road entrance; the lake was formed c 1895 to the design of Kenworthy when land to the north of the original park was acquired. A smaller pool immediately to the west of the lake is today (2000) covered over with metal grilles, while the lake is surrounded by late C20 metal railings. On level ground to the north-east of the lake there is an approximately oval cricket ground enclosed by late C20 metal railings with a mid C20 pavilion to the south-west. To the north and east a curvilinear tree-lined walk follows the boundary of the cricket ground, while beyond, the ground rises towards a belt of mature trees on the northern boundary which screens domestic properties beyond the park. To the east, the railway embankment is similarly planted. This northern walk connects to the west with the Hinstock Road and Grove Lane entrances. From the Grove Lane entrance a walk extends east towards the centre of the park, passing a sunken garden created c 1920. Approximately oval on plan, the sunken garden is today (2000) laid to grass with beds of ornamental shrubs to the north-west and south-west retained by low brick walls. Concrete steps descend from the west, north, and south to a perimeter walk, while a further central walk extends east across the garden,

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to a square central area which surrounds a vacant tapered pedestal. The pedestal formerly supported a sculpture of a child and lamb carved by John P Walker and presented by Richard Wheatley in 1930; it does not survive. The sunken garden has been considerably simplified from its form shown in photographs c 1930 (BRLA). An aviary constructed adjacent to the sunken garden c 1930, itself replacing a C19 aviary adjacent to Park House, does not survive. The east walk continues as a terrace overlooking level lawns to the south-east of the lake, and leads c 270m east of the Grove Lane entrance to a late C19 bandstand (listed grade II). Standing on an octagonal brick and stone drum, the bandstand comprises ornate cast-iron columns which support an ogee-domed roof rising in two stages to a weathervane finial. The bandstand, originally constructed in 1891, was moved to its present location c 1907 (Parklands 1998) from a position c 190m east of Park House. Some 140m west-north-west of the bandstand, a late C19 cast-iron octagonal umbrella formerly covering a drinking fountain (listed grade II) stands on late C20 paving adjacent to the south bank of the lake. Fluted cast-iron columns support an open-work dome surmounted by a vase finial (finial missing, 2000), the dome rising above roundels formerly containing shields (missing, 2000) and winged dragons (dragons' wings missing, 2000). The arched openings above two roundels are inscribed 'keep the pavement dry'. The umbrella and associated drinking fountain were presented to the park by Councillor Austin Lines, a moving spirit in the foundation of the park, in 1888 and formerly stood c 100m east of Park House where it terminated the vista across the bowling green. The umbrella was moved to its present location in the mid C20; the associated fountain shown in early C20 photographs (BRLA) does not survive. The umbrella is similar in form to a contemporary example in Victoria Park, Tipton (qv).

The north-facing slope below Holly Road is laid out with the Broad Walk running parallel to the road at the top of the slope. To the north-west, some 190m north-west of the Holly Road entrance, a late C20 sports centre of concrete block and coloured metal construction stands approximately on the site of the late C18 Grove House. The sports centre is well-screened from the lower areas of the west park by ornamental trees and shrubs, some of which survive from the C19 pleasure grounds associated with Grove or Park House. A straight tree-lined walk leads north-west from the Holly Road entrance. The north-facing slope to the east of this walk has been terraced to provide a late C20 hard-surface sports pitch, while c 190m north-west of the entrance the walk passes a mid C20 shelter of rough-cast brick and tile construction (disused, 2000) which was built in 1937 to replace a timber shelter constructed in 1930 by the Sons of Rest, a society for retired men. The Handsworth Park Sons of Rest shelter was the first of several constructed in Birmingham parks. A further tree-lined walk leads north-east from the Holly Road entrance, extending c 190m to join a further walk which runs parallel to the railway line. A mid C20 brick toilet block (disused, 2000) c 190m north-east of the entrance has three ornamental carved stone roundel reliefs on its west facade. Some 350m north-east of the Holly Road entrance, the north-east walk meets the north walk and turns east to cross the railway on a wide brick footbridge constructed in 1895(6 to link the west park to the east park extension.

The east park is similarly laid out on the north- and south-facing slopes of a shallow valley in which the Grove Brook and Handsworth Brook are dammed to form a wide, approximately oval-shaped lake with an island towards the centre. The lake was created to the design of Edwin Kenworthy as a boating pond in 1897, submerging the remains of a medieval moat (Tithe map, 1843; Parklands 1998); much of the former pleasure grounds associated with the rectory were also flooded. A half-timbered and gabled boathouse, also designed by Kenworthy in 1897, which stood at the south-west end of the lake, does not survive; neither do the late C19 low railings shown surrounding the lake in early C20 photographs (BRLA).

From the east side of the footbridge over the railway, a walk lined by Lombardy poplars descends c 50m north-east to the site of the boathouse, and thence continues along the north bank of the lake. From this point further walks sweep north-north-east to reach the south-west end of the tree-lined walk leading to Hamstead Road north of the church. From the railway footbridge a further tree-lined walk descends c 130m north-east to join a tree-lined walk on the south side of the lake. At the junction of these walks stands a red and grey granite drinking fountain in the form of a central column supporting four water basins (taps missing, 2000), surmounted by four low pediments above which rises a dome; pinnacles formerly separated the pediments, while the dome was surmounted by a pinnacle with a foliated finial (all missing, 2000). The drinking fountain was donated by Councillor C A Palmer in 1898 (inscription). The walk to the south of the lake continues for c 240m to reach the lodge and principal entrance from Hamstead Road. To the south the walk is adjoined by a level lawn terraced into the north-facing slope and partly enclosed by holly hedges. This late C19 bowling green was created on the site of the walled garden associated with

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the rectory (Parklands 1998). To the south-east of the lake, adjacent to the lodge and entrance, the south walk is bordered by lawns and geometric beds for seasonal planting, while to the south-west of the lodge an area of ornamental shrubbery encloses a lawn planted with groups of rhododendrons. Remains of stone and timber seats stand in alcoves around this lawn; the seats were donated in memory of Councillor Richardson, c 1950. A formal walk extends parallel to the east end of the lake, with an area of lawn and specimen trees and shrubs lying between the lake and the road to the east. Some mature trees in this area, and to the south-east of the lake survive from the C19 rectory pleasure grounds (ibid), while the lawn was developed as tennis grounds in the late C19. Some 80m north of the lodge, and at the central point of the east end of the lake, a semicircular area surrounded by ornamental shrubs projects to the east; this was the site of an ornamental two-tier fountain which was set in a circular pool. The fountain was removed to Handsworth Park from the Aston Lower Grounds in the late C19. The fountain pool fed a cascade which descended to a further small circular pool to the east; none of these features survive. Late C19 and early C20 photographs (BRLA) show the fountain surrounded by ornamental shrubs, rockwork, and rustic fencing. The walk to the east of the lake returns along the north bank below the churchyard and late C19 churchyard extension to join the walk leading north-east to Hamstead Road, and the walk leading south-west to the railway footbridge.

REFERENCES

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OS 6" to 1 mile: 1938 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1890 2nd edition published 1904

Archival items Late C19 and early C20 photographs and postcard views of Handsworth Park (Birmingham Reference Library Archive) Handsworth Local Board Minutes, late C19 (Birmingham Reference Library Archive)

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Legal

This garden or other land is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.