

The Rush to the Sea

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The future of public parks has recently been under review and the Government's Select Committee report was published in February 2017. The inquiry was endeavouring to establish why parks matter and how a sustainable future can be secured for them. It considered that the amenity and leisure value of public parks is important at both a community and a national level and that 'striking the right balance between open access to parks and revenue-raising activities' is challenging.¹ These challenges apply to the sub-group of public seaside gardens, many of which are sited in potentially prime development locations that would command premium prices if sold by the local authorities.

Seaside gardens have their own history to tell, and are worthy of retention in their own right. This can be demonstrated by considering the history of the main public gardens in two major holiday resorts in Dorset, namely Weymouth and Bournemouth. As social conditions improved during the nineteenth century the visit to the seaside became very popular. Entrepreneurs and local authorities recognised the need to offer public gardens as one of their tourist attractions but at the same time these authorities were accountable to the local ratepayers.

Weymouth, which was originally a fishing port, became known for its Royal patronage in the late 1700s, when King George III's physicians felt that drinking seawater would help with his illness, which they were unable to identify. However the development of its public gardens came much later. This could be because initially the seaside Esplanade provided a sufficient and attractive amenity for promenading, with its backdrop of a long continuous arc of Georgian terraces on its northern side and Weymouth Bay to the south.

In 1867 George Robert Stephenson, on one of his frequent trips to Weymouth aboard his steam yacht, gave the purchase monies (£346) to the authorities for The Rings on the western end of the Esplanade with the stipulation that the land should be laid out as public gardens straight away.²

These became known as the Alexandra Gardens and were the resort's first public gardens. The authorities appointed John Gibson to prepare plans.³ Gibson was famous as the Parks Superintendent responsible for the laying out of Battersea Park, London, (amongst others) and for the concept of sub-tropical planting.⁴ However, as appears to be the case in the development of public gardens at many other seaside resorts, local politics stepped in and eventually the design contract was awarded to a Weymouth architect, George R. Crickmay.⁵

By 1869 the construction and planting of the Alexandra Gardens was largely completed. Initially there was a gravelled circle in the centre where a band could play under a temporary canvas awning. Over the years this was replaced with various building designs; the Electric Palace is in situ today. In 1899, a large quantity of classical statuary was installed and in 1904 six thatched rustic shelters appeared.⁶

With the advent of cheap holidays abroad in the 1960s, the fortunes of Weymouth, like those of many other seaside resorts, started to suffer. The future of the Weymouth gardens came under review and Weymouth Council felt that 'everything proper should be done to attract holiday makers to the town', and that, rather than keeping the theatre in the Alexandra Gardens which was losing money, it should be taken over by Holland's Amusements. It was converted to take fairground and slot machines in the mid 1960s; these remain to this day. Alexandra Gardens probably still continue their theme of entertainment but their overall design of spacious walkways and pleasant seating areas has all but been lost.

Weymouth's other major garden is Greenhill Gardens, sited at the north-eastern end of the Esplanade. Underneath the seaward edge of these lies an extraordinary range of 107 beach chalets, both one and two-storey; the Gardens essentially being laid over the top of them.⁷ The 31 two-storey chalets, which were built in 1923, were listed Grade II in 2008; the single-storey beach huts are later, not listed and separate from the Gardens. It is this combination of beach huts with the existing inter-war garden that makes this place so unusual.



Weymouth Esplanade and The Rings (1819) by John Upham; the grassed areas are now the site of the Alexandra Gardens. (Google Images 10 May 2017)



Weymouth Bay and Portland from Greenhill Gardens (1924) by Alfred Robert Quinton. Copyright J Salmon Ltd, Sevenoaks, Kent

The sloping site provides commanding views over the entire Weymouth Bay, and beyond, and this ‘borrowed landscape’ is one of its main assets. The land was partly gifted in 1902 by a former local MP, Sir Frederic John William Johnstone. The tennis courts, bowling club and site of the future chalets were bought by Weymouth Council from Johnstone in 1904. An extension to the Greenhill Gardens was made in 1904; the design was carried out by William Golding (1854-1919), a Kew-trained garden designer and assistant editor of *The Garden*.⁸ He designed:

... newly made up tennis courts to complement those already there with croquet lawns and bowling greens. Grounds are banked up on either side and planted with shrubs and flowers and a narrow strip sloping towards the Esplanade is in time to be laid out as a rockery.⁹

Today the boundary of Greenhill remains unchanged but there have been alterations within the Gardens themselves, with the rising ground now retained by low stone walls of differing heights and constructions rather than the high clipped hedges of the last century. It has one of the few remaining floral clocks in the country today.



*Floral Clock, Greenhill Gardens, (c.1960).
By kind permission of Weymouth Museum*

Time has been kinder to Greenhill than Alexandra Gardens in that the fall in visitor numbers prevented modernisation. However, since the start of this century, cash-strapped local authorities view these assets somewhat differently. The Friends of Greenhill Gardens have been able to ensure that planning was not granted for a large restaurant on the tennis courts. In 2014 Weymouth and Portland Borough Council indicated they wanted to sell the site but failed. Now they appear to be considering how they can secure the long-term viability of the Gardens. However other public gardens in Weymouth have been lost over the years, primarily for use as car parks. One example of this is the public gardens that were known as the Melcombe Regis Gardens where, in 1967, the Rose Walk and associated gardens, putting green and tennis courts were replaced with 245 car parking spaces.

However, Bournemouth recognises its gardens as one of the main draws for tourists and also has a long horticultural pedigree. Bournemouth was developed from heathland; it had no royal patronage but just the strong belief held by one

of the original landowners that it could be a marine village to rival Weymouth or Brighton. The main public gardens are known as the Bournemouth Gardens and are made up of four different areas. All have evolved over similar time periods but vary in their look and use today. The gardens have developed in a chine (the local word for a steep dried-up river valley) carved out by the River Bourne, which descends into the sea. Because of their topography chine gardens are unique in their style and are therefore unusual as public gardens; their steepness in many cases makes them unsuitable for development.

The Lower Gardens, being next to the beach, are the most visited by tourists and consequently have the greatest use. The first development was by a local landowner, Sir George Ivison Tapps, who was responsible for the planting of considerable numbers of Scots pines. Pine trees are a key aspect of Bournemouth and an integral part of the various public spaces. However it was his son, Sir George Williams Tapps Gervis, who appointed Benjamin Ferrey to undertake the first major planning of Bournemouth, which included the gardens on the land below Westover Road and as far as the River Bourne. They were opened to the public in 1859 and it was reported that the ‘soil which refused to cherish cabbages promised a famous field for the cultivation of the human race ...’¹⁰

The next, and very unlikely, landscape designer was Augustus Bozzi Granville, a physician who was one of the many doctors then promoting the benefits to health of sea bathing. Dr Granville’s main contribution to the Gardens was the conversion of ‘that narrow flat prairie’ (the valley of the River Bourne) into a ‘regular promenade garden all the way down the valley with parterres and beds of flowers by the side of the brook’.¹¹ This is basically what is seen today; the brook became a favourite, particularly in the Edwardian period, for the sailing of model yachts.

Dr Granville suggested that ‘... [the] imaginative and skilful agronomist Mr. Loudon be consulted.’¹³ It does not appear that this actually happened, but aspects of the gardenesque style that John Claudius Loudon was promoting at the time can still be seen in the Gardens, such as ‘small episodal walks to display particular scenes in detail ...’¹⁴



*The Children’s Corner, Lower Gardens (1915).¹²
The River Bourne heading towards the sea*



The Bandstand with the River Bourne and the Lower Gardens behind it. (2014). Photo author

Between 1845 and 1859 Decimus Burton was instrumental in the design of the Westover Gardens, which are on the eastern side and featured general wooded areas and paths, including the pine-lined Invalids' Walk, named to highlight its suitability for the weak and infirm. This shaded promenade provided an attractive area for early visitors. To the west of this walk there is a bandstand, the original being of a rustic nature. Rather than being in the normal setting of the centre of the Gardens, it is sited unusually right under the walk with the River Bourne between it and the Lower Gardens.

In the late nineteenth century, as towns became established and the entrepreneurial energies of the local landed estates declined, Councils became responsible for parks and pleasure grounds. The Bournemouth authorities embraced this task



Part of the Rockery in the Lower Gardens, Bournemouth, with the Pavilion behind. (December 2015). Photo author

with vigour, and set up a competition for a design for the Lower Gardens. It was won by a Mr Philip Tree but for some reason, and probably because local politics intervened again, he was not permitted to supervise the laying out of his design.¹⁵ It appears that this honour went to the Borough Surveyor, Christopher Crabbe Creeke. Extensive activity took place in the Lower Gardens from 1877 to the end of the century with the construction of paths, bedding, fencing, bridges and seating, so that the Gardens developed into something of a horticultural showcase. As well as the bandstand, other entertainments were introduced such as the 'Flowers by Candlelight' event in 1896. In the twentieth century various parks superintendents were instrumental in making changes, such as introducing the award-winning formal floral displays, the aviary and the large rock garden that are all still there today.

The rock garden in the Lower Gardens is reported to be the largest municipal rockery in the country.¹⁶ It had been thought that it was designed by Veitch and Son, although there does not appear to be any evidence to support this attribute.¹⁷ However there is some indication that Mr R. S. Lynch, who was the Head Gardener at Dartington Hall in Devon and in charge of the garden design team who contracted out their services, might have been involved with the building of the Bournemouth rockery.

The team were in the early 1930s winning Gold Medals for their rockeries at the Chelsea Flower show.¹⁸ Lynch, in one of his letters to Beatrice Farrand updating her on the works being undertaken at Dartington in June 1933, states 'busy with work for the Estate generally, nurseries, Chelsea Show and Bournemouth'.¹⁹ This could mean reference to the rockery at Bournemouth as the timings fit. It is known from the obituary of the Bournemouth Parks Superintendent for this period (Mr W. Felstead) that although he was in charge of the famous pavilion rockery it had attracted experts from all over the country.²⁰ The Dartington Hall team offered a full design, construction and planting service for both commercial enterprises and local authorities: they were responsible for the design and build of the Connaught Gardens, Sidmouth. Therefore their involvement with Bournemouth seems very plausible.

Connaught Gardens (Grade II listed by Heritage England) was opened by HRH The Duke of Connaught on 3rd November 1934. The work of transforming what was the Sea View Estate (a house and five acres of ground purchased by the local authority) was under the direction of Mr. Lynch. The old house was knocked down but many of the walls of the original gardens and outbuildings were preserved in the new design. It was reported at the time that the Gardens 'with its sloping banks and pleasant lawns, its intersecting



The formal gardens in the Connaught Gardens planted as a rose garden, as shown in the Dartington Hall Ltd Gardens Department marketing brochure of 1935. Source: DGT Library

paths, the sunken garden and the pergola garden' would be a great asset to Sidmouth; a fact that is still true today.²¹

The Dartington Hall Gardening Team had the skills and knowledge to design and build projects to a high standard, such as Connaught. The Bournemouth Borough Gardener today acknowledges these capabilities by stating that the Bournemouth Rockery is one of 'high class workmanship and demonstrates a true understanding as to the construction of a rockery'.²²

One of the later and controversial introductions to the Lower Gardens, Bournemouth was a tethered helium balloon, which took the place of an earlier fountain and was in situ until summer 2016. It had a host of fencing and rigging associated with it and intruded in to what was designed to be the open space in the Bourne Valley. Michael Rowland, Head of Parks Development, Bournemouth, said: "We are sorry to see the balloon leave the Lower Gardens after more than 15 years of service". He said no decision about the future of the site would be made without 'careful consideration, time and consultation with both the community and heritage organisations'.²³ At least for 2017 the area will return to lawn.

Several years ago, the English Heritage (now Heritage England) listing for these Gardens was reduced from Grade II* to Grade II. This was due to the 'higher density surrounding development altering the setting rather than the management of the Gardens themselves'.²⁴

Public seaside gardens, as all public parks, are faced with reduced financial budgets and friends' groups will be crucial in securing these gardens for future generations. This is an aspect that the 2017 Public Parks report identifies but feels that 'it would be unfair and short sighted to lay responsibility for resolving the challenges parks face wholly at their doors'.²⁵ It concludes that innovation is required in management models and new funding sources.

Ongoing funding is something that public seaside gardens have endeavoured to address in recent years with their attractions such as slot machines, static balloon rides, amusement rides, Winter Fairs etc. This could mean that the atmosphere of these gardens with their simple traditional entertainments, such as music and the ability to sit and relax, has been or will be lost. Perhaps that is the price that has to be paid if these historic public open spaces are to be sustainable and to be protected for future generations.

References

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25. House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, *Public Parks*, (2017) p. 3. The Government have set up a cross departmental group to review the Report and its recommendations and to report back before the end of this Parliament.