

## Origins of Fully Funded Public Parks

It is commonly held that Birkenhead Park on the outskirts of Liverpool, England, was the first fully funded public park. The Birkenhead Park project began in 1841 as a venture initiated by municipal authorities with participation by private developers, and differed from previous efforts to create parks for the English general public. Birkenhead embodied a vision of the future in which a large area of land within a town was to be set aside in perpetuity for the specific purpose of affording an amenity site for leisure and recreational activity for use by all the people of the community. Moreover, the people would tax themselves for that purpose.

There had been previous “public” parks in all of the cultures of the ancient and medieval worlds, where parks were part of the ambience and public activity of the city. The concept of the urban landscaped area emerged some 6,000 years ago in the first cities of Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, China, and a few other parts of the world. Landscaped spaces were initially located within the inner religious and political sanctuaries that were reserved for royalty, the priesthood, and privileged citizenry, though most had some public aspects. The well-known “Park in the Center of City” of Mesopotamian Nippur of 1,500 BCE is a representative example of a religious landscaped area within the city’s *temenos* that served as a site for ritual (Kramer 1963, 64). It was an irregularly shaped 21-acre area that was most likely connected to nearby temple complexes, and possibly served as the site for the New Year’s Festival, or perhaps held plants and animals for offerings to the god of the city. Such spaces often took on aspects of a public park in the lives of the people when used at festival time. Festivals and public

events are held today in any modern landscaped urban central park. An ancient Babylonian text (ca. 2000 BCE) indicates the public nature of such open spaces. People ate splendid food, drank beverages, rejoiced in the courtyards, and thronged for celebration; monkeys, elephants, water buffalo, and other exotic animals jostled each other in the public squares (Cooper 1983, 50). Cities in this period (4000-1000 BCE) were centers for managing rural districts, for craft making and trading, and for military, administrative, and cultural-ideological activities where religious and political events were important in holding the cohesiveness of society. Such public places were maintained by a religious and political leadership who ran the affairs of the city-state. Similar landscaped public places existed in ancient Egypt and China. The great Shang-lin parks connected to the ancient Chinese capitals provided a garden setting for palace, temple, and tomb, where the emperor and nobility undertook hunting, fasting was performed, and rituals were held. The “Park as Empire” played various roles in Chinese life.

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Many governmental units were located within the park, such as the royal mint, the headquarters of the tax collector, and even a prison (Schafer 1968). The modern-day National Capital Parks in Washington, D.C., have many of the characteristics and uses of the ancient Chinese Supreme Imperial Parks, in that they provide landscaped backdrops for important buildings in United States governmental operations, including the Capitol, White House, and Treasury Department, among others.

Landscaped backdrops were prevalent in ancient Greek and Roman cities: around the agora, the temples of the gods and goddesses, the monumental public buildings, and the gymnasiums. Roman imperial rulers provided green open spaces for public use between theaters, baths, temples, government buildings, and residences. In the Augustan era, a major building program for Rome was concentrated around the centers of Campus Martius, the Forum Romanum, and the Palatine. Spaces around these political structures were landscaped and opened to the public (Van Sickle 1948, 397). Augustus used his friend Maecenas, an unassuming Etruscan of equestrian rank, to aid in his rebuilding of Rome. Maecenas bought a plot of ground just outside the city walls that was an old city dump and pauper burying ground. Here he laid out a splendid park for the general public. In this summery Mediterranean region, people were inclined to stroll such landscaped areas and enjoy each other's company. (In similar fashion, many centuries later, landscaped areas were decreed by the Colonial Assem-

bly in Philadelphia for around the Pennsylvania Statehouse—later Independence Hall—for proper walks planted with suitable trees for shade.) The use of undesirable plots and remnants of city land for parks was to become common practice. At both Birkenhead and New York City's Central Park, undesirable, uneconomical lands were converted to parks.

In the ancient cities, emperors, victorious generals and the wealthy created and financed the construction and operation of parks for the public. The practice of the elite part of society providing landscaped open spaces for the public continued on through the medieval period into the European renaissance. Royalty often used their private parks for public purposes. In the sixteenth century, Queen Elizabeth I opened some of her royal parks in London so the public could watch the military reviews she held there. Some English royal parks remained private to the monarchs; others became ceremonial points for public receptions on important holidays in the same way that ancient Greek kings assembled the public at the Acropolis for ritual and celebration (Lasdun 1992, 42). By Queen Victoria's time (mid- to late nineteenth century), much of the royal park space had been opened to the public. Hyde Park, for instance, was opened to the public by Charles I about 1635. George IV in 1826 acted on a report on the state of London's royal parks by issuing instructions that "the whole range and extent of Parks should be thrown open for the gratification and enjoyment of the Public" (Lasdun 1992, 13). Public monies given by Parliament to the

Office of the King's Works maintained such parks. The public usage of a royal park was at first a rather limited, privileged activity, confined by dictate of royalty to a select class of socially acceptable people who held keys to the locked park gates. This privileged use was gradually eased. Many of these parks became full public parks about the time urban development reached their boundaries. Most have since become integral parts of the London scene.

The opening of royal parks for public use was one part of a growing idea of the park as public venue as England moved from monarchical control to a democracy. Walking became a national pastime in the Tudor period. The general public in the cities needed areas in which to stroll. Churchyards provided opportunities for leisure time in many of the provincial towns of England. Cemeteries were pleasure grounds for the diversion of gentry. The general public for years had the grounds of commons for outdoor activity. Gradually, however, the common was made unavailable to them under enclosure practices. With the rapid expansion of English cities after the Restoration, there began a movement toward parks as integral parts of cities for the public at large. Londoners began to see the delights of placing their residences adjacent to the inner-city royal parks: St. James's Park, Green Park, Hyde Park, and Kensington Garden. To have a residence overlooking one of these parks became the preferred way to live.

In the early 1830s, the prominent architect John Nash and the landscape architect Humphry Repton worked on

the Regent's Park project with the Prince of Wales through the Department of Woods and Forests. They took a roughly circular-shaped property of about 1,000 acres that had been a royal forest in medieval times and a hunting preserve and Marylebone Park in the Tudor era and developed it into a residential park (Saunders 1969). Regent's Park thus went through virtually all the stages of English park development: first a medieval royal forest, then a royal hunting preserve, then a private park, and finally a public park open to all. Nash and Repton combined urban architecture with country landscape elements by setting terraces around a park that made up about half the total acreage of the development. They combined the orderliness of Georgian London with the openness and wildness of the countryside. Nash reversed the visual direction of the palace and manor park, where residences were surrounded by parkland. He framed the park with handsome terraces of classic design that housed people who then had magnificent views across the park. Nash and Repton wanted to create an in-city relationship with nature similar to that enjoyed by many people in the English countryside who had a Georgian mansion set in a park of modest proportions. Royalty and the wealthy, of course, had great countryside palaces and mansions surrounded by expansive parks. Merely well-to-do people sought to follow the essayist, poet, and politician Joseph Addison's advice in *The Spectator* (Essay no. 414, 1712) to make a neat mansion pleasantly situated in a park that would show a "pretty landskip of their

possessions.”

Such rural landscape values were introduced into the English urban fabric during the cultural transition from late feudalism to a full capitalistic economy. The park and the public square were arenas for working out major class tensions in the struggles over public and private rights. With the public square and the park, the English were the first to develop effective ways of integrating elements of the natural landscape into the urban fabric. The public square was one model that was taken and augmented with greater amounts of nature so as to form a large public park. The residential square and the large public park, says Henry Lawrence, are cultural acts that carry with it some expression of the social values of class distinction, domestic isolation, and private open space that later forms the basis for suburban living (Lawrence 1993, 60). The park portion of Regent's Park was gradually opened to the public. Residential subscription maintained the park for a number of years until it became a fully funded public park. Like most of the early large urban parks, Regent's Park had a zoo, a band kiosk, meeting place structures, an open-air concert theatre, and playing fields. On a trip to England in 1839, the American painter George Catlin sold two grizzly bears he had brought from America to Regent's Park operators (Catlin 1852, 1:28-33). In time the park itself became a historical monument, as have many famous parks, to be placed on lists of historical properties worthy of preservation.

Public parks in early nineteenth-century England made the transition

from those created under royal and private initiative to those that were fully publicly funded. The transition occurred within the context of a public park movement that sought to meet recreational needs and deal with the social problems of poverty, disease, and wretched living conditions of the lower classes caught up in the excesses of the Industrial Age. People were moving to English cities in uncontrollable numbers. Unplanned tenement housing quickly ate up open space. Efforts were made in the 1840s to convert some commons to public parks in those cities associated with manufacturing and in the towns that had factoring systems. J.C. Loudon, writing in *Gardener's Magazine* in 1829, campaigned for public parks as “Breathing Places” for towns and cities. Democratic political action toward this goal moved with the issuing of reports on the problems and the need for open space to solve the lack of working-class recreation. In 1841, Parliament voted the sum of £10,000 to promote the opening of parks, on the condition that political bodies wishing to benefit from this fund should match such loans with at least an equal amount of their own money. Applications were immediately made by numerous public entities. Other avenues to create public parks included exchanging Crown properties in one area to produce park sites where there were no royal parks. Wherever such a residential development as Regent's Park was proposed, it became government policy to require the local municipal body to purchase the residential strip to be let out as building plots. The income from the plots, and the increased value

of the property adjacent to the public park, would pay for the cost of the park. Within this general milieu, Birkenhead Park came about.

The city of Birkenhead in the early 1820s was one of series of dormitory towns that emerged in Great Britain as a suburb of a main city to serve the residential needs of the Industrial Revolution. A steam ferry service in 1820 provided commuting between Liverpool and Birkenhead. Prosperous Birkenhead residents commuting to Liverpool wanted a small version of what the wealthy possessed in the larger private park estates in the countryside and in the in-city residences of the kind connected to Regent's Park and to a similar park-residential development in Liverpool itself, Prince's Park. This desire was coupled with recognition by the Birkenhead municipal authorities of the need to control and establish municipal power over community development. In effect, they began to zone the community. A park became a prime focal point of that zoning as well as figuring in the economic development of the suburbs. Parks were also desired objects in a growing Reform movement. Robert Owen, the Welsh manufacturer turned reformer, proposed what was later termed the "garden city," where dwelling units were arranged around open landscaped spaces with community facilities connected to a central square. Owens was convinced that environment affected character. Improved surroundings, including parks and gardens, would have a salutary effect upon workers, and this in turn would benefit the industry of the nation (Cole 1925).

A Birkenhead Improvement Commission was set up under an Act of Parliament that gave them authority to implement the zoning they desired. In 1841 the idea for a Birkenhead Park was raised. Two years later, empowered by a Third Improvement Act, the Birkenhead Commissioners were allowed to purchase land for a park with a loan of £60,000 made to them by the central government. Birkenhead was the first town to apply to Parliament for permission to use public funds for the purpose of establishing a public park. The money was borrowed on behalf of the city ratepayers with the proviso that not less than 70 acres was to be set aside for the "free recreation of the town's inhabitants" within a 226-acre area along an estuary across from the city of Liverpool. The resulting Birkenhead Park became the world's first publicly fully funded park.

The section of land chosen for the park was an unattractive, swampy, low-lying tract at the foot of a sandy ridge that lay entirely within the town. The area of land was a mixture of fields, marsh, and commons that contained a small farmhouse, which was a known beer den where illegal gambling and dog fighting took place. One hundred and twenty-five acres of this site was designated for public use. The remaining acreage was sold for private residential development (Borough of Wirral Leisure Services and Tourism Department 2000, 6). The general relationship between the park and associated housing had its inspiration in John Nash's work at Regent's Park. At Birkenhead, detached villas were located on terraces surrounding the

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park. The proceeds from the sale of the building plots were sufficient to recoup all the public costs incurred by the purchase of the land and the construction of the park. There was a mutually beneficial blending of an ornamental public park with private residential estates that seems to have been the outcome of a self-conscious linking of the commercially profitable with the socially useful. This combination of values that early Victorians strove to achieve proved influential for subsequent park projects in Great Britain and then in America with the creation of New York City's Central Park. Essential to the existence of the park were steady income streams for park development and maintenance costs. The park contributed significantly to the town's tax base. The park fostered rising property values. Commissioners planned the character of the housing and park as one entity. Residential styles were confined to early English, Elizabethan, and Tudor. Architectural controls were designed to promote messages of authority, dignity, and political power. The park also was to reflect these purposes in acting as an attractive backdrop for the spatial residences abutting it. However, the pursuit of the park was not entirely in the public interest. Several commissioners were speculative owners of the land to be purchased for the park and the potential residential lands surrounding it.

The well-known English landscape architect, Joseph Paxton, whose work on Liverpool's Prince's Park had brought him to the attention of the committee, was engaged in August 1843 to design and supervise the con-

struction of the park. He thought it a credit and an honor to make something handsome and good out of the undesirable property. A completed plan was soon presented to the committee, which approved it. Preparatory work began under an individual who would become the park's first superintendent. Lakes were excavated and the major planting of trees was carried out in the planting seasons of autumn 1844 and spring 1845. The planting of grassy areas followed. A prime feature was the irregular shape of the park set within a built-up suburban setting of a grid of straight streets. A circulation system provided for carriage pleasure traffic around and through the park. Within the park there was a separate circulation system for pedestrians. There were four small lodges at the park's gates, quaintly named the Gothic, Italian, Castellated and Norman lodges. Bridges across sections of the lakes and over roads were Victorian in style. The park was completed in 1847. It had a park superintendent and a staff of keepers and maintenance personnel that were paid out of municipal funding. It was to be opened to the public without restrictions.

Birkenhead was conceived in a pastoral landscape tradition, which resembled grounds surrounding a country mansion, except there was no central residential structure. The first public parks were essentially transfers of the palace and countryside manor park landscapes without that central structure. The residences surrounded the park, rather than the park surrounding the residences. The vision sought by Paxton featured islands in lakes, winding paths, open glades, and

wooded areas designed for strolling and quiet reflection. While some of the open spaces were suitable for active games, Paxton's main emphasis for Birkenhead was on the passive enjoyment of pastoral landscaped scenery. In time, sport clubs imposed cricket, archery, quoits, and football ground conversions of many of the open spaces. Considerable modification of Paxton's design occurred over the years as the park went through what was to be a typical transformation of most urban parks from initial areas of pastoral quality to busy places for active sports and large-scale public events. There were times of deterioration of the landscaped areas, followed by restoration. Commemorative trees were planted. Memorials and sculptures were erected. Unemployment relief schemes were undertaken within the park in 1878-1879, 1893, and 1947. Two World Wars intruded on the park. Different buildings and structures were erected and then demolished. The Friends of Birkenhead Association was formed in 1970 to aid park administrators in controlling intrusions and raising monies to maintain the park. Corporate sponsors provided monies for restoration projects. The park was included in the late 1980s in a regional political body's "Leisure Strategy" to promote tourism. This pattern of creation, intrusion, deterioration, restoration, and then a re-focusing on the heritage and economic value to the community, was to be repeated in many urban parks around the world.

"There is more to be gained by a study of it [Birkenhead Park] than in any others," said Charles Smith, the

Edinburgh garden architect, writing on English garden park design in 1852. Smith's commentary influenced many park designers' works (Smith 1852). Frederick Law Olmsted visited Birkenhead in 1850 and 1859. He noted the carriage roads, walks, and aquatic ponds. He recorded the mounds made natural with trees, shrubs, flowering plants, rural lodges, temple pavilion structures, bridges, bandstand, cricket and archery grounds, and the verdant valleys. He commented that "all this magnificent pleasure-ground is entirely, unreservedly and forever, the people's own" (Olmsted 1859, 62-64). He later was to incorporate many of the features he saw at Birkenhead into the design that he and Calvert Vaux prepared for New York City's Central Park. Olmsted credited the development of the American urban public park system to the inspiration he received from his Birkenhead visits.

According to the historian George Chadwick, the general design of British public parks has changed little since Paxton's day, "although elsewhere there are now examples of the acceptance of twentieth-century aesthetic standards in this field" (Chadwick 1961, 253). Olmsted was to set a somewhat different style in his parks in America: a wilder, more rugged style. He did borrow the Birkenhead procedure of placing the park within an urban residential setting that has strong commercial connotations. This commercial aspect also was applied to the early expansive national parks of the American West, where tourism played an important role in their creation. Starting with Regent's and

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Birkenhead parks, the idea of a residential belt around or in association with an interior public park is still a valid proposition for most communities.

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