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OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST IN WALES

REGISTER ENTRY

NEATH, VICTORIA GARDENS

Ref number	PGW (Gm) 64 (NEP)
OS Map	170
Grid ref	SS 754 974
Former county	West Glamorgan
Unitary authority	Neath Port Talbot
Community council	Neath
Designations	Listed buildings: Bandstand Grade II; Pedestal and bronze statue of Howell Gwyn Grade II Conservation Area: Victoria Gardens
Site Evaluation	Grade II
Primary reasons for grading	A small, well preserved and popular Victorian urban public park, with most of its original layout and features, including a fine bandstand and inclined beds used to display carpet bedding designs.
Type of site	Urban public park
Main Phases of Construction	1897, 1898

Site description

Victoria Gardens is a small, well preserved urban public park in the centre of Neath. It lies on level ground, occupying a rectangular block bounded by St David's Street on the north, Victoria Gardens on the south and east and London Road on the west. The park was laid out by a local builder, Thomas John Snow, in 1897 on the Corporation Field. The land was known as Mera Field in the mid nineteenth century, when it was owned by the occupier of Gnoll House, Henry John Grant. In 1856 the Neath Borough Council bought the field to provide open space for the growing town. It then became 'Corporation Field' and the annual Neath September Fair was held on it. Houses in the north-east corner, Park Row, had to be demolished to make way for a park, and in 1895 they were bought from Evan Evans Bevan. The entrance gates and flanking marble piers near St David's church were ceremonially opened on Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, 22 June 1897. The piers were of Italian marble and were donated by Thomas Snow. At first the park was known as the Neath Recreation Ground but it was officially reopened on 30 June 1898 as Victoria Gardens.

The 1913-14 Ordnance Survey map shows the park laid out with a central bandstand, a circular path around it, straight cross paths and curving perimeter paths, with a belt of mixed planting between them and the boundaries. Much of this layout has been retained. In the 1930s bus stops and shelters were built on the south side of the park, thus reducing it slightly in size.

The park is surrounded by a low stone wall and privet hedge on all but the south side. Originally the wall was topped by iron railings but these were removed during the Second World War. Three of the original entrances, in the north-west, north-east and south-west corners, survive. That in the south-east corner has been closed and a new one made on the south side. The main entrance is in the south-west corner. This is the entrance opened in 1897. It is grander than the others, with tall marble piers topped by large ball finials and heavy iron gates. The entrances at the north end have simple iron posts and gates flanked by curving iron railings in the north-west corner and by a prunus hedge in the north-east.

The interior is laid out with wide tarmac paths, lawns, island beds and specimen trees, including large sycamores and oaks. There is a wide perimeter border of mixed trees and shrubs. This is the original layout except on the south side, where the curving path has been replaced by a straight one, most of the planting along the boundary has gone, and buildings have been added. In the middle of the north side are some small maintenance buildings hidden behind a privet hedge. Near here a First World War tank was displayed until removed for scrap in the Second World War.

The park is divided into quadrants by the paths. The north-west quadrant is planted with specimen trees, the main ones being evergreen oak, oak, plane, two pollarded horse chestnuts and a tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). The lawn in the north-east quadrant has a gorsedd circle of upright stone slabs with a central, flat-topped, stone 'altar', with stone slab steps on either side. This was added to the park in 1918, when the National Eisteddfodd was held in Neath. It was used again for eisteddfods in 1934 and 1994. Around the circle rose beds are cut in the lawn. Planting includes a *Cedrus atlantica glauca* next to the north-east entrance, a lime tree, yuccas and standard osmanthus bushes with clipped, dome-shaped heads. The south-east quadrant is planted with a Lombardy poplar, copper beech and cypresses. In the corner is a children's playground. The path in the south-east corner is flanked by variegated hollies. The entrance, originally in the corner, has been moved to the south side, next to a wooden bus shelter, with a large plane tree to the west. Nearby is a granite drinking fountain standing on a square stone plinth. The fountain stands on a rectangular segmented column, under a canopy with four arched openings and a pyramidal top with iron finial. An inscription on the fountain reads: 'Drinking Fountain. This memorial was erected by Mrs Rowland of this town, wife of John Rowland, Banker 1863'. The fountain is said to have stood originally in the old livestock market, now the Parade.

There is a patchy prunus hedge along the south side of the park, with golden privet towards the west end. In the centre of the south side is a modern toilet block. This replaced earlier underground toilets on the same site, which in turn replaced toilets originally sited at the north end of the park. On either side of the toilet block are two wooden shelters dating to the 1930s, with glazed upper halves and pitched, hipped roofs. These act as bus shelters on the outside and also give access to the park. The original undulating path and mixed perimeter border on the south side have gone, the path being replaced by a straight one. The path leading from it is flanked by low box hedges, with a rose bed to the east. Just north of the entrance, between the path

and the perimeter border, is a large statue of Howel Gwyn (1806-88). This is a life-sized bronze statue on a rectangular granite plinth. It was moved to its present position from outside Gwyn Hall in the 1960s.

The south-west quadrant of the park contains four inclined beds set in the lawn. Each one has a different pattern of carpet bedding on the top, the remainder being grassed. The beds face outwards towards the perimeter path. These are a notable feature of the park and a rare survival. The quadrant also has rose beds and a weeping ash. Two circles of darker grass in the lawn indicate the positions of former beds. That to the north has a concrete platform with a square socket in it but it is not known what this once contained.

The cross paths are flanked by pairs of Irish yews next to the circular path around the centre of the park. This encloses an area of grass and circular beds planted with highly coloured bedding plants. In the centre is a fine octagonal bandstand surrounded by a wide tarmac path. This has a stone base, with steps up to the platform on the west. Its ogee-shaped lead roof, topped by a decorative iron finial and weather vane, is supported on slender iron pillars with decorative ironwork supporting the roof at their tops and forming a frieze between them. Low iron railings bound the platform. A postcard dating to about 1900 shows the bandstand and its surroundings, which look very similar to today except that the present-day Irish yews had not been planted at that time.

Sources

Primary

Information sheets in Neath Public Library.

Postcard, *c.* 1900.