

History of Faringdon Road Park

Introduction

Brunel's Great Western Railway (GWR) arrived in Swindon in 1840 and the first phase of the new works was officially opened on 2nd January 1843 employing some 423, by 1848 the figure had risen to 1,800. The Company provided accommodation with some 300 cottages in the adjacent Railway Village built by 1842. St. Marks Church opened in 1845.

In 1844, land to the west of the new Railway Village, between Faringdon Road and the church was purchased by the GWR from Lt. Col. Vilett, a local landowner, for use as a cricket ground hence it was originally known as the cricket field. A pavilion was built on the north side of the site and the New Swindon cricket team played there from 1847.

Cricket

Cricket was a popular sport amongst the railwaymen and in addition to intershop matches, the New Swindon side played matches against other local towns and villages. There was a fierce rivalry with the Swindon Cricket Club based at the Okus Fields in The Sands, Old Town. Cricket was very popular and the standard of play between the two clubs was high. In 1870, the great Dr.W.G.Grace playing for Bedminster against the New Swindon side was dismissed for 0 in both innings.

In addition to cricket, the GWR Park (also known over the years as The Plantation and Victoria Park) played a big part in the social life of the Railway Villagers and occupies a special place in the history of Swindon. It was a natural leisure place for the people of the Railway Village and the surrounding area for both young and old. The Park was a place for local people to meet and pass the time, for children to play, to have a picnic or just to sit in the sun and watch a game of cricket or to enjoy the ornamental gardens.

Landscaping

The landscaping of the cricket field took place in 1871-2 when the entrance lodge was built and formal gardens were laid out on the eastern side of the park. A footpath surrounded the cricket field with some 20 seats located at regular intervals. Ornamental metal railings on top of a low brick wall surrounded the park with a number of entrance gates located at intervals around the boundary. The railings

were probably removed as part of the war effort during the 2nd World War and the tall brick pillars reduced to a safe height. The wall, pillars and the ornamental gates still remain today.

All the formal and ornamental gardens were concentrated around the eastern side of the park near the main entrance from Church Place. To the left of the entrance were the park keeper's lodge and several ornamental glasshouses and frames. On either side of the entrance were formally laid out borders of herbaceous plants and annual bedding as well as a couple of fountains and numerous ornamental urns. A small team of gardeners would have been kept busy tending the ornamental gardens to a high quality. For a while, a small bandstand stood in the park and an ornamental drinking fountain with metal drinking cups on chains attached to railings was located near to the Lodge.

Children's Fete

A children's fete was a very popular event organised by the Mechanics Institute and held annually in the park in the afternoon of the Saturday following August Bank Holiday between 1868 & 1939 except during the Great War. Every child under the age of 14 was admitted free and given a slab of fruitcake and a cup of tea as well as one free ride on the roundabouts. At the fete there were roundabouts, swing boats, coconut shies and a wide variety of sideshows. The fete would always conclude with a great fireworks display.

In 1904, 38,000 people attended the annual fete with some 3.5 tons of cake and 1,200 gallons of tea being distributed amongst the crowd. Cutting up the cake was such a tremendous task that Mr. Harvey, a foreman in the works, designed a slicing machine to speed up the process.

TA Centre

In 1871, an 8,000 sq.ft. drill hall was built for the 190 men of the 11th (Wilts) New Swindon Rifle Corps in The Park cricket field, this is the site where the TA Centre now stands.

Park House

Adjacent to the park in Church Place is Park House. Built in 1876, this elegant 3 storey brick house with stone dressings and a substantial porch was rented by the GWR Medical Fund Society in 1908 as a home for some of its medical staff and it later became the Company's medical headquarters.

Swindon Corporation

The Park, which was under the control of the Mechanics Institute Park Improvement Committee, was never exclusively for employees of the GWR. In 1925, The Park was made over to Swindon Corporation for use as a public park in exchange for some land to build a further carriage workshop on the north side of the town.

Unfortunately, the formal, ornamental gardens have long since disappeared from The Park and the cricket pavilion, bandstand, drinking fountain, lodge and glasshouses no longer exist. The lodge and glasshouses were demolished and replaced with a block of municipal garages for the residents of the adjacent Railway Village.