

HORSHAM PARK

Horsham is a prosperous historic market town in the north of West Sussex on the edge of the High Weald. It is well provided for with green spaces as St Leonard's Forest is to the south east of the town, Warnham Nature Reserve to the north west, and Chesworth Farm to the south. Horsham Park is very central to the town, lying between the railway station and the main shopping centre. The hospital, police and fire station, courts and sixth form college are all situated on its northern border of Hurst Road, while the town centre is to the south.

Geologically Horsham Park sits on sedimentary rocks laid down by river deposits 120 million years ago. In more detail this area can be identified as Upper Tunbridge Wells sand and sandstone within which are bands of Wealden clay and dense shale. Deposits of Horsham Stone, which was used for roofing slabs, are to the south of the park. This soil is free draining in part but with bands of clay there are often areas of standing water in winter.

The poor drainage can also be explained by examination of the 1840 Tithe Map of Horsham, central section, (see Fig.1) which shows a stream running across the park, north south, then turning west across the North Parade road at Bean Bridge and widening into a lake. There are also two small ponds indicated in the centre of the park immediately to the west of Park House, and generally the park slopes and drains towards these ponds. By the late 20th century the stream and the bridge disappeared, although underground water courses still come from the direction of the hospital and college and further east from Foundry Lane Industrial Estate which can cause problems of pollution in the park lake.

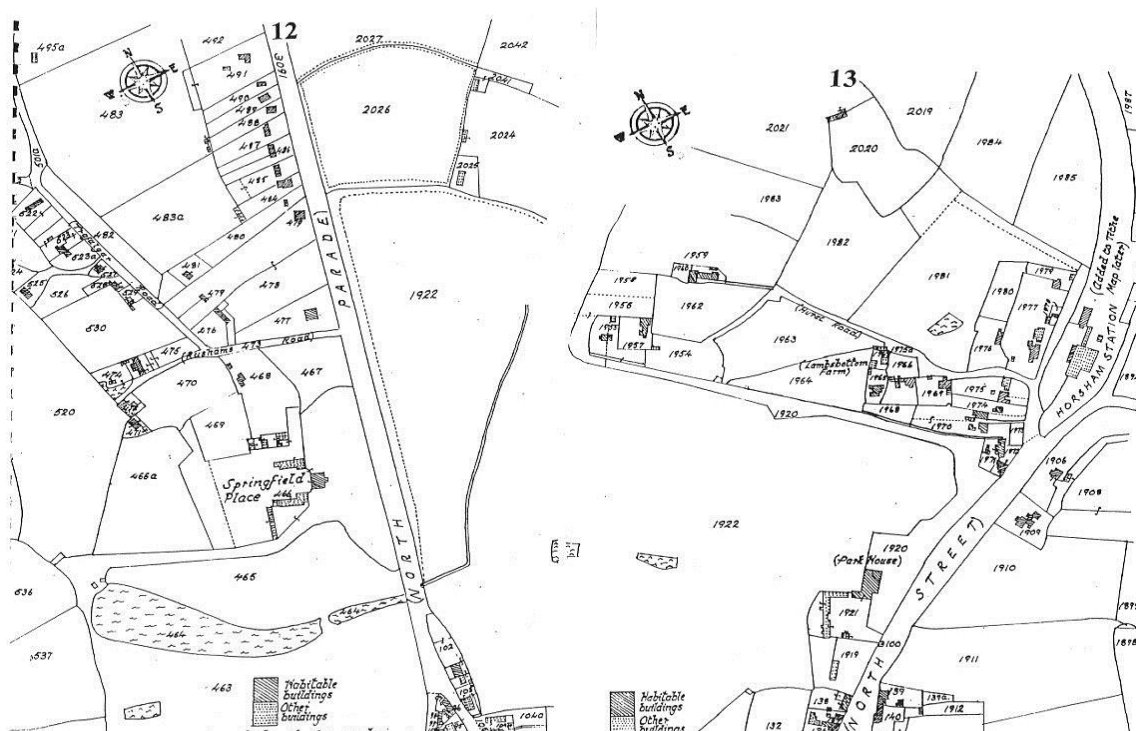


Figure 1: Reproduced from *The 1840 Tithe Map of Horsham (central section)* redrawn by Alan Siney from the original maps showing water course running south and the lakes.

The two small natural lakes of Horsham Park that existed in the mid 19th century were extended and then joined together probably at the turn of the century, and an island left in the centre planted with weeping willow. This is now the home of swans, moorhen and ducks. The lake has been fenced for protection of the wildfowl from dogs and for general safety. Feeding of the wildlife is discouraged due to the ongoing problem of rats. A sculpture known as 'Waterforms' has been set up amid the trees around the edge of the lake (see Fig.2).



Figure 2: Lake in the centre of Horsham Park, with 'Waterforms' sculpture and willow trees.

Due to poor drainage, it is likely that the area of Horsham Park was never a good option for agriculture, but neither was it originally designed as a public park, but as a private estate with gardens and parkland. Robert Hurst had bought Park House and grounds in about 1800, and by 1843 when he died Hurst family lands had increased to 2,100 acres in the parish of Horsham, due mainly to an advantageous Enclosure Act 1813 of the Common. He had stood for Parliament, as did his son and grandson, and when the latter, Robert Henry Hurst stood for the general election in 1868 it was reported that he gave his supporters a banquet laid out in tents in his back garden, or what was to become Horsham Park.

Robert Henry Hurst's younger son, Colonel A.R. Hurst approached Horsham Urban District Council in late 1927 to offer for sale the Queen Anne style manor house built in 1701, Park House, with a range of stabling, garage and outhouses, plus 6 acres of gardens and 9 acres of meadow and parkland, together with a very useful subway which went under North Street and the railway line to link to New Street. The subway was built around 1840 in order to transport vegetables in carts from the vegetable gardens to Park House.

Colonel Hurst made it clear to the council that the property was not on the market in the normal way, and was to be for the benefit of the people of Horsham. He offered the whole estate for £23,000, however the District Valuer decided it was only worth £17,000 and they finally agreed on a price of £18,000. At a special meeting of the Horsham Urban District Council on 18th January 1928 it was agreed to purchase, subject to approval from the

Ministry of Health to whom they applied for a loan of £20,420. It was pointed out to the Ministry that Horsham had no park in the town, only ten acres of recreation grounds and that this was a unique opportunity to acquire a public park centrally located, an offer which could not be repeated. The Ministry agreed and contracts were confidently exchanged on 12th May, 1928, somewhat ahead of the local inquiry on 15th May, 1928.

There are a number of letters from unemployed gardeners requesting employment from the new council owners and giving a flavour of the work situation at the time. A plaintive letter was received from a local man, G. Dawes giving the wider context of the demise of the large estates and their staff after the First World War:

'I have spent some twenty-five years in some of England's finest gardens acquiring the necessary knowledge for a first class place. Unfortunately, many are now closed, or at very low ebb, so that I find myself often glad to accept unskilled work to obtain an honest livelihood'. (WSRO, UD/HO Correspondence 21.2.54, dated 18.2.1928).

However, despite the plea from Mr Dawes the existing gardeners, two men and a boy, were kept on through the recommendation of Colonel Hurst. Some idea of what the gardens and parkland contained can be seen by the sale particulars of garden effects in August 1928, such as three beehives, ferret hutch, fruit netting, garden seats and plants in pots, of which the council bought a number.

There was an initial flurry of enthusiasm and activity. Costs were submitted for one additional grass tennis court and five hard courts, three greens for clock golf and a putting green. Arrangements were made for the transfer of the bandstand from the Carfax to the park, much to the annoyance of one town band. The MP for Horsham, Rt. Hon. Earl Winterton, Under Secretary of State for India, donated two rustic wooden seats. Ideas abounded as to how to use the barns and outhouses; the council surveyor suggested the basement of Park House could be used for slipper baths and refreshment rooms, and the barns could be used to house the fire brigade. A deputation from the Museum Society secured housing for the museum in Park House until more suitable accommodation was found in the Causeway in 1946, and strong public lobbying enabled the establishment of a reference library and reading room in Park House.

There had been pressure growing for a swimming pool as the existing arrangement of using the Adur River at Mill Bay by the Garden of Remembrance was not really safe or suitable, and although there was a private campaign to establish a proper pool there, it was somewhat upstaged by Colonel Hurst agreeing to give the land on the east of the park for this purpose. The pool was opened in 1934. It was 50 yards long, unheated, and aerated by a large concrete fountain. The pool was immediately popular with record attendance on August Bank Holiday 1938 with 1,228 admissions. Popularity of the park and the pool continued into the war years as can be seen in Douglas Coghlan's memory quoted by Chapman:

'Each summer we spent at the pool and it was the main attraction for many young people. The Park was a real centre of activity during those war years and I often wondered if the

Hurst family realised what a favour they did us as we really enjoyed all the activities that went on there during the war' (Chapman, 2005, p56).

However, by the 1960s the swimming pool was thought to be outdated and lobbying began for a warm indoor pool although this was not built until 1981. With an emphasis on sport and leisure this new covered pool was again replaced in 2002 by Pavilions in the Park, a larger pool with gym and sports hall.

A poster from the 1930s advertised a 'Stupendous Fun Fair' in Horsham Park to include a spectacular flying display by Surrey Aero Club to include stunts, a dance ring, fire display, side shows and prizes. This gives a flavour of the type of events that were happening in the park pre-war, along with the regular sports of tennis, putting, bowls, and swimming. Additional land of 26.5 acres was added to the park when more Hurst land came up for sale in 1949. This greater area facilitated the setting up of football pitches as mentioned in the 1955 Horsham Official Guide.

A Family Entertainment Centre was built in the 1970s providing indoor facilities of badminton, table tennis and a sports hall. This building, situated on the western edge of the park by the Albion Way underpass into the town centre now houses a 10-pin bowling alley, and The Venue nightclub. This entrance area, known as the Jubilee Entrance was refurbished in about 2005 with improved landscaping, planting and public art.

Park House garden, immediately behind the mansion was made into a formal sensory garden in 1991. The idea behind this was to provide an inclusive garden with wide paths, benches and sensory plants full of texture and scent. In the centre is a sundial sculpture 'sungod' by John Skelton. This is an enclosed and attractive garden, opening through an arch onto a row of fastigiated oaks which run into the centre of the park and the lake (see Fig. 3).

A family attraction was then made to the south of the axis path from the scented garden in the form of the Millennium Maze. This was installed in 2000 with low growing hedges and a theme of Sussex legends. In the centre is a sculpture of the St Leonard's Forest dragon of 17th century myth. The sculpture was made by Hannah Holmes and the whole project a partnership between Horsham in Bloom, Ballast plc and Royal & Sun Alliance (see Fig. 4).

A decade later another important small garden was added. This time the theme was educational and the garden was built on what was the old putting green which had been closed in 1999 due to lack of use. This interesting garden was created, and is now maintained, by Horsham in Bloom with the original funding coming from the Big Lottery. It is called the Human Nature Garden and illustrates the link between people and plants. It has areas of planting which show plants used for medicine, food, health and beauty, an orchard area and an amphitheatre stage used for music and entertainment. The garden is also set with wooden sculptures separating and illustrating the areas. Information boards about the plants are set in the borders (see Fig 5).



Figure 3: Two views of Park House garden, behind the mansion looking west across the park to the centre. The upper photograph shows an open, neat garden with central sundial and bedding dated 1929, lower photograph taken in 2017 shows the scented garden with new sculpture and more relaxed planting within box hedging.

It should be noted that due to the history of the park as a private garden and parkland there are some impressive old trees remaining in the park. There are perimeter plantings of beech and oak and in the courtyard of Park House is a large London Plane with a Norway Maple and Eucalyptus nearby. By the side of the original tennis courts are a row of specialist trees, a Killarney Strawberry Tree, Golden Rain Tree, Tree of Heaven, Foxglove Tree, Blue Atlas Cedar and Japanese Maple. To the north of the mansion are two more Atlas Cedars, several Himalayan Birch, a Monkey Puzzle, Giant Redwood, and 2 Indian Bean Trees. It was estimated that about 50 trees were damaged in the 1987 storm but 200 were planted in response, including the row of beautiful fastigiated oaks lining the path to the mansion.



Fig 5: Sculpture of the St. Leonard's Dragon in the Millennium Maze



Fig 6: Human Nature Garden showing sculptures and planting

With regard to sports provision, in addition to Pavilions in the Park and its many facilities, a new High Tops tree house and ropes was opened last year within the Pavilions boundary. A popular skate park was established in 2001 and this was extended and improved 5 years later with better lighting. In addition, there are now 6 football pitches, a boxing club gym, a trim trail around the perimeter of the park with 8 rather tired exercise stations, which are due to be replaced with outdoor gym equipment. Near the Human Nature Garden a beech hedge encloses the Bowls Club green and pavilion. This year the tennis courts and basketball courts have been refurbished while the entrance at North Parade car park has been refreshed with new rails, grass replacing the higher maintenance shrubs and the planting of drifts of spring bulbs and young trees in the nearby grass.

The green spaces in the park are important for younger children and often toddlers from a nearby nursery can be seen exploring and playing in the park with their teachers. There is a more formal play area near Pavilions which is the largest in the district and includes a wheelchair swing, a new large accessible roundabout and new sensory play area. Plans are for a more challenging multi-way climbing frame, improved seesaw slides and aerial runway.

In response to the 2005 User Survey of the park there was an 86% approval rating of the park and so the 10-year Maintenance Plan 2008-2017 focused on maintenance of the high standard of satisfaction albeit with increasingly limited funding. One way forward has been to work with a collection of contractors and volunteers. The partnership with Horsham in Bloom has clearly been very fruitful. It will be interesting to see what emerges from a review and new plan due this year.

References:

Albery, W. (1947) *A Millennium of Facts in the History of Horsham and Sussex 947-1947*, Brighton, Southern Publishing.

Chapman, N. (2005) *Coming In? 50 Years of Swimming in Horsham 1930-1980*, Horsham Museum Society

Horsham Park Management Plan 2008-2017, Horsham District Council

Siney, A. (1998) *1840 Tithe Map of Horsham (Central Section)*

MWW/11.5.2017