The Genesis of the Green Infrastructure: the international diffusion of new concepts and design principles for public parks, 1840-1900.

An international symposium, Tuesday 26th May 2020, at the historic Birkenhead Town Hall, Hamilton Square

When Frederick Law Olmsted first visited Birkenhead Park on the 27th of May 1850, few people could have predicted the enormous impact it would have on the development of public parks in the USA. Birkenhead Park had only been opened three years earlier and was heralded by Olmsted as a ‘Democratic Institution’ where for the first time ‘the privileges of the garden’ could be ‘enjoyed about equally by all classes’. In many ways his design for Central Park, New York (1858) was ‘a facsimile of Birkenhead Park’ and similar design principles were incorporated in Prospect Park, Brooklyn (1867) and Delaware Park (1870). But his visit to Birkenhead Park was not part of a plan: it was the result of a casual recommendation by a local baker.

In fact, little is known about how new concepts and design principles for public parks, now regarded as key heritage assets, were disseminated in the nineteenth century, or how the green infrastructure developed from a planning and aesthetic perspective. The symposium will therefore address the following issues.

1. What role did tours of gardens and parks play in diffusing new ideas?

2. How important was personal correspondence and professional networking among leading landscape gardeners?

3. What were the benefits of overseas employment in securing subsequent commissions?

4. Did European colonisation lead necessarily to the adoption of ‘national’ park designs?

5. How significant was the rapid growth in commercial publishing on landscape gardening in influencing developments in the design of public parks?

6. To what extent, did visitors to public parks fully understand the local context in which they had been created?

The international symposium is organised jointly by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and the Friends of Birkenhead Park. It will take place at Birkenhead Town Hall on Tuesday 26th May 2020. It will be followed by an official reception and a guided tour of Birkenhead Park. Hospitality during the day will be covered by the organisers. Depending on funding, limited support might be available towards the travel costs of doctoral students. The intention is to publish the proceedings, as was the case two years ago with a symposium on Edward Kemp. Wednesday 27th May 2020 will see a re-enactment of Olmsted’s first visit to Birkenhead, exactly 170 years since landing by ferry at Woodside. Everyone is invited to attend.

Proposals for papers (500 words) should be submitted no later than Sunday 1st March 2020 and should be accompanied by a one-page c.v. All applicants will be notified of the outcome within a week.

For further information, please contact Robert Lee, Chaddock Professor of Economic and Social History (Em.), Department of History, University of Liverpool (w.r.lee@liverpool.ac.uk).
A Day that changed Urban Life for ever

A Celebration and Re-enactment of Frederick Law Olmsted’s first visit to Birkenhead Park on 27th May 1850

Wednesday 27th May 2020

Olmsted became America’s foremost landscape architect. His visit to Birkenhead Park in 1850 left a life-changing impression on him. It determined his choice of career and was a source of inspiration, because of its lofty principles, exquisite design and technical details. It strengthened his belief in the importance of public parks and green infrastructure in town planning to create a harmonious life for everyone.

Birkenhead Park was designed by (Sir) Joseph Paxton. It was opened on the 5th April 1847, as part of a wider movement to mitigate the environmental and health problems generated by rapid urbanisation and the Industrial Revolution. It was the first park to be funded by a local authority (The Improvement Commissioners for Birkenhead)...

We will celebrate the 170th anniversary of Olmsted’s visit to Birkenhead Park in style, with the help of actors, volunteers and local schoolchildren, all of whom will be in historic costume. Olmsted will again cross the River Mersey by ferry and land at Woodside. He will progress to Hamilton Square (the finest Georgian square outside of London); meet a local baker who will suggest a visit to the newly opened park; and retrace his walk in Birkenhead Park. Unlike in 1850, his visit will end with a reception at the Visitor Centre.

We expect the event will be covered by national and local media (television and the press). It will be a momentous day celebrating a key turning point in the history of public parks and the role of green infrastructure in town planning.

Come and join us in this celebration and mark the start of events planned for 2022, the bicentenary of Olmsted’s birth.

Note: Text supplied by conference planners.