

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

WESTBOURNE ROAD TOWN GARDENS

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Name: WESTBOURNE ROAD TOWN GARDENS

District: Birmingham (Metropolitan Authority)

Parish: Non Civil Parish

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.463049
Longitude: -1.9292782
National Grid Reference: SP 04902 85014
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II
List Entry Number: 1001375
Date first listed: 30-Jun-1997

Details

A now rare survival of a set of mid C19 rented town gardens.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In the late C18 and early C19, many of the larger industrial towns had sets of rented town gardens, often forming a ring around the densely developed town centre. As the towns grew, so these garden sites were pushed ever further from the centre, only to be lost entirely as development continued. A national survey (Lambert, 1994) has indicated that very few of these sites survive either in their original form or, indeed, at all.

The Westbourne Road site as it exists today represents the core of a more extensive area of gardens, which retains the basic structure, if little of the finer details, of the mid C19 site. As shown on maps such as Samuel Bradford's of 1751, and Piggot Smith's of 1828, C18 Birmingham was surrounded by large numbers of town gardens laid out in blocks detached from any residences, which were available for rent. John Claudius Loudon commented, in 1831, that there were upwards of two thousand such gardens round the City, laid out on sites divided by hedges, and rented out, for annual sums of between 17/6 and 30/-, mainly to members of the skilled working-class. The gardens, generally provided with a brick or wooden summerhouse, were used for the growing of a wide range of plants, both functional and ornamental - Loudon registered astonishment at the variety of hardy shrubs found on one plot ('The Gardener's Magazine', 1831) - and likewise were laid out for pleasure as well as practical purpose. The sale prices for the gardens (that is, the buildings, plants and the right of possession) varied according to content of the garden in question, Loudon citing the average as being around 20gns, but noting that prices could reach up to 60gns. By the 1870's, the increasing suburbs of Birmingham were already supplanting such garden plots. J T Bunce in his history of the corporation, 1878, remarks that very few are now to be found, the principal group remaining being in Westbourne Road and Chad Valley in Edgbaston: all the rest have been swept away by the extension of the town, and even those just mentioned appear to be doomed to the same fate, as the surrounding land is being rapidly cut up for suburban villas (p.310).

In 1717, the manor of Edgbaston was purchased by Sir Richard Gough, merchant, who rebuilt the Hall and created a park; his grandson, Henry (d.1798), was raised to the peerage as Baron Calthorpe, in 1796. In 1784, the family moved away but continued to accrue land around Edgbaston such that by the late 1820s the estate comprised 85% of the parish. Henry's grandson, George, 3rd Lord Calthorpe (d.1851), inherited on the death of his father in 1807, and it was he who was responsible for most of the activity in the period 1843-80 which saw the Calthorpe's embarking on redevelopment of their agricultural landholdings as a

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predominantly middle-class suburb which offered a significant number of houses for the wealthier artisan. This, along with a demand from the workers employed in manufacture and in shops closer in to Birmingham (Rawlinson, 1849), created a demand for gardens to rent and by the middle of the century there were over 250 such gardens, most of 1/16th to 1/8th of an acre, those of the Westbourne Road site being generally 1/8th acre.

Historic maps (1827 Tithe, surveyed 1820; 1843 parish map; c.1843 parish survey) show that formerly the Westbourne Road Gardens area had been a series of fields in use as a mix of arable and meadow. In 1844, the Botanical Gardens were, for financial reasons, obliged to surrender back to the Calthorpe Estate the lease on six acres of the lower part of its plot. Rather than be developed as housing, possibly for philanthropic reasons, this land was laid out by the 3rd Lord Calthorpe as a set of gardens lying to either side of a track from the Westbourne Road south to the Chad Brook (see Piggot-Smith, map c.1852). By 1855, these had been extended across the meadowland to either side of the Brook, south-eastwards to the Worcester and Birmingham Canal. In 1876, the Birmingham and West Suburban Railway Company, as part of the Midland Company, opened the single-track line from Granville Street to King's Norton, this running to the south of the garden area; the Ordnance Survey 1st edition at 25":1 mile, 1887, shows the site at this time, stretching south from the Westbourne Road to the railway line. A licence to double the tracks meant that in the early 1880s these cut through the southern end of the site resulting in the loss of ten plots.

In the 1950s, Edgbaston Girls School was granted the lease on land, including over thirty gardens, to the west of the access from Westbourne Road, and this area was converted to playing fields. East of this, 17 gardens abutting the Botanical Gardens were lost to expansion of the Edgbaston Archery and Lawn Tennis Club in the inter-war period. In the early 1960s, the Birmingham Botanical and Horticultural Society (BBHS) acquired the leases of the 20 gardens on the eastern boundary of the site, six of these being cleared and remodelled by the British Broadcasting Corporation as part of their Gardening Club series, the Programme continuing to occupy them until 1968. This area subsequently became neglected, all of the buildings and hard landscaping together with most of the fruit trees and hedges, having been removed. In 1964, the City Council took on the lease of those gardens which then remained, the lease running until the year 2002; all of these plots continue in use as gardens, bar one (no.127) currently, 1997, unusable due to tipping by the Council, and five (nos. 65-67, 131, 132) which were occupied by the Urban Wildlife Trust and used as a tree nursery and plant centre, the Trust departing leaving unsold trees and having used the topsoil for use as potting compost.

In 1972 and onwards through the 1970s, the Council carried out a programme of demolition of the buildings on the plots, with accompanying loss of some of the hedging to give access to the plant and lorries required for the work. Thus while the basic structure of the remaining core of the gardens is intact, much of the detail has been lost.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING The Westbourne Road Leisure Gardens, traditionally known as Malthouse Meadows, occupies low-lying level grounds in the Chad Valley, divided from Edgbaston to the east by the railway and the Worcester and Birmingham Canal which form the south-eastern boundary of the site. The railway is screened from the Gardens by a planting of mature Corsican Pines, put in as part of the landscaping work to mitigate the impact of the railway on the gardens when the tracks were widened in the early 1880s. The site is otherwise set within an area of sports grounds, games facilities and playing fields on the outskirts of the Birmingham conurbation. Immediately to the north of the Gardens lies the Birmingham Botanical Gardens (qv) first opened by The Birmingham Botanical and Horticultural Society, in 1832.

The Westbourne Road site as it survives today (1997) is approximately rectangular in shape, orientated north-west/south-east. Having entered mid-way along the north-western boundary, through the centre of the site runs the Chad Brook, this having originated as a leat supplying a blade mill which once stood on the site (gone by the C18). The course of the Brook has been altered several times, including adaptation for use as a water supply for the Gardens. A second water course runs along the north-eastern boundary, following the original line of the Brook.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main entrance to the Leisure Gardens is via a track which leads south off Westbourne Road, past a lodge which stands south-west of the fish pond in the Botanical Gardens, along the west side of the Botanical Gardens, to the northern end of the site. Here it joins with a track down the northern boundary, and with two access tracks which run through the site, parallel to this edge, dividing the area into thirds.

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GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The three main strips of land formed by the access tracks are subdivided, mostly still by the traditional hawthorn hedges (although there has been some replacement with chestnut paling and other fencing materials), into a number of individual gardens. Where the traditional means of access survives, this is by a single wooden door hung on a substantial frame set into the hedge off one of the access tracks. Within, most gardens are now used as allotments for the growing of fruit, vegetables and flowers, only one plot retaining its C19 path system. Traditionally, in many plots the paths, of brick or gravel, were laid out to an elaborate design, accompanied by arrangements of beds, often edged with tiles (site evidence). A scattering of mature fruit trees still gives a marked character to the site. Due to clearance in the 1970s, hardly any of the once common brick summerhouses survive although one relatively complete example still stands and there are the remnants of several others.

REFERENCES *The Gardener's Magazine*, VII, 1831 Rawlinson, Robert, Report to the General Board of Health on a preliminary inquiry into the sewerage, drainage and supply of water, and the sanitary condition of the inhabitants of the borough of Birmingham, 1849 Langford, J A *A Century of Birmingham life*, 1868, vols I-ii Langford, J A *History of Birmingham 1741-1841* Vol. 2, 1871 Bunce, J T *A history of the corporation of Birmingham*, vol I, 1878 Cannadine, David *Lords and landlords*, 1908 Lambert, D *Westbourne Road Leisure Gardens. Report on the Historic Landscape.* Vols I and II; unpublished report for Westbourne Road Leisure Gardens Association, 1993

Maps *A Plan of the Manor of Edgbaston.. belonging to Sr Richard Gough Knt.; surveyed Humphrey Sparry, 1718 A Plan of Birmingham .. surveyed by Samuel Bradford in 1750, engraved Thomas Jeffreys, 1751 Sketch map of Edgbaston and Northfield, 1820 Tithe map, 1827 Map of Birmingham .. from a ..survey made in the years 1824 and 1825, J Piggot Smith, 1828 Parish survey, Edgbaston parish, nd [1843] incomplete map of Birmingham, J Piggot Smith, surveyed 1851 Street Map of the Borough of Birmingham, J Piggot Smith, surveyed 1850-55, published 1855 Midland Railways Additional Powers Act. Plan, 1878 Street Map of the Borough of Birmingham', W Tell, 1884 Ordnance Survey, 25" to 1 mile s.1882, published 1890; 10' to 1 mile, s.1887, published 1887-90*

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.