

Park Hill Recreation Ground history

This delightful park, which is so close to the busy centre of modern Croydon, was once a deer park for the enjoyment of the Archbishops of Canterbury, who hunted there for nearly eight hundred years, when Croydon's "Old Palace" was one of their chief summer residences. (The Old Palace is now a girls grammar school)

The Park covered about 227 acres between Coombe Lane and the present Addiscombe Road, and employed a resident Keeper, for whom the first Park Hill House must have been built. The post of Keeper was at one time held by Sir William Walworth, who is remembered for having killed the leader of the 14th century Peasants' Revolt, Wat Tyler.

When the "Old Palace" was sold in 1780 the first intention of the Archbishops was to replace it with a new palace on Park Hill, probable centred on Park Hill House, but the plan was abandoned when Addington Palace came on the market and was bought instead.

Park Hill House, which stood on the present site of Stanhope Road adjacent to Park Mead must have been rebuilt several times, the last being in the 18th century. During the 19th century the House came into private occupation, one of the owners being John Wickham Flower, who was one of the founder members of Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society which began in 1870 as the Croydon Microscopical Society.

Park Hill House was demolished in 1949 but before this it was connected with Croydon's Atmospheric Railway. The power house had originally been at Norwood, but after the railway was abandoned the building was removed to Park Hill House, where part of it was re-erected at the entrance of the grounds and used as a lodge; the rest was re-erected in the grounds as stables.

The use of the Parkland for Deer gradually diminished and much of the land was used for farming and also racing. A race track was thought to have been roughly on the site occupied by Chichester and Selbourne Roads, from about 1860 until the course was moved to Woodside. The area was developed and wealthy business men started to move onto large, impressive, leasehold properties, on this part of the Estate which was then controlled by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and not by the individual Archbishops.

By the beginning of the 19th century large towns were rapidly growing and becoming over populated and crowded. In June 1832 there was a Parliamentary Report by the "Select Committee appointed to consider the best means of securing open spaces in the vicinity of populous towns as public walks and places of exercise, calculated to promote the health of the inhabitants".

The old Archbishops Park was ideally situated and much of it was still undeveloped, but in spite of this it was another half century before Park Hill was purchased as a "Park" for the people of Croydon. There was limited access to the Park Hill farm land when a reservoir (1851) and the water tower (1867) were built but as the Croydon Advertiser reported in the 1880's, "The Reservoir is a very pretty walk for whispering lovers and children of older growth, but for boys who play cricket and such amusement, the Reservoir Hill affords no attractions".

The reporter went on to point out that the growth of building operations at the time "suggests the advisability of securing a piece of land in that neighbourhood before it becomes too dear to buy for that purpose".

Between 1849 and 1883, the Local Board of Health, Croydon's local government, used its limited powers to begin the task of providing open spaces for the town. Although there was an earlier attempt to purchase part of Park Hill (which was hindered by lack of funds) it was left to the newly formed Croydon Corporation, which first met in 1883, to buy a piece of Park Hill land for public use.

In 1887 the Corporation bought fifteen acres of the land from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, for the sum of £4,000. A further £2,000 was spent in laying out the land with paths, turf, plantations of trees etc. The newly formed borough had no department to deal with parks, and the work was supervised by Mr. Powell, the new Borough's Road Surveyor. Much of the work was done by a contractor, Mr. Alfred Bullock, and his workmen.

"Park Hill Recreation Ground" was opened on July 11th 1888 by the Mayor of Croydon Mr. J. W. Hobbs (who had made his fortune in building and at the time had just completed work on a large hotel in London's Northumberland Avenue). Mr. Hobbs lived at Norbury Park and after the opening he had hoped to give a garden party but the weather was cold and miserable and it even snowed in Norwood.

Mr. J. Ward of the Croydon Advertiser attended the opening and thought it was a great pity that only a little more money should not have been spent in order to provide the new "Pleasure Ground" with seats and a small bandstand. The only decoration to the ground was an old fountain which had been transported from Broad Green and then painted white. "More suitable for a cemetery than a pleasure ground", Mr. Ward reported sourly. He was also concerned that the new park would be used entirely by the nursemaids from the surrounding large houses "pushing their perambulators along the new asphalt paths...". "Rich and poor, saint and sinner", commented the Editor, "all are welcome to this ground...As long as they behave themselves".

The year after the park was opened, Mr. F. T. Edridge was elected a Councillor for the East Ward of Croydon, and he celebrated his victory by providing a bandstand for the Park Hill Recreation Ground, which became a favourite place for outdoor concerts and entertainments.

The reservoir was under the hill, it had a circular dome structure with cemented brickwork and a 75 foot diameter. When full it held 950,000 gallons of water. The walls of the reservoir rose vertically for 30 feet and there were 16 arches, the wall piers continued as ribs in the dome roof some 12 feet above the maximum water level which was 32 feet deep.

The water was pumped from Surrey Street through a steel aqueduct carrying a 12 inch main into the base of the reservoir. The head of water required to supply the town came from the gravitational pull of being 293 feet above sea level.

On the 11th December 1851 the Archbishop of Canterbury inaugurated the new works system and so gave Croydon a pure water supply.

The rapid increase in houses in the vicinity caused difficulties over the water supply in the neighbourhood. In spite of the 125 feet high Water Tower being constructed (which was designed by the engineering firm Baldwin and Latham) provisions for carrying water were still inadequate.

A new reservoir was built on higher land at Addington Hills and the central site in Croydon was abandoned in 1923. The reservoir was used temporarily in the 1939-1945 war as an Emergency Water Supply for fire fighting purposes.

In 1850 Mr. Horniman the tea merchant, bought land next to Park Hill known as The Warren and in 1853 he employed the "Brown" building firm to build a house on the site for him.

Mr John Horniman was credited with changing the lot of the working classes, he gave them a fair deal in Tea. In the face of very stiff opposition from his rivals in the trade he instituted the pre-weighed packet of unadulterated tea.

Horniman poured his fortune into religious education, hospitals, handicrafts and helping the diseased, sick and troubled. He travelled worldwide and collected curios and items of interest and natural history items. Many of these can today be seen at the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill, which is one of several buildings that he and his family left to the public.

Horniman lived at Coombe Cliff, as his home and gardens were known, for 40 years and in that time he had a conservatory built for his botanical collection that he gathered in his travels. The glass and iron structure that was constructed was probably inspired by the new "Crystal Palace" at Norwood which had been designed by Joseph Paxton.

With the death of John Horniman in 1893 his son came to live at Coombe Cliff, however he found the place too expensive to run and the house was left unused for several years until Alderman C.L. Allen lived there. In 1930 Croydon Corporation purchased the house and gardens for a Convalescent Home for Children, however it had several other uses before finally being used as an Adult Education Centre in 1960. Park Hill Recreation Ground and Coombe Cliff Garden were renamed Park Hill in 1964 and the house was referred to as Coombe Cliff.

Next to the house was an area of Victorian Glass houses which were used for many years by the Parks Department for growing bedding and other plants. Unfortunately the glass houses were all so close together that every thing had to be done by hand and so when more intensive production was required the nursery was closed down and moved to a more modern site. An Old English Garden was planted in the walled garden and it is still very popular, especially in the summer when it is a blaze of colour.