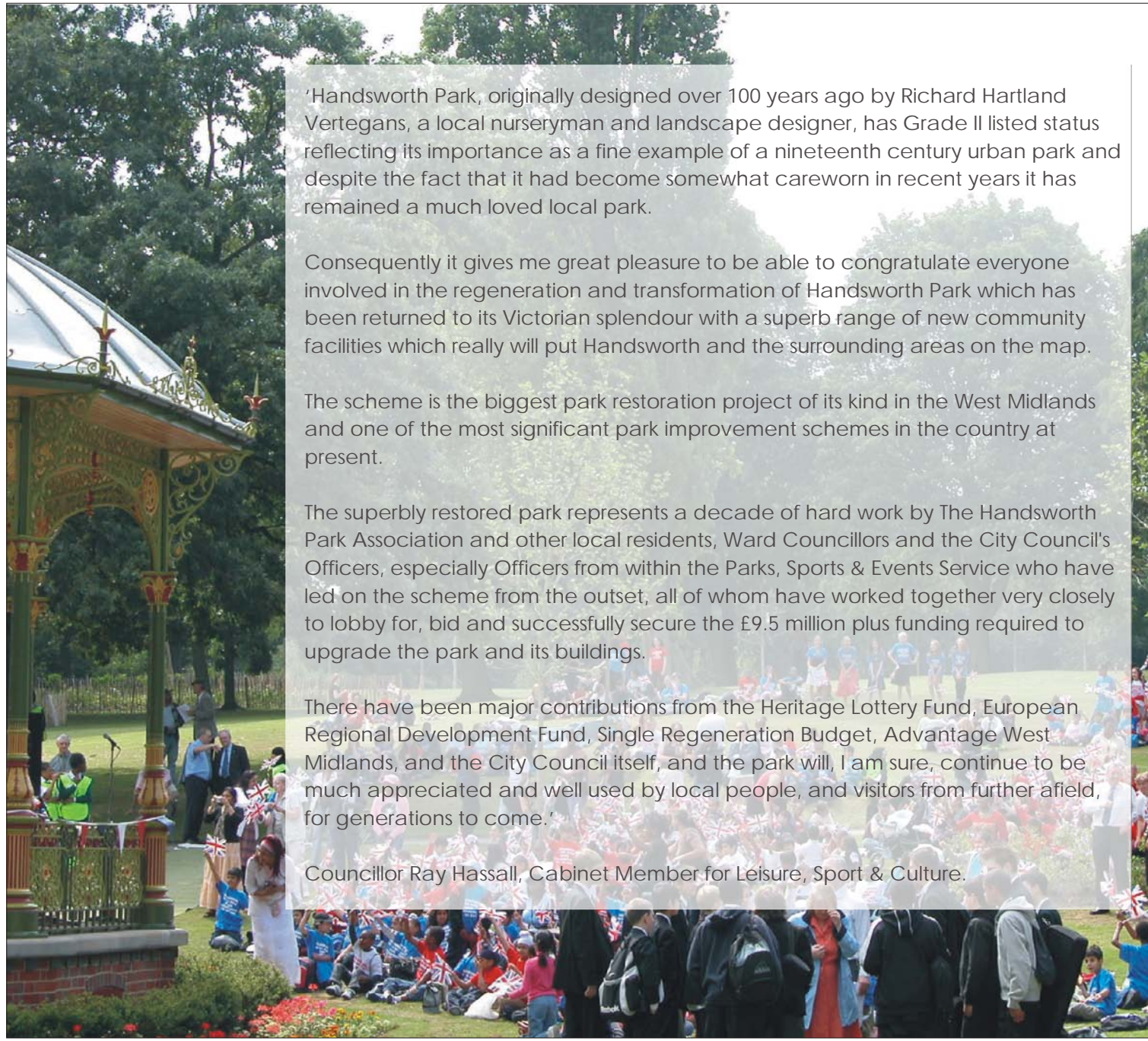




# HANDSWORTH PARK

*Restoration and Rejuvenation*

# HANDSWORTH PARK, 2006



'Handsworth Park, originally designed over 100 years ago by Richard Hartland Vertegans, a local nurseryman and landscape designer, has Grade II listed status reflecting its importance as a fine example of a nineteenth century urban park and despite the fact that it had become somewhat careworn in recent years it has remained a much loved local park.

Consequently it gives me great pleasure to be able to congratulate everyone involved in the regeneration and transformation of Handsworth Park which has been returned to its Victorian splendour with a superb range of new community facilities which really will put Handsworth and the surrounding areas on the map.

The scheme is the biggest park restoration project of its kind in the West Midlands and one of the most significant park improvement schemes in the country at present.

The superbly restored park represents a decade of hard work by The Handsworth Park Association and other local residents, Ward Councillors and the City Council's Officers, especially Officers from within the Parks, Sports & Events Service who have led on the scheme from the outset, all of whom have worked together very closely to lobby for, bid and successfully secure the £9.5 million plus funding required to upgrade the park and its buildings.

There have been major contributions from the Heritage Lottery Fund, European Regional Development Fund, Single Regeneration Budget, Advantage West Midlands, and the City Council itself, and the park will, I am sure, continue to be much appreciated and well used by local people, and visitors from further afield, for generations to come.'

Councillor Ray Hassall, Cabinet Member for Leisure, Sport & Culture.

# HANDSWORTH PARK, 2006

In 2006, Handsworth Park is facing a flourishing future. This is thanks to the vision of those who, more than a hundred years ago, created a beautiful Park for the people of Handsworth. It is also thanks to those who have cared enough for this Park to rescue it from the state of dilapidation and neglect into which it had slipped. Above all, it is members of the local community who have campaigned for, and supported, this Park and who will now secure its future.

Handsworth is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse areas in Europe. The Park is once again at the heart of this community, responding to different needs and benefiting from its liveliness. With the Leisure Centre and Play Centre, the play and sporting facilities, the lakes and the Boathouse, the Sons of Rest Pavilion, the Bandstand, and the natural beauty of trees, shrubs, views and wild-life, this is a Park that offers something for all.

On a daily basis, the 63 acre Park is busy with lots of people, old and young, children and families, men and women. Early morning power-walkers compete with those taking a more leisurely stroll with their dogs. A group of older locals organises weekly tours of the Park. Several local primary schools regularly use the Park as

an educational resource. The Park Rangers also run nature walks and other outdoor education events, involving conservation and ecology, maths and art. The Council's 'Out and About' leaflet reveals a wealth of activities and opportunities.

The Park is also host to several major events which celebrate the lives of the community. The annual Sikh event, Vaisakhi, involves huge processions to the Park. The Marcus Garvey Festival features live music and entertainment over two days. Cricket - together with music, poetry and fashion - is celebrated with the Malcolm Marshall Cricket Memorial Cup. The 'Classroom in the Park', now in its eighth year, attracts children and families from all around, enjoying the history, fauna and flora of the Park.

Handsworth Park is now a beautiful, safe, busy landscape. All this is a remarkable achievement in one of Birmingham's most crowded neighbourhoods, only two and a half miles from the city centre. Thanks to the restoration and to the hard work and enthusiasm of so many people, the glories of Handsworth Park can be enjoyed once more by the communities of today and of the future.

Opening of the restored bandstand.

Park staff, 2006.

Crowds celebrating Vaisakhi.



# PARK BEGINNINGS, 1888-1901

The Grand Opening of Handsworth Park took place, amid much public pride and excitement, on 20th June 1888. At that time, the Park was less than half its present size and was called 'Victoria Park', after the Queen. It was so well received that it quickly expanded and by 1901 it was the beautiful Park we know today.

There had been a clear need for a public park in Handsworth. Local Councillors were concerned, 'to improve the town and make it a healthy and pleasant place of residence'. A public park was one of the chief requirements.

Much publicity accompanied the discussion of the new public park.



Medal commemorating the opening of the extension to Victoria Park, 1898.



IMAGE SUPPLIED BY BIRMINGHAM MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

The *Handsworth News* announced in 1887, that the locality would now have its 'Lung'.

*'It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of such open spaces in a district like ours which, day by day becomes more populous, and where land is continually growing more difficult to obtain. To the children...it means that they will have a recreation ground free from the dangers and temptations of the streets. To their elders it means the possession of a promenade tastefully arranged and tastefully kept, to which, after the fatigues of the day, they can resort for change and rest. To all it means the preservation of a large and important plot of land from the ravages of the speculative builder and the enrichment of the district by the acquisition of something of real beauty and utility.'*

# PARK BEGINNINGS, 1888-1901



IMAGE SUPPLIED BY BIRMINGHAM CENTRAL LIBRARY

The Earl of Dartmouth opening the Park extension, March 1898.

Handsworth Church glebelands and gardens of its former rectory, took place in March 1898 and was equally grand.

*'In this park those whose faces are towards the setting sun can rest after their labours, and see their children and grandchildren growing up around them. ...It is here that little children, the men and women of tomorrow, will gain strength for the life which lies before them.'*

In these early years, pride in the Park was enormous. Local benefactors made many gifts. Two

In 1888, the Park was opened. By all accounts, it was a jubilant occasion. One journalist wrote,

*'On Sunday last a rare sight was to be seen. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of children, of all ages, and mostly well-dressed, clean and wholesome-looking, as well as men and women, poor and well-to-do, were thoroughly enjoying the pleasures of the park.'*

The local Councillors processed to the Park; the band of the First Staffordshire Rifle Volunteers played; speeches were made and a hymn and the National Anthem were sung by all.

A second ceremony, to mark the opening of the Hamstead Road entrance to the expanded Park, which embraced the

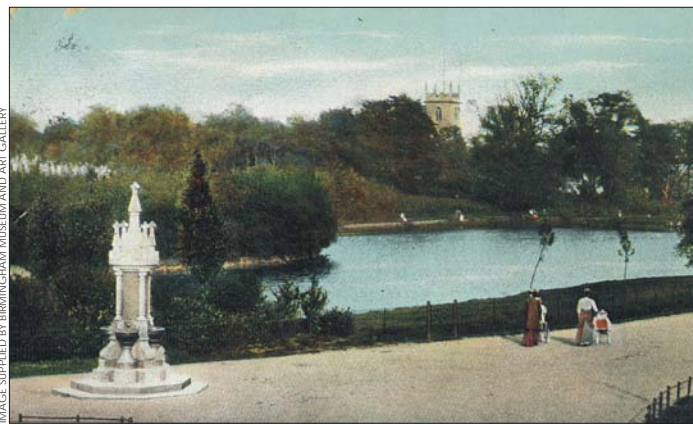
Councillors, Austin Lines and Charles Palmer, each gave a new drinking fountain. Another local man, Walter Wilkinson, gave four ducks and two drakes; Mr. Sydenham gave bulbs; Captain Hart presented seats; and Mr. Ward offered two large, terracotta vases. The future of the Park seemed assured.



IMAGE SUPPLIED BY BIRMINGHAM MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

The Park and St. Mary's Church, 1906.

# DESIGN



Hand-coloured postcards of the Park in the early 20th century.

# DESIGN

Amongst the reasons for the success of the Park were its many facilities and its elegant design. The first part of Handsworth Park had been laid out by local nurseryman, Richard Vertegans, of Chad Valley nurseries. It occupied the grounds of The Grove (later known as Park House), a large country house dating from 1780. The house, a square duck pond, an aviary, outbuildings and kitchen garden were retained, but Vertegans redesigned the landscape, adding winding walks, flower beds, trees and the huge Broad Walk - a raised promenade, twenty feet wide and seven hundred feet long, surrounded by beds designed to receive, 'upwards of 10,000 young geraniums, to say nothing of annuals and other plants from seed'.

Elsewhere in the Park, the lavish planting included rhododendrons, copses and avenues of trees, and colourful flowers. Vertegans' subtle but sophisticated design made

clever use of topography and views and his style influenced the whole Park.

From the 1880s, there was an increasing interest in improving the physique and competitive spirit of the people. The nation required strong young men to develop its industries and Empire and to be ready to fight in wars. The emphasis on vigorous sports can be seen in many public facilities during these years. The Handsworth Committee ensured that this Park was no exception and a good proportion of the land was dedicated to sporting activities. The Grove's walled garden and tennis lawn were transformed into a bowling green; and tennis lawns and a cricket ground were provided. The lake at the heart of the eastern part of the Park had a grand fountain and adjacent pools, and was used for fishing, boating and ice-skating.



Scenes from the Park in the 1930s.



Boating on the lake, 1930s.



Children playing on the frozen lake, 1970s.

# 'IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL PARK... THEN'



During the century since its foundation, Handsworth Park has hosted a range of events. In the summer, bands played in the Bandstand on Wednesday and Saturday evenings. By July 1892, these events were attracting enormous crowds. Open air theatre performances also took place in the summer. From 1900, the annual

Handsworth Horticultural Society Flower Show was held in the Park. This was resurrected by the Parks Committee in 1947, as the Birmingham Flower Show. By this time it had grown to resemble a country show, with animal competitions - the dog championship alone saw nearly 8000 entrants. The Boy Scouts' Jamboree took place yearly from 1917 to 1975, as did the Tattoo, from 1960 to 1964. The Park was also a regular host for the Girl Guides' Jamboree, horse shows, cycle races,

Above: Exercises in the Park, early 1900s;  
Arthur Heard and Dennis Perks with giant delphiniums, 1958.

walking events and other local and city-wide celebrations.

In the 1920s and 30s, Handsworth Park was seen as a popular, safe and loved environment. The Birmingham Civic Society provided a new, sunken garden, with seats and flowers. In the 1930s, intense residential development, of both large houses and denser terraces, meant that the Park became the focus of a wide range of communities, and many continued to use the Park for sport, entertainment and relaxation. The Sons of Rest, a local society for retired men, built a simple timber lodge in the Park, beginning a movement for similar buildings in other parks around the city. The popularity of the Handsworth shelter reflected the growing concerns of the various city districts to address the needs of the whole of society, not just those of families with young children. A new pavilion was provided in 1937, by the City Council.



The Sons of Rest Pavilion, 1950.

# 'IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL PARK... THEN'

Many of these features and events are still remembered fondly by older local residents.

*'When I was young we used to spend virtually all our school holidays in the park. There was skating on the pool. When the boathouse was there you hired a boat to go round the pool. There used to be a group of old Sikh gentlemen playing cards by the boathouse. The Park House where you got ice creams. The cabbage patch where you went to play football. Bands in the bandstand on a Sunday. The park used to be packed; crowded out with kiddies, all with a bottle of pop or something like that to last you for the day. Oh there was tennis, bowls, tiddlers in the pool. It was a beautiful park then.'*  
(Recorded accounts collected by Simon Baddeley, 1995).

Below and right: the Park in the 1970s.



# DECLINE AND RESCUE, 1939-2004

In 1939, the Hamstead Road entrance gates and railings were removed to be melted down as part of the war effort. Without this barrier, the Park must have lost some of its protected and prosperous atmosphere. After the war (during which a two roomed air-raid shelter had been dug beneath a flower bed in the Park), there was a determination to improve and renew society and the Park was once again the focus for community activity. Locals recall boats, including a small motor launch, on the lakes; and refreshments were still served at Park House, known, from the early 1950s as the 'Civic Restaurant'.



By the 1960s, however, the Park became less popular. This led to financial losses for the Park and a reduced staff. Efforts were made to attract new users. A new

playground was supplied in 1972 and festivals and pop concerts were held from 1973 to 1992 but, by the early 1980s, the Park was no longer safe or clean. Part of the historic landscape was lost when the Leisure Centre - now, of course, an extremely popular facility - was built over Park House and most of its associated gardens. By the late 1990s, lawns were eroded and muddy and the Park ponds were so polluted and foul-smelling that they were unable to support any life. The Park's problems were worsened by the considerable social unrest which occurred in Handsworth in the late 1970s and 80s and associated crime spilled into the Park from the

surrounding area. The fear of crime and a lack of management (there were no resident park keepers from 1990-2000) deterred potential users, and the Park became virtually derelict.

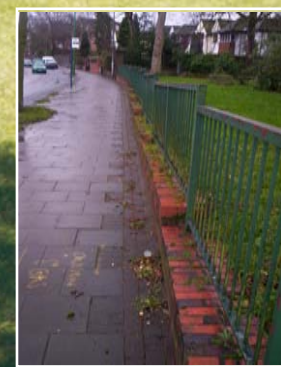


There were now vociferous calls for the restoration of what had been a much-loved Park. Interested locals included children from St Michael's C of E School and Cardinal Newman RC Secondary School, who visited the Park and shared views on what they would like to see there.

*'We considered what had happened to the Park. We looked at what the park needed from different viewpoints. We thought that many things needed to change. We would like the park to cater for everybody.'*

The Park finally turned a corner in July 1996, with the formation of a community group, then called 'Save Handsworth Park'. This group campaigned tirelessly to improve the Park, organising meetings and developing activities, including the 'Classroom in the Park', which is now such a well-established, annual celebration. As a result of their campaign, Birmingham City Council decided to reintroduce resident Park staff. The newly-appointed Park Manager took on new staff from the local community. This represented the major turning point in tackling the Park's problems. As a result, conditions improved, local people began to enjoy the Park once more, and visitor numbers began to rise.

# DECLINE AND RESCUE, 1939-2004



Handsworth Park in the bad times - the Bandstand with holes in the roof and paint flaking off; rubbish floating in the foul-smelling lake; damaged walls and ugly railings.

## RESTORATION, 2004-2006



Handsworth Park's potential to play a major part in the life of the immediate neighbourhood, and of the wider city of Birmingham, was finally recognised. It was hoped that, with an injection of vision, energy and capital, the quality of the Park could be transformed and its role revitalised. Work began in the late 1990s to study the Park, consult local people, and identify what needed to be done. The Heritage Lottery Fund awarded nearly £5m towards the multi-million pound renewal project. The Council also secured around £1.4m from its Single Regeneration Budget, and a further £1.3m from the European Regional Development Fund and supplied nearly £2m itself, totalling £9.6m and making it the biggest park regeneration project in the West Midlands. External partners included the Police and Groundwork Birmingham and Solihull, as well as representatives of various local community groups and other well-wishers. Members of 'Save Handsworth Park', now called 'The Handsworth Park Association', have proven a wonderful and energetic group of Friends. The future of Handsworth Park now looks more secure than it has done in decades.

Thomas Vale Construction, one of the City Council's Partnership Contractors, commenced major works on site in



## RESTORATION, 2004-2006

2004. In the early months, there was little to see but mud and mess. Gradually, however, the new Park began to take shape. The lakes were dredged and the silt removed. The lake edges were rebuilt and the paths improved. The lakes now have a permanent aeration system, which will help to ensure that the water quality continues to be healthy. The new Boathouse was followed by a new Sons of Rest Pavilion. Improvements were made to the Leisure Centre and the Cricket Pavilion, and new play facilities and a Multi-Use Games Area were introduced. All round the Park, the historic walls and railings were rebuilt. Planting of trees, shrubs and flowers now lend more colour and beauty to the Park. The historic gates at Hamstead Road and Grove Lane were refurbished and reinstated; the two fountains, donated by Austin Lines and Charles Palmer, were restored; and new seats provide opportunities to relax and enjoy the marvellous new views. In 2005 the Bandstand was brought back from the foundry in Glasgow, where it had been restored.

The sunken garden, designed by the Civic Society, was replanted. Finally, the Broad Walk was renewed, surrounded, once more, with lavish plantings of shrubs and colourful bedding-out.

St Mary's Church, of 12<sup>th</sup> century origin, has always had a strong connection with the Park, and improvements were made here, too. Some of the walls and railings around the Church have been restored, and a new gate now provides direct access from the Park to the churchyard, with its numerous and fascinating monuments, which include the grave of James Watt.

Best of all, the Park already attracts hundreds of new visitors. At the beginning of 2006, an elderly lady who lives near the Park and who had not entered it for more than a decade, expressed her delight.

*'This Park is beautiful.  
It's better than I have ever seen it.  
It gives me pleasure just to come in.'*



# HANDSWORTH PARK



- 1 Handsworth Leisure Centre, public toilets
- 2 Car Park
- 3 Play Centre
- 4 Play Area
- 5 Multi Use Games Area
- 6 Sons of Rest Pavilion, Ranger Service & classroom
- 7 Broad Walk
- 8 Park Depot
- 9 Civic Society Garden
- 10 Bandstand
- 11 Cricket Pavilion
- 12 Events Arena
- 13 Football Pitches
- 14 Boat House, public toilets
- 15 St Mary's Church & Churchyard
- 16 Lake-side Garden & Austin Lines Fountain Canopy
- 17 Park Lodge





Simon Gaddaley, of the Handsworth Park Association, and Jacqui Ellis, the Park's Community Development Officer, enjoying the Park.

The regeneration of Handsworth Park has been achieved as a result of the unstinting efforts of the Handsworth Park Association and other local residents, Councillors, past and present, from Lozells and East Handsworth Ward, Handsworth Wood Ward, and Soho Ward, working closely with one another and City Council Officers, most notably the Parks, Sports and Events Service who have led on the project throughout.

Postal Address:  
Handsworth Leisure Centre, Holly Road,  
Handsworth, Birmingham, B20 2BY.  
Tel: 0121 464 0305  
Email: [Handsworth.Park@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:Handsworth.Park@birmingham.gov.uk)

