

ROATH PARK

Ref number	PGW (Gm) 24 (CDF)
OS Map	171
Grid ref	ST 185 795
Former county	South Glamorgan
Unitary authority	The City and County of Cardiff
Community council	Cyncoed, Plasnewydd

Designations Listed buildings: Footbridge over Roath Brook near conservatory Grade II; Footbridge over Roath Brook midway between conservatory and lake Grade II; Footbridge over Roath Brook south of the lake Grade II; Footbridge over Roath Brook, Pleasure Gardens Grade II
Conservation Areas: Roath Park lake and gardens; Roath Park

Site evaluation **Grade I**

Primary reasons for grading Roath Park was the first publicly owned public park in Cardiff and was ambitiously conceived to provide a wide range of recreational, sporting, and educational facilities for the residents of east Cardiff. It is a very fine, extensive late Victorian public park, laid out by William Harpur and planted by William Pettigrew, which remains intact, with much of its original framework, although layout and planting have been simplified and built structures replaced. The large lake is an unusual and outstanding feature. The park still contains all the typical elements of an urban public park of this period, and continues to serve most of its original recreational functions. The park also retains its setting of surrounding villa residences, which were built to take advantage of the pleasant setting that the park, and in particular its large lake afforded.

Type of site Urban public park

Main phases of construction 1887-1894

Site description

Roath Park is one of the largest and most important Victorian public parks in both Cardiff and Wales as a whole. It is a long, narrow park occupying 130 acres of the flat valley floor of the Roath Brook, which runs from north-west to south-east through north-eastern Cardiff. The park is bounded on all sides by roads, and is divided into four main sections. The largest area of the park is the lake section, which lies between Celyn Avenue in the north and Eastern Avenue (A48) in the south. This is an elongated north-south area, the greater part of which is taken up by a lake. To the south of Eastern Avenue the valley runs south-eastwards, and the park is divided into two further sections - the Pleasure Garden as far as Alder Road, with pleasure

gardens, tennis courts and bowling greens, and the Recreation Ground south-east of Alder Road which is taken up by a large recreation ground. At the north end of the park, detached from the rest, is an oval section, Llandennis Gardens, which was the last part to be made.

Roath Park came into being following twelve years of negotiations, between 1875 and 1887, by the City Corporation with various landowners in an attempt to acquire a public park for Roath. Finally, on 6 April 1887, the Roath Park Committee received a letter from Sir William Thomas Lewis, chief agent to the Bute Estate, suggesting a gift of 80 acres of what was then poorly drained, flood-prone land, on condition that Lord Tredegar and other owners also gave land (5 acres and 13 acres respectively) to make up the park, and that the Corporation be responsible for all roads, fences and other necessary works. The gifts were accepted, and the borough engineer, Mr Harpur, was instructed to make a plan. Construction began in 1889 at the south end (the Recreation Ground), and the framework was completed in 1893. A competition was held for the landscaping, with seven designs submitted, none of which was chosen. Instead a Head Gardener, Mr William Wallace Pettigrew, son of Andrew Pettigrew, was appointed on 31 July 1891. He is known to have obtained many plants for Roath Park from Kew Gardens.

The first recorded work on laying out the park is on 15 March 1892, when a hundred-yard long border was being made on the west side of the Pleasure Garden. At the end of 1892 Mr Harpur reported that a large number of trees and shrubs had been planted, including on four of the five islands at the north end of the lake, then known as the reservoir, and that work had started on the Botanic Garden. The Pleasure Garden was finished in April 1894, the walk around the lake was under construction, and parts of the Botanic Garden were finished. In May four bridges were being built, two in the Recreation Ground, two in the Botanic Garden, and a propagating house was being built at the south end of the Botanic Garden. Fifty pleasure boats were put on the lake, and on 21 May five park-keepers were appointed. The park was formally opened to the public by the Earl of Dumfries, son of the Marquess of Bute, on 20 June 1894. A *Gardeners' Chronicle* article of 7 July 1894 states that the work involved an 'unusual amount of work in road-making, draining, and levelling'. The total cost was in the order of £55,000. Despite some fears the park became popular very rapidly.

The wild garden area, at the north end of the lake, was originally intended as a second lake, and was developed slightly later. It was ceremonially opened on 27 May 1896. The uppermost section, originally called 'The Oval', then Llandennis Gardens in 1898, was laid out and planted in the winter 1897-98. It was decided not to open it to the public, and it was not opened until 1 May 1923, after the 1922 extension of the borough boundaries. The park did not acquire a bandstand until 1903. The park is notable as one of the earliest sites in Britain where baseball was played and is still in use for baseball tournaments.

The layout was dominated by the large lake, and was largely informal, with winding paths and much specimen tree and shrub planting, boat house, landing stage, a bathing platform, bandstand, botanic gardens, pleasure gardens, and recreation ground. Some of the detail has been lost, including the bandstand, an aquarium, the original propagating house and boat house and the rockery. The park contained a large fish hatchery, at the head of the lake, to provide a supply of trout for fishermen, but this has now gone. The western half of the botanic gardens has been planted with roses, and some of the formal bedding display areas have been grassed over. However, the park remains intact, with much of its internal layout, such as paths, and many of its

trees still in existence, and it retains something of the character of a late Victorian public park. It also retains its setting of surrounding Victorian and Edwardian villa residences which in their turn were built to take advantage of the pleasant setting that the park afforded. The park remains the focal point of the local community and continues to provide the opportunity for fresh air and recreation for which it was originally intended.

At the extreme north end of the park is a small detached part of the park, Llandennis Gardens. This is an oval unfenced area of grass and specimen trees ringed by Llandennis Road and housing. A gravel path runs diagonally across the middle, to the west of a small natural pool flanked by oaks. This is a spring-fed pool which was cleaned in the winter of 1897-98. A slightly narrower channel leads southwards from it to a stone-arched culvert at the south end of the gardens. Trees are mainly deciduous and include plane, ash, sweet chestnut, holly, evergreen oak, and a large cedar on a low mound towards the north end.

At the northern end of the main part of the park is a triangular area, bounded by roads but without railings, known as the Wild Garden. This area was left more or less untouched when the park was made, with only some winding paths, two bridges, trout hatchery ponds and underplanting of the native tree canopy being added. The canopy is of oak, pines and sycamores, with beech and evergreen oak on the west side and conifers at the northern end along the road. Beneath the trees is scrubby undergrowth. The Roath Brook winds through the area and is crossed by a concrete bridge on the site of one of the original rustic bridges. The other has gone. The main path is of gravel, the side paths unsurfaced. The Wild Garden is bounded on the south by a straight cross road at the head of the lake. This is flanked by copper beeches and by a row of pines at the western end of the south side.

To the south is the main area of the park, approximately three-quarters of which is taken up by a 29-acre lake. This occupies almost the full width of the park and is dammed at its southern end by a huge, straight, stone-revetted embankment. The lake has curving, stone-edged sides except on the south. At its northern end are five small islands planted mainly with mixed deciduous trees, including copper beeches, pines and rhododendrons. Pettigrew describes them as: 'five artistically constructed islands, destined to become the homes of the water fowl'. In 1895 groups of bamboos were planted by the water for them, and there are still numerous ducks and other waterfowl on the lake, which is also used for fishing and boating. An article of 15 April 1911 in the *Cardener's Chronicle* mentions the problem of otters and great crested grebes taking the trout reared for fishing. At the north end of the lake there are railings around the lake (the park was originally completely railed), tarmac paths, and a small plantation of horse chestnuts in the north-west corner. Along the west side the lake is flanked by a smooth grass slope, a wide tarmac path and informally planted mixed trees. Towards the south end of the lake the park is bounded by a bank, with several flights of steps up to the adjacent road. The lake has a wavy outline on this side, and four weeping willows are planted on alternate bulges. Towards the south end is a plantation of pines, a shrub bed on the boundary bank, and a row of limes behind the boathouse area.

The east side of the lake is similar, with a tarmac path along the lake, mown grass and specimen trees. A row of limes runs along the boundary towards the south end. Where the ground widens trees include willow, evergreen oak, oak, lime, weeping lime and pine. Towards the north end there are also poplars.

At the south-west end of the lake is an area surrounded by modern iron railings that contains a tarmac stone-edged landing stage and boat houses. The buildings are modern, but replace earlier structures. Jutting out from the landing stage is a boathouse for the launch *Roath's Pride*. This has cast iron piers on a concrete base, with a red tiled roof. Behind it is a long, single-storey red brick boathouse, with a similar roof and with a verandah supported by cast iron pillars along the south and east sides. Rowing boats for use on the lake are stored here, and there is a ticket office at the south end. To the south is a raised viewing platform on cast iron pillars, with boats under it and steps up at each end. Next to it is a modern, octagonal restaurant, with two concrete terraces to the south. The main entrance to the park lies to the west, with modern piers and iron gates and two modern kiosks inside it. At the east end of the dam is a similar entrance.

At the southern end of the lake, next to the dam, is the Scott Memorial, a tall, tapering clock tower lighthouse, erected in 1910 to commemorate the departure of Captain Scott's 'Terra Nova' from Cardiff on its voyage to the Antarctic. It is a white-painted cylindrical structure topped by a square clock tower and small balcony, and with a weather vane on top. The top of the dam is taken up by a wide tarmac walk bounded by iron railings, with seats at intervals. At the west end water runs over a stepped weir into a sunken, stone-revetted, stepped channel sloping down to the foot of the dam. On the south side of the walk, towards the west end, is a semi-circular area of formal flowerbeds planted with bedding plants, surrounded by a *Lonicera nitida* hedge. The *Gardeners' Chronicle* article of 15 April 1911 has a photograph showing the bank of the dam laid out with a formal bedding display.

The area below the lake is the former Botanic Gardens. These are formally laid out on the west side, and informal flanking the winding Roath Brook in the centre and on the east. In 1923 the area of the Botanic Gardens was said to be 15 acres, and the list of plants within it took up 43 pages of the guide to the park. The more steeply sloping ground at the northern end of the east side was originally laid out with an extensive rockery, but this has now been smoothed and grassed over and planted with trees and shrubs. Paths lead down into the area at the east and west ends of the dam. Immediately below the dam is a level lawn with a large oak tree on its west side, and to the west a children's playground. Parchmarks on the west side of the lawn show the position of the former bandstand. The area to the south is laid out with winding tarmac paths, lawn, and informally planted trees and shrubs. In the north-east corner the ground slopes southwards, with a triangular area between two diverging paths planted with pines. The paths continue through banks of shrubs until a cross path is reached. Here, to the west are two lawns, one on either side of the cross path. These are planted with Japanese acers. Beyond, oaks, a large cedar and a belt of shrubs are planted along the road. To the east, the cross path leads to a wide, flat bridge across the stream, with a small pool above it. The bridge has concrete parapets and balustrading. Below it the stream is canalised and straight, flanked by limes, horse chestnuts and a catalpa. On either side are former, now disused paths. This section of the stream ends with a weir of large blocks of stone, some now tumbled, just above a gently curving concrete bridge with criss-cross iron railings, standing on brick supports. This carries another cross-path over the stream. Below the bridge the stream narrows, and winds between coursed stone revetment walls.

The formal part of the former Botanic Gardens occupies a roughly rectangular area along the west side of the park. This was originally an educational area, sometimes known as the Students' Garden, with formal beds planted with many

different kinds of shrubs, herbaceous plants, medicinal plants and alpiners. The area is laid out as a formal rose garden, with formal beds arranged around three circular beds aligned north-south on the central axis. The beds are set in lawn, and the area is surrounded by trees and shrubs. Six of the beds are for National Rose Society trials; the remainder are planted with 55 modern roses, with 16 climbers on supports around the perimeter. The area is bounded on the east by a straight gravel path, off which is a small lawn with a central oval bed and bordered by a flagstone path and seats.

The stream runs through an area of shrubs and trees, with a narrow winding flagstone path to its west. At its south end this joins a gravel path which continues to the south to a lawn dotted with specimen trees, including a large tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). At the south-west end is a lawn planted with cherry trees, with a large modern glasshouse, built in the late 1970s, on its east side. This stands on the site of two former glasshouses, one large, one small. The lawn is bounded on the south by a gravel path and a belt of trees and shrubs, beyond which is a screened off maintenance area which formerly contained glasshouses. On the east side of the stream a wide tarmac path winds at the foot of a steep bank up to the park boundary through an area of specimen trees, including three large pines.

The third section of the park, the Pleasure Garden, is a roughly rectangular area between Fairoak Road in the north-west and Alder Road in the south-west. The Roath Brook winds through this area, entering it in the north-east corner. Its sides are revetted with coursed stone similar to that in the park to the north. The area has traditionally been called pleasure gardens, and was described in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* article of 3 March 1923 as being 'full of the quiet beauty which lawns and flowers provide, with a wealth of trees and shrubs ...'. It is enclosed by iron railings, with a row of limes along the south boundary. Curving paths run through the park on both sides of the stream, in places with stone revetment walling. Flanking the path along the south side is a bank of shrubs, including large hebes. Next to this is a bowling green with large deciduous trees to its west, and hard tennis courts and another bowling green to its north, on the north-east side of the park. To the west of the second bowling green is a lawn with rose beds set in it. Most of the remainder of this section of the park is laid out with informal specimen tree and shrub planting in mown grass. Trees in this area include various oaks, plane, birch, beech, copper beech, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, and a large tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) next to the path to the east of the stream. The main path crosses the stream over a single-arch, concrete bridge with concrete 'pergolas' at either end and concrete railing parapets, the ends decorated with panels of Celtic design.

At the north end is an area of deciduous trees, including copper beech, with a tennis court on the west side. On the west the park is bounded by a bank leading up Ninian Road, the bank planted with trees, including pines and a row of magnolias. Below this bank is a level, slightly sunken lawn with three sinuous island beds planted with a brightly coloured bedding display. The central one also has some low-growing shrubs. The *Gardeners' Chronicle* article of 1923 mentions four beds here, planted at that time with *Geum* Mrs Bradshaw. A path on a raised embankment on the west side of the stream winds through mixed trees, including oak, beech, plane, evergreen oak, willow, cut-leaf beech, birch, weeping lime, another tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) west of the southern bowling green, and a wellingtonia at the south end. The site of a former pond at the south end is now grassed over.

The fourth section is the 23-acre Recreation Ground to the south-east of Alder Road. This was the first part of the park to be completed, and required much drainage

and levelling work, and the diversion of the brook. It was originally used for a wide range of sports including cricket, football, lawn tennis and croquet. On 23 February 1894 a tour of inspection by the Parks Committee noted that: 'a fine gravel track is being laid down which should delight the heart of a cyclist when completed'. It was said to be similar to the one in Sophia Gardens, but double the length.

The whole of this large rectangular area is open mown grass, tree fringed on the north-west and north-east, and with the canalised stream running along the north-east side. The stream originally ran through the middle of the area and had to be diverted, and the land levelled, to make the playing fields. A tarmac path runs next to it, and another path runs along the south-west side, with a row of copper beeches next to it. There are no railings. In the north corner the path passes over the stream on a flat concrete bridge with iron balustrading.

Sources

Primary

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Secondary

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