

# Princes Park

## A visionary Victorian landscape



**Travel information**  
 Pedestrian entrances are located on Princes Road, Windermere Terrace, and Belvedere Road.  
 Bus Services:  
 Princes Park is served by the following bus routes: 26, 27, 60, 75E, 76A, 77, 80A, 83, 84, 681, 682.  
 Traveline 0871 200 2233  
 or at [www.merseytravel.gov.uk](http://www.merseytravel.gov.uk)

**Rail Services:**  
 The closest train station is Edge Hill.

**Credits**  
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 Telephone: 0151 233 3007 (Ranger Interpretation Service)  
 E-mail: [parks@liverpool.gov.uk](mailto:parks@liverpool.gov.uk)  
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**Related websites**  
[www.liverpool.gov.uk/leisure-parks-and-events](http://www.liverpool.gov.uk/leisure-parks-and-events)  
[www.projectdirtliverpool.com](http://www.projectdirtliverpool.com)  
[www.green-space.org.uk](http://www.green-space.org.uk)

## Princes Park

Opened to the public in 1842, but not fully completed until the mid-1850s, Princes Park represented a radical experiment in both the design and function of urban green space. Designed by the master of nineteenth-century landscape architecture, Joseph Paxton, it provided the blueprint for the myriad public parks that were to follow. Combining private gardens, public walks, a lake, boat house, and greensward, the original scheme had more in common with grand country-house estates than with urban garden squares. Having passed into public ownership in 1918, it constitutes an important and influential step in the democratisation of green space and the development of the City of Liverpool.



Fig 1 E. Rooker, *View of the Harbour of Liverpool*, 1770

## A City in Crisis

During the eighteenth century, Liverpool experienced one of the most rapid rates of population growth of any commercial centre. From approximately 6,000 residents in 1700, the population grew to exceed 80,000 by 1801. Atlantic trade routes fuelled the expansion of the docks and provided employment opportunities for those seeking employment. The result was a city of contrasts. Liverpool was united by civic pride and commercial purpose, but divided by chronic social and economic inequality. As the densely-populated city centre became infamous for damp cellar dwellings, crime, and disease, the wealthy began to retreat from the commercial heart of Liverpool. Their initial refuge was Mount Pleasant and the new town houses of Abercromby Square, and Falkner Square.

However, the pressures of the growing city slowly encroached upon this sanctuary. As the city expanded, Liverpool's residential streets spread south, towards St. James's Mount, Myrtle Street and Toxteth Park, bringing with them courses of domestic chimneys, smog and poverty. By 1833 the situation had become so dire as to lead the Select Committee on Public Works to conclude that St. James's Walk was, 'little frequented in consequence of its being surrounded by the town, and the trees being spoiled by the smoke'. New smart residential districts were demanded, along with equally impressive green spaces in which the city's commercial elite could escape the grime of the over-populated city.

At Princes Park, Paxton and his architectural assistants John Robertson and George Henry Stokes were quick to introduce Swiss-inspired elements. The boathouse was a two-storey structure. At the lower level was a functional boat store, with doors that opened directly onto the lake. Above that was a steep, overhanging chalet-style roof and series of pierced timber balconies. By way of enhancing the Alpine reference, rockworks and conifers were introduced to surrounding area, creating a romantic 'set piece' on the lakeside.

From the 1950s onwards, neglect resulted in the gradual silting up of the lake and what can be seen today is a considerably smaller body of water than that enjoyed by Victorian patrons. By 1972, the Chinese bridge had also been lost to a combination of neglect and vandalism, leaving a truncated pond with an inaccessible island. The boathouse fell afoul of vandals and arsonists in the latter decades of the twentieth century and today little remains. However, the surviving sandstone chimney stack and foundations give some hint as to the character and quality of this novel structure.



Fig 5 All that remains of the boathouse today are the stone footings and chimney stack. However, this reconstruction provides a valuable insight into the ornamental wooden structure that once stood on this site

## Grand Residences

Early plans for the site indicate the intention of erecting a number of substantial terraces around the periphery of the park. In fact, in 1844, a competition was held to design these imposing buildings. In the event, only the winning entry for 'Terrace D' was ever constructed. Princes Park Terrace was designed by Wyatt Papworth, the son of a well-regarded architect of garden features and, unsurprisingly, a friend of Joseph Paxton. Standing alone and never accompanied by its companion terraces, it came to dominate the landscape and its Doric entrance and ironwork balconies provide the focus for many views of the park. In 1912 work began to convert the large terraced houses into apartments as rich residents decamped from the area to even more exclusive developments. In the place of the other imposing terraces envisaged by Paxton came the more modest 'Cavendish Terrace' (now Cavendish Gardens) and a series of semi-detached villas that came to be known as 'Sunnyside'. Despite these modifications to Paxton's vision, the overall result met with wide approval, as J.A. Picton observed in 1875: 'Making the circuit of Prince's [sic] Park by Belvedere Road, Devonshire Road, and the pleasant glades of Sunny Side, overlooking the expanse of the Park, everything appears "coloeur de rose."'



Fig 6 Princes Park Terrace (now Princes Park Mansions), c. 1910

In line with the grand 'country house' character of the park and the aspirations of potential residents, Paxton originally intended to construct a number of entrances to the Park, each comprising a set of imposing gates and lodges. In the event, only

## A Brave Experiment

In 1842, the local industrialist and town councillor Richard Vaughan Yates approached the Corporation of Liverpool about the possibility of developing a residential park scheme on a site to the south of the city. Lacking the legal means to raise funds for the scheme, the Corporation declined involvement. However, Yates remained undeterred and proceeded with the development privately, promptly purchasing 90 acres of land from Lord Sefton for the sum of 50,325. Yates' scheme was to be a brave experiment in the provision of public and private green space.

The costs of creating and maintaining the park were to be borne by private speculators whose investment would be rewarded by the sale and lease of private residences built on the periphery of the site. Of the 90 acres purchased, 50 would be retained for the park, while 40 acres would be given over to building plots. Although a precedent for this kind of development had been set by Regent's Park in London (opened to the public in 1835), Princes Park was to be the first on this scale outside the capital. In the months following, notices appeared in the Liverpool Mercury offering 'an opportunity of aiding the founder of Princes Park in the accomplishment of his design' while advertisements were published assuring potential investors that 'Several of the principal Gentry of Liverpool have already purchased Villa lots, and many have expressed a wish to rent Houses'.



Fig 2 An early plan for Princes Park. The large lake with its two islands can be seen clearly

one truly impressive entrance was constructed, at the northern gate. Here were erected two lodge houses named South Lodge and Doric Lodge.



Fig 7 The North gates and Doric Lodge, c.1907



Fig 8 The restored North gates (detail)

## A New Social Arena



Fig 9 John Isaac, *Grand Fancy Fair in Princes Park*, 1849

Although the commercial nature of the scheme clearly dictated the social status of residents, Yates' aspirations for a public park for the working population of Liverpool did not go entirely unmet. The large open greensward proved popular among dayvisitors and the domestic servants who found employment in the grand new properties. Social commentators remarked upon the opportunity afforded by the new park for healthy and wholesome entertainment. In May 1844, before the park landscape was even

Key to the attraction for both residents and investors alike was the fact that they would have exclusive use of an elegant private garden situated within the wider park. Yet, despite the hype and excitement, the creation of this idyllic retreat was to be far from straightforward. The land purchased from Lord Sefton comprised a number of former agricultural fields and orchards with names such as 'Stubble Field', 'Further Brow', and 'Nearer Horse Hey'. The site contained a natural brook and small ponds, but it would require substantial work to transform it into an elegant and fashionable resort for polite society. Yates' ambitious scheme required an equally ambitious and innovative landscape architect; qualities he found in Joseph Paxton.

Paxton made his name and fame as Head Gardener of Chatsworth House, Derbyshire where he transformed the grounds with orchid houses, rock gardens and water features. Both prior to his involvement with Princes Park and long after its completion, he combined the skills of gardener, engineer and architect to design radical, inventive and influential landscapes. Having secured a fee of 100 for his advice and a further 42 plus expenses for his drawings, Paxton's set about laying out a diverse and appealing landscape. His early designs were produced with the assistance of James Pennethorne, a former assistant to John Nash, and indicate that the original intention was to surround the park with number of substantial terraces. This proposal was later abandoned, but other elements of Paxton's initial plans remained to become the backbone of his final scheme.



Fig 3 Sir Joseph Paxton (1801-1865), principal architect of the scheme

completed, the Liverpool Mercury reported that 'it is delightful to see the labouring man, his wife and children in the evenings enjoying themselves in the pleasure grounds'. Over the decades that followed, the popular appeal of the park was enhanced by a series of events, musical performances and pageantry. One of the most famous of these occasions, The Philanthropic Festival and Grand Fancy Fair, took place in August 1849 and attracted over 10,000 visitors. Hosted to raise money for the infirmary, Northern and Southern Hospitals, it boasted an array of spectacular attractions and amusements ranging from balloon ascents to bell ringing, ventriloquism to a 'Lilliputian sailing match'. Although few events could match the splendour and variety on show at the Fancy Fair, the park frequently played host to brass bands performances, attracting audiences from across the county. For children, there were donkey rides provided by the ever-popular Judy the donkey. Her grave can be seen in the northern portion of the park.



Top: Fig 10 Advertisement for the Grand Fancy Fair in Princes Park, 1849



Left: Fig 11 Band programme for Princes Park, 1889. Both military and civilian brass bands were popular attractions in public parks

## The Scheme

From the start, it was clear that the character and form of Princes Park would reflect the status and lifestyle of the city's wealthier inhabitants. These aspirations led to investment in a number of grand features the likes of which had previously been the preserve of large country estates. A broad serpentine carriage drive was to encompass the main park, with a wide footpath along its edge. Although the gates were smaller in scale than those found bordering grand country houses like Chatsworth, once inside the park, visitors and residents were transported to an apparently rural and naturalistic idyll. The landscape within the confines of the carriage drive was divided into two distinct parts. The larger of these two areas was to become the public area and comprised a large open swathe of grassland, punctuated occasionally by single trees and naturalistic coppices. Although accessible to the public, this tract of land was initially administered by a Trust for a limited term of 75 years, after which it was intended that the land would revert to Yates' heirs. In this area, footpaths were few and far between and pedestrians were instead invited to enjoy the extensive greensward. In an extension of the country house analogy, this 'meadow' area represented the estate park and was influenced by the work of Capability Brown a century before.



Fig 4 The Chinese bridge was a central feature of the Park in the 1860s. It is pictured here in an engraving by Rock and Co. of London. Many such engravings, and later postcards, were produced as souvenirs of the park. The boathouse can be seen in the far distance

## The Twentieth Century



Fig 12 Park regulations, Princes Park, 1918

In the later decades of the nineteenth century, the price of maintaining the park rose continually. By the 1870s the funds raised from the property leases were barely covering expenses. The cost of 'watching' (policing) the park increased year by year and capital expenditure on additions such as 'unclimbable fences' could easily wipe out the budget. By 1904 the condition of the park was deteriorating and there was concern within the Corporation that the site would become 'dilapidated'. Certain changes were welcomed however, and although the cricket ground and pavilion were gone by 1908, the creation of bowling greens and tennis courts in the years that followed indicates a commitment to reflect the changing demands of the population.

On May 1st 1918, while the Great War still raged across the channel, the Corporation of Liverpool purchased Princes Park for the sum of 11,000 and Paxton's first great park scheme finally became truly public.



Fig 13 Playing giant draughts in the park, 1943

## The Park Garden

The second area was given over to the private Park Garden, which represented a complete contrast to the wider park in both style and purpose. Enclosed by an iron fence, the Garden was a private retreat for the owners and residents of the new grand residences and remained inaccessible to the vast majority of park users until the twentieth century. Upon entering the private garden, visitors were quickly enveloped by a secret environment, secluded from the world. Here, narrow paths weaved between densely-planted borders and ornamental beds. The main feature of the area was the lake, formed by a puddled clay base from an ancient tributary of the Mersey. It was originally a long, narrow and meandering body of water that boasted two islands: a small decorative mound dubbed 'Swans Island' and the larger, surviving island, which was formerly accessible to pedestrians via an ornamental Chinese bridge in place by the mid 1850s.

The Chinese bridge was not the only architectural feature within the Park Garden. By the end of the 1840s, the lake had acquired a boathouse in the 'Swiss' style. Improvements to continental travel in the early decades of the nineteenth century fuelled a craze in Britain for Alpine landscapes and architecture. Rock formations, waterfalls and fanciful buildings that replicated the style and materials of Swiss chalets became popular features in private landscape gardens and public parks.

Between 1918 and the year 2000 few significant additions were made to Princes Park. In a pattern replicated across the country, the cost of war and the damage it wreaked on the urban landscape prompted a period of prolonged decline in our public parks. By 1953, Princes Park had acquired an additional bowling green and tennis court and in 1943 a giant draughts game was installed. However, other features were lost to decay, enemy bombing, or vandalism. By the 1970s, the decorative rockwork had been replaced by steps and glasshouses and railings removed. In recent years these process of decay has been halted and although some significant features have been irreparably lost, elements of Paxton's scheme remain evident to visitors, along with new features, such as a children's play area and licensed angling. The Park has an active Friends Group and in 2007 the site was upgraded to Grade II\* listing on English Heritage's *Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest*. Princes Park continues to serve the people of Liverpool as a place of health and amusement.



Fig 14 The parks continues to attract visitors seeking tranquility