

# **THE FOUNDING OF HANDSWORTH PARK**

**1882 ~ 1898**



**Simon Baddeley  
1997**



# A HISTORY OF HANDSWORTH PARK: 1882 - 1996

Simon Baddeley

## INTRODUCTION

As the civic gospel of municipal improvement spread from Birmingham into the estates of Handsworth, its local government leaders saw a public park as a benefit for the district. Following the setting up of an education board and a free library, the adoption and proper kerbing of roads, street lighting, tramways and the construction of sewers,<sup>1</sup> influential voices in the district began to speak of the need for a “lung” in the city. They did not pursue the idea simply out of expediency or to raise the value of their properties. Such self-interest was present - used unashamedly to strengthen their case among the practically minded citizens of Handsworth - but opposition to the Park from that quarter was at times so intense that calculative motives alone would not have carried the project through.

Handsworth Park in the district of that name lies 10 minutes drive from the centre of Birmingham. It comprises 60 acres of landscaped grass slopes divided by a railway built long before the park was conceived. It includes one large and several smaller ponds fed by Handsworth Brook adjoining St. Mary’s Church to the north and the Victoria Jubilee Allotments to the south. It contains a cricket ground, pavilion, Leisure Centre and children’s play-area.. The Park was promoted during the 1880’s by members of the Handsworth Local Board and its first part was laid out under the supervision of the Board Surveyor, Edwin Kenworthy and opened by Councillor Austin B. Lines on 20 June 1888 after considerable local opposition. It was extended by Handsworth Urban District Council on glebe-land of the Church of St.Mary and declared “open to the people for ever” by the Earl of Dartmouth amid pouring rain on March 30 1898. It was incorporated into Birmingham City Council in 1911. It served as the site for many years of Birmingham Flower Show and other city-wide and even national events like the Scouts Jamboree attended on several occasions by Lord Baden-Powell. It was increasingly neglected from the mid-1970’s, though even then the Municipal Parks Department could still deploy an on-site staff of 16. By then the Flower Show had already been transferred to a more car friendly site at Perry Park and this problem of vehicle access in the narrow streets and dense residences that surround the Park has dogged attempts to use it for the city wide and national events that would justify the cost of its maintenance. Handsworth Park though a faded version of what it was is still valued, remembered, respected and enjoyed by many citizens in the multi-racial communities of Handsworth, Soho and Perry Barr as well as by visitors from further afield.

This text supports a formal request for registration of Handsworth Park as a place of special historical interest by *English Heritage*. There are much larger areas of open space within or adjacent to Birmingham - Sandwell Valley and Sutton Park being notable examples. Handsworth Park with marble and cast iron fountains and plaques bearing the names of its original champions and the inevitable prerequisite of all such parks - an ornate pergola’d bandstand - is a typical product of Victorian concern - part altruism, part self-interest - to ease the collateral damage of industrial growth. We understand there are four parks in Birmingham especially eligible for attention by English Heritage - Adderley, Calthorpe, Cannon Hill and Handsworth. As residents of Handsworth - generally reputed an “inner-city” area - we tend to believe our own Park, occupying the glebe-land of the Parish Church of St.Mary safeguarding the remains of and memorials to James Watt, Matthew Boulton and William Murdoch, with its mature trees, landscaping, large pond, mature trees and shrubberies, supporting a wealth of natural species<sup>2</sup> deserves special attention.

<sup>1</sup> “... probably”, according to the late Rector of the Church of St.Mary, Handsworth, “the most important thing that ever happened here” given the ensuing reduction of infant mortality.(Tompkins:20)

<sup>2</sup> See Handsworth Ward Sub-Committee comments [Agenda Item 6.A] on the *Nature Conservation Strategy for Birmingham* submitted 10 Jan 1996 and the report prepared by John Richfield, member of *Save Handsworth Park Campaign*

**MR. AUSTIN B. LINES' MOTION FOR A PLEASURE GROUND IN HANDSWORTH**

A hundred and thirteen years ago, on Wednesday 29 January 1882 the eleven elected members of Handsworth Local Board within Handsworth Urban Sanitary District held their monthly meeting in the Council Rooms in Soho Road under the Chairmanship of William Joesbury. The minutes were kept by the Clerk to the Board, Henry Ward. Board members considered the previous year's accounts which, as well as the salaries of their officers - surveyor, clerk, treasurer and librarian - recorded expenditure on street improvements, sewerage, street lighting, the fire department, public library, Hackney carriage licensing, urinal and building repairs and the instalments and interests on a series of loans, total expenditure amounting to £30,495-1s-4d.<sup>3</sup> During the meeting the Board recommended the re-appointment of the Medical officer of Health, John Welch and of John Leach as Inspector of Nuisances and heard reports from these officers on the Health of the District and continuing progress on the sewerage of Church Vale from Church Hill Road to Wilton Road. The key work of the Board out of the way, Mr. Joesbury asked Austin B. Lines, a member of the Board to bring forward the motion of which he had given notice, *on the subject of a recreation ground for the district*.

Mr. Lines pointed out that the population of the District - its boundaries not far different from the area still considered to be Handsworth and Handsworth Wood - was 25,000 with 26 miles of streets and an acreage of 3,700 with not one single acre of land in the whole of the parish to which the inhabitants could go for the purpose of recreation. He moved:

That in the opinion of the Board it is very desirable that a public park or pleasure ground should be provided for the use of the inhabitants of this district.<sup>4</sup>

After some discussion four members of the Board - W. Joesbury, John Allday, Austin Lines and J.J. Hughes - were appointed to pursue the matter. At the enquiry that was held five years later into the loan arrangements for buying land for a park, the clerk to the board reported that negotiations were entered into at this time for purchasing the Grove Lane estate. This was offered at £10,000. This price being regarded as too high, the committee turned their attention to contacting the trustees of Bridge Trust about a piece of land off Wellington Road - the Heathfield estate including James Watt's old house. The committee hoped to obtain this and, in memory of the great inventor, keep one of the upper rooms where Watt's lathe and other implements remained in the same state as when he used them.<sup>5</sup> At the Board's next meeting Mr. Lines reported that nothing had been done officially about the proposed park as the trustees did not meet for another fortnight "nor had anyone in the interval made us a present of a large or even a small park." After laughter, Mr. Joesbury mentioned he'd had an informal meeting with one of the Bridge Trustees. "I doubt" he concluded "that there's the smallest opening in that direction."<sup>6</sup> The price being asked was too high.

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<sup>3</sup>In old currency: s=shilling, d=pence

<sup>4</sup>*Daily Gazette*, Feb. 3 1882 (Osborne)

<sup>5</sup>*Daily Gazette*, Mar 17 1887. The room was transferred complete to the Science Museum, London.

<sup>6</sup>*Daily Gazette*, Mar 2 1882 (Osborne)

## THE SOCIAL CONTEXT: CAN HANDSWORTH AFFORD A PARK?

This set-back marked the emergence of a Park in the public records of Handsworth's local government. The project ran parallel with other civic works which took their momentum from continuing waves of industrial expansion that had begun in the previous century. This story has many versions - some optimistic in their depiction of growing wealth, creative invention and liberal reform; some of them grim in their documentation of urban depravity, sewage born disease and social exploitation. The story as it reveals itself in the minutiae of the district of Handsworth is, unsurprisingly, a mixture of these with too much that will remain unknown or will only become clear from more assiduous digging in those local records which once discovered or connected with other details may contradict or confirm the larger social and political histories of the age. A recent local history of Handsworth suggests "It is difficult to make any pattern out of 19th.C development." (Jones 1969:7) The pattern of development that might have given order to the growth of a more self-contained country settlement was interrupted by larger trends. Handsworth from the 1860's is incomprehensible without comprehending Birmingham, just as Handsworth from 1960 on is incomprehensible without comprehending the world.

Birmingham for a period from about 1760 to 1860 conformed to a familiar exponential curve in the growth rate of its population and housing. Proliferating arteries of communication - roads, canals, railways - one of which runs through the centre of the present park - carried goods and ideas to and from the expanding metropolis. The built-up area of Birmingham grew and grew and on the "outskirts" - a novel word to describe a new urban scale and dynamic - new streets were laid out where once there had been lanes or fields. Complete housing districts were built. Some of these attracted a new breed of skilled artisans, clerks and shopkeepers.<sup>7</sup> Doctors and lawyers continued to live in the centre of Birmingham - many in the area around St. Philip's Cathedral - but redevelopment from 1860 onwards removed some of the old quarters and the professional classes moved outwards to such areas as Edgbaston, Moseley or right outside the city to such rural areas as Bournville, Handsworth and Hamstead. During the decade 1861-71 - the time of the emergence of the civic gospel of municipal improvement in Birmingham - the population of the city's central wards peaked and then began a steady decline. Birmingham's expanding population sought new living space, leaving only the poorest and the economically insecure in the insanitary courts of the city centre. A certain familiar idea of "inner city" was not so much when the poor increased but when they no longer lived so close to the unpoor. In addition there were houses closer to the city centre, such as the Jewellery Quarter, whose artisan owners were converting them into workplaces and setting up home some distance away while still working in the city. Handsworth, many of whose residents had that special connection to Hockley and St.Pauls, was only one of the outlying parishes of Birmingham to undergo a process of transformation to "suburb":

While it was going on, the process gratified landowners, developers, builders and the occupants of the new suburbs, or at least continued to lure them with the prospects of profits, status, and happiness, but pleased practically no-one else. Contemporary social and architectural critics were fascinated and appalled by the mindless, creeping nature of the sprawl ... The ceaseless activity of the builders, the alarming rapidity with which they turned pleasant fields into muddy, rutted building sites, the confusion of hundreds of building operations going on simultaneously, without any discernible design, the impression that little schemes were starting up everywhere at once and were never being finished, were in themselves frightening portents of disorder and chaos ...<sup>8</sup>

It is easy to see the continuation of this expansion now in the detached images of a series of ordinance survey maps (*enclosed as appendices*) dating from 1880. New habitation can be seen expanding like a fungal growth into the farm and village dotted rural spaces of Staffordshire where the parish of Handsworth was still located. These developments informed the politics of those who stood for the Handsworth Local Board - a governmental creation of eleven elected

<sup>7</sup>Gordon E. Cherry (1994) pp.66-67

<sup>8</sup>F.M.L.Thompson (*ed.*)(1982) p.3. *in* Cherry (1994) *op.cit.* pp.67-68.

members supported by an establishment of local officers - set up to oversee the expenditure needed to address the health problems attending industrial expansion. Britain was the first country in the world to become industrialised. What was happening was new and unpredictable - partly alarming, partly exciting. Two years after the idea of a park had been raised at the Local Board, William Gladstone's Third Reform Bill tripled the electorate, and this, with his government's Redistribution Act three years later, continued policies that ignored the traditional claims of property and wealth, upholding the contested principle that the vote be given to people as a matter of right and not expediency. Hand in hand with this reform came the Education Act of 1880 completing a nation-wide process of compulsory elementary education. Handsworth Park can be seen as a rational extension of a political determination to address the social challenges that came with this new concentration of humanity. One of many letters that appeared in Handsworth newspapers in the early 1880's was headed "A Park for Handsworth."

Sir - The population of Handsworth is fast growing and roads and houses have been rapidly increasing the past seven years, and continue to increase without apparent abatement.

It therefore suggests itself to me, whether this is not a fitting opportunity for the local authorities to consider the question of purchasing a large acreage for the purpose of a central public park, before all eligible sites get built upon. Several of the suburbs of Birmingham do well for parks, but Handsworth is entirely without, for Aston Park is fully two miles from parts of this parish.

In such a parish as Handsworth, in which there is a great quantity of small house property, a park is much required, for this class of property rarely has any garden, or truly speaking, the back yard and its out-buildings frequently have to suffice for several tenants jointly. It is to be regretted that law does not compel a given area at the back of cottages, as it now compels it in each room; but such is the demand for houses in some parts that houses renting at from £40 to £70 are being erected with such minute back gardens or yards that one could cross them with a hop, skip, and jump.<sup>9</sup> The Smethwick works supply this parish with a few thousand mechanics, and as these become Handsworth ratepayers, the parish should secure to them some means of enjoyment and recreation.

I remain, yours truly,  
HEALTHY VIGOUR<sup>10</sup>

### FIRST PUBLIC MEETING ABOUT THE PROPOSED PARK

On Wednesday evening March 25 1883 Mr. Austin. B. Lines, Chairman of the Finance Committee was reporting back to a public meeting of the ratepayers of Handsworth. the gathering is well-attended, there are few apologies - one from the Chairman Mr. W. Joesbury who was indisposed and another from Board member, Mr. W.M.Ellis, an opponent of the introduction of the Free Libraries Act into Handsworth, who regretted that the meeting clashed with the banquet for Lord Salisbury in Birmingham. The acting Chairman, Mr. J.J. Hughes who had begun by saying that meeting was called under the belief "that it was good and wholesome thing for the members of the Board to meet their constituents in friendly conference over matters relating to the district", remarked that this meeting had been specially called on a Wednesday as it was thought that "more people would wish to attend the public meeting at which Lord Salisbury was to speak on Thursday than the banquet, ..."<sup>11</sup> There is a suggestion here of political point-scoring by the Board's acting-chairman - himself a Liberal along with a majority on the Board - and the politics of one of the absentees engaged in Conservative business at a feast in Birmingham.

Mr. Lines told the meeting that loans taken up amounted to £79,724 16s. 6d; that over £6000 of that had been repaid; that £66,750 had to be repaid in 30 years, the rest in shorter periods. Estimated total income from all sources was £14,800. He told the meeting they had "about 572 lamps" costing £1450 per annum. Sewerage work cost £1350; the Tame & Rea Drainage Board a little over £1300. After that precise "572", rounder figures could pass. The Board maintained 40

<sup>9</sup> By-law housing built under the provisions of the Torrens Act (1868) (*Artisans' & Labourers' Dwellings*) and the Cross Act (1875) (*Artisans' & Labourers' Dwellings Improvement*) - progressive reforming legislation championed most famously by the philanthropic zeal of Lord Shaftesbury from the 1840's onward.

<sup>10</sup> *Daily Post*, March 23 1883 (Osborne)

<sup>11</sup> *Daily Gazette*, March 28 1883 (Osborne)

miles of roads for £3000 per annum. The fire brigade cost £220; the Free Library £390 - and last year, of 6000 volumes there was a circulation of over 40,000. The area of the Board district was about 3,800 acres. The rateable value of the District was about £117,000 and they had about 5100 houses. Comparing Handsworth's financial situation favourably with Aston's or Birmingham's Mr. Lines suggested they might have public parks and public baths "as soon as they could afford them."<sup>12</sup> There followed reports by each Chairman, from the Sanitary, the Sewerage and the Plans Committees and a few questions from the floor.

A working man called attention to "the red tapeism of the petty officers of the Board" pointing out that Mr. Shipton, one of the officers, had put a bow window in a house in Wattville Street although he built up to the line, while the speaker was not allowed to do so - (*laughter and applause*). Mr. Basnett, [Chairman of Plans Committee], said Mr. Shipton's property was under consideration.<sup>13</sup>

The meeting passed quietly, finishing with a resolution, proposed and seconded, thanking the members of the Board for their work and expressing confidence in their policies.

### WORKING ON THE PRACTICALITIES

Although it was to be extensively debated in public and private over the next few years, the idea of a park for Handsworth feels, by 1883, to be well esconced in the commitments of most members of the Board - one of whom I suspect of being or informing "Healthy Vigour". The issues that now surface in the local press are all about the interconnected financial and technical problems of how to make Handsworth Park politically acceptable. Thus, over a hundred years later, supporters of *Save Handsworth Park* do not doubt the value of the Park, but are preoccupied with how this can be affirmed in the governmental void attending the future of so many city open spaces.

At their meeting on 6 September 1883 Mr. Lines<sup>14</sup> reminded Board members of the necessity for a public park. Delay had occurred he told them because landowners and others had not come forward with the offer of land or money, also:

because the Board had its hands so full of pressing work of an important sanitary nature as not to find time to deal with the matter, nor was it able to find the funds to be expended in that direction. Considerable expense would now be incurred in the construction of the No.2 sewer running from Smethwick to Saltley, and he had been asked if, in the face of this large cost to the ratepayers, he would incur further charges by providing a park. To this he would answer in the affirmative, believing it to be a great sanitary measure, besides having the advantage that pleasure and profit might come from using a park. As to cost ... supposing they did not get land or money gifts, and they even expended say £10,000 and borrowed it for thirty years, the sinking fund with interest at 3¼%, would cost about £545, or 13/8d in the pound. Even if the maintenance made it reach £800. per year, a 2d. rate would pay it. If they got a good park of from fifteen to thirty acres, the surrounding land, if unbuilt upon, would soon be covered, and would probably yield in rates the whole annual cost. Birmingham has an acre of park or recreation ground to each 1,818 people, and to equal it they required fourteen acres for their 25,200 people. Considering the number of men of wealth and position in their midst, he thought that they ought to be able to obtain this great boon, the benefits of which would be as increasingly beneficial as they would be permanent.

Mr. Lines added to this motion his belief that the time had now arrived to make provision for public swimming and other baths, and moved these two matters should be put to the vote of ratepayers. His Board colleague, Mr. Wainwright, seconded this motion but repeated the view heard earlier that neither park nor baths could be carried through until the real sanitary work of the District had been completed. The Chairman said he'd support the measure as soon as it could be shown it was financially feasible. Mr. Cooper said he could not see the use for a park,

<sup>12</sup>*Daily Gazette*, March 28 1883 (Osborne)

<sup>13</sup>*Daily Gazette*, March 28 1883 (Osborne)

<sup>14</sup>*Daily Post*, Sept. 6 1883. The person referred to is spelt "Lanes" but this probably says more about the unfamiliarity of the reporter with Handsworth politics than the arrival of a new advocate for the park.

since Handsworth was a park in itself. Mr. Mann, a Conservative, supported the motion adding that if Handsworth people had the right public spirit they'd soon be making their own gas and if they bought their water in bulk and sold it, they would make enough profit to remove any difficulty in getting themselves the park.

### THE SELECTION AND PURCHASE OF A SITE

There the matter seems to have stood though there followed many private discussions and meetings and informal speculations. Then an editorial appeared in the *Handsworth News* on January 1 1887, announcing "A Handsworth 'Lung'":

It is gratifying to reflect that the beginning of the New Year will probably be signalised by the purchase of a public park for Handsworth. ... It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of such open spaces in a district like ours which day by day becomes more populous, and where land is continually growing dearer and more difficult to obtain. To the children, especially those of the poorer classes, it means that they will have a recreation ground free from the dangers and temptations of the streets. To their elders it means the possession of a promenade tastefully arranged and carefully kept, to which, after the fatigues of the day, they can resort for change and rest. To all it means the preservation of a large and important plot of land from the ravages of the speculative builder and the enrichment of the district by the acquisition of something of real beauty and utility.<sup>15</sup>

The land the editor refers to is now that part of Handsworth Park that runs beside Grove Lane and contains Handsworth Leisure Centre, the cricket ground, bandstand, and is bounded on its eastern edge by the railway. About 100 yards from Grove Lane - its drive starting opposite the mouth of Douglas Road - was Grove House, with its home farm further up Grove lane, over the Handsworth Brook - the culverted storm drain that now pollutes the park's pools - on the site of the currently derelict site of the Grove Baths on the junction with the present Hinstock Road - which did not exist even as a lane. All around it, except for the narrow terrace houses along Albert and Douglas Road groping eastwards from Smethwick, are green fields - but none would now have avoided the speculative gaze. All would have been assessed and valued as future living space by those who planned to leave the area and those who planned for others to move into it. At a meeting of the Handsworth Local Board chaired by Mr. Wainwright on Wednesday January 5 1887 Mr. T.H. Pearson, Chairman of the General Purposes Committee, proposed:

that the Board purchase the Grove Estate, containing 20 acres, 2 roods and 8 perches, with the buildings thereon, for £7500, for a public park, subject to the approval of the ratepayers of the district, and that a meeting of the ratepayers be convened by the chairman of the Board, on a date to be fixed by him, to consider the matter.<sup>16</sup>

Mr. Pearson reminded the Board that this subject had been before them since 5 September 1883. His committee had been in treaty for several sites, but they had all gone off in consequence of the high prices, or because they weren't quite suitable. The Grove Estate was the first that had been brought before them which was considered suitable, both as regarded its position and the money to be paid for it. Supporting his colleague Mr. Wainwright remarked that for a long time the Board was divided over the idea of a park, but now that the purely sanitary work of the Board was nearing completion it should be feasible to borrow £7500 and make an appeal to the well-to-do of the neighbourhood to contribute the £2500 for laying out the park.

<sup>15</sup>*Handsworth News*, 1 Jan 1887

<sup>16</sup>*Daily Post*, Jan. 6 1887



One gentleman had offered, on certain conditions, to head the list with £250; and he thought they could get a few hundreds from other gentlemen ... in this way they would be able to lay out the park and open it in celebration of the Queen's jubilee, and only have to burden the rates with the first item of purchase. ... He knew there were some people who maintained that although some parts of Handsworth were fairly densely populated, yet that it was so far a rural district that they could do without a park. If they were certain that Handsworth would not grow in the next ten or twenty years he would not mind saying that they could do without the park. But they knew that it was growing at the rate of 1,200 per annum, and as the population had doubled during the last fourteen years there was every probability that it would double during the next fourteen. Great difficulty would then be experienced in finding a suitable site. ("bear, bear")<sup>17</sup>

Mr. Austin Lines rose in support of these points and in the process gave more details about the land the Board had in mind. The estate, with the addition of a few extra pieces of land on its edges which might be given by the current owner or sold cheaply to the Board, would be bounded by a wall on one side, Handsworth Brook on its northern edge with the railway mostly sunk into a deep cutting forming its eastern boundary. The government, furthermore, might be prevailed upon to release the ordnance or soldiers' practising field which adjoined the estate increasing the park to over 27 acres. He calculated that the burden on the rates would be about 2d. in the pound on top of the present rate. He pointed out that the Board hoped that the new houses which would probably go up near the park would yield in rates. in a very few years. the whole annual cost, and the park would be "the people's freehold."

Mr. Lines described the rapid progress Handsworth had made in the past decade.

If they went back to the last census of 1871 they would find the population was 14,000 or 16,000. In 1881 the population was nearly 23,000, and the houses 4,915. Now they had a population of nearly, if not quite, 29,000, and not very far short of 5,500 houses. The majority of their houses, too, were of a very fair size. The Board had formed a little over ten years. When it came into existence it found the streets almost quagmires, the county roads themselves having no defined footpaths; the only kerbing between the footpath and the horseway being - in the Hamstead Road, for instance - turf, so that when the floods came the few old men employed had to seek after the missing sods, or leave the gaps until the grass grew again. then the footpaths were little hills and dales composed of soil, gravel, or ashes. All the drainage there was was carried into the streams or into the gardens or fields to get away as best it could. There were no lamps except a few private ones. They now had a suburban town of nearly 30,000 inhabitants, with thirty-eight miles of streets in good order, with drainage almost complete, and in addition a free library, an institute, and splendid churches and chapels. The rateable value was between £120,000 and £130,000, and they had nearly 600 lamps.

To go ahead with a public park, concluded Mr. Lines, would be "to crown the edifice" and having one might not be all - Handsworth could enjoy *three* parks at some time in the future. Mr. Harris and Mr. Hughes voiced their support. When the proposal was put to the meeting all but one - Mr. D. Rose - of the eleven Board members voted to proceed. It was then announced that it was Captain Wilkinson who had offered that first £250 towards laying out the new park.

#### HAPPY HANDSWORTH!

That is, Handsworth ought to be happy. After five years of effort in looking for a suitable site for a people's park a considerate providence has at last given them the refusal of one of the very best pieces of land that could possibly be chosen for such a purpose, and that, too, at a price which makes the possession of a free park so far as Handsworth is concerned, one of the cheapest of all known luxuries. ...

*Daily Times*, 6 January 1887

#### "HOW MUCH DOES THE PRESENT GENERATION OWE ITS DESCENDANTS?"

At this last moment before purchase, opposition to the Park became more audible. There were those who said no park was needed; others who argued that even if it could not be afforded

<sup>17</sup>*Daily Post*, Jan. 6 1887

and even if it was needed and could be afforded the Board was acting outside its powers in proceeding with the project. These views were expressed in letters to the *Daily Post*:<sup>18</sup>

Mr. A.B. Lines referred to the time when the roads of Handsworth were almost “quagmires” ... Such is still the condition of the roads to which I have referred [Alfred Road] ... And this is not the worst aspect of it. There are now in existence numerous dumbwells, there being no other receptacle for sewage matter. Now, sir, it is all very well for gentlemen to meet together and paint a glowing picture of the future; but what about the present? ... When the meeting of the ratepayers is called, and the subject of a public park is discussed, I trust the inhabitants of Handsworth will demand good roads, properly drained, and the removal of those “fountains of disease” which I have mentioned, before the rates are further burdened to the tune of £7500, whilst several public parks are easily accessible, and at no great distance from Handsworth. AN OLD RESIDENT

the policy of the Board seems to be to poison us at home and provide a public park as an antidote. ANOTHER RESIDENT

The editor gave the Board the chance to counter such reproaches in the same issue. The Chairman of the Highways Committee, Mr. J.J. Hughes, assured the writers that the drainage needs of the roads in question would be met by the sewer that had been under construction over the last year:

For myself, until the present time I have opposed spending money for a park; but as the drainage of all the district roads is now assured, and the Grove estate can be purchased without raising the rate, I go heartily for it, as it contains the best site in the district for public baths, which will be secured at the same time.

A resident of Murdock Road wrote to the *Daily Gazette* and a similar letter from the same road, possibly from the same pen, appeared a few days later in *Handsworth News*:<sup>19</sup>

... before the ratepayers are committed to any project I must ask that we have the opportunity of recording our opinions - not in a hole-and-corner meeting, but by means of a *poll of the parish*, as when a School Board was to have been thrust upon us.

We are already too heavily rated, and don't get value for what we pay, and as I for one don't consider a public park necessary here most decidedly object to any increase in the rates.

Let those Local Board worthies who are so enthusiastic in this matter make a Jubilee present of the park, and not devise these schemes to try and make themselves illustrious at the ratepayers' expense. - Your obedient servant, RATEPAYER

I have no ambition to pay more than 5s. 4d. in the pound at present, and if there is any chance of a reduction let us have it by all means. I hope they are not overlooking the extra 4d. on the poor-rate this last six months, and also the advance in the price of gas, which comes almost like a rate.

I wish members of the Local Board would bear in mind that they are not sent there to see how much they can spend, but to do the most work at the least cost possible to their constituents.

Perhaps the members of the Local Board - a generous body no doubt - would celebrate the Jubilee year by presenting the park to the inhabitants. We should then have something to remember them for, besides extravagance. - Yours truly, ANOTHER RATEPAYER<sup>20</sup>

The next day, the editor of the Mail wrote a long editorial piece considering the pros and cons of a park. He warned that the experience of Birmingham:

ought to be a warning to suburban districts against the rapid accumulation of corporate debt. Believing strongly, as we do in, in the communal duty of beautifying a municipality or any urban district, as well as that of sewerage, lighting, and paving it, we are, nevertheless, reminded by lamentations of the ratepayers that the present is hardly the time for incurring large capital expenditure ... As to the advantages of the Park there cannot be two opinions ... No sensible person can dispute that twenty acres of public recreation ground, where the lads could play football and cricket, would be a very desirable complement to the intellectual assistance furnished by means of the Free Library. Every year, the youngsters - for whom fresh air and exercise are just as necessary as education - have to go further out for playgrounds

<sup>18</sup>*Daily Post*, Jan 8 1887

<sup>19</sup>*Daily Gazette*, Jan 11 1889

<sup>20</sup>*Handsworth News*, Jan 15 1887

and cricket fields. One by one the suitable sites are being snapped up by the builder, and where the lads of the village once “drave the wicket in” bricks and mortar now reign supreme. ... But this loan of £10,000 has also to be considered with reference to the existing indebtedness of the Board. the total loans contracted amount to £94,912, of which there is still owing £76,205; in addition ...

A very simple calculation will show that when the new loans have been taken up, the proportion of the rate demanded by the implacable conditions of interest and sinking fund will be rather more than one half, leaving not much more than £7000 a year available for all the ordinary expenditure of the Board on revenue account.

We do not for a moment counsel the adoption of that selfish and short-sighted policy which never looks beyond immediate requirements ... but we do say that the claims of posterity require to be regulated by the exigencies of the present, and that the present generation cannot be expected to do everything for its descendants..<sup>21</sup>

The Editorial of *Handsworth News* of January 15 1887 announced that the ratepayers of Handsworth were to be asked to meet together on the coming Tuesday evening to give their verdict on the park project. It observed that the outcry raised - including the many letters to the press - has “compelled the Local Board to review the decision at which they had so recently arrived.”<sup>22</sup>

It seems to be generally thought, not that the park is unnecessary, or that in ordinary circumstances it would be undesirable to purchase it, but that the ineptitude, and mismanagement of the Local Board have made it inexpedient to incur so large an expense at the present juncture. ... at the public meeting on Tuesday plain statements will certainly be made, and home truths told, and we fancy that the ears of more than one member of the Local Board will tingle unpleasantly. But these inconveniences are far preferable to any rash action, opposed to the wishes of the ratepayers on the part of our local administrators.<sup>23</sup>

## SECOND PUBLIC MEETING

### **HANDSWORTH URBAN SANITARY DISTRICT, IN THE COUNTY OF STAFFORD PROPOSED PUBLIC PARK**

I hereby give Notice that a MEETING of RATEPAYERS will be held TO-MORROW (TUESDAY), the 18 day of Jan. instant, at Eight o'clock in the evening, in the Public Hall, Soho Road, Handsworth, to consider the Proposed Purchase by the Local Board of land, and the laying out of the same as a Public park and Pleasure ground.

JOSEPH WAINWRIGHT  
Local Board Offices,

Chairman of the Local Board  
Handsworth, January 11, 1887.  
8342<sup>24</sup>

Who are all these people who have gathered at the Council House in Soho Road on January 18 in 1887? Such snow as hasn't been cleared from Soho Road is lit by globe gas lamps. Some citizens have come on foot, others in carriages. Do they wear top hats and frock coats, like the Victorian crowds in the pictures? Are their coats taken at the door? How do they greet each other? Do they discuss the weather or grumble about the state of the pavements. There are notices in shopkeeper's windows issued by the Local Board “enjoining all persons to sweep the snow from before their doors”. A resident complains at the waste of printer's ink and type<sup>25</sup> since the “injunction is ... persistently ignored and no steps appear to be taken to enforce its observance”.

\* \* \*

<sup>21</sup>*Mail*, Jan 12 1887

<sup>22</sup>*Handsworth News*, Jan 15 1887

<sup>23</sup>*Handsworth News*, Jan 15 1887

<sup>24</sup>*Daily Gazette*, Jan 17 1887

<sup>25</sup>*Handsworth News*, Jan 15 1887

*It's snowing on 30 December 1995 as I walk with my 10 year old daughter, Amy, to Handsworth Park. The sound of traffic on Hamstead Road gives way to the babble of ducks and geese on an unfrozen patch of the pool between the bank and the island. A warmly clad man is feeding them chapattis. A frieze of trees stands out against the dim snow. Lighted windows glow round the edges of the park. The tattered bandstand is rimed with frost; the breeze-block changing room for cricketers softened by the gloom. Snow softens contours, as well as evidence of place and even time. I'd taken a break from recording the past but instead of inhabiting my daughter's present which is all about sledging and snow-balling I think of those assembling in the Public Hall on Soho Road.*

\* \* \*

As it gets closer to 8.00 p.m. on January 18 1887 what are the waiting Board Members thinking? How do they expect the evening to go? How is the room arranged and where do people sit? Joseph Wainwright, who will be in the Chair knows that the Board needs a mandate from this meeting to go ahead with the purchase of the Grove Estate. What are the Board officers thinking? Is there a reticent enthusiast alert to the work of "Capability" Brown or Frederick Olmsted.<sup>26</sup> Has the surveyor, Mr. Kenworthy, already discussed and sketched out an outline plan for converting the estate to a park?

\* \* \*

*On the pathway over the railway bridge in the centre of the park I make graffiti in the snow with my stick, competing with my daughter to see who can finish a word first. Prompted by an impulse of evocation I scrawl - "Wainwright", "Austin Lines", "Jubilee", "Ward", imagining the bafflement these might cause if spray-painted beside the present ephemera - "Ace", "Gaz", "Kaks" - on the bridge walls. Amy gets bored with this. Wanting me to push her sledge, she walks over my names and tugs me back to the present.*

\* \* \*

By 8 o'clock the Public Hall is full of "all the Handsworth notables".<sup>27</sup> They're all men of course. Woman do not yet have the vote, though the recent Women's Property Acts mark a stage toward emancipation.<sup>28</sup> Some spouses will be waiting to ask how things went when their husbands get home after eleven o'clock. Joseph Wainwright, Chairman of the Local Board, presides, "supported by nearly the whole of the members of the Local Board". Mr.D.Rose, who alone voted against purchasing the Grove Estate at the Board's last monthly meeting, is there. Mr.William Joesbury, Chairman when the issue of the park first arose, Mr.Austin Lines, Mr.J.J. Hughes and Mr.J.Allday - the four members of the sub-committee set up in 1882 to seek out land for the park - are there. The Rev.Dr.D Randall, Rector of Handsworth Parish Church that overlooks the Hamstead Road side of the present park is there, looking "calm and contemplative". His rectory stands near the banks of what is now the pool where I had been watching the birds being fed by a Sikh neighbour. Other names on the record are Messrs. William M.Ellis, Robert Mann, George Blackham, Philip Antrobus - some connection there with Antrobus Road near the park - Henry Ward, Clerk to the Local Board, who, having the agenda, will read out apologies for absence from Lord Dartmouth, who sympathises with the movement for a park but thinks that a resident of the parish as well as landowner should preside; from the Hon.A.C.G.Calthorpe who sends his support and trusts the Park will be approved and from Captain - just promoted Major - Wilkinson, who writes that "he could not think that anybody who had any regard for the poor could raise any serious opposition to the scheme. They might rely upon his best services." (*Applause*)<sup>29</sup>

I wonder if the gentry anticipate the sort of meeting this will be and wish to avoid its clamour and the association with those with more reason to express themselves vociferously against further charges on their rates. This park is still a new idea. There may be a few who still think of Handsworth as part of the countryside and apprehend with grief the tectonic changes that are enveloping it, seeing in a myriad signs cause for dread at what the future may hold as the end of

<sup>26</sup>Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) who, inspired by visits to landscaped parks in Liverpool, especially Sefton Park near Toxteth, had achieved fame as the designer of Central Park in New York.

<sup>27</sup>*Handsworth News*, Jan. 22 1887 - "from our own opera glass".

<sup>28</sup>In 1879 Emmeline Goulden had married Richard Pankhurst, lawyer, friend of John Stuart Mill, and author of the first *Woman's Suffrage Bill* (late 1860s) and of the *Married Women's Property Acts* (1870, 1882).

<sup>29</sup>*Daily Gazette*, Jan. 19 1887

the century approaches. But in contrast to the urban pessimism of the 1990's, the majority at this meeting, are probably optimistic about an improved economic base for the Borough. The park has aristocratic patrons in the 5th Earl of Dartmouth and his son, Lord Lewisham M.P.<sup>30</sup> The scheme is largely welcomed by the landed gentry whose land is being built into. Some of these are envied for being able to mingle the esteem of *noblesse oblige* with even greater speculative advantages than those who have migrated to Handsworth from the centre of Birmingham and now seek a balance between their enjoyment and profit from residence in the growing suburb and the effect of its public cost on their private pockets. Others may be motivated more purely by the civic gospel that has brightened the industrial night of Birmingham - contributing to a municipal culture committed to education and health, opposed to those with a vested interest in ignorance. When people heckle at meetings like this that they are hearing the voice of Birmingham and not Handsworth in the rhetoric of the Board, they are mindful of Joseph Chamberlain's ambitious schemes of civic improvement initiated in the 1870's - work he'd not scrupled to call "municipal socialism".<sup>31</sup> There may be men at this meeting who would have been aware and in sympathy with the growing organisation of the working classes, observing the emergence of trade unions out of the spreading network of urban benefit societies (Williams 1973).<sup>32</sup>

At last, but absolutely on the hour on this wintry night off Soho Road, Joseph Wainwright, received with applause and hisses, opens the proceedings. Apologising for having "lost nearly half my voice" he reminds everyone of how desirable it is to discuss this question of the park reasonably, fairly, without heat. (*"Hear, hear"*) "We all know there is nothing like opposition to warp and take captive our judgement (*"bear, bear"*) - therefore I hope we will do credit to ourselves and Handsworth - which, I think - has a fair reputation for conducting its meetings creditably. (*"Hear, hear"*) I think I may safely jump to the assertion that pretty nearly every ratepayer is of the opinion that a park would be a good thing (*Cries of "no, no", "question", interruption*) Those of you who say 'No' - if someone offered to give you twenty or thirty acres of land would you not take it? (*"Oh" and a voice: "that's a different thing altogether"*) I repeat my assertion that the majority of the ratepayers are of the opinion that a park is a very desirable thing. (*Cries of "Question" and "No, no"*) Don't the people of Handsworth prefer to make a small effort themselves to secure a park rather than be indebted to someone for giving it? (*interruption and cries of "Stick to the question," "Put it right" and "bear, hear"*) I wish to inform you that at our last meeting, when the question was fully gone into, ten out of eleven members of the Board were of the opinion that it was right to recommend the ratepayers to purchase the Grove Estate for a public park (*cries of "shame"*) We came to that conclusion, not after a month's careless investigation, but after five years' close and patient observation. The matter has actually been discussed for three years, and we have only been waiting for the time when we could come before the inhabitants and say that we could provide them with a park which will cost £7500 and not add one farthing to the price of the present rate (*cries of "no, no" and a voice "That won't do" "bear, hear"*) Two or three years ago we were not so unanimous upon the subject, but today we are ten to one (*"shame" and "bear, hear"*) and I think that fairly unanimous. (*A voice "How is the Board composed?" "bear, hear" and cheers from Mr. Rose*) I did ask you to assist in conducting this meeting properly! Can I impress upon you that the credit of Handsworth is in your hands? It has been said in public and private that Handsworth is of itself sufficiently a park already. (*"bear, hear" and applause*) Let me call to your attention that large cities throughout the length and breadth of this country are spending thousands and thousands of pounds so as to bring a little light and fresh air into their midst (*"bear, hear"*) and in some ten years time Handsworth will be placed in the same position (*"No, no" and "never"*). Handsworth is a very healthy place. I think the Local Board may take great credit for that (*Laughter and a voice "I like that, now."*) We want Handsworth not only to retain her good

<sup>30</sup>William Heneage Legge, Lord Lewisham M.P. from 1878 to 1891 when he succeeded his father, as 6th Earl of Dartmouth. He was to open the park extension on 30 March 1898 and speak at the dinner on Soho road that followed.

<sup>31</sup>Joseph Chamberlain (1836 - 1914) Encyclopaedia Britannica 1911

<sup>32</sup>Raymond Williams (1973) p.231

character but to make some provision for the future whilst it can be done cheaply.” (“*bear, bear*” and “*question*”)

Mr. Wainwright continued amid interruptions and heckling. From the reports of the meeting, the speaker was not one for repartee with his audience, though when a voice cried “Look at some of the streets” he was soon talking about the progress of the sewer in that area and the expansion of the district and the continued existence of unadopted roads<sup>33</sup> for which the Board could not be held responsible. Concluding his speech he pointed out that “the Board, with a strong voice, recommended the inhabitants to adopt the scheme. But the acceptance or refusal is entirely in your hands. (“*Hear, bear*”, “*We’ll knock it down*”, *laughter, applause and an unpleasant and discordant “babel of sound*”)<sup>34</sup> But I fear I am trespassing too long on the time of my auditors.” (*Prolonged applause*)

It seems a tactical move that Mr. J.H.Stone, not a member of the Board, should have been asked now to propose the purchase of the Grove Estate. This he proceeded to do, and was going well, except for an extreme hoarseness of voice, until in justification of the cost he mentioned that the land for the park had been bought at £360 an acre while “I understand that the land on the other side which was taken by the railway company and sold by the Rector realised £1300 an acre” (*laughter and applause*), at which point Dr. Randall, the Rector, interrupted with some warmth: “I may as well stand up at once and say that that is untrue.” (*loud cheers and interruption*) Mr. Stone asked the rector what the cost was. (*uproars and cries of “It’s a private matter”, “Don’t answer it”*) Dr. Randall rose again amid louder cheers. “That question is presumptuous! (*Interruption and heckling*) I am ashamed that at a ratepayers’ meeting, where no personalities and no politics ought to be introduced, such a statement as that should have been made and such a comparison instituted. It is a scandal (*renewed interruption and cries of “order”, “Chair”*) “The London & North-Western Company promoted a railway through my glebe-land.<sup>35</sup> I had nothing whatever to do with the settlement of the price, but I had the necessary valuers appointed, and they put a certain value upon my land. Now listen to me, to what has never been stated before, and what has been drawn out of me by this shameful attack.” (*Cheers and some dissent*)

At this point some might have been enjoying the discomfiture of Dr. Randall while others would be shaking their heads and wondering why the Chairman would not call the meeting to order and proceed with the business. But Mr. Wainwright will let this fracas continue, knowing the figure mentioned is the correct one even if the imputation of venality in the vicar is unjust. He needs to demonstrate how good a price he and his colleagues on the Local Board have negotiated for the Grove Estate.

“The very first words ... the very first words that I said to the solicitor and to the agents of the company were these “The value set upon that land by my valuers is far too *high*.”” (*Great cheers, and cries of “withdraw” addressed to Mr.Stone*)

Mr. Stone rises. “Mr. Chairman, if Dr. Randall deems that ...” He makes the appropriate humble apologies for causing offence and then continues “but I do not think it is unjust to compare the price of land in the immediate neighbourhood.”

Dr. Randall: “I don’t attribute to Mr. Stone a syllable of disrespect for me. His comparison is unfair because if the railway company wished to go through the Grove Estate the owners would have got just as high a price as I did.” (“*bear, bear*”)

The point the Chairman wanted to established thus drawn out, Mr. Stone added that the price paid by the Board was even better because a house was included worth nearly three-fourths of the money. He moved the resolution. It was seconded by Mr. J.H.Pearson and supported by Mr. H. Fielding.

Then Mr. W. M. Ellis rose to applause and dissent. “I do not come here as a Tory and the other side did not come here as Radicals. Both come as ratepayers. Unfortunately I have the duty cast upon me of signing an immense number of summonses for the Handsworth rates. (*a*

<sup>33</sup>There are still several in Handsworth, e.g. Hill Grove, off Wellington Road.

<sup>34</sup>*Handsworth News*, Jan 22 1887

<sup>35</sup>Dr. Randall’s use of the term “my” does not mean he owned the land. Glebe-land is owned by the church assigned to the Rector as part of his benefice for grazing and other sources of support. Its use and disposal is regulated by the Bishop and ultimately by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners.

voice: "I've got one now" and laughter) I am surprised to hear some of the remarks of the preceding speakers. They seem to imagine they are in the midst of a dense population where there isn't sufficient breathing space, but as a matter of fact the whole of the parish of Handsworth is a park ("hear, hear" and applause). I therefore think the provision of a park is unnecessary."

He went on to say, to much audible agreement, that the sewerage of Handsworth was only half completed; that the authorities could not clean the streets for want of money; that the rates were already 5s.4d. in the pound and would have anyway to rise soon to 6s.8d. - as in Birmingham. "I move as an amendment that in the opinion of this meeting it is unnecessary and inexpedient, under present circumstances, with our heavy rates, to impose a further debt in Handsworth of at least £10,000 on the ratepayers" (applause and dissent)

The Chairman: "I decline to receive an amendment. You can accept or negative the resolution." (a torrent of disapproval, uproar, and cries of "fair play", "a plant", "a cut and dried affair", a boo-booing and whistling from a small clique, mingled with groans and applause, the interruption lasting for some minutes with an enormous amount of "superfluous gesticulation on the part of several gentlemen on the platform.")

Mr. George Blackham rose to second the amendment but being told again that this would be refused he began to speak in "sepulchral and portentous tones" against the resolution slowly clapping one hand over the other. "I think the men of Handsworth have brains enough to know what they are about. You will give Mr. Ellis credit for having worked to the best of his ability and given his time and money to work for the well-being of the parish ("hear, hear") I feel that the voice of Birmingham has been heard this night and not the voice of Handsworth. (applause and "no, no") We have not a vast population with courts and alleys and miserable creatures tied up in smoke and dirt (a voice "We soon shall have.") On the contrary Handsworth is one of the healthiest places in England ("No"). When our local debt amounts to £92,000 on a rateable value of £120,000, I think that instead of spending more money we should have a reduction in the rates." (applause).

Mr. D. Rose added his arguments against the park. "I am the one out of the eleven members of the Local Board who oppose the recommendation. We are all loyal to her Majesty and if it is decided to make a jubilee park by all means let us do so and let the 29,000 inhabitants of Handsworth each give half a sovereign, and the park will be provided free. I do not deny the advantages but if we buy the park we will have to pay the piper." Referring to the comparison made between the Grove Estate and Dr. Randall's land he added with emphasis "I'm a butcher (laughter) and I say that it is just like comparing the middle cut of a sirloin with a breast of mutton." He sat down to much applause.

Mr. Jacobs now rose: "I was charged on entering this room with leading a forlorn hope, but I rather feel pleased in leading a forlorn hope to victory. (Cheers) There is a majority of ratepayers against the proposal and they will reject it. The credit of the scheme belongs to Mr. Lines, and the supporters of it are no doubt acting conscientiously in the public interest, but the rates are already a burden to the community. There is no town outside the Birmingham ... I was going to say caucus influence where the rates were so high as in Handsworth." (A tornado of disapprobation and he is called to order) "Well then, if you won't let me call 'em what I want to, I'll say the Birmingham wire pullers. ("hear, hear", and opposition, interruption "We are not here for the purpose of listening to politics") It is useless talking about the price being a bargain when the estate has been offered to more than one man and they were begged to buy it for £6000 (sensation - there follows a disgustingly disorderly scene, and cries of "name") I say this without fear of contradiction."

Mr. Wainwright asked for the name and Mr. Jacobs wrote it down and handed it to the Chairman who refused to receive it unless he could make it public. All across the Public Hall there was now considerable excitement and confusion for some minutes until Mr. Jacobs spoke again: "I cannot give the name of my friend (shouts of disapproval and incredulity) but I can say that the Rector was the one to whom it was offered." (Uproar and loud calls for Dr. Randall)

If you look at the map (appendix) the charged nature of this situation becomes apparent. To the East of the Grove Estate, on the other side of the railway lie the glebe-lands of St. Mary's, Handsworth's Parish Church. Why should the Rector - and the church authorities in Staffordshire - having already overseen the sale of glebe-land to the railway at £1300 an acre be

considering, if they were, the purchase of land beyond the railway when it was widely known that the Board was seeking land for the park project?

Dr. Randall rose amid the uproar to make what the *Handsworth News* reporter, with irony, called the speech of the evening: "I will answer for myself. Allow me to say that from my heart I am the last man in the parish to stand between any object which is for the welfare of the people of the parish. It is because I don't think it is for the well-being that we should have the park that I lift up my voice against it. We have an agricultural parish, and we have some of the finest air in the kingdom, and I believe that the park will be more for the benefit of the roughs of Birmingham." (*a perfect bowl of dissent, uproar for at least a minute and cries of "shame" followed by alternations of groaning and cheering*)

Dr. Randall spoke of people leaving the parish because of the heavy rates. (*"Hear, hear" and applause*) He thought the Local Board had erred through jubilee zeal or some other zeal. (*laughter*) The vendors had taken advantage of that zeal to raise the price. (*clamour*) "I will state on my honour and word that the same land including the house has been offered to me even a few months ago, first at £7000 and then at £6000. If on no other ground I will oppose the purchase because it is above the price at which it has been offered to a private individual." (*Great cheering and interruption, Babel itself was not in it with the confusion of sounds that then ensued*)

The Chairman: "I am justified in asking Dr. Randall to give us the name of the gentlemen who offered it to him for £6000." (*"Hear, hear" and opposition*)

Dr. Randall: "Ratepayers and gentleman of Handsworth, do you think I ought to answer the question? (*"Yes", "No" and uproar*) I repeat it was offered by a man who had authority to sell."

At the request of the Chairman the Board Clerk, Henry Ward, read a letter from the Grove Estate solicitors "There is not a word of truth in the suggestion that this estate has ever been offered for £6000" (*"Nobody said it was"*)

The Rector asked the Chairman if he could answer this point but was refused. Mr. Lines rose to speak but was so interrupted that he had to sit down again. Then the Rector got up again to hearty applause "The letter is a quibble on the proposal made to me. The words used to my solicitor were 'We ask £7000 for the property but if you offer £6000 we will get it for you'" (*applause and cries of "That's the point"*) Then under a threat from the Chairman to adjourn the meeting to the next evening, Mr. Lines was allowed to make the final speech for the park. "This is the first time I have heard of a gentlemen not being allowed a hearing at Handsworth. May I remind the meeting that the question is entirely in your hands. During the last two years Mr. Pearson and myself have offered £6500 and then £7000 for the Grove Lane Estates, but both those offers were refused. The estate is in a splendid and suitable locality. If the park is established I feel sure that in a very few years houses will be built in the locality which will render no extra rate necessary to support the park" (*laughter and cries of "No, no"*) and Mr. Lines sits down.

The reporter of the *Handsworth News* described the end of this meeting:

Mr. Lines' speech ... produced no effect except that of further exasperating the already bad-tempered audience. ... When the not-too-successful advocate of the Board's policy had resumed his seat Mr. Wainwright rose to reply. He was commendably brief, but exceedingly earnest, and his short fiery speech was admirably adapted to secure his purpose. Every word told, and the promise that the Board would, if the resolution were carried, do all their promised work without raising the rate, and throw in the park as well, seemed to produce the desired effect. Having concluded his speech, Mr. Wainwright put the resolution, and hands having been held up on either side, he declared that

IT WAS CARRIED,

much to the disgust of many on the platform. Mr. Jacobs loudly protested that the proposition was lost and demanded a poll. Mr. Cooper offered to place in the hands of the clerk or the chairman a cheque sufficiently large to cover the expenses of a poll. Mr. Ellis fumed and Dr. Randall looked disconsolate. But the clerk explained that the Board had no power to arrange for a poll of the ratepayers and the malcontents had to satisfy themselves with empty protest and not too polite observations as to the chairman and his manner of conducting the proceedings. Meantime, Mr. Wainwright, with radiant face and beaming eyes, left the platform, being heartily congratulated by his friends and supporters, and as we

<sup>36</sup> The main account of this meeting is from the *Handsworth Gazette*, Jan. 19 1887



elbowed our way out of the still crowded room, we felicitated ourselves on the fact that the vexed question of a public park for Handsworth had been set at rest, with every appearance of the settlement arrived at, being a final and permanent one.<sup>37</sup>

On January 22 the editor of *Handsworth News* reported that the ratepayers had:

seen fit to adopt the large-minded policy of beautifying and improving the locality in which they reside, for the sake of the generations that are to come after them.

### PETITION AGAINST PURCHASE AND DEMAND FOR A PUBLIC ENQUIRY

On February 2 1887 the seal of the Local Board was affixed to the contract for the purchase of the Grove Estate for £7500. At the same time the Board decided to apply to the Local Government Board for sanction to borrow £7,600 for the purchase and conveyance of the estate for a public park and recreation ground. The issue of whether a lesser sum should have been paid and the truth of what had been offered to Dr. Randall grumbled on in the correspondence columns of the papers, including letters from the Rector, from his solicitors and those acting for the Grove Estate. Meanwhile the opposition formed into a committee led by William Medlicott Ellis, Mr. Jacobs and Dr. Randall, the Rector, were passing round the District for signatures, a circular to Mr. Ritchie,<sup>38</sup> President of the Local Government Board appealing to him not to sanction the loan for the park. A letter appeared from "Anti-Parkite" in the *Daily Gazette*.<sup>39</sup> It called upon the Handsworth Conservative Association to organise itself against the preponderance of Liberals on the Board with their "excessive taxation, neglected thoroughfares, impure gas, and Radical nostrums" and their current plan to impose the "perpetual burden of a park for the exclusive advantage of no other than the non-taxpaying classes".

On February 10, Dr. Randall the rector of St.Mary's Church, angered at rumours about his interest in buying or selling land in connection with the park wrote to the *Gazette* having been "forced into the controversy through idle gossip":

The truth is this: Some months ago Major Wilkinson came to me and inquired if I would sell a small field, which he wished to present to the parish, if some land adjoining could be obtained, for "an ornamental park." He fixed on this "low-lying" land as "the best site", and because it had a running stream of "water, which was indispensable." ... I considered his intention a most generous one, and having consulted several members of the church as to the desirability or otherwise of a park in that locality, I ascertained from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners that I might sell; and on communicating this to Mr. Wilkinson I learned to my surprise, that he had had my land valued, and £700 per acre was his valuation, not mine! I then, by his desire, entered into communication with Mr. Gibson Watt, and obtained his offer of six acres, behind mine, "at £500 per acre - for a park." Meanwhile I heard for the first time that the Local Board had been treating for the Grove estate, and therefore I kept the other matter strictly to myself, lest anyone should say that I wanted to sell my own land. Perhaps it will surprise some of the agents to hear, and may help their view, that I can get for this "low-lying" land, which is all frontage, much more than I was willing to accept from Major Wilkinson. But the argument of these gentlemen proves too much. If it is correct, the vendors are actually throwing away their property by giving it at £360 per acre! I wonder if the directors of the bank think so, and why their agents have not obtained for them the £700 or £800 or £1200 per acre all these years! I will tell them why. Grove Lane is not Hamstead Road, nor free sale the same as compulsory sale to a railway company; and as for comparing prices realised in different localities, it would have been as much to the point to compare the Grove estate with land under the shadow of Westminster Abbey.

He fulminated further against the high-handedness of the Board and declared himself "done with this paper war", he added a postscript:

Had I been disposed, like some of your correspondents, to retail vulgar, common gossip, I might have told you that a large number of the supporters of the Grove scheme are said to be so because they wish

<sup>37</sup> *Handsworth News*, Jan. 22 1887

<sup>38</sup> Charles Thomson Ritchie, 1st Baron Ritchie of Dundee (1838-1906) Conservative politician, notable for his reorganisation of local government. From 1886 to 1892 he served as president of the Local Government Board in Lord Salisbury's administration.

<sup>39</sup> *Daily Gazette*, Feb 21 1887

turn into another reservoir the streams of riff-raff which are a continual nuisance in their own localities, as they were in the halcyon days of "the hermit's cave" and "the baronial furniture" at Hamstead Hall. But I question if gossip is ever truth. - W.R.<sup>40</sup>

On February 28 Joseph Wainwright signed a circular from the Local Board Offices announcing several funds to raise money in honour of the Queen's Jubilee - one of these was the Public Park Fund to attract support for laying out the park.

"... what better thing can we do than to provide a beautiful park for the present and future use of the inhabitant of this district? Thousands of whom would not except for such provision have any fit place at hand in which to enjoy an hour's outdoor recreation."<sup>41</sup>

At the Local Board's monthly meeting on March 2, Henry Ward, Local Board Clerk, read out a letter from the Local Government Board (LGB) stating that a petition of 2000 Handsworth ratepayers had been sent to the LGB opposing the loan for the Park<sup>42</sup> and that before a decision was made about sanctioning the loan, a government inspector would hold an enquiry into the matter. Mr. Lines asked the Clerk to request that the LGB fix this enquiry as soon as possible as the Board was ready to seek donations for the park's lay out. On Tuesday, March 8 it was reported in the *Daily Times* that Major Tulloch had been appointed by the LGB as the Inspector to come to Handsworth on Wednesday March 16 to hold an enquiry "as to the desirability of forming a park for Handsworth."

On March 5 an editorial in the *Handsworth News* had expressed the hope that an election contest could be avoided when the term of office of four Local Board member's expired:

Could we not have a "round table conference" in Handsworth and see if by mutual arrangement, a contest cannot be averted? The Liberals are by far the strongest in the district; and we suggest that they should consent to one seat being given to the Conservatives. ... one of the gentleman retiring does not seek re-election, so that the question of sacrificing a tried and faithful public servant would not be applicable in this case. ... the constitution of the board would then be: Liberals 8, and Conservatives 4. ... as there seems every probability of sufficient money being contributed voluntarily to lay out the park the Conservative party might consent to withdraw their opposition to the purchase of the land. ... Everyone will readily admit the value of open spaces in our midst, and while there are good arguments, for each side on the question, we hope, whatever happens, that we may be spared the turmoil of a contest.<sup>43</sup>

By March 12 this advice would appear to have been taken with the Conservatives nominating in place of Mr. Robert Mann, who was retiring, and Mr.A.A.Ellis<sup>44</sup> the son of Mr.W.M.Ellis.

The Local Government Inspector will, therefore, be the person who will practically decide the question of "park or no park"<sup>45</sup>

On March 15 a "Ratepayer" aggrieved at the apparent removal of the park issue from Handsworth party politics and feeling unrepresented by the Conservatives nominated for the new Board in April, wrote to the *Gazette* that:

no Conservative can consistently give his support to any candidate who will not tooth and nail oppose the park. Independent candidates will not be wanting if there be sufficient public spirit and energy and disinterestedness left among Handsworth conservatives to venture upon a bold stand and a determined fight.

<sup>40</sup>*Daily Gazette*, Feb 10 1887

<sup>41</sup>*Daily Gazette*, Feb 28 1887

<sup>42</sup>*Handsworth News*, Mar. 12 1887

<sup>43</sup>*Handsworth News*, Mar. 5 1887

<sup>44</sup>*Handsworth News*, Mar. 12 1887. Elsewhere described as W.A.Ellis, he supported the "Victoria Park Extension" opened in 1898. As Chairman of Handsworth Urban District Council, his name is on a plaque on the Park Lodge off Hamstead Road.

<sup>45</sup>*Handsworth News*, Mar. 12 1887

**THE ENQUIRY: DID THE BOARD PAY THE RIGHT PRICE FOR THE PARK?**

At 10 o'clock on March 17 1887, Major Tulloch, the Local Government Inspector, held his enquiry at the Public Buildings in Soho Road. The attendance was large. As he opened the proceeding he acknowledged there had already been a "rather stormy meeting" about the park, and hoped that on this occasion those present would moderate their feelings and give everyone a chance to express their sentiments without interruption.<sup>46</sup>

Henry Ward, Clerk to the Board, described the background. At one point William Ellis interrupted to say that he had not received a notice of the meeting on January 18 and challenged the validity of the resolution passed at it. Mr. Ward continued:

"I now have to deal with a very delicate matter. I have this morning received a copy of a memorial which purports to have been signed by 2,083 ratepayers and property owners. Now, there are nearly 6,000 houses in Handsworth (*cries of "5,000"*). Although those gentlemen who oppose the scheme have been exceedingly zealous in obtaining signatures they have not got more than two-fifths of the ratepayers to sign. However, I venture to say that very few persons would have signed the memorial if they had been acquainted with the whole facts of the case." (*a voice: "That does not say much for the inhabitants."*)

Mr. Ward rehearsed the Board's point that the park would not add one farthing to the rates and had not cost the amounts rumoured. "The future of Handsworth depends upon it being kept a pleasant place ... large numbers of people are at the present time coming to live in Handsworth (*a voice: "Bankrupts"*). I think that remark is a reflection upon the inhabitants of Handsworth (*another voice: "They are only visitors"*; *laughter*) I may state that the workpeople employed at Messrs. Tangye's works have passed a resolution in favour of the scheme."

Henry Ward's presentation was followed by a report from Mr. E. Kenworthy, Surveyor to the Board. He ran over the work done on streets and sewers and then reminded the enquiry that "if this opportunity falls through I think it'll be difficult in the future to find a good site as ground is rapidly being bought for building purposes. I don't think this land will lie idle."

There now began a long exchange about the price that had been paid for the Grove estate. This seems to have fluctuated between £13,000 and the £7500 the Board had actually paid. Exchanges became acrimonious. Mr. Beale, solicitor to the vendors, had reported that in 1881 the estate was valued at £13,000 by Mr. Thomas Maden and in the same year, £10,000 by Mr. Ludlow.

Mr. Jacobs, opposing the loan, asked: "Is it not a fact that the Grove estate has been hawked about among solicitors?"

Mr. Beale: "No. Will you tell me a single instance?"

Mr. Jacobs: "I don't like to mention the names."

Mr. Beale: "Then don't make a general statement. Neither I nor Mr. Roderick (the Birmingham auctioneers and valuers responsible for selling the estate) was authorised to sell it for as little as £7000 and the Bank had never been willing to sell it for less than £8000, until the Board came upon the scene. I wrote to Mr. Chatwin (the rector's solicitor) and Mr. Chatwin told me he knew you (Dr. Randall) had stated something about a conversation about £7000 and £6000, but he (Mr. Chatwin) had a very indistinct recollection of it, but you were very clear about the matter. (*Laughter*)

Dr. Randall: "I beg to controvert that in the most emphatic manner. Can you produce Mr. Chatwin's letter?"

Mr. Beale: "I have not got the document with me." (*Laughter*)

After this exchange Joseph Wainwright was given the opportunity to describe the decision at the public meeting on January 18. He reminded the enquiry that the Board's decisions to purchase the park was within their powers but "We consulted the ratepayers as a matter of courtesy"

Mr. Jacobs: "And you lost."

Mr. Wainwright: "We deny that."

<sup>46</sup>*Daily Gazette*, Mar. 17 1887

Mr. Jacobs: "We say you did. Don't you remember me jumping up and shouting out 'Hurrah, we've won?'"

Mr. Wainwright: "Yes, and a few minutes *before* you shouted 'We've lost.'" (*Loud laughter*)

Mr. Jacobs: "Have you not been told that you are the most partial chairman that ever sat on the Local Board?"

Mr. Wainwright: "Never, except by Mr. Jacobs, who is the most practical jester in Handsworth."

Mr. Jacobs: "Will you drop politics and go to the ratepayers on this question?" ("Hear, hear")

The Inspector: "It is unusual to mention politics at enquiries. I hope the gentlemen present will refrain from doing so."

Mr. William Ellis: "A number of the Conservatives retired from the Board some years ago disgusted with the whole proceedings"

Mr. Wainwright: "I give my word that the park will not increase the present rates."

The valuer and auctioneer Mr. J. Roderick said "I never offered the Grove estate for £6000 or £7000, or even for £8000 to anyone. I had a chat with Mr. Chatwin, Dr. Randall's solicitor, with respect to the matter, and I might have said to him 'Well, go and talk it over with the rector, and see what he will offer.' But £8000 had always been the figure in my mind as the price of the estate."

Dr. Randall: "If I had known such evidence was going to be called I should have had my solicitor present."

Mr. W. Ellis now made his closing statement: "Those of us who wish to oppose the scheme appear here under a great disadvantage at this late hour. I have lived in the parish for many years and have been sent here as leader of the opposition. I would wish the Inspector to understand that many of the inhabitants of Handsworth are clerks who are occupied in town, and at the present time, they have great difficulties to make both ends meet, and if the rates could be reduced it would be a great boon to them." A few others then made the point that their opposition to the scheme was its effect on the rates and their distrust for the Board's assurances on that score.

Dr. Randall made his final remarks: "I oppose the park on the grounds that it has not been demanded nor asked for by the ratepayers. This place is very healthy and essentially rural and I contend that a park will prove a great nuisance to private householders. Public parks are resorts of pickpockets and bad characters and this one will have a tendency to demoralise the inhabitants of the district."

Major Tulloch said he would give the matter his thorough consideration adding that most of the districts throughout the country were striving to secure for themselves some open breathing grounds: "Smethwick is making provision for a park and I don't think Handsworth will like to be behind its neighbours."

## LOCAL ELECTION AND LOAN SANCTION

### HANDSWORTH - A CONTEST ON THE PARK QUESTION

- The nominations of candidates for the Handsworth Local Board closed on Saturday evening. There are four members to be elected this year. With the view of avoiding a contested election the Liberals decided to offer the seat vacated by Mr.R.Mann, who does not seek re-election, to the Conservatives; but a section of the ratepayers who are opposed to the park scheme seem determined to force an election, and for this purpose Mr. George Blackham, of Trinity Road, Birchfield, has been nominated, and it is understood that he will enter the field as an "anti-park" candidate. Mr. Blackham states that he intends going to the ratepayers on the question of "park" or "no park" irrespective of politics. If returned he is aware there will still be a majority on the Board who are in favour of the park scheme, but he will ask the Board if they feel justified in proceeding with the purchase in the face of his return, which he contends should be accepted as a true verdict of the ratepayers. Mr. Blackham, who is a member of the Liberal Association, comes forward as an independent candidate nominated by Mr. Joshua Horton, a leading member of the Conservative party, and he does not anticipate any support from any political organisation. The three retiring members of the Board offering themselves for re-election are Messrs. J.H.Pearson, A.B.Lines, and D.Rose, whilst Mr.W.A.Ellis, of Soho Road, has been nominated as the Conservative candidate to take the seat vacated by Mr.Mann.

*Handsworth Gazette*, March 29 1887

### CRUSHING DEFEAT OF THE ANTI-PARK CANDIDATE

The counting of the votes polled in this election took place at the Public Building Soho road, on Wednesday in the presence of Mr.Wainwright,(Returning Officer), Mr.H.Ward (Clerk), and Mr. H.S.Blackham who watched the proceedings on behalf of his father, Mr.G.Blackham, the anti-park candidate.

The result was made known at 3.30 as follows:-

D.Rose .....	2,652
W.A.Ellis .....	2,535
J.H.Pearson,J.P .....	2,293
A.B.Lines .....	2,044
G.Blackham .....	1,217

*Handsworth News*, 9 April 1887

On 13 April 1887 the Local Government Board in a short letter signed by C.N.Dalton, Assistant Secretary wrote from Whitehall to Mr.W.M.Ellis informing him that the Board "have seen no sufficient reason for refusing to comply with the application of the Handsworth Local Board, and have today sanctioned the borrowing of the sum of £7,600 for the purpose referred to."<sup>47</sup> At the Local Board meeting on July 1 1887 its General Purposes Committee recommended approval of the plan to lay out the 21 acres of the Grove estate as a public park.this would involve taking down all the old buildings with the exception of the stable and coach house. The committee agreed the tender of Thomas Elvins of Naden Road, Soho Hill, amounting to £217, for the repair of the park house and instructed the Clerk to prepare the contract and bond and get it executed. Mr.E.Kenworthy, Assoc.Inst. C.E, the Board surveyor, presented the plans for the park. The original plan on which the estate was laid out would not be greatly altered. 12 acres used as meadowland would now be used for cricket, football and lawn tennis. The main entrance would remain in Grove Lane, but would be extended to the terrace at the back of the house.

Branching from the main entrance on the right will be a short walk leading to a promenade, and at the end of this will be the entrance from the Hamstead road side. Another walk, 10ft. wide, will skirt the remainder of the grounds to within a few yards of the front of the house. Most of the outbuildings will be removed, but the main portion of the house will remain; and it is proposed that the dining room shall be used for the purpose of a refreshment room. The lawn at the rear of the house will also be widened and used as a bowling green. The plan provides something like twelve acres for recreative purposes, the remainder being composed of the now disused pool, kitchen garden, conservatories, and plots of ornamental bedding.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup>*Handsworth Gazette*, April 15 1887

<sup>48</sup>*Handsworth Gazette*, July 2 1887

There would also be a picture gallery and museum in Grove House and a portion of it would be used as a residence for the first park keeper, Mr. A Morgan.<sup>49</sup> The Finance Committee that day, chaired by Austin B. Lines, recommended that a cheque be drawn for £9,647-15s.-7d. - the largest sum, he noted, that had ever been asked for at one meeting of the Board. It included, of course, £7,500 for the purchase of the Grove Estate for use as a public park. The report was seconded and adopted.

### HANDSWORTH PARK'S DEBT TO ST.MARY'S CHURCH

The process of rousing concern about the future of Handsworth Park has led inevitably to learning more about its past. I had tended to assume this was a guaranteed space and it came as a rude surprise to find that it is and always was negotiable - no more inalienable than the pasture land it replaced a century ago. In starting this history I have begun to see the layers of successive experiences that make or break a sense of continuity between now and then. In these fragmented times social mobility, for necessity or choice, has eroded connection with neighbourhood and place, while for some the "hood" is more snare than home. The area of forgetfulness consigned to "history" seems to get closer. With even the 1980's subject to revival, I was consoled to read this letter in an old edition of the *Handsworth Herald*:

Handsworth Park and its History	
To the EDITOR of <i>The Handsworth Herald</i>	
Sir,- We have heard much, and doubtless shall hear more of our splendid possession, the park, and the progressive policy of our District Council. Will some of your readers inform us who initiated this policy, and if it is true that the Conservative party led by the then rector of Handsworth (Dr.Randall) opposed the purchase of the park? In justice to those gentlemen, who in years gone by gave of their best services, and for the information of the rising generation, I trust someone will give us the true history of the park from its inception. - Thanking you in anticipation, believe me, yours,	
March 30, 1898.	J.L.D.

Dr.Randall *was* against a park in Handsworth; so were *some* members of the Conservative Party. Imputations and refutations lie in the detail. Just over ten years earlier, in January 1887, there had been a packed meeting of ratepayers in the Council Offices on Soho Road. Despite progress on the construction of sewers, kerbed and lighted roads, a Free Library and other public works, the Handsworth Local Board sought approval for the largest single project loan it had applied for - to buy the Grove Estate between the railway and Grove Lane for a city "lung". At the meeting local people spoke out, cried out, and heckled against the cost and idea of a "park" in the midst of rural Handsworth. Among those articulate in opposition was the Rector of Handsworth. He supported a petition against the loan signed by over 2000 ratepayers - from a total of just over 5000. This prompted a public enquiry in which a government Inspector judged the Board within its rights to raise the loan to create a park. In a final stand, George Blackham, a Liberal nominated by a Conservative, Joshua Horton, stood as the "Anti-park" candidate in the April 1887 local elections. He came last in the poll. The loan was approved. Thereafter the project proceeded with little opposition. The Grove Estate was bought, laid out as a park during 1887-88 under the direction of Edwin Kenworthy, the Board surveyor, and on 20 June 1888 the part beside Grove Lane - was opened in celebration of the Queen's Jubilee the year before by Austen B. Lines, JP. He had first moved the idea in January 1882. During 1887-1888 a pond on the estate was converted to "a small ornamental water, a number of pretty walks laid out, including a fine broad promenade 700 feet in length ..." and Handsworth Park gave promise "of becoming one of the bonniest in the district." (Dent 1916).

On the 19 June 1890 land to the east of the railway - 9000 square yards - was leased for 999 years from William Mayner at a rent of £75 per annum and added to the Park. In 1895 the Board celebrated the addition of 36 more acres bought for £5575 from Mr. P. Williams.

The first part of the Park had proved enormously popular. The apprehensions of those who had anticipated the growth of Birmingham northwards was proven and their foresight appreciated.

<sup>49</sup>*Handsworth News*, July 9 1887

The *new* Rector of Handsworth not only supported the new park's extension along with Handsworth notables across the political spectrum, but, more significantly for us today, was instrumental in vacating Dr.Randall's old rectory on the south side of the present park and selling part of St.Mary's glebe-land - some of which lies beneath the present pond - at a price well below what it would have fetched on a lucrative market for development land; indeed, well below the price of the land for the *first* part of the park.

At the grand opening of the "Victoria Park Extension" on March 30 1898 - when "J.L.D" enquired about the history of the Park - it poured with rain most of the morning, a condition one local journalist called "Handsworth's luck" and which has accompanied other Handsworth events since especially Carnival. The new Rector of Handsworth, the Rev. Prebendary Hodgson, spoke after the Earl of Dartmouth who had opened the ornate Hamstead Road gates<sup>50</sup> with a silver key, declaring in a loud voice that the extension of Victoria Park was now "open to the people for ever."<sup>51</sup> Addressing a large crowd from a temporary platform overlooking the pond - created by damming the clear stream of the Handsworth Brook - the Rev. Hodgson congratulated the inhabitants of Handsworth on their lovely park, the District Council on the superb way they had laid it out and everyone present on being there on such an auspicious occasion and, "so far as it is possible for me to do so", generations yet to come, on the facilities provided for their health and well-being:

There might have been many other things done with the ground added to the park. Numerous suggestions were offered for the utilisation of the forty-four acres other than for park purposes. One gentleman said it would make a really beautiful addition to the parish churchyard ("*oh, oh*" and *laughter*). Then the ground might have fallen into the hands of a building syndicate, and before long been covered with buildings of a not very ornamental kind, in a not particularly salubrious position. Another alternative. The present rector of Handsworth might have decided to remain in the house occupied by his predecessor, and that would have been an effectual block. Happily all these contingencies have been averted. The old rectory grounds have become part of a beautiful park instead of a part of the parish graveyard. You have a fine view of the cemetery. From where I am standing distance lends enchantment to the view (*laughter and applause*). You owe very much to the progressive policy of the Handsworth District Council and I, as a believer in progress, and not in retrogression, heartily congratulate the Park Committee on the brilliant function witnessed today.

In the afternoon the sun showed its face allowing a balloon ascent followed by a magnificent fireworks display.<sup>52</sup> There was a procession from the Handsworth Council offices in Soho Road - now the library and Handsworth College of Further Education - and, in the evening, a grand and exclusive dinner with speeches to round off the day. Though the Revd. Hodgson spoke out on that rainy morning in celebration of Handsworth Park, the thing which the church had done in secret - not "sounding a trumpet" before itself - was what mattered. This discretion may be put down to the confidentiality surrounding a conveyance but the fact of the matter was that the Local Board - in one of its last acts before becoming Handsworth Urban District Council under local government reorganisation - paid only £150 an acre for St.Mary's glebe-land.

Mr. J.H. Pearson reported at a Board meeting in January 1894 that "the negotiations have been carried through with such admirable skill that hardly anyone outside the committee has been aware of the important movement afoot" He added: "The conduct of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, in whom the right of sale was vested, is worthy of recognition for the public spirit they have displayed in the transaction. The two bodies evidently felt they were dealing together in the interests of the public."<sup>53</sup>

Even at the time of this transaction, when Handsworth was outside the direct control of Birmingham Corporation which took the area over in 1911 serving the park well for over 50 years, our great working city was expanding inexorably - its more prosperous citizens seeking new habitation beside the countryside their entrepreneurial energy was subverting. I speculate that Dr.Randall's opposition was fired by the sense of a known place being enveloped by forces

<sup>50</sup>Not the present gates. The originals went, with the other Victorian railings, to assist the war effort in 1939.

<sup>51</sup>*Handsworth Herald & North Birmingham News*, April 2 1898

<sup>52</sup>*Handsworth Herald & North Birmingham News*, April 2 1898

<sup>53</sup>*Handsworth Herald*, Jan 6 1894

that seemed beyond human control, certainly beyond the now derelict powers of a vestry that had once been the source of local governance in rural Staffordshire (Jefferies 1979). He spoke passionately, mindful of the voice of *Deuteronomy 19:14* - "Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance". His successor recognised the irreversible and yet, with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, resisted the temptation of the times. No human creation can be guaranteed inalienable when the economic and social forces are strong enough. But without the church's charity *all* of the Park enjoyed this side of the railway would have been built upon. I owe much to St.Mary's for all "we" - that most *political* pronoun - now seek to protect in the lake and trees and slopes and animals and birds of Handsworth Park and its surroundings.

## HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

In 1911 Handsworth Park, with its current boundaries between Hamstead Road and Grove Lane, came under the control of Birmingham Corporation and there it thrived for half a century under the guardianship of the Parks Committee and a substantial ground staff of at least 16 people. Many events were run as matter of course in Handsworth Park. It hosted the Birmingham Flower Show, annual Jamborees for the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, horse shows, cycle races, walking events and other local and city-wide celebrations, until during the 1970's its fortunes faltered with the diminishing power of Birmingham City Council to exercise their previous stewardship. Around these events there is a file of history - "lost and found" - containing a polyphony of stories waiting to be told and intimately entwined with the future of Handsworth.

Apart from the tags that re-appear almost as soon as they are removed by Birmingham City Council's "graffiti squad" I have noticed more permanent names in the Park and nearby streets, - on a plaque by the porch of the Park Lodge, on the remains of a marble fountain, beside a flowerbed border. Others have disappeared. I hope this brief account will bring the Park they and their unknown successors created and maintained back onto the record for all who do and shall enjoy this place.

## APPENDIX

*Extract from a recorded interview with George and Norah Taylor, West Drive, Handsworth B20 interviewed on 27 December 1995*

G.- When I was young - between the ages of 10 and 15 - we used to spend virtually all our school holidays in the park ... that would be from about 1930 to 1934 ... and we wasn't allowed to play football in any part of the park apart from the part over the Hinstock Road ... and that was roughish grass ... and we used to call that the cabbage patch. And to play with a proper case ball we used to have to go over there. ... It was strictly supervised. The park-keepers - if they saw you kicking the football in any other part they used to tell you to get up to the cabbage patch. There was no proper football pitch. There was no goal posts. We used to put coats down, but there was the cricket pitch- the proper cricket pitch where cricket was played throughout the summer, you know. You used to see some nice batting. But it used to be great. On a Sunday afternoon, you know, everybody would put their best suits on - would walk round the pool and there used to be a queue to have a boat out. The smart lads was there on the skiffs, you know, showing off to the girls the speed they could row the skiffs. When we was young we used to just have a canoe and paddle a canoe. And it was a lovely park. ... Apart from the skiffs there was the ordinary rowing boats where a couple of passengers could sit while one rowed and then there was the canoes.

S. - Do you remember when and why that stopped?

G.- I don't exactly know when it stopped

S.- Was it still going after the war?

G - Oh it was going after the war. Yes, yes, oh, certainly it was. There was never any fishing in the park. I personally think the park started to decline round about the 1970's, the late 60's



or the early seventies. It seemed to take a dip after they stopped holding the flower show there. I think they stopped holding the flower show there in '72 or '73.

S.- What do you remember going back to that period as boy in the thirties?

G.- Obviously the pool was always an attraction, but in the week we hadn't got money to have a boat out. You saved your money for the weekend.

N. Weren't there swings there?

G.- Oh yeah, there were swings

N. -They were over near to where the bandstand -

G.- By the bandstand. And I remember bands playing on Sunday afternoon. And it was extremely nice. And there was swings. But I don't think they let you use the swings on Sunday afternoon. And there was the nice drinking fountain by the side of the pool coming up towards the boat-house.

S.- Where it still is now?

G.- It's where you press the button ...

S.- There [*indicating map location*]- the one with "Palmer" on the outside? ... And that was working? Do you remember when that stopped working?

G.- No...no. But ..em .. we had some lovely summers there when we was kiddies. Everything was nice and peaceful. And the park used to be packed ... crowded out with kiddies, all with a bottle of pop or something like that to last you for the day.

N - mothers with prams and push-chairs going through ...

G.- And the park-keepers going round to see it was supervised .. and if anybody got

N - There even used to be ...

G.- A cut knee they used to be there on hand to bandage the knee.

N- ... there even used to be somebody apart from the man that used to call you in on the boat-used to be people supervising it. You know, if they saw anybody getting a bit out of hand - they'd fetch them back in ...

G.- Any fooling about. Because there was the danger part, wasn't there - in the centre of the pool? Railings round, deep and keep away from it.

S.- So there was quite a lot of staff in the park?

G. - Oh there was. Beautiful flower beds. It was a lovely park. A beautiful park. ... The moment you crossed the Villa Road and started to walk down Hamstead Road it was as though you was in the country. ... And the flower beds was always beautiful. It was lovely entrance to the Park. But it still is really, isn't it?

S.- But it needs work on it

G.- In its heyday it was gorgeous. Those beds was ... to pass it down the Hamstead road it was a lovely sight. And it was a tragedy when at the start of the war all the beautiful railings was cut down and taken away, because the entire park had beautiful railings - cast iron railings round and it must have been one of the first parks where they was taken. It was gutted to see all those go. It was a shame.

*Extract from a recorded interview with Mrs. Joan Swann, 51 Stamford Road, Handsworth B20 -Sunday 31 December 1995*

J.- I had my first child in '46 and in those days we went down to Handsworth Park practically every day. ... we went down to Handsworth Park and it was a beautiful park then ... to meet all the other young mums and their babies, but now nobody's ... they're all afraid to go in the park aren't they? I haven't been in the park for years. And yet when you stand at that bus-stop opposite the park to go into the city I've seen the wild-life on the pool and I've thought "Oh I'd love to go in there again." But you're just afraid to aren't you? ... It was lovely. There used to be tennis courts and ... we used to go in the park and sit behind the tennis courts which were just inside the park gates actually and sit and have a chat and our kids used to - those that weren't in the pram - used to nip about and play ... and there was always seats all around that pool. And there was a big house there ... further up there was a place where you could ... well we used to call it the tea rooms I think but it was the Park

House really where we could get ice creams and things. It was .. really was a lovely park. And the flower beds were kept beautifully and there was always gardeners around and police on duty - parks police -- ooh if a kid didn't behave itself they were soon on to them. Now the parks police would be afraid to walk round I think. What else was there then? Oh there was tennis, bowls, tiddlers in the pool, which as the children got older they used to love to get the tiddlers. There was the Park House. Skating on the pool. When the boat house was there and the pool wasn't frozen over you hired a boat to go round the pool. It really was an interesting place. And they always had the Scout's Rally there once a year. And the flower show was there in those days. The dog show. Bands in the bandstand on a Sunday. I mean you can't believe it really can you? The boat house was burnt, wasn't it?

S.- There used to be a group of old Sikh gentlemen. They used to sit in the front and they'd be playing cards.

J.- Yes.

S.- The boats had all gone by then. They'd be sitting there playing cards.

J.- Cards. That's right.

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An invaluable resource for this research has been the collation of Handsworth & Birmingham newspaper cuttings collected and arranged by G.H. Osborne between approx. 1870 and 1900 [Birmingham City Council Central Library Archive *ref*: L.f30.3]

*Research: Simon Baddeley (0121 554 9794) with assistance from Birmingham Central Library Archives and neighbours in Handsworth - 1995-1996 Contact: s.j.baddeley@bham.ac.uk*

**1882 ~ 1898**

- 1882 Triple Alliance of Austro-Hungary, Germany and Italy. Start of the British occupation of Egypt.
- 1883 Death of Queen Victoria's servant, John Brown. Eruption of Krakatoa.
- 1884 Invention of rayon. Invention of the linotype machine.
- 1885 First meeting of the Indian National Congress. Inventions of Daimler and Benz bring about first automobiles. Building of the Canadian-Pacific Railroad. Use of fingerprints proposed for identification. Britain colonises Burma. Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule for Ireland. Death of evangelist and social reformer Ashley Cooper (Lord Shaftesbury). Joseph Conrad publishes "Almayer's Folly" - "Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings."
- 1886 Introduction of "Coca-Cola". South African gold rush. Statue of Liberty erected in New York harbour. Lord Salisbury becomes Conservative prime Minister (until 1892). Death of Randolph Caldecott, illustrator of children's books and early graphics celebrating middle class family life, especially snowy Christmas celebrations in the countryside. Having become famous for the design and layout of Central Park in New York, the landscape architect Frederick Olmsted designs and creates a system of public parks, parkways and harbour landscape in Boston, Massachusetts.
- 1887 June 20 - Queen Victoria's Jubilee. The year from which a wooden chair (the Welsh bard's highest honour) has been awarded the writer of the winning *awdl* - vehicle for many outstanding Welsh poems - at the annual national Eisteddfod. Death of Ellen Price author of the sensational international best-seller "East Lynne" (1861).
- 1888 Birth of Isaac Halevi Herzog, scholar, author, religious philosopher, lecturer, chief rabbi of the Irish Free State and chief rabbi of Palestine (later Israel) from 1936. Birth of thriller writer Herman McNeile - who under the pseudonym "Sapper" was to create the character "Bulldog Drummond". Birth of T.S. Eliot. **OPENING OF VICTORIA PARK IN HANDSWORTH (JUNE 20).**
- 1889 Second International founded in Paris. Brazil becomes a Republic. London Dockers' Strike. Death of the British reforming politician John Bright.
- 1890 American writer, J. Ralph, calls Birmingham "the best-governed city in the world". Design and manufacture of one of the last horse-drawn vehicles - the "bike-wagon" or "runabout" - a lightweight, open carriage with rubber tyres. The name "bloomers" - advocated by Amelia Bloomer in 1850 - survives to describe the divided skirts, knickerbockers and loose baggy underwear that women wear in the cycling craze of the 1890s.
- 1891 Russia begins constructing the Trans-Siberia railway.
- 1892 General Election. Gladstone returns as Liberal Prime Minister. Founding of the American Sierra Club to encourage enjoyment and protection of the "great outdoors". Founding of Katipunan - Filipino Nationalist organisation to resist Spanish rule. Lord Cavendish murdered in Phoenix Park, Dublin.
- 1893 Birth of Wilfred Owen. New Zealand becomes the first country to grant women the right to vote.
- 1894 Opening of the Manchester Ship Canal. The Dreyfus Affair begins. First automobile race from Paris to Rouen. Gladstone resigns over Home Rule. Lord Rosebery succeeds him as Liberal Prime Minister.
- 1895 Roentgen discovers X-rays. General Election. Lord Salisbury returns as Conservative Prime Minister (until 1900).
- 1896 Setting up of the Nobel Prize. Gold discovered in the Klondyke starting the California gold rush. First modern Olympic Games held in Athens. Edison's movie projector first demonstrated. Gladstone denounces Turkish atrocities in Armenia. Death of William Morris.
- 1897 Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. First modern submarine launched in USA. Women's National Suffrage Society formed in Britain. Publication of Rudyard Kipling's poem "Recessional" with its reference to "lesser breeds without the Law." Pablo Picasso - aged 16 - enters the Royal Academy in Madrid but finding the teaching stupid spends his time recording life around him, in the cafés, on the streets, in the brothels, and in the Prado where he discovers Spanish painting.
- 1898 The newspaper headline "J' Accuse" begins Emil Zola's letter to the President of France denouncing the anti-Semitic conspiracy that had sent Captain Alfred Dreyfus to Devil's Island on a trumped up charge of espionage. Death of William Gladstone. A chance darker mutation of the British peppered moth leads to its proliferation relative to the light moth since less conspicuous to predators against tree trunks sootened by industrial pollution. New Territories of Hong Kong leased to Britain for 99 years. Death of Ahmadu Seku, last ruler of the Tukulor empire in West Africa celebrated for his resistance to French occupation. Mysterious destruction of the US battleship Maine in Havana harbour precipitates American-Spanish War. Death of Lewis Carroll. Bolt-action Mauser becomes the basic infantry weapon of the German army. **OPENING OF VICTORIA PARK EXTENSION IN HANDSWORTH (MARCH 30).**