



Handsworth park

location: Birmingham

Originally designed over 100 years ago by Richard Hartland Vertegans, a local nurseryman and landscape designer, Handsworth Park, has Grade II listed status and is an excellent example of a 19th century urban park. Despite the fact that it has become somewhat run down in recent years it has remained a much loved local park.

The project to regenerate the park is the largest park restoration project of its type in the West Midlands and one of the most significant park improvement schemes in the country.

Introduction

Handsworth Park opened on 20 June 1888. At that time, the park was less than half its present size and was called Victoria Park. It was so well received that it quickly expanded, and by 1901 it was the beautiful park we know today.

Amongst the reasons for the success of the park were its many facilities and its elegant design. The first part of Handsworth Park had been laid out by local nurseryman, Richard Vertegans, of Chad Valley nurseries. It occupied the grounds of The Grove (later known as Park House), a large country house dating from 1780. The house, a square duck pond, an aviary, outbuildings and kitchen garden were retained, but Vertegans redesigned the landscape, adding winding walks, flower beds, trees and the huge Broad Walk – a raised promenade, 20 feet wide and 700 feet long, surrounded by planting beds.

The park covers over 63 acres, and was largely created in two parts, the first opening in 1888 with the second significant parcel being added in 1895.

During its early years the land was acquired piece by piece:

- Over 20 acres, once part of the Grove estate, was purchased in 1887 from the Birmingham and Midland Bank Ltd for £7,500
- A further 2 ½ acres were leased for 999 years from William Mayner in June 1890
- A parcel was added in March 1895 sold by Philip Williams
- In March 1895 another 16 acres were purchased from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners.
- In November 1901, a strip of land adjacent to Hinstock Road was purchased. Much of this final piece was added to the park with a small parcel being retained for the construction of public baths.

Despite the somewhat random and piecemeal approach to the assembly of land, the park is recognised as having a remarkable unity of design which testifies to the quality of the first plans prepared.

Design process

Though the character of the park suffered after the war when many of its metal railings and gateways were removed to aid the war effort, the park continued to be a focus for community life right up to the early 60's. During this period however, visitor numbers declined and staff numbers were reduced as a result of shrinking financial support. By the 1980's the condition of the park was very poor, due in part, to the overspill of social problems and associated crime that had been prevalent in the surrounding area through the 1970's and 80's. There were no park keepers from about 1990, and the fear of crime and lack of management left the park in a fairly derelict state.

The fortunes of the park finally began to improve when in 1996 a community group called 'Save Handsworth Park' was formed. The group campaigned to improve the park, organising meetings and developing activities, including the 'Classroom in the Park', which is now a well-established celebration. As a result of their campaign, Birmingham City Council decided to reintroduce resident park staff. This was clear recognition by Birmingham City Council that the park could play a major role in the lives of people living around the park and indeed the wider city region. This led to the commitment to inject the necessary vision and capital investment to revitalise the park.

Birmingham City Council and their Landscape Practice Group began the process of regeneration for the park in the late 1990s. They studied the park, consulted local people, and identified what needed to be done. Landscape consultants Hilary Taylor Landscape Consultants were employed to provide specialist landscape advice. Additional external partners included the Police and Groundwork Birmingham and Solihull, as well as representatives from local community groups. Designs were carefully developed to respond to the needs of a diverse, urban community, as well as restore the distinctive historic character of the park. Hilary Taylor's work included new designs for railings, gates, lake edges, planting and paths, and the development of a colour palette for site furniture, structures, buildings and signage.

Hilary Taylor also worked closely with Birmingham City Council in their preparation of a successful application for Heritage Lottery funding which awarded nearly £5m towards the multi-million pound renewal project. The Council also secured around £1.4m from its Single Regeneration Budget, and a further £1.3m from the European Regional Development Fund and supplied nearly £2m itself, totalling £9.6m and making it the biggest park regeneration project in the West Midlands.

Thomas Vale Construction, one of the City Council's Partnership Contractors, started major works on site in the sunken garden in 2004. Early on in the process there was little to see but mud and mess, but behind this apparent chaos the new park began to take form. The lakes were dredged and the silt removed with the edges being rebuilt and the main board walk renewed and once again being surrounded with lavish plantings of shrubs, perennials and annual plants. As part of the design development process it was decided that the lakes should have a permanent aeration system, to help ensure that the

water quality continues to be healthy. The new boathouse was followed by a new 'Sons of Rest' Pavilion. Improvements were made to the leisure centre and the cricket pavilion, and new play facilities and a multi-use games area were introduced.

All around the park, the historic walls and railings were reinstated. Planting of trees, shrubs and flowers now bring colour and beauty back to the park. The historic gates at Hamstead Road and Grove Lane were refurbished and reinstated and the two fountains, donated by Austin Lines and Charles Palmer, were restored. In 2005 the bandstand was brought back from the foundry in Glasgow, where it had been restored.

The nearby St Mary's Church has always had a strong connection with the park, and improvements were made here, too. Some of the walls and railings around the Church have been restored, and a new gate now provides direct access from the park to the churchyard with its numerous and fascinating monuments.

Evaluation

Handsworth is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse areas in Europe, and the success of the project is demonstrated by the fact that the park is once again enjoying large numbers of visitors from not only the immediately surrounding areas but the wider city region.

One of the key factors in the successful regeneration of the park has been the tireless support and campaigning undertaken by the dedicated group of local residents.

Handsworth Park was officially re-opened on July 8 2006, and was recently featured on a special parks edition of BBC's Gardeners' World.

Best of all, the park already attracts hundreds of new visitors. The future of Handsworth Park now looks more secure than it has done in decades.

The Places and Genius Landscape Design Award for Excellence was the most recent award for the Landscape Practice Group of Birmingham City Council for the restoration of Handsworth Park.

Key design features to look out for

- Although the park was acquired piece by piece over many years, the overall design of the landscape has created a surprising unity between the different areas.
- The combination of modern construction methods/materials with a dedicated design approach of restoring the distinctive historic character of the park. This results in a scheme that not only meets the needs of today's visitors, but provides a window into the social and aesthetic sensibilities of historic communities now long gone.

- The wide range of facilities plays a key role in the success of the park in attracting large numbers of people who now visit and use the park on a regular basis. The proximity and spatial relationship of associated community facilities such as the leisure centre helps to support the overall spatial qualities of the park.

Link and downloads

Birmingham City Council

http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent?CONTENT_ITEM_ID=17503&CONTENT_ITEM_TYPE=0&MENU_ID=11903

Birmingham City Council press release

http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent?CONTENT_ITEM_ID=120391&CONTENT_ITEM_TYPE=9&MENU_ID=126

Thomas Vale Construction

<http://www.data7.co.uk/Thomasvale/Projects/project.asp?ProjectType=TypeLeisure&ProjectID=67>

Hilary Taylor Landscape Associates Ltd

http://www.htla.co.uk/comp_projects.htm

Handsworth Park Brochure

http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/Media/Handsworth%20Park%20brochure%20pdf.pdf?MEDIA_ID=276301&FILENAME=Handsowrth%20Park%20brochure%20pdf.pdf