

**CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL
CHELMSFORD**

**CENTRAL PARK (formerly Chelmsford
Recreation Ground), BELL MEADOW,
AND SKY BLUE PASTURE**

TL703 066

The park is a good example of a late Victorian public park – its layout incorporates most of the usual park features.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In December 1886 a public meeting of the town's inhabitants resolved to ask their Local Board of Health to provide a recreation ground, and the Tax and Ratepayers' Association countered by asking for a poll to test public opinion. A recreation ground was one of seventeen suggestions considered to commemorate Queen Victoria's golden jubilee in 1887. A decision could not be reached, and the jubilee was commemorated by putting up a clock.

In 1888 the town's government was modernised and in 1893 the mayor, Frank Whitmore, an architect, took up the idea of a recreation ground and riverside promenade and asked for subscriptions. The land was to be leased to start with, in case the ground was not a public success as well as to keep the initial expenditure down (below £2,000). One area leased from the railway company was a flooded borrow-pit next to a railway viaduct and embankment running across the river flood plain. This became the bathing and boating lake which was over two acres in extent and in the early days was studded with magnificent white water lilies and a pair of fine white swans which were placed upon the lake by Mr E Hunt-Carter. Chelmsford Recreation Ground was to cover sixteen acres and the work of laying out paths and beds, and constructing footbridges over drainage ditches to the river, took three men nine months. The new park was opened on 4th July 1894. Wells and Perry, whose brewery once stood on the corner of Duke Street and Victoria Road, charged a nominal sum of a guinea a year for the land which made the main entrance from Threadneedle Street to the bank of the River Can, where a circular grotto was planned and planted with flowering shrubs and nasturtiums. The next two hundred yards of the promenade, down to a new rustic bridge, belonged already to the council as part of the market area. The eight feet wide promenade ran on down to a second rustic bridge, bordered on one side by a twenty feet wide planting of trees of all kinds. In a field across that rustic bridge an athletic track was laid out and three tennis courts were constructed: cricket and football were also catered for there. Entrances to the park included one from Seymour Street, off New Writtle Street, Upper Bridge Road, and you could also enter the park from a path under the arches of the viaduct, or via Park Road from Duke Street. Lastly there was an entry past the Friends' Meeting House down the street, known today as Victoria Road South.

The recreation ground was quickly successful. A bandstand, designed by Whitmore, was built and the council let out a pavilion where refreshments could be bought. Boats could be hired on the lake, bowling greens were laid out, and the grounds were looked after by a full-time uniformed caretaker, who lived in a cottage on the site. In winter when the lake froze it was used for skating. A 'floating island' was formed and ducks and swans were raised.

By the early 1900's the council decided to buy the land bit by bit, partly using money that had been raised for a library and art gallery, which in the event had not been built, and partly with a loan from the Public Works Loan Commissioners. The total cost was apparently £6,076. The first greenhouse was built in the winter of 1902 to keep the more tender plants alive through frosty days and an estimate from Crompton & Fawkes on 21 May 1902 with an amended sketch was for £25. The cost of slow combustion heating apparatus, a boiler fitted with a special grate for economising fuel with a 15 ft. chimney, cap and stays, and a set of stoking irons and a 12 ft. flue brush, amounted to an extra £11.

People applied to use the recreation ground for various functions. The Literary Institute was allowed to hold a fete; the town's fire brigade frequently gave demonstrations; and in the First World War soldiers camped there and were visited by Lord Kitchener in 1915. The recreation ground was to be closed to the public one Wednesday afternoon and evening July or August for a concert on behalf of the band fund. A temporary building was to be erected near the lake to contain closets and a urinal.

A series of green spaces, linked one to another, was developed through the centre of the town. The recreation ground was linked to other public open spaces along the river, through the town centre and out to the countryside.

During the second world war the land was requisitioned for anti-aircraft gun emplacements, dig for victory allotments, and similar uses. In 1945 Anthony Minoprio produced a plan for Chelmsford's future development, in which the central open space was highly valued (and compared to The Backs in Cambridge). A section of Minoprio's analysis stated that 'From Admiral's Park past the Recreation Ground and right through the town to Moulsham Mill, both banks of the river should be acquired by the Corporation. Along the south banks would be the new tree-lined parkway, the extension westwards of Baddow Road, while on both sides of the river shady walks, attractively lit in the evenings, with bridges, seats, cafés and shelters, would wind amongst flowering trees, pollard and weeping willows'. Minoprio also said that '...the opening up of the riverside land to a depth of fifty feet back on each bank is more important near the two bridges than anywhere else, for it is from there that the beauty of the new park will be most appreciated'.

By 1949 the battered old bandstand was demolished, and work was begun to replace the old rustic bridge over the Can at Seymour Street with a graceful pre-moulded concrete construction. The elegant gates of the Recreation Ground marked the official reopening of the park, renamed Central Park. The opening ceremony was performed by the High Sheriff, Major Nigel Capel-Cure, on July 28, 1951. All that remains of where Major Capel Cure stood for this ceremony are just two brick pillars and a piece of approach walling.

In 1960, at the same time as the road scheme was being considered, huge flood prevention works were undertaken. In the course of these the land was cleared in places to either side of the river, much as Minoprio had recommended, but this clearance was only temporary. In fact the diminution of the risk of flooding, and the landscaping of the river banks, proved to be an impetus to redevelopment, although continuous riverside walks were created.

By the 1960's increasing car ownership brought pressure for new roads through the town. 'Parkway' was finally built across the river in 1965, through the northern part of the original recreation ground and over the site of the bowling greens and bandstand in Central Park. This cut off outlying parcels of land which were then threatened with development.

Chelmsford's green riverside centre is hugely popular: it is not a conservation area but is designated as a 'strategic green wedge' in the local plan.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, BOUNDARIES

The town centre is divided by the River Can, which meets the River Chelmer just downstream of the town centre, to the east. The flood plains of these rivers, often under water in winter, were never built on. Central Park embraces 14.8 hectares and encompasses Central Park Main, Central Park North, Central Park West, Bell Meadow and Sky Blue Pasture. The park's attractively landscaped areas are situated close to the Town Centre, adjacent to Parkway and form the centre of the Riverside Walk Network.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

There are many entrances to the park where pedestrian walkways link with roads such as Roxwell Road, Waterhouse Lane, Writtle Road, Seymour Street, New Writtle Road and Parkway. Many of these are by means of pedestrian bridges over the River Can and some underpass roads such as Parkway and under the bridge that links Waterhouse Lane to Rainsford Lane. The pedestrian mid C20 reinforced concrete bridge over the River Can from Seymour Street has a single span semi-elliptical arch and open square balusters and replicates the stone bridge in the High Street. The New Bridge in New London Road, giving access to Bell Meadows, is an iron C19 bridge over the River Can with six elliptical arch ribs and is listed Grade II.

THE PARK

Central Park is an important recreational space within the town with many mature trees and areas of soft landscaping as well as several activities and facilities for the public to enjoy. The park has a network of footpaths and cycle ways linking all areas of the park and beyond, all of which are well signposted. The 1960's/1970's steel and reinforced concrete bridge leading across the River Can from New Writtle Road meets other paths and here a roundabout controls pedestrian and bicycle traffic flow and has a stock brick retaining wall laid in Flemish bond brick with a simple steel railing on top, and with a central flower bed.

The old bathing lake, which is now a fishing lake, is an attractive and well maintained feature in the park with its impressive backdrop of the arches of the railway viaduct. The lake, c1843, pre dates the formal recreation ground and its shape remains as depicted on earlier maps. It was created by excavation for the construction of the adjacent railway embankment. The lake has a central island and there are mid to late C20 York stone steps and copings to a curved brick retaining wall to the northern end of the lake.

Bell Meadow and Sky Blue Pasture are nearest to the shopping centre of Chelmsford: Bell Meadow is the site of the town war memorial, a polished granite obelisk dedicated to those who died in the Boer War (1899-1902). Planting in this area includes a C20, possibly 1960's, rock garden, a giant leaning Redwood situated beside the River Can, and a centenary avenue of red oaks.

Bordering Central Park are the Marconi Ponds, a local green space of natural beauty and interest situated in the centre of Chelmsford. The ponds were originally created by Cromptons for industrial purposes and following Marconi's closure in 1994 were left untouched for 3 years. The Friends of Marconi Ponds was formed to develop the Nature Reserve, help in different ways ranging from practical conservation, recording the plants and animals on the site or help promote and manage the project as part of the 'Friends' group. The area is perfect for wildlife, with kingfishers and herons already present. The site is being transformed into a permanent area for wildlife, education and recreation. As well as ponds the site also contains woodland and meadow areas. The railway embankment acts as a habitat corridor linking it to Central Park.

Central Park currently provides the following facilities: junior equipped play area; toddlers' equipped play area; fishing lake; bowling green; tennis courts; croquet lawn: river and jetty; café building; public conveniences; riverside walks; lit footpaths and cycle ways; park furniture such as benches and bins. It is also home to special events such as the funfair, firework displays, circuses, etc.

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