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Women in Manchester's Edwardian Parks 1900 – 1935

Women's Life and Leisure in the Twentieth Century conference

Introduction

Heaton Park in Manchester was purchased by Manchester City Council from Lord Wilton in 1902. The park is 650 acres, four miles north-west of the city centre and cost £130,000. Prior to the purchase of Heaton by the City Council, Manchester had had few large open spaces for the citizens. The campaign for open spaces in the city had begun in 1846 but Heaton was the 1st large-scale municipal park in the city.

As a former aristocratic estate, Heaton Park had been open by application to individuals and groups for many years (limited access). The Wilton family were no longer resident and were content to leave the day-to-day running of the estate to their agents. There is evidence that school parties and social groups were given permission to enter the estate and to picnic on its grounds. However, for most Mancunians, the park was an unknown space. Its transformation from private estate to public park is where this paper will begin.

There is evidence that many women used the park for both leisure and non-leisure activities. Non-leisure activities consisted mostly of attendance at political meetings (for example, suffragettes) and temperance or religious events.

Private to Public

One of the stated aims of the purchase of Heaton Park by Manchester City Council was to create a space that would bring all social classes together. This was a common aspiration in the Victorian era – the cause of many social problems was attributed to the separation of social classes. There was also a concern that many of the wealthier citizens had moved out of the city into the affluent suburbs, leaving a dearth of middle class role models for the working classes.

There is no evidence that there was a deliberate attempt to address the gender of the parks users from its earliest inception. It was simply not considered. However, many of the decisions taken by the City Council in general and the Parks and Cemeteries committee in particular, did have consequences for both male and female park employees and the parks users. The Parks and Cemeteries committee at the time was all-male and continued to be so until Margaret Ashton (the first woman to be elected to Manchester City Council) joined the committee in 1911.

Some women were employed by the City Council as lodge-keepers in the park. Some of these had been employed by the Wilton family and were kept on by the Council after the sale. Two female lodge keepers – Mrs. Evans at Station Lodge and Mrs Diggle at Grand Lodge – managed to negotiate and secure an improvement in their working conditions in 1908 (P&C minutes, Vol. 27). They were awarded a weekly allowance of 10 shillings each instead of their previous £5 per annum stipend. This occurred as a result of an appeal from Mrs. Diggle which occasioned the intervention of the Lord Mayor himself. In lieu of the proposed pay increase from £5 per annum to £7, the Parks and Cemeteries committee resolved to offer a weekly wage to the two women instead. Both Mrs. Evans and Mrs. Diggle were widows whose lodge keeping duties were their sole source of income. Both had been employed by the Wiltons but were finding their duties increasing under the new ownership. Lodge keepers were required to open and close the gates of the park, to maintain the outward face of the entrance to the park and to monitor the comings and goings of the users. Many male employees dating from the Wilton's tenure were dispensed with by the Council, mostly on the grounds of old age, but female employees like the two lodge keepers were more successful in keeping their jobs and homes.

There is evidence that many park users were women, especially during the week. Contemporary photographs show substantial numbers of women and children in the park (SLIDES 2 & 3). Women were often employed in the tea rooms as catering staff and, as we have seen, as lodge keepers. They were also employed by the City Council to supervise the play of young children during the summer months, thus serving an important didactic function.

They were frequently customers in the various tea rooms, designated according to the price of the teas on offer (SLIDES 4, 5 & 6) . The more expensive tea room situated in Heaton Hall itself (in the former music room) and depicted in 1904, is clearly staffed by men and men form the majority of the customers. In contrast, the refreshment tent and exterior tea room also photographed in 1904, has a majority of female customers. Women can be seen queuing outside the tent and the background also shows some female employees, wearing white aprons.

Taking tea at the park was a very popular past time, especially at weekends but was segregated based on ability to pay. The provision of variously priced teas was supposed to be a reflection of the Parks and Cemeteries committee's commitment to serve all social classes but it is evident that many park users could not afford to have tea at all and that those who could took tea with others of a similar social class, thus reinforcing class differences.

Why did women come to the park? Clearly, many brought their children, which can be seen from the earlier photos which show many women with groups of children.

Women with children went with other women with children, often without men. It represented a rare opportunity to escape the domestic environment into the fresh air and to enable the children to run and play in a safe place. Some of the sporting facilities on offer at Heaton and other Manchester parks were especially attractive to

women such as tennis and cycling. Edwardian fashions permitted women to ride bicycles in a manner that was socially acceptable and it rapidly became a popular past time.

Bicycles are again in evidence both as a mode of transportation to the park and of getting around within it. By the Edwardian period, cycling was increasingly popular, both as a hobby and as a means of physical exercise among both men and women. Production and design innovations had made bicycles cheaper to purchase, lighter and more comfortable to ride and cycling rapidly became an activity that transcended class, gender and age (McCRONE, K. *Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women 1870 – 1914*. London: Routledge, 1988, pp. 178 – 179).

Most visitors are wearing hats, usually of a plain straw boater style. These styles were popular due to their cheapness and their connection to a having a day out, as Harrison has remarked (HARRISON, M. *The History of the Hat*. London: Herbert Jenkins, 1960, p. 173). De Courtais has remarked on the boom in the popularity of the straw hat during this period because of the expansion of the English straw plaiting and hat manufacturing industry in the mid Victorian era (DE COURTAIS, G. *Women's Hats, Headdresses and Hairstyles*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006, p. 113).

Some more elaborate hats are also evident in this photo, reflecting the new fashion for ornate trims (Ibid., p. 142). Walton has demonstrated the importance of wearing one's best clothes to public gatherings at this time as a statement of fashion and as an attempt to impress strangers away from one's home environment (WALTON, J.K.

The Seaside and the Holiday Crowd. In: V. TOULMIN, S. POPPLE AND P.RUSSELL (eds.). *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film*. London: BFI, 2004, (pp. 158-168), p. 160). He remarks that many working people now had access to Sunday and holiday clothes and felt the need to dress up to

go to the park. Rose has remarked on the rise in both living standards and leisure time during the Edwardian period (Rose, 1986: 165)

Most park users fell into 2 categories: those who lived in its environs and could walk there and those who lived further afield and could afford the tram fare. Taylor points out that, while public parks like Heaton were designed by men, they were predicated on notions of family values, security and polite, contemplative activity. Taylor sees these latter attributes as specifically female and argues that many public parks were therefore more appealing to women as users than men. Wyborn argues that parks were a mechanism for the middle classes to encourage working class men out of the taverns and pubs and working class women away from the streets. The irony is this is that working class users frequently imported their own norms and values into the environment of the park. There is evidence that a park in East Manchester, located near a military barracks, was a favoured haunt for prostitution (DAVIES, A. *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working Class Culture in Salford and Manchester 1900-1939*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992, p. 141). Thus, attempts by the City Council to impose middle class value systems onto working class park users were often a failure.

While the provision of amenities was initially pragmatic at Heaton Park, the later developments such as the golf course and the boating lake were more characteristic of the Edwardian park than the Victorian. The earlier emphasis on rational recreation gave way to more segregated sports facilities, reflecting the differing appeal of certain sports to men and women (McCRONE, K. op. cit., p. 13). Cycling and tennis were enjoyed mainly by women while football and cricket were more popular with men. Such facilities are in contrast to the earlier Victorian inclination to provide more general amenities for walking, sitting and observing the planting schemes and often

had the effect of dividing up park visitors by gender and sporting interest. The *Manchester Evening Chronicle* welcomed the opening of Heaton Park as conducive to 'healthy and manly' development (MEC, editorial, 25 September 1902, p. 2). The yoking together of physical health and masculinity indicates the slow provision for women's recreational needs in the late Victorian period. Often participation in such sporting activities was regarded as unladylike and women were welcomed in public parks more for their stabilising influence than their ability to make active use of the facilities (CRANTZ, G. op. cit., p. 82). However, this situation did not persist in the longer term, mainly due to women's desire to actively participate in sports such as tennis and to the growing acceptance of at least some sports as permissible for women.

These landscapes were once a symbol of personal political power under aristocratic ownership. Once sold, they often presented an opportunity to other groups to rally for their own empowerment. This can be demonstrated by the use of parks like Heaton for political meetings in the nineteenth century. The large numbers of female users of Heaton Park indicates the popularity of a day out for women of diverse backgrounds and is symbolic of the gradual increase in freedoms for women during this period.

This experience was reflected in other municipal parks in Manchester as the Edwardian era progressed (SLIDES 7 – 11).

Parks and Politics

While Manchester City Council moved quickly to establish their authority over a new park, there is evidence of much use that was unintended. The most significant of this type of usage was parks as spaces for political meetings. In 1896, the International Labour Party held a series of meetings in parks such as Boggart Hole Clough. As these meetings were held without the permission of the Parks and Cemeteries

committee, two members of the ILP, Fred Brocklehurst and Leonard Hall were arrested. They were given the option of paying a fine or spending one month in Strangeways prison – they chose the latter. This controversial decision highlighted the determination of some citizens to use the parks for purposes not sanctioned by the authorities but to treat the space as if it belonged to all of the people. The City Council were reprimanded by the Home Secretary for imprisoning Hall & Brocklehurst and, shortly afterwards, issued a series of parks bye-laws to permit organisations to hold such meetings in the city's parks provided that they abided by certain conditions. These conditions included no distribution of literature, no collecting of money and no more than one meeting to take place at a time in certain designated areas within the park.

This provided the back-drop to a series of meetings held in Manchester parks, including Heaton, in the early twentieth century. These meetings were designed to promote the cause of women's suffrage and to give the citizens the opportunity to hear speakers like Emmeline Pankhurst. The cause of women's suffrage had been closely connected with Manchester since 1903, with the formation in the city of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in the Pankhurst's own home near Victoria Park (Kidd, p. 182). From 1906, the WSPU became more militant and devoted to the single issue of votes for women and split from the rest of the suffrage movement.

In 1908, the WSPU successfully applied for permission to the Parks and Cemeteries committee to hold a series of public demonstrations at Heaton Park and other Manchester parks in favour of votes for women. Two demonstrations were held at Heaton Park - on July 11 and 19 1908. The demonstration on July 11 was echoed at Alexandra Park to the south of the city on the same date and was attended by almost

10,000 people. The larger demonstration on July 19 attracted an estimated 50,000 people (59). Members of the WSPU had given out leaflets promoting the meeting in Manchester city centre the previous day. The illustration shows Mabel Capper and Patricia Woodlock outside the Royal Exchange (SLIDE 12). This bastion of male enterprise was entered by Capper and Woodlock where they attempted to make a speech about women's suffrage but were asked to leave the Exchange or be arrested. The speakers at the Heaton Park meeting were accommodated on thirteen luries (platforms) and included Mrs. Pankhurst and her daughters Adela and Christabel and Mary Gawthorpe, a Leeds school teacher (SLIDE 13). While there was some heckling from 'rowdy youths and young men' (60) who threw grass and sticks at the speakers, the general organisation of the demonstration was praised by local newspapers and attendees (MCN July 11 1908, p. 8). The *Manchester Evening News* described the demonstration as 'decorous', 'informative' and 'logical' (MEN editorial July 20 1908, p. 3).

A request to distribute handbills inside the park was refused so the distribution took place outside the park gates instead, demonstrating that the WSPU were able to find alternative methods to get their message across to meeting attendees (MEN, *The Suffragettes*, July 17 1908, p. 4). While the local newspaper coverage of the suffrage demonstrations was unanimously positive and balanced, the story always appeared on the news pages of the papers concerned and was never referred to in the women's pages. Thus, it was regarded as merely another news story and not one that would be especially relevant to women alone. For instance, the *Woman's Realm* section of *the Manchester City News* never mentioned the suffrage meetings, concentrating instead on marriage reports, fashion articles and the principles of home decoration.

Conclusion

Did public parks represent a site where the private female and public masculine worlds could be united?

'First, it seems that the presence of women at public meetings and debates was expected to increase the pressure on public men and their supporters to behave in a civil fashion, while transgressors were castigated for jeopardising the safety of the 'weaker sex'. Secondly, the presence of women on a platform or in the audience could be taken as a pledge of good faith, theoretically ensuring that the men they supported intended to behave with civility and decorum' (Morgan, 2007 p.88). It is clear from the contemporary photographs that men and women were both enthusiastic users of Manchester's municipal parks during the period. We know frustratingly little about what they thought of their experiences although there were frequent complaining letters to the local newspapers (mostly from men) about the cleanliness of some park users. The municipal golf course opened at Heaton Park in 1911 was popular with women who were provided with their own lockers and toilet facilities.

Parks were very much a family destination, often a substitute for a day trip to Blackpool. It is unlikely that the Manchester poor could access Heaton Park and that they would have been welcome. Most people attracted to the park, women included, were the better off and the middle classes. Notwithstanding the issues of access, parks like Heaton Park offered women visitors the opportunity to indulge or develop sporting interests, to enjoy the scenery or to express their political views.

Much academic debate about public parks has centred on parks as symbols of the Victorian middle class desire to civilise the working classes or to impose their middle class norms and values onto working people. Rarely has the issue of gender been

considered in both the design and layout of the parks or in those who actually used the parks and their facilities. The Edwardian period is a particularly fruitful time in which to examine the use of parks on a gendered basis due to the changing relationships between men and women. Birchall points out that 'in late nineteenth and early twentieth century cities, public spaces allowed young working class women to utilise a certain freedom that was available to them away from the constraints of family supervision existing closer to home' (Birchall, 2006, p. 243).

This paper has demonstrated the extent of the options available to women to participate in both leisure and non-leisure activities in Manchester's Edwardian parks. These public spaces offered the opportunity to express political views, hear debates, listen to music or just stroll with children on a Saturday afternoon. They also marked a new era of social responsibility and self-help and a period of gradual easing of the many restrictions placed in women's lives during the Victorian era. Parks offered a respite from the domestic environment although they often replicated similar economic and gender inequalities that prevailed. Most female park visitors were accompanied, if not by men, then by children. The idea of an open space where a woman could be alone as a woman was still in the distance.

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