

‘Theatres of Transgression’: Municipal Public Parks in Edwardian Manchester.

Introduction

It seems appropriate to begin by examining the ways in which local authorities attempted to regulate behaviour in Manchester’s parks. The Victorian municipal park of the 1840s displayed a public commitment to regulated behaviour. Notices were posted in prominent positions to remind patrons of the consequences of any attempt to deviate from the planned routes and pathways – Victorian parks having developed from the concept of walking and promenading (prompted by the Select Committee on Public Walks of 1833).

The Victorian park was developed, in part, to offer an alternative to the allegedly degenerate working class behaviours of drinking, gambling and fornicating – this alternative is often referred to as ‘rational recreation’. However, there is some evidence from Walton to suggest that these activities continued as well as, and not as an alternative to, working class life. Thus, the regulation of visitor behaviour became a greater challenge than anticipated – a contest between various interpretations of the function of public open space.

The Edwardian park was a more complex and varied space than its mid-Victorian ancestor. Large municipal parks such as Heaton Park (the former home of the Earls of Wilton) in Manchester (650 acres, purchased in 1901) were especially challenging to administer and manage particularly in respect of visitor behaviour.

SLIDE MAP OF HP Such parks had quickly developed a wide variety of activities which provided ample opportunities for visitors to use the park in various ways according to their interests. These activities included sports such as tennis, golf and cycling – driving a motor car through a public park was permitted in Manchester from 1909 and was considered a leisure activity at that time.

Parks were thus always subject to transgressive behaviour of various kinds and municipal authorities found themselves having to develop behavioural regulation strategies on an ongoing basis. Transgressive behaviour by either individuals or groups was a routine occurrence in municipal parks in Manchester during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. This paper will examine several instances of such behaviour and the strategies deployed by the Parks and Cemeteries committee of Manchester City Council to deter and discourage this. The main park to be examined will be Heaton Park, whose size and variety of landscape provided an attractive space for residents to spend their leisure time but also was the focus of an ongoing debate about the use of open space in the city.

Parks, as well as being social landscapes, are contested spaces – sites of battle over meaning, use and interpretation. Definitions of transgressive behaviour altered over time according to established norms and changing social and political practices. In 1902, the city of Manchester had 411 acres of parks and recreation grounds; by 1912, this had trebled to 1,305 acres spread over 61 parks. Parks were regulated primarily by the Parks and Cemeteries committee and their formal parks bye-laws.

Regulation of Visitor Behaviour

The increasing professionalisation of park management and administration in the early twentieth century is illustrated by the gradual relaxation of attempts to control visitor behaviour directly. In general, Victorian parks drew their visitors' attention to the parks regulations principally through prominently displayed noticeboards, whose rules were enforced by park keepers. These practices were by no means abandoned in the Edwardian and later periods. Indeed, as late as 1937, W.W. Pettigrew, the general superintendent of Manchester parks, wrote that such notices were necessary as park visitors needed to know what was allowed and what was not,

thus establishing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour (Pettigrew 1937: 88). Prior to the official opening of Heaton Park in 1902, the *Manchester Guardian* noted the enforcement of Corporation regulations in the park: “When it was lent to the public at Whitsuntide by its late owner, one could wander everywhere. Yesterday, there were policemen and keepers almost by the score, who gave the word to ‘keep off the grass’” (In Heaton Park: A Great Holiday Throng, MG, 27 June 1902, p. 6). This nostalgia for the former aristocratic owner omits the fact that under aristocratic ownership, the park was rarely accessible to the general public. The following day, the same paper expressed the hope that ‘too much zeal will not distinguish the well-meaning custodians of our new park or the citizens who make the journey there may begin to feel that they are being dragooned into revolt’ (MG, Manchester: A Continued Celebration, 28 June 1902, p. 5). The *Manchester City News* continued this theme the following year as it described how people walked on the grass in spite of being asked to refrain by the park-keeper. ‘It is curious to note...that gentleman always walks on the grass himself, forgetting the moral influence of that action’ (The Parks: Saturday Afternoon in Heaton Park, MCN, 25 July 1903, p. 3).

Initial attempts by the Parks and Cemeteries committee to exert control over the park led to Robert Cawley, a local bleachworks owner being refused permission for his workers to take a shortcut to the works through Heaton Park in the early morning as they had been allowed to do by Lord Wilton, the former owner. Cawley wrote to the committee after the decision: ‘It seems strange to the men that democratic ownership of the park should be so much more inconsiderate to working men than aristocratic ownership’ (P&C minutes, Volume 27, p. 18). Democratic municipal ownership therefore, did not automatically convey equal rights of general access for all as had been assumed by the Victorian ‘parks for the people’ rhetoric. The

Edwardian park, such as Heaton Park, was often larger with a more diverse landscape **SLIDES (2) OF PEOPLE IN PARK** and therefore more difficult to patrol and control by noticeboard.

Physical and Morality Purity

A constant feature of concern about behaviour in municipal parks at this time was that which may be broadly termed romantic or sexual behaviour. The carefully planted walkways of the Victorian park with its clumps and belts of trees and shrubs provided in many ways an ideal environment for courting couples to obtain privacy. Davies has pointed out that parks were a source of peace and quiet for young couples who could not afford to go to the cinema or those for whom the monkey parades around city streets were simply too public (Davies 1992:139). However, as the twentieth century progressed, it was the public nature of courting behaviours that became the focus of concern. Manchester's parks byelaws for all of their attempts to regulate a variety of behaviour are silent on the subject of sexual behaviour, apart from an admonition to not 'behave in a disorderly or indecent manner' (1912 byelaws, P&C minutes, Volume 32, p. 44). **SLIDES ON PARK REGULATIONS** This was despite that fact that some parks were well-known for attracting prostitutes, especially those parks located close to army barracks such as parks in Ardwick and Ordsall in Manchester (Davies 1992: 141). The location of the Manchester Regiment at Heaton Park during the first world war occasioned complaints (including some from the military themselves) to the park authorities about 'the presence of undesirable women in the grounds after closing time' (P&C minutes, Volume 35 1915, p. 223). The introduction of police assistance to clear the general public from the park at closing time in early 1915 seems to have had the desired effect of discouraging the undesirables. As Walkowitz has pointed out, the closure of lodging house brothels in

British cities between 1880 and 1914 drove many prostitutes into the open spaces of streets and parks (Walkowitz, p. 85) and therefore made public the most private of sexual behaviours.

While the existence of prostitutes in municipal parks undoubtedly represented a form of sexually transgressive behaviour by the standards of the time, it is also clear that there was little toleration of the broader romantic behaviour of courting by some park users. Isabel O'Hanlon, honorary secretary of the Women's Patrol Committee (WPC) wrote to Manchester's General Superintendent of Parks in 1919 to complain about the 'bad state of things in Heaton Park and other parts where open immorality takes place' (P&C minutes, Volume 38, 1919 p. 188). Here, it is the both the immoral behaviour and its openness that is at issue, suggesting that young courting couples no longer felt the need to conceal their behaviour behind trees and bushes. The accessibility of the park space and the rhetoric of 'parks for the people' had unforeseen consequences. O'Hanlon continued: 'Many children and young lads from the villages about go into the park on purpose to watch the couples on the grass' (ibid.). The openness of the couples' behaviour has thus led to a voyeuristic attraction for local children, providing an additional element of concern. Given that parks had originally been established and credited with the improvement of public health and thus morality, the complex varieties of their usage as the twentieth century progressed meant an almost constant shift in publicly tolerated behaviours. The 1833 Select committee had echoed this in its stated belief that parks should act 'as a moral enclave' to learn good behaviour (McMaster 1990: 118-9). Clearly, larger parks like Heaton Park had the capacity to cater for tens of thousands of visitors, making regulation of behaviour difficult.

Weeks has pointed out that a network of meeting places for homosexuals had developed by the late nineteenth century including public conveniences (p. 37). Large parks such as Heaton Park had numerous public lavatories at this time but there is no evidence of their use for this purpose. However, the human body continued to be viewed with caution and sensitivity – in 1921, the ladies of Birchfields Bowling club at Birchfields Park in Manchester asked the Parks and Cemeteries committee to build a pavilion or shelter where they could change into their bowling shoes out of the sight of the male bowlers. Doing this in public, they believed, was ‘not in keeping with the dignity of a lady or the city of Manchester’ (P&C minutes, Volume 40, p. 65).

Part of Mrs O’Hanlon’s motivation for her complaint was to suggest the use of trained police women to patrol the parks with the aim of removing the existence of this behaviour – this reflects an ongoing view of women as positive behavioural role models in public places that had been prevalent since the Victorian period. The presence of women in public spaces like parks and art galleries was valued for their stabilising influence and not for any recreational or leisure needs they may have had (Crantz, p. 82). We have frustratingly little evidence about the kinds of sexual behaviour practised in municipal parks, the extent of it and by whom it was practised. However, these incidents illustrate that parks were often far from the educational, didactic and ennobling environments and more contested spaces where people themselves decided how to behave and with whom.

Other objectionable parks users were the unclean and the vagrant. Manchester’s parks bye-laws specifically provided for the removal of ‘a person who is offensively dirty’ (Parks Byelaws 1912, P&C minutes, Volume 32, p. 44). There is evidence to suggest that both art galleries and public libraries also suffered from the

regular intrusion of vagrancy. It is clear that dirtiness was also considered offensive by other park visitors who actively lobbied the parks authorities to remove vagrants. Henry Coupe, writing to the *Manchester Guardian*, protested the holding of a demonstration on a Sunday, claiming that churchgoers like himself had to 'pick their way...to their places of worship' through parkside streets past 'men and women whose cleanliness...(was) an open question' (70). The fact that some park visitors felt that the park was attracting the 'wrong type' of visitor, suggests that the parks were not people's parks in the true meaning of the term – parks were contested spaces in which people confronted each other without the possibility of the more delineated demarcation prevalent in other urban spaces, all of which were less easy to establish in the open space of a park.

These protests are also indicative of an attempt by some park visitors to encourage or impose their values on others. Historians such as Wyborn have argued that it was the City Council that tried to do this but it is clear from this evidence that park visitors themselves did not agree what constituted a municipal park, how it was to be used or by whom. Dreher has pointed out the impossibility for parks authorities of enforcing either physical or moral purity in public spaces such as municipal parks (Dreher 1997: 256). We should note the continuing challenge posed to municipal authorities by the trend for using public parks for sexual activity in the twentieth century. Councils in boroughs such as Hounslow and Lambeth continue to try to monitor and regulate more contemporary forms of sexual behaviour such as cottaging and dogging. Drinking and drug taking in contemporary urban parks remain problems. The most recent example of transgressive behaviour in an urban park is the Iqbal brothers who allegedly trained for jihad in the Victorian Corporation Park in Blackburn, proving that parks provide an almost unlimited number of ways in users

can behave – spaces that are simultaneously regulated but fundamentally unregulateable.

Political Demonstrations and Rallies

From their earliest inception, municipal parks were used for the staging of political rallies and demonstrations. These took various forms in Manchester from political party rallies to temperance meetings and suffrage demonstrations. Two local ILP party activists, Leonard Hall and Fred Brocklehurst, had been jailed for a month for holding a public meeting without permission in Boggart Hole Clough in 1896 (116). The jailing of the two men had elicited widespread condemnation from organisations including the Manchester and Salford Trades and Labour Council and the South Manchester Liberal Association (117). On 22 May 1896, Manchester City Council passed a bye-law banning the use of public parks for political meetings, raising the issue of what kinds of activity would be permitted in public spaces and how (and by whom) they should be policed. The 1896 bye-law was amended in January 1897 after the intervention of the Home Secretary, Sir Matthew Ridley, and political meetings were permitted in the city's parks (119). Although the new byelaws allowed such meetings subject to certain conditions such as not raising money, tensions continued to prevail about the political content of such meetings. The ILP and the suffrage movement were now tolerated and Manchester's largest parks saw audiences of significant numbers attend meetings organised by the WSPU in the summer of 1908 – up to 50,000.

However, while political ideas like suffragism were openly permitted to be discussed at Heaton Park and other parks subject to the appropriate parks bye-laws, there were still some political ideas regarded by the Parks and Cemeteries committee as impermissible. This became evident in 1909 with the refusal of permission to

several Manchester co-operative societies to hold meetings at Heaton Park, Boggart Hole Clough and Alexandra Park (72). A deputation from the co-operative societies met with the committee in September 1909 to ask for a reconsideration of this decision which was amended to allow the societies permission to hold their meetings but not to give speeches promoting co-operation (73). The motion was passed with just one opposer and was reaffirmed at another Parks and Cemeteries meeting in April 1910, albeit by a slimmer margin of eight to six (74).

Gurney has interpreted this as an attempt by the commercial interests on Manchester City Council to stifle the widespread promotion of co-operativism (75). The doctrine of co-operation was regarded with suspicion at this time, especially due to its association with socialism. Gurney points out that allowing speeches promoting co-operation in the parks may have given the impression that parks were being used for commercial or even advertising purposes (77). This would have placed the Parks and Cemeteries committee in an invidious position, given the many members of the City Council who were engaged in business themselves. They were also being pressurised by retailers' groups in the city. A 1910 letter to the Parks and Cemeteries committee congratulated them on their refusal to grant permission for speeches at co-operative meetings and noted that 'parks are provided for the pleasure and convenience of all ratepayers and are not for the use of any organisations having for their objects the furtherance of special forms of trading' (P&C minutes, Volume 29, p. 151).

More controversy was caused in 1936 with the granting of permission to the British Union of Fascists to hold meetings in Manchester parks. While some concern was expressed about the granting of permission, the chairman of the Parks and Cemeteries committee, Miles Mitchell, argued that the BUF should be entitled to the

same facilities as other groups (Fascists May Parade But Not in Uniform, MG, 8 October 1936, p. 11). Some councillors objected to the use of public parks for such parades arguing that ‘a playground set aside for children...(should) not be turned into a battleground’ (Fascists Must Doff Their Uniforms for Park Meeting, MEN, 7 October 1936, p. 8). The meeting was permitted to go ahead but the BUF were not allowed to parade in uniform which was considered to be inflammatory. The MEN pointed out that a similar tactic in Germany had had the effect of granting more publicity to the Nazis who paraded in fancy dress instead of uniform (MEN, Tonight by Tempus, 7 October 1936, p. 8).

It seems ironic that the public expression of ILP political views in the 1890s were found to be so objectionable as to result in the imprisonment of the speakers while 40 years later, Oswald Mosley was permitted to express and discuss his political creed in Manchester’s municipal parks. This is not just a measure of the inconsistency of the treatment of political groups by the Parks and Cemeteries committee but, rather, a reflection of the growing acceptance of rights to both free speech and freedom of access to municipal open space for all citizens. Some of Manchester’s largest parks were still off limits to the citizens of the very poorest areas due to their distance from them. The principle of access to all and ability to access were still not equal. Parks such as Heaton Park were large enough to contain a variety of visitors who came for a variety of purposes, not all of them acceptable to everyone.

Conclusion

The Victorian municipal park in Manchester was characterised by a desire on the part of the municipal authorities to regulate and control parks visitor behaviour as much as possible, principally through the mechanism of the parks bye-laws. As the number of parks in the city expanded rapidly through the late Victorian and

Edwardian periods, this attitude began to relax. The appointment of William Wallace Pettigrew as General Superintendent of Parks in 1915 marked the beginning of a period of more professional park administration and management and an increasing willingness to tolerate a wide variety of behaviours in municipal parks, subject to the byelaws. Municipal parks were increasingly viewed as sporting and recreational facilities for the general public and whose spaces were expected to provide a variety of facilities for users. The rights of free access to such spaces were established alongside other related principles such as the right to roam. Parks visitors themselves frequently had a highly articulated (if not always consensual) view of the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in public open spaces which ensured that the use of municipal parks remained a contested subject well into the twentieth century and beyond.

The municipal park in the Edwardian period became not just a site for sports and recreation but a place to learn how to behave as a good citizen, a concept that was enshrined in organisations such as the Boy Scouts who often camped and drilled in municipal parks. Each park user was expected to set a good example not just in terms of dress codes and submission to publicly advertised rules but in terms of taking collective responsibility for the upkeep and care of the park's facilities. Pettigrew summed this up when he observed that:

“Broad-minded, far-seeing public authorities appreciate the fact that the real assets derived from the provision of all past-times in their parks are not monetary in character but are the enhanced health and happiness of the community”.

The community's future depended on the commitment of its citizens to upholding the established norms and standards of behaviour and the municipal park was well-placed to provide a public space where such behaviours could not only be displayed and

learned but could be forged, contested and debated. This is the real legacy of the Edwardian municipal park.