

Victoria Park

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Victoria Park



Historical Guide



LOTTERY FUNDED



St.Helens
Council





Welcome to Victoria Park

Until the early 19th Century St.Helens was little more than a village.

The 1868 charter of incorporation defined St.Helens officially as a municipal Borough and the St.Helens Improvement Act of 1869 gave the new borough powers under sections 243 -245 to create parks, fund, maintain and use them. In 1886 St.Helens bought the Mansion House and grounds for £11,000 and opened Cowley Hill Park, subsequently renamed Victoria Park. It was the boroughs second park but the only park in St Helens which still has it's original Mansion House within its grounds. Victoria Park was opened with a protective order; this means that by law it can only ever be used as a public park.

The brewing and coal owning Speakman family originally owned the land and the pond was a series of Marl pits linked by a belt of woodland that was on the ordinance survey map of 1849 which was altered to create a single large pond with an island and a summerhouse to the south of the pond.

Set within open countryside, John Speakman's former fields were swiftly planted to form an estate with Cowley House at its heart.

In 1847 John Speakman died and John Ansdell, a local solicitor who had married the widower of John Speakman brother Richard Speakman, acquired part of Cowley Hill estate and built Cowley House in 1849-1850. The house was of Italianate design and the architect is believed to be Edward Kemp, who also designed St.Helens Cemetery.

John Andsell's lived at his new home until his death in 1885, after which his widow moved on to live in Rainhill with her sisters. The house and grounds were bought in 1886 for £11,000 by St.Helens Corporation and the contents of the house and outbuildings were auctioned. On 14th June 1886 Cowley Hill Park was opened by the Mayor. At this time, changes were made including (thanks to a gift of land from Colonel David Gamble) a new entrance (St Mark's Gate) at the corner of City Road and Rutland Street, making the proposed new 'park' much more accessible to the townsfolk. New flower beds were stocked with plants brought from the greenhouses. Seats were provided and bent hoops were installed to keep wayward feet off the grass. A much enlarged lake and a bandstand were envisaged though not built at the time. The new 'Cowley Hill Park' opened in June 1886; however its name was short lived. To commemorate the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 1887, David Gamble renamed it 'Victoria Park' on June 21st.

In 2013, a partnership between Age UK Mid Mersey, Friends of Victoria Park and St.Helens Council resulted in a successful bid for Heritage Lottery Funding for redevelopment of the park, including The Mansion House orangery and fountain.

This restoration work was completed in time for the grand opening by the Mayor (Councillor Geoffrey Pearl) on Tuesday, 19th August 2014. These works included the introduction of a Victorian-style bandstand (almost 25 years after first envisaged), restoration of the park pond, re-establishment of tennis courts, redevelopment of The Mansion House fountain and gardens, and the building of a brand new state-of-the-art orangery in the style of a previous orangery at the site.

1. Mansion House

It was John Andsell, requested the building of Cowley House. Andsell was already quite successful. The brewing and coal owning Speakman family had become his in-laws when, after his work partner Richard Speakman died, he married Richard's widow.



Cowley House was very much a Victorian gentlemen's residence. Money was lavished on the new build which was designed to the Italianate style typical of Victorian opulence though unique within the neighbourhood. Its imposing entrance porch led to a spacious central atrium with elegant Italian tiled floor, ornate staircase and beautiful lantern skylight. Downstairs, the library, with its legal, literacy and religious books. In the dining room, twelve could sit comfortably at the 17'6 x 5'3 dining table. Upstairs were six first floor bedrooms and a dressing room. Four more bedrooms were on the second floor, two (thought to be the servants quarters) were situated off a top landing. Each room had its own washstand and the servants would have had much carrying of hot water to do given that, typical of 1885, only one bathroom had been installed!

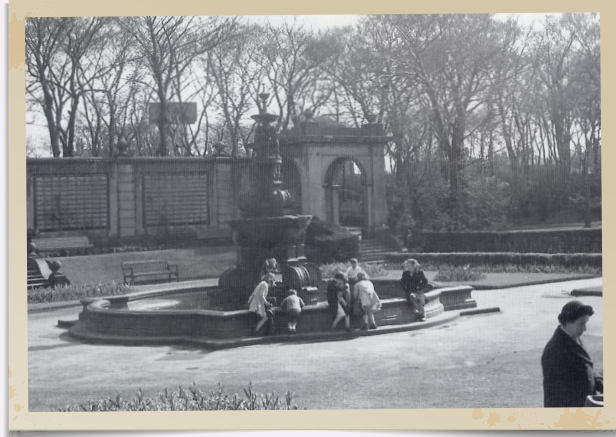
Cowley House remained John Andsell's home until his death in 1885, after which his widow moved on to live in Rainhill with her sisters. The house and grounds were bought in 1886 for £11,000 by St. Helens Corporation and the contents of the house and outbuildings were auctioned.

By this time, in 1892 the house had become a free public museum and Art Gallery, which occupied four rooms in the house. Its collection was enhanced by loans from the Victoria and Albert Museum and by gifts from local donors. Other additions included park seats, tree and shrubs, stalls selling tea and coffee, and the greenhouses which opened each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday 2.00-4.00pm.



Its magnificent stuffed tiger (now long ago recycled to repair patches to other museum animal exhibits) lives on in the memory of the children and adults who loved the Museum and mourned its closure in 1965 when the exhibits were transferred to the Gamble Institute. During the house's museum days, two flats had been created on the upper floors; however, these rooms are no longer accessible except for maintenance work.

The gardens just inside the Mansion House were very popular and in 1897 Doulton gifted a second more elaborate fountain that replaced his earlier gift in the formal garden and also a semi-circular seat facing the fountain.



In 1914, during the First World War, Belgian refugees were accommodated in the Mansion House.

Following closure of the museum in 1965, the building became the base for St. Helens Parks and Cemeteries. In 1983 the garden was enclosed by a wall with panels of railings and the Doulton seat was relocated, however it was then abandoned and sadly become increasingly derelict. In 1985 it was listed as a Grade II Listing Building to mark and celebrate its special architectural and historic interest, and also brings it under the consideration of the planning system, so that it can be protected for future generations.

Fortunately in 1993/94 a local charity - Age Concern St. Helens (now Age UK Mid Mersey) purchased the house and immediate grounds (including formal gardens, courtyard, outbuildings and parking areas) and set about restoring this beautiful venue.

2. Folly or Grotto



Built in between 1847 and 1849 using a waste material called “slag” meaning waste from the local glass industry. The Folly or Grotto as it was also known was a major feature in the park and was constructed only for decoration, it serves no purpose and creates a romantic backdrop to the pond and is believed to be the oldest structure in the park and was built before the house. It had two towers and the remaining tower would have been linked to the wall by an archway. The central tower had windows and doors but it is unknown whether there were any rooms inside the tower. There were benches around the folly which would have looked out over the pond. In 1985 was listed as a Grade II Listing marks and celebrates a building’s special architectural and historic interest, and also brings it under the consideration of the planning system, so that it can be protected for future generations.

Grotto was subject to repeated vandalism and eventually lost its larger tower and much of the fabric.

3. Pond

The pond was created from a series of Marl pits that was on the ordinance survey map of 1849. Marl is a type of clayey soil that contains lime and farmers ploughed their field with it to reduce the acid in the soil. The clayey soil holds water so that over years the pits became permanent ponds. Maps indicate these pits had been altered to create a single large pond with islands in the middle. Early records show the pond having islands with rustic duck house, a bridge crossing over the pond and small building presumed to be a that was removed in the 1980', all of which were never replaced.



4. Travellers' Resting Stone

Beside the pond there is a stone step, this stone is a Travellers' Resting Stone dated 1861, which were once all over the country designed to be roadside seat. It may also have been used as a horse mounting block and a coffin resting point. Relocated from the courtyard at the time of sale, it is one of only a few left in St. Helens. It is not known where the stone originally stood however The Travellers Rest public house is a possibility.

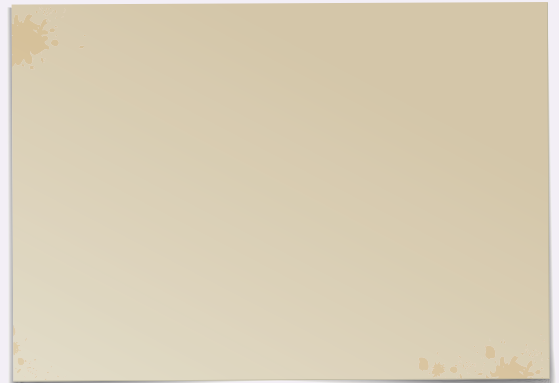
5. Play Area

In 1890 12 swings were to be installed, six for girls and six for boys, and the children's sand heap was extended. In 1907 two see saws, a horizontal ladder, 30 feet long parallel bars for boys and two see saws for girls was added. Over the years the play areas and equipment have been moved many times about but are now situated close to where they originally where.



6. Drinking Fountain

In 1887, when the park was renamed, the focus was on facilities for visitors which included a McFarlane drinking fountain installed near the pond.



7. Kings Gate

On 8th July 1913 King George V and Queen Mary visited St Helens and visited the park entering the park on the corner of City Road where all the schoolchildren were assembled nearby. The Borough Engineer was instructed to widen the gates at Windle City entrance and to erect permanent gates and pillars, the entrance thereafter to be called Kings Gate in commemoration of the visit.

8. Bandstand

In 1886 plans were drawn up to erect a complete ornate bandstand but it was never built. Instead in 1889 a basic band platform was constructed and bands started to perform the following year. It was thought by 1894 the bandstand had been removed but in 1929 when a bowling house, café and toilet was built plans to build an ornate bandstand in the style of one that had never been built, were put forward but the council did not have enough money, so again decided on a very basic band platform it was a raised platform with no roof and seating around it. The platform was enclosed in a fence area and people were charged an entrance fee.

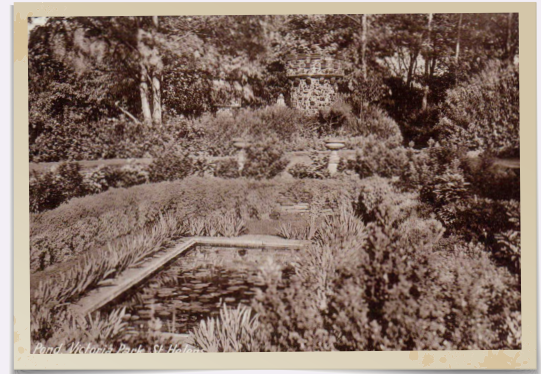
9. Windlehurst Gate Lodge

This Gate lodge was built around the same time as St Marks Gate Lodge and was also used to house boroughs employees until it was sold off around 2000 and is now a private residence.



10. Sunken Garden

In 1927 a sunken garden with pool was constructed but by 1945 the pool was filled in and a rose garden took its place after the second world war a rectangular ornamental pool was created in the a Sunken Garden. Crazy paving, which was laid around the pond is an original feature that still remains.



11. Commemorative Tree

In 1902, Mayor Gamble planted a tree to celebrate the Coronation of Edward VII. This tree still exists and has bench around it to commemorate this event. An engraved shovel was used to plant the tree and presented to the mayor. The shovel still sits in St.Helens Town Hall today.

12. Bowling House, Greens and Cafe

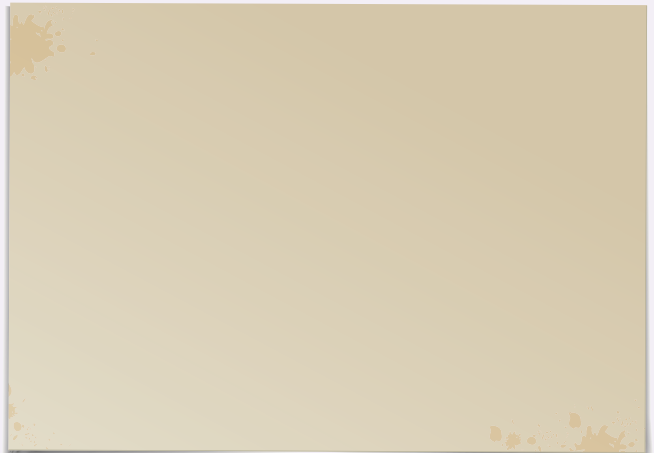


In 1924 two Bowling Greens, Tennis Courts and a Bowls House were added. And a few years after sales of refreshments were available in the Bowls House. In 1928 another request was put together for a more substantial building that made from brick with steeply pitched tile roof overhanging sheltered verandas to all sides and was accepted and built in 1930. Sadly burnt down 1987/88. Bowling greens ceased to be maintained in 2006/7 due to decrease of public interest in the sport. Today one of the greens have been turned into a garden maintained by the community.

13. Griffin Memorial Pavilion



In 1935 proposals to erect an 'Old Men's Shelter' was put forward and so in 1938/39 it was constructed next to the Bowls House. It was for aged and infirmed men in memory of Alfred Griffin and paid for by his family. Sadly this was burnt down in the 1980's.



14. Tennis Courts

In 1911 two Tennis Courts were first installed on the lawns in front of the Mansion House and later in 1924 more were added. In the 20th century Tennis Courts fell out of use and in 1997/8 the last clay surfaced courts stopped being maintained and were later removed. During the Heritage Lottery works two courts were installed close to where some of the original courts were situated.

15. Meteorological Station

Built in 1899 by Boulton and Paul Ltd, it was equipped with instruments and equipment for measuring atmospheric conditions to provide information for weather forecasts and to study the weather and climate. The circular area was fenced off and inside was a large thermometer and a rainwater collection tank for measuring the acidity and pollution in the rain. In 1901 a weather clock was added to the building and the same year it was recorded that gasses were escaping into Victoria Park from Cowley Hill Works which was later reported as causing damage to trees. In 1936 a combined wind direction and velocity recorder was installed in the station and was all monitored by the Park Foreman, Mr Hopkin. The station suffered spates of vandalism and was demolished in the 1980's as it was no longer needed due to advances in technology.



16. St Marks Gate Lodge

In 1887 permission was given to erect a lodge and premises at North Road entrance giving life to the building we now know as St Marks Gate Lodge. The owners of the Mansion House created a mound to screen the lodge and other premises on Rutland Street. This screen still exists and is now the backdrop to the ornamental bedding area in front of the St Marks Gate lodge. It was designed to complement the main house and the council's coat of arms was incorporated into its walls. In 1887 it housed the first Head Gardener, Edward Pye. Mr Pye was also the park keeper of Sutton Park, Gaskell Park and Queens Park Recreation Ground and died in 1909. In 1985 St Marks Gate Lodge was listed as a Grade II Listing mark and celebrates a building's special architectural and historic interest, and also brings it under the consideration of the planning system, so that it can be protected for future generations.

The lodge remained empty for some years until in 2007 attempts to sell it met with strong opposition which eventually led to the Heritage Lottery Application bid.



Influence of the First and Second World Wars on the park

17. Air Raid Shelter

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Allotments

In 1917 and 1941 large areas of the park were given over to allotments. In 1916 four women gardening students were trained in the park. Allotments remained for some years after each war but the land was returned back to parkland eventually after each war.

Iron Railings



All iron railings except for the ornamental entrance gates were scrapped for the Second World War efforts and hedges were planted to fill in the gaps.



Acknowledgements and thanks to Barbara Moth, a Consultant Landscape Architect for her report produced during the Heritage Lottery application.