

The historical significance of Stamford Park

Stamford Park's particular position in the development of public parks lies in two aspects of open space philosophy. The first is the underlying design principle & the second relates to its function.

With regard to the former, the underlying approach of English landscape gardeners until the 2nd half of the 19th century was of a unified effect. A landscape was designed as a whole, witness the work of Capability Brown & his successors. Their intention was to create a single landscape wherein the parts combined to achieve a unity of expression.

The challenge to this approach came from across the Channel. In Parisian parks designs involving a complex geometry of overlapping circles & ellipses which opened up multiple vistas had been developed. Here the intention was to create lines of vistas between the greatest numbers of attractive points. This approach was first used in England by Edouard Andre, a Parisian designer, & Lewis Hornblower for Sefton Park (Liverpool) in 1867.

In relation to function, public parks were originally designed for promenading & passive enjoyment but this was gradually changing. During the 1840's Joshua Major included "innocent athletic games" (archery, quoits, bowls, gymnasia) in his Manchester parks. These more sedate activities could be relatively easily incorporated into contemporary park design – hedges around archery or raised beds surrounding bowling greens for example.

By 1880 the concept of sports parks came into being, with Stamford Park & West Park (Wolverhampton) in the vanguard. Here the fundamental design of the park was around, rather than accommodating, more active sports such as cricket & football. The inclusion of football is of interest. Previously it had been viewed as unseemly & not to be encouraged due to its roughhouse image. However, by the 1880's it was being played by church groups & at public schools hence its newfound social acceptance.

In Stamford Park the landscape gardener John Shaw sought to combine the continental school of complex geometry with wide-ranging provision for sporting activities. The walks were to be numerous & in graceful curves with plantations of shrubberies for shade & shelter. The original proposal included sites for fountains, vases, statuary, seats & summerhouses with "views & objects of interest multiplied". Promontories, broken up by clumps & specimen trees, would help enclose open spaces for "games & other amusements". For the "recreation of the youth of the town" there were to be spacious playgrounds with "gymnastic appliances" (separate ones for boys & girls naturally) & a swimming bath of variable depth with dressing sheds for men & boys. These features were to have rockwork arches to seclude them. The oval was a cricket ground & there was the football pitch as well as provision for lawn tennis, croquet & quoits. The whole was to be enclosed by substantial iron palisade.

It is these two aspects of its design that make Stamford Park so important in terms of public open spaces. Unfortunately it is likely that not all of the fine detail was translated from plan to park. John Shaw himself handed over implementation to his son, also John Shaw.