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‘A BEAUTIFUL BALANCE’? EDWARD KEMP  
AND GROSVENOR PARK, CHESTER

*Edward Kemp was still superintendent at Birkenhead Park, a post he had held since 1844, when he secured the commission to design a new public park for Chester in 1864. In those twenty years he had established himself as the successor to Humphry Repton, John Claudius Loudon and his mentor Joseph Paxton through the publication of three books, articles in the Gardeners’ Chronicle and numerous private commissions. In 1864, much was happening in Chester, including the recent completion of the new town hall and market, and Grosvenor Park was one of a number of civic improvements under the patronage of the 2nd Marquis of Westminster. Kemp worked with the architect John Douglas who designed the lodge, the walls and shelter. The work was completed in 1867 and marked by a grand opening in November of that year, which included a civic procession and a déjeuner in the park. This paper will provide a report on recent research and the light it sheds on Kemp’s practice as a landscape designer.*

In describing his approach to landscape design in *How to Lay Out a Small Garden* (1864), Edward Kemp wrote that there should be ‘a beautiful balance maintained, however subtle and disguised it may be, in the proportions of every garden, whatever be its style’.<sup>1</sup> This paper discusses how Kemp’s aesthetic classicism came up against a different set of demands when designing a public park. In 1864, when the commission for Grosvenor Park came his way, he had been superintendent of Birkenhead Park for twenty years, and a garden designer for not much less, but this was his first attempt at designing a public park. Moreover, the practice and principles built up in a successful career supervising an enormous public park such as Birkenhead, on the one hand, and designing a multitude of private gardens, on the other, did not entirely serve the purposes of this very different kind of space. The demands of the patron required significant compromise on the layout and decisions by the council over the by-laws led to the park being a hotly contested space over which arguments continued for many years.

By 1840, Chester’s economy was in decline, but the arrival of the railway and the transport connections it provided heralded a major revival that lasted for most of the second half of the nineteenth century. This economic revival was reflected in, and partly supported by, investment in the city’s civic infrastructure. Inspired by the opportunities the railway offered, the corporation put through a series of Chester Improvement Acts in the 1840s, which saw the construction of a range of civic buildings including a new station (1848), the new Overleigh Cemetery across the river (1848–50), a new market hall (1863, demolished in 1967) and the new town hall (1865–69).

The city was fortunate to have the patronage of the wealthy and influential Richard Grosvenor, 2nd Marquess of Westminster (1795–1869), of Eaton Hall, and later his son, William Grosvenor, 3rd Marquess, who became the 1st Duke of Westminster (1825–99).



Figure 1. 'The Groves, River Dee, Chester', shown in an early twentieth-century postcard.  
Courtesy: Parks Agency collection

The 2nd Marquess was Member of Parliament for Chester between 1818 and 1830, later for South Cheshire, and Lord Lieutenant from 1845 to 1867. The Westminster estate was a major landowner in the city and was closely involved in the redevelopment of the city's commercial centre. But despite all this investment in the civic realm, the corporation had not taken advantage of the Improvement Acts to follow the example of other cities in the North West and provide a public park. The city's population had increased between 1831 and 1871 from 25,079 to 39,757, and during this time Chester's public open space provision remained limited to the racecourse or Roodee, and the riverside promenade in the Groves by the River Dee (Figure 1; see also Figure 3).

By the 1850s, the area south-east of the city walls, on the high ground above the river, was beginning to interest developers. A number of buildings had been erected along the riverbank, and the Queen's Park Suspension Bridge had been built in 1852 to open up the developing Queens Park suburb on the south side of the river. It was an attractive area that had already featured in a number of picturesque views of Chester. John Wood's plan of Chester shows it in 1833 with one or two houses already constructed and parts of the rest being used as detached town gardens, no doubt on short-term leases (Figure 2). At an auction in 1850, ten lots of valuable residences and lands on the future site of the park were parcelled up for development and purchased. John McGahey's celebrated view of Chester from a balloon shows the western half of the site in 1855 (Figure 3).

At some point before 1864, the Marquess of Westminster decided to assemble the land required to make a new park to donate to the city. Between February 1864 and early 1865, the estate paid £13,264 for seven parcels of land, totalling just over six hectares, much of it bought from those speculators who had acquired them only in 1850.<sup>2</sup> The purchase included houses, which were demolished in order to open up the views to both the river and the church. The marquess's motive is unclear. It was not the common-enough purpose of seeking to raise land values for directly adjoining residential development, so it was more likely to do with generally improving the attractiveness of the city in which he had extensive interests. At the opening of the park, the marquess's son expressed the

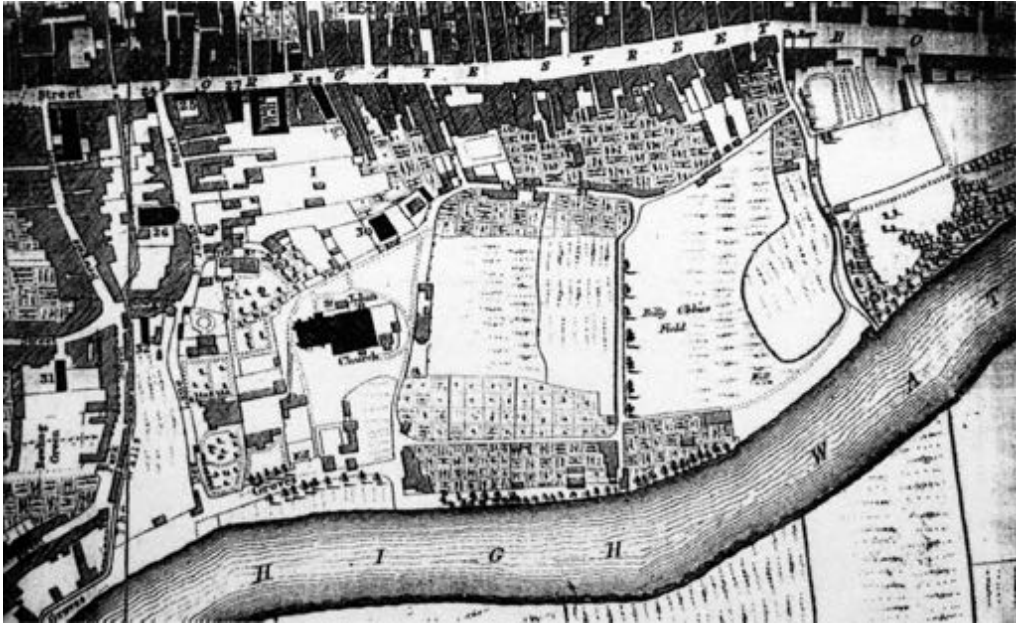


Figure 2. *Plan of the City of Chester, made by John Wood, 1833*, detail showing the future Grosvenor Park area (retrieved from: <https://www.chesterwalls.info/gallery/oldmaps/woodmap.html>)



Figure 3. John McGahey, aerial view of Chester from the east (1855). Colour lithograph. The Groves and Queen's Park Suspension Bridge are at bottom left; the racecourse is the oval area at centre top (retrieved from: <https://www.chesterwalls.info/gallery/oldmaps/mcgahey.html>)

pious hope that the park 'Being within the very heart of the city and close to the doors of the very poorest of the population, [...] will afford to them the opportunity of enjoying fresh air and sunshine', although subsequent decisions on the use of the park undermined the effectiveness of this charitable intention and possibly also indicated its limitations.<sup>3</sup>

It is also not clear how Kemp came to be approached for the job. By 1864, he had been superintendent at Birkenhead for twenty years, although from 1849 this had



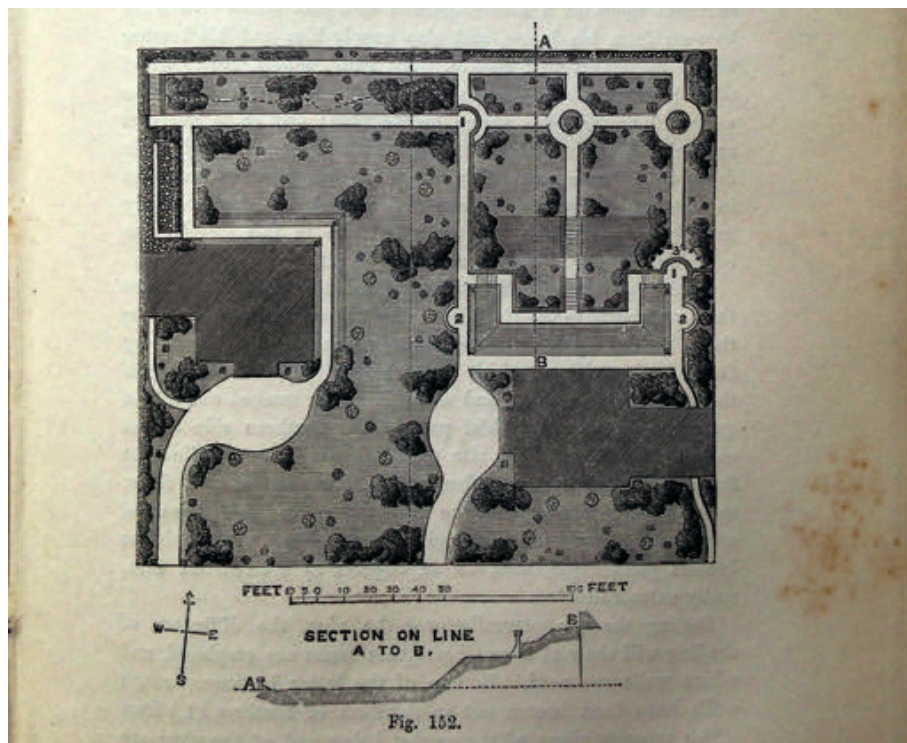


Figure 4. Edward Kemp, scaled designs for the villas Redcliff and Limegrove in Queen's Park, Chester; from Edward Kemp, *How to Lay Out a Garden*, 3rd edn (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1864), fig. 152

been an honorary post of 'Consulting Superintendent' without a salary, and he had established himself as a consultant garden designer and writer. He had written articles in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* about James Bateman's pioneering garden at Biddulph Grange, Staffordshire, had published three books, one of which, *How to Lay Out a Garden*, was published in its third edition that year, and had also completed many private commissions, including designs for the grounds of two adjoining villas, Redcliff and Limegrove, for the Chester industrialists Thomas and Robert Frost, in the Queen's Park development on the other side of the Dee from Grosvenor Park in 1853 (Figure 4). Barbara Moth suggests that the introductions may have been provided by the prominent nurserymen Francis and Arthur Dickson & Sons, based at Newton and Upton near Chester, whom Kemp may have known through his work on the planting of Birkenhead Park. Francis Dickson (1793–1866) had been a friend of John Claudius Loudon who often consulted him when writing his many books and he was a corresponding member of the Royal Horticultural Society. In addition, he was an alderman of the city and later sheriff; the firm advertised itself as 'Seedsman to the Queen' and the marquess later chose it as sole supplier to the new park.<sup>4</sup>

Kemp's first visit to the site was in January 1864, before any land had been purchased. Quite on what terms this was is uncertain, but it is possible he may have been asked his views on the suitability of the site. He would also have known it from his work in Queen's Park ten years previously. If he were asked his opinion, it may have been along the lines of what he wrote in the third edition of *How to Lay Out a Garden*:

It is far from being desirable that only the features of Nature should be seen from a place. The better parts of detached neighbouring houses, good public buildings, places of

worship, &c., will, if nicely brought into view, give an air and sociality to a district [...] glimpses of a navigable river, in the immediate vicinity of a large town, may, from the variety and motion of the craft employed upon it, give animation and beauty to a scene.<sup>5</sup>

Kemp's comments in *The Parks, Gardens etc. of London and its Suburbs* (1851) reflect his keen eye for the picturesque potential of urban settings. Of St James's Park, he remarked:

The principal circumstance worthy of notice in this park is the glimpses or views which are obtained, in walking about it, of so many noble or striking architectural objects, to which the old elm trees form such varied and excellent foregrounds, supports, or frames. In no other place that we have seen, are so many striking combinations of this kind produced. [...] Even inferior houses, [...] or such as have no great architectural pretensions, acquire a character, and make pleasing parts of a picture, when they appear half shrouded with venerable trees.<sup>6</sup>

The site at Chester had the advantage of the adjoining St John's church tower and its priory ruins to provide a focal point in long views. (Unfortunately, the tower collapsed in 1881: although rebuilt, it was 'a mere stump' and no longer served as the great vertical accent in Kemp's design.)

Not only was this valuable development land but also it had significant advantages in landscape terms. Apart from its proximity to those picturesque ruins, it commanded views of the Dee and the wider landscape beyond, described by *The Chester Observer* at the opening as 'a magnificent view of the castellated ruins of Beeston Castle, the Ridley and Peckforton Hills, and the charming landscape of the meadows throughout which the Dee winds its course for a long distance'.<sup>7</sup> In *The Parks, Gardens etc. of London and its Suburbs*, Kemp had had the temerity to criticize the classic view of the Thames from Richmond Hill, saying:

the prospect from Richmond Hill, or that part of it where the terrace walk has been formed, opposite the Roebuck Inn, has never appeared satisfactory to us. [...] To render the view of such a river good, a considerable length of it should be seen, or several of its windings.<sup>8</sup>

At Chester, the view from the proposed park would capture just such a considerable length of river prospect.

Within days, Kemp seems to have been verbally commissioned at least to prepare a plan for the park for the sum of ten guineas. This he had done by April, when he was asked to quote for supervising the laying out, proposing a charge of three guineas a day for drawings and site visits, along with the services of a clerk of works at thirty shillings a week, for which post he recommended Robert Reid, with whom he had worked at Birkenhead. His fee was grumbled over by Lord Weston, acting as agent for the marquess, who remarked that 'a Mr Barron' had laid out the grounds at Elvaston Castle for only two guineas a day.<sup>9</sup> Reid was subsequently appointed as the park's first keeper in October 1867.

The estate appointed the Chester-based architect John Douglas to build the lodge (Figure 5), boundary walls and gate piers, retaining walls, the pumphouse known as Billy Hobby's Well and a shelter, which, as described below, was eventually omitted. A local building contractor was used along with a local foundry for the railings and gates, except for the more ornate entrance gates and the railings to St John's churchyard, which were made by the Birmingham-based John Hardman & Co. Douglas (1830–1911) was a relatively young man at the time and the commission for the new park was an important milestone for him. This was the beginning of a prestigious relationship with



Figure 5. The entrance lodge to Grosvenor Park, designed by John Douglas and built 1864–66. It was recently refurbished as part of the Heritage Lottery Fund restoration project. Photo: Parks Agency, 2014

the Grosvenor estate and over a long career he became a leading figure in the city's Victorian renaissance. His oeuvre included a wonderful design for a triumphal arch for the 3rd Marquess in honour of the Prince of Wales's visit in 1869, which came to nothing; Grosvenor Park Road (1872), built on his own land; the Grosvenor Club (1881); the public baths opposite the park lodge in Union Street (1898); and the famous Eastgate Clock (1899), as well as many commercial buildings in the black-and-white vernacular revival style.

Work began in 1864 with the levelling and removal of buildings, including the closure of the lane across the site and the demolition of the substantial Dee Bank House, which blocked the view of St John's church. Unfortunately for Kemp's design, the park had to accommodate a grandiose statue of the marquess, and Kemp rather nervously tried to argue with Lord Weston about its siting, but to no avail. The statue was an initiative of the mayor who had first proposed a public subscription and a site in the town centre in 1865. There had been little public support until the opening of the park, after which donations accrued and Thomas Thornycroft was commissioned to carve the giant figure, said to have been the largest marble statue in the country at the time; it was unveiled in 1869 (Figure 6).<sup>10</sup>

Kemp's design (Figure 7) had included a wonderful piece of landscape theatre: the formal walk from the entrance towards a large octagonal shelter which would be entered from the rear and from which the great burst of prospect over the river would burst open. But the location for the statue made it impossible to build the belvedere or shelter in the location planned. It was a question of priorities and Lord Weston was adamant: 'the proposed circular building in the edge of the Bank is to remain as a uncovered seat, so as





Figure 6. Thomas Thornycroft, statue of the 2nd Marquess of Westminster, erected 1868, commemorating the marquess as 'The Generous Landlord, The Friend of the Distressed, The Helper of All Good Works, the Benefactor of this City'. Photo: Parks Agency, 2008



Figure 7. Edward Kemp, scaled design for Chester Park (undated). Courtesy: Cheshire Archives and Local Studies, ZDPA/1



Figure 8. 'The Grosvenor Park, Chester'. Engraving; from *The Cheshire Observer* (9 November 1867)

not to interfere with the view of the statue'.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the location blocked both of Kemp's two key axes as the long axis would also be interrupted short of its terminal point to the east of the statue.

The plan, impressive though it is, appears to be a draft, a working version rather than a final version – it is not signed or dated, the planting list is not complete and there are pencilled annotations such as outlines of paths. It also shows Kemp's planned belvedere or shelter, and pencils in the location of the statue. The blank on Union Street running along the north boundary represents seven plots which the estate did not acquire.

There is also a group of trees crossed out on the site of the lake, and Moth has suggested that an item in Kemp's invoice of 22 June 1866 for 'making altered plan of part of the park £3 3s' may refer to the inclusion of the lake in the drawing.<sup>12</sup> The Grosvenor Park Account Book refers to payments being made to Timothy Connor, 'on account of excavating the Lake', in July and August 1866.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting – given how central water is at Birkenhead – that Kemp did not originally envisage a lake for the park, but the site here was far smaller, and, in addition, was elevated above the river. Kemp may well have thought that a lake could only appear to disadvantage in contrast with the river and may even have risked appearing unnatural in its elevated situation. That said, it seems to have been designed as part of his commission, and he clearly took care to locate and plant it to avoid that contrast (Figure 8).

Douglas's building works were implemented in a two-year programme, with planting taking place once they had ended, from autumn 1866 into early 1867. All plants were provided by Dickson & Sons. Kemp's last visit was in November 1866 and the park was given its grand opening in November 1867. Kemp's plan, Dickson's plant schedule and invoice, and newspaper accounts give an unusually good level of information about the planting, which was a careful balance of evergreens to provide structure and exotic interest, deciduous natives and exotics, and flowering shrubs for scent and colour. Moth has categorized the components of the Grosvenor Park design as follows:

- boundary tree belts and shrubberies – defining the space, screening boundaries and providing shelter;
- amoebic island shrub beds often with outliers comprising specimen shrubs or small trees to enliven the space, provide foreground interest and to contain a variety of species;
- informal tree groups of single species or mixed groups of complementary species



- to direct attention and act as a focus;
- individual specimen trees and shrubs for emphasis and display; and
- planting along the (straight) walks, shrubs or small conifers to be maintained to a regular form, complementing the formal nature of the promenade.

These are all subjects covered in *How to Lay Out a Garden* and there are clear similarities between the practice for private gardens set out there and what Kemp designed at Grosvenor Park.

Therefore, for example, when planting a deep belt along the northern boundary to screen the plots omitted from the land purchase for the park, over the development of which the estate would have no control, Kemp followed his own advice:

Although it is necessary, to secure any degree of order and beauty for a few years, that the shape of irregular masses should be set out in a series of bold, and well-connected, and flowing curves, the actual outline of the plants, when they have reached some eight or ten years' growth, must never be supposed or arranged to take any such figure. On the contrary, each plant, (in the front at least) like the heads of old trees in a forest, should jut forward or retire with a curve of its own, forming an infinitely more numerous and varied series of little curves; these again uniting in their general outlines, to fill up and vary the series of larger sweeps at first marked on the ground.<sup>14</sup>

The plan also shows a number of irregular, amoeba-shaped beds, many with outlying trees or shrubs. This pattern was in line with his advice in *How to Lay Out a Garden* that:

single specimens on a lawn ought to be disposed with the greatest nicety and care. For the most part they should be attached to [...] groups by being put at some salient points, to carry out and soften off the swells in them. [...] By thus adding, in effect, to the bolder points, a much greater play of line will be produced.<sup>15</sup>

The use of single specimen trees or shrubs, whether evergreen or deciduous, was quite restrained in Kemp's design, one of the most noticeable contrasts with the present appearance of the park, which has seen ill-judged tree planting in many of the designed spaces. In Kemp's design they are all associated with shrub beds or are planted close to the paths. The design left the central area largely open and void of tree planting. This was no doubt an aesthetic decision on Kemp's part. In his book he wrote that a

striking interruption to that beautiful continuity [...] occurs when unnecessary divisions are introduced into a place [...] all kinds of separating lines, though varied and broken in the most artful manner, must be condemned, as a rule, unless where the place is tolerably large. [...] A garden will always look meagre without a good open lawn. One broad glade of grass should [...] stretch [...] with as little interruption from walks as possible.<sup>16</sup>

Later debates focused on the extent to which the open grassland was intended for recreational purposes. It seems likely that there was originally an intention to do so, a report by Reid referring to plans to rotate recreational access to the grass between three different areas of between one and two acres, and enclosing them with temporary hurdles, but this was not implemented.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Kemp was not displeased at the absence of fencing, even if it had been his own idea given his experience of its importance in regulating access for recreational purposes at Birkenhead Park. In any case, it was omitted, and this omission became a persistent source of contention as the years went by.

In terms of his choice of plants for urban situations, Kemp advised that:

Consistently with a good supply of flowering plants [...] a town garden cannot well have too many evergreens, for they produce liveliness and verdure at a season of the year, when, in towns, the most leaden dullness often reigns in the atmosphere.<sup>18</sup>

He recommended the following:

variegated evergreens, Laurustinus, Arbutus, Erica carnea, shrubs that bear red berries, and other flowering or gay-looking evergreens [...] the various kinds of Holly, the double blossomed Furze, several kinds of Broom, Garrya elliptica, Rhododendrons, Andromeda floribunda, Berberis aquifolium, Cotoneaster microphylla, numerous Heaths, Kalmias, rock and sun roses, Gum Cistus, the varieties of Alaternus, Junipers, Cypresses, Arbor-Vitae, Lavender, Sweet bay, Portugal Laurel, common Laurel, Daphnes, etc.

Most of these are to be found in the order placed with Dickson & Sons for Grosvenor Park.

The dominant structural feature of the park is the pair of axial paths. The Kemp plan does not specify the planting of the two paths, but the report by *The Chester Observer* corresponded with Dickson's plant list when it noted that the entrance avenue was 'planted with handsome specimens of Cupressus Lawsoniana, Thuja borealis, and Juniperus Chinensis, in alternate pairs. The plants named are of upright or conical habit' and were to be kept clipped.<sup>19</sup> The long avenue was:

planted with pyramidal specimens of Hodgins's broad-leaved holly (one of the handsomest and hardiest of the hollies), the rich dark green of which will form a fine contrast to and will throw out the statue in bold relief, whilst they can be pruned and kept in any desired form, so that from this point also the view may remain perfectly uninterrupted.<sup>20</sup>

The long avenue as originally planted would have been permeable to long views out over the flood plain. The young evergreens were especially at risk at Christmas that first year, so a nightwatchman was hired for the nights of 24 and 31 December to 'prevent the evergreens being stolen'.<sup>21</sup>

The trees in the entrance avenue largely failed and were replaced the following year with more of the Hodgins holly. Moth observed that it was only after the decision to place the statue at the intersection that the planting began to be referred to as an 'avenue'.<sup>22</sup> Kemp never envisaged it as such: the plants in the long walks are always referred to as shrubs in this period, and, despite their current appearance (Figure 9), they were clearly not intended to grow to full size but to be kept formally pruned at a low level. In the long avenue, Kemp's original plan introduced some variety with two formal circular pools, which were eventually (after the lake was added to the design) built as quatrefoil planting beds. It is unclear why the hollies were inter-planted later in the nineteenth century with the present limes, although it has been suggested that it may have been in the 1880s when the planting of lime avenues from Grosvenor Bridge into the city took place.

Note that soon after it opened, the park was criticized for its lack of flowerbeds: the editorial in *The Chester Chronicle* for 12 September 1868 asked:

Where are the flowers which ought to adorn this magnificent piece of property? They appear to have been totally forgotten. At present the Park is clothed with grass and shrubs, beautiful enough in themselves, but of the most sombre hue, nothing to relieve the universal green being visible except here and there for a few weeks when the rhododendrons are in bloom. Why not have a few beds, say of ordinary geraniums, lobelias, and calceolarias to attract the eye? They would cost little, and, with the present rigid keeping of the ground, we need have no fear that they would be plundered.



Figure 9. The Hodgins hollies, now grown to seven to eight meters in height, in Grosvenor Park. The inter-planting with lime was a later addition. Photo: Parks Agency, 2008

This was probably a little harsh given the care Kemp had taken in selecting flowering shrubs, but he had certainly expressed reservations about flowerbeds in *How to Lay Out a Garden* where he had written:

Another mode in which the effect of a garden may be marred by too much being aimed at, is in the formation of *numerous flower-beds*, or groups of mixed shrubs and flowers on the lawn. This is a very common great failing and one which greatly disfigures a place. [...] They interfere sadly with all ideas of breadth, harmony and repose.<sup>23</sup>

The demand for more colour may be the reason why by 1872 small formal beds had been introduced in the entrance avenue, interspersed with the clipped hollies (Figure 10). The arrangement may have been agreed by him, as the pattern is similar to one shown in *How to Lay Out a Garden*, or it may have been done by Reid on the instruction of his employers.

More seriously, the park when it opened contained no provision for children or for games or sport, indeed for any form of recreation other than promenading. Kemp's plan had included an area set aside for a gymnasium or children's playground, in the north-east of the park, as specifically required by the marquess and it is not clear how its furnishing with equipment came to be omitted. Press coverage seems to imply it was a matter of cost, but it may be that despite the pious hopes expressed at the opening, it was felt – like the recreational use of the grass – to be undesirable on social grounds. There may even have been a cynical recognition that if it were to be absent from the opening, campaigners would find it increasingly difficult to introduce it subsequently.

Chester Corporation in this period is characterized in the *Victoria County History* as unsystematic in its approach to public health policy and reluctant to get involved.





Figure 10. Town map of Chester: detail showing Grosvenor Park; from Ordnance Survey, Chester XXXVIII.11, 10 inches to 1 mile (1872). Courtesy: Cheshire Archives and Local Studies

It was parsimonious and cautious, ‘unwilling to commit itself to major new initiatives except when compelled by central government’.<sup>24</sup> Chester had lagged behind other north-western cities economically and had not developed a significant manufacturing base. On the contrary, it had retained its role as a base for local landed gentry during the winter season, with a social season including the May races and the assizes. Chester did have significant poverty and slum areas in central parishes such as St John’s, but the pressures that led other cities and towns in the region to develop urban parks were less acute in Chester and, by 1864, the powers for a corporation to buy land for public recreation (introduced in the local Improvement Act 1845) had lain unused for nearly twenty years.<sup>25</sup> The park might not have developed at all except for the Grosvenor family donating the site, paying for its construction and providing an endowment for its upkeep. The implication is that despite the pious sentiments expressed at the opening, the park was developed more as part of an aesthetic programme of urban improvement than as a social one to improve public health amongst the poor.

The need in principle to provide for a range of uses and users was well established by this time: the Joshua Major plans for Philips Park and Queens Park Manchester, for example, included from the start spaces for shuttlecock, skipping, quoits, swings and even archery. At Birkenhead, although there was no formal provision, cricket was permitted on the open lawns and children were allowed to play on the grass. Other parks had gymnasias, tennis lawns, bowling greens and boating lakes. Note that the absence of recreational provision at Grosvenor Park was similar to the People’s Park in Halifax, laid

out by Kemp's mentor Paxton, where the benefactor, the mill-owner Francis Crossley, expressly excluded provision for any games.

The response to the new park was initially one of fulsome gratitude to the marquess and admiration for the new park, but within months questions about the park's exact nature and purpose began to be voiced. From its opening, public access was restricted entirely to the gravel paths, which in Kemp's elegant layout largely circumscribed the level open space above the scarp which dropped down to the river. In February 1868, the council debated new draft by-laws which explicitly excluded a whole range of recreational activities, including, most controversially, walking on the grass. The debate centred on whether the 'keep off the grass law' was desirable and this in turn focused on what exactly the new park was, and who it was for.

The prohibition was defended by the proposer of the new laws, Alderman Major French, on the basis that:

there is no portion of a pleasure ground that can be more defaced than the grass if everyone is allowed to walk upon it. You will see placards in gentlemen's parks 'keep off the grass' and indiscriminate walking [...] would greatly disfigure it.<sup>26</sup>

However, Councillors Ayrton, Powell and Tasker argued that they 'could not see how the park was called a people's park when the people were excluded from going on the grass'. Councillor Butt supported Mr Ayrton adding that 'if the people were shut out from any portion of the park, the park would not be a people's park, but a penal park'. Alderman Humberston spoke of the number of people harmlessly enjoying themselves on the grass in St James's Park in London and argued that too many restrictions would keep people from the park, 'and none of [us] would like to see that'.<sup>27</sup>

Major French countered that the London parks were:

more like large fields than anything else. [...] It was all very well to talk of curtailing the rights of the people and all that sort of thing, but had they not in that park the most beautiful walks, and the most splendid views imaginable from it, of the Cheshire and Welsh hills? If they wished to retain the park in its beauty and integrity they must have some restrictions [...] they must bear in mind that they had a population of 30,000 people, and that 30,000 people would do the walks but little harm, whereas they would certainly injure the grass.<sup>28</sup>

Councillor Farish suggested that the new park was:

a mere pleasure ground, and not a park in the sense in which the word is applied to St James's and other large parks in London; it is a nice little place, whither invalids and others can retire to see the beauties of nature.<sup>29</sup>

The town clerk tried to find a middle way, saying that the by-law should be:

liberally construed – Persons who were orderly could apply to the park-keeper for permission to go on the grass, and he would be the judge as to how far the liberty should be extended. If the law was found to work badly they could rescind it.<sup>30</sup>

The debate was settled with a reference to

a gentleman sitting at the bottom of the table who understands this subject much better, as is his profession to lay out such grounds, and he knows what ought and what ought not to be done. With a beautiful small park and pleasure ground given to for the recreation of the people, I think it should be preserved as neat and orderly a manner as possible.<sup>31</sup>

It is tempting to think this was Kemp, although it may have been Reid: whichever, it seems that the professional gentleman also opposed opening up the grass for public access. Following this argument, an opinion piece in *The Chester Observer* in April 1868 remarked:

What a select place the New Park is. One would fancy it had been presented to the gentry of Chester and not to the people, for you scarcely ever see a working man put his foot in it. [...] I am told that people won't be allowed to the grass, without they obtain the license of the park keeper. If true this may account for the scanty number of people in the park, and I should recommend the Council to allow all parties alike the same privileges, because to allow one to walk on the grass and the other [only] on footpath looks like 'favouritism' and the noble giver I am sure never thought of that when he presented the park to the 'people' of Chester.<sup>32</sup>

The park was well maintained horticulturally, not least because the marquess had included a bequest of one hundred pounds per annum to pay for maintenance, which included the salary of the park keeper who was the experienced Reid. However, costs soon outstripped the endowment. More importantly, there is clearly a disjuncture between the idea of a 'people's park' and a private-garden aesthetic, with the social ramifications the latter implies.

In 1870, the sense that 'The Park was not at present so much a place of recreation as a fancy garden' crystallized in a further council debate on a motion seeking to enclose the central parts of the open lawn to create areas for games and children's play. It was argued that:

at present it was only a place for adults [and ...] it was very desirable that the children should have their places to play in. It was all very well for invalids, and people who had not the free use of their legs to walk up and down these walks, but children did not find pleasure in that sort of thing, and surely if the Park was to be the people's park, some provision ought to be made for the amusement of children.<sup>33</sup>

The motion was passed by the council and forwarded to the Corporate Estate Committee where it was promptly and firmly rejected. Pleas for a playground continued in the press as late as 1884, including a petition from the city magistrates in 1878, but to no avail, especially after new housing had been developed adjacent to the site in Grosvenor Park. The Estate Committee acknowledged that:

when they first got the Park they intended to erect a gymnasium on the spot now proposed, but since that time considerable property had been erected and if a gymnasium were now established it would be an eye-sore and a detriment to the property put up there.<sup>34</sup>

In the event, the gymnasium appears never to have been equipped, the area later becoming a works yard for the park.

In 1878, the question of access to the central lawn was answered in limited fashion when the Grosvenor Park Sub-Committee allowed Reid to spend eighteen pounds on 'walks across the large grassed space on the west side of the park', while authorization for further 'New Walks and completion of Walks for £75' was recorded in the committee minutes in 1889.<sup>35</sup> The c.1873 Ordnance Survey had shown the park laid out almost exactly as had been envisioned in Kemp's design (Figure 11), but by the time of the 1898 OS (Figure 12), the open lawn in the centre of the park had been significantly subdivided by new paths, which would probably have dismayed Kemp more than the installation of temporary hurdles. Even so, judging by the ongoing grumbles in the local papers, the by-law on keeping off the grass appears not to have been relaxed at least during the nineteenth century.



Kemp's experience at the much larger Birkenhead Park, where circuit routes encompassed large meadow areas, together with his work on small private gardens, had resulted in a design that soon prompted significant dissatisfaction in terms of its management. The decision not to equip the gymnasium was not his, nor was the decision



Figure 11. Grosvenor Park; detail from Ordnance Survey, Cheshire XXXVIII.11, 25 inches to 1 mile (surveyed c.1873, published c.1875)



Figure 12. Grosvenor Park; detail from Ordnance Survey, Cheshire XXXVIII.11, 25 inches to 1 mile (revised 1898, published 1899)

not to introduce temporary fencing to create access to the open lawn, but even so, his plan, which embodied his principles of 'beautiful balance', and 'breadth, harmony and repose', while uncontroversial in a private landscape was, perhaps unwittingly, a political act. While not alone in failing to anticipate the challenges of public access to a new public park, the council was more unusual in the persistence with which it rejected demands for adaptation and the realization of Kemp's original design. Accentuated by its relatively small size, Grosvenor Park illustrates the tension between garden design and mass public access, and in Victorian Chester we hear the hollowness of the rhetoric of 'people's parks' and see the betrayal of 'the poorest of the population' by the park's guardians.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As part of the recent Heritage Lottery-funded restoration, historical research was undertaken by Barbara Moth, who unearthed much new information in the Eaton archives on the construction of the park and its planting, including the famous Hodgins hollies, of which seventy-seven make up the striking avenues which are a major component of Kemp's design. The author is enormously grateful to Editor Barbara Simms for sharing her research so generously and for their conversations about Grosvenor Park. This paper would not have been written without her support.

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- <sup>7</sup> *The Chester Observer* (30 March 1867).
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- <sup>10</sup> Thornycroft (1815–85) was a leading sculptor of public monuments, including *Boadicea and Her Daughters* (designed 1856–63, erected 1902) at Westminster Pier, London.
- <sup>11</sup> Correspondence, 1864–67, Kemp writing from 35 Cannonbury Park, London; Eaton; Archives EP 59/15/1; cited in Moth, 'Grosvenor Park, Chester', p. 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Moth, 'Grosvenor Park, Chester', p. 9.
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- <sup>14</sup> Kemp, *How to Lay Out a Garden*, 3rd edn, p. 160.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30, 52.
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