



Christchurch Park

A brief history

Introduction

Christchurch Park extends over 33 hectares (approximately 82 acres) of picturesque grounds in the heart of Ipswich, just north of the old town wall. The Park, a designated County Wildlife site, is in a conservation area and is on the English Heritage register of historic parks and gardens of special historic interest. It was the first public park in Ipswich, opening in 1895.

The Park has a rich and fascinating history dating back to the 12th century. The Domesday Book (1086) records that the church of Holy Trinity was in possession of 26 acres of land. This was almost certainly the Anglo-Saxon church that later became the site of the Augustinian Priory of the Holy Trinity founded in about 1177. A wealthy priory, it owned 260 hectares (643 acres) of farmlands, fishponds and further land parishes around Ipswich. Trinity Chapel was probably on the site that Christchurch Mansion now occupies with its tower being recorded as standing to the east of the mansion in formal gardens.

A series of ponds, fed by the same springs that feed today's ponds, provided fish for the monks. The horseshoe pool was probably a medieval conduit head, and the springs in the park supplied water to the town at least from medieval times. These were the source of town streams and the medieval water system.

The Park has a variety of habitats including ponds, grassland, woodland, old and veteran trees - the oaks and sweet chestnuts are particularly important, some of them being 300 - 400 years old.

Most of what you can see today is the result of work in the 18th and 19th centuries by the Fonnereau family. More recent additions include the tennis courts, croquet lawn, bowling greens and toilet blocks.

Today Christchurch is a Grade II listed park, and there are 14 other Grade II listed structures within its boundaries, including lodges, gates, walls, shelters, drinking fountains, memorials and the Ice House.

Some Interesting Dates

1177 The Augustinian Priory of Holy Trinity (also known as Christchurch) is founded.

1297 Edward I visits Christchurch.

1536 Land and buildings are seized by the Crown as part of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries.

1544 A survey of the trees by the Crown states there were '300 oks and elmes of lxxx & c yeres growth' (300 oaks and elms of 80 - 100 years growth). 30 were reserved for timber to repair houses, fences and hedges. The tenants near woodland around Ipswich also had the right to gather firewood and use timber to repair agricultural equipment. This was on all lands belonging to the Priory, not just the park, but tells us about the importance of native trees.

1545 Paul Withypoll, a prominent London merchant, buys the estate.

1548-50 The priory had been demolished by 1548 and work was started by Edmund Withypoll (Paul's son) on building Christchurch Mansion, originally called Withypoll House and also known as Christchurch Withypoll. Originally, there would almost certainly have been formal gardens in front of the E-shaped Mansion. By the 17th century, maps show large formal gardens over the whole southern part of the park where the large chestnut trees now stand. These gardens may also have been redesigned in the 18th century.

1560s The Star Chamber proceedings: an on-going dispute between the corporation and Edmund Withypoll throughout the 1560s involving changes Withypoll made to the Soane Street (main) entrance, the demolition of at least one house and moving the churchyard wall. There were public disturbances after he tried to prevent access to the annual fair and disputes over boundaries and flooding of Borough land and the Queen's highway.

1561 & 1579 Elizabeth I visits Christchurch.

1567 Edmund Withypoll created the pond which today is called the Wilderness Pond. The springs had previously fed four separate ponds below a terrace of formal gardens and orchard to the west of the mansion.

1568 The present churchyard walls were built after 1568.

1645 Christchurch is inherited by the Devereaux family.

1662 Charles II stays at the Mansion and plays bowls in Christchurch Park.

1675 Ogilby's map depicts a series of ponds, probably the Priory fish ponds, lying next to elaborate formal gardens to the east and west of the Mansion.

1734 Claude Fonnereau buys Christchurch estate for £11,500. The grounds are described in deeds as 'yards gardens and twenty one acres of meadow, eighty acres of pasture, ground paled in for a park and thirteen acres of wood.' This adds up to more than 114 acres of land; today the park covers about 82 acres, or 33 hectares.

c.1735 The Ice House is built to the north of the Mansion. John Kirby (author of 'Suffolk Traveller') produced an estate map of Christchurch. On this map the Wilderness Pond is called Dovehouse Pond.

1737 Before 1737 there had been a 'fine bowling green' alongside the Mansion.

1772 The public had some right of access to the park by 1772, but Thomas Fonnereau tried to introduce keys for those who would sign an agreement with conditions of entry so he could restrict public access.

1848 On 20 January 1848 a public meeting organised by Councillor A. Ransome took place to find 'an eligible spot for the formation of a park or a place of helpful outdoor recreation for all classes.'

1851 Prince Albert visits Christchurch.

1853 W.C. Fonnereau leases 13 acres out to the Ipswich Corporation to develop the Upper Arboretum.

1863 An Italianate Drinking Fountain, donated to the town by John Brett, is unveiled near the main entrance to the Park's Arboretum, in Henley Road. Total cost £64.

1869 The Suffolk Show takes place in the Park.

c.1870 Large numbers of oak, elm, ash and horse chestnut trees are taken down and disposed of by sale.

1870 Hillside on the eastern edge of the wilderness area is excavated to provide fill for an area of low ground east of the wilderness pond. It is planted with Austrian

Pine and Scots Pine.

1869 The Arts and Crafts shelter (sometimes known as the 'bandstand') is constructed in the Upper Arboretum.

1895 Felix Cobbold gives Christchurch Mansion to the town on the condition that the Ipswich Corporation purchases the rest of the property and that the house be preserved. He bought the Mansion from the Fonnereau family; they had already sold some land and it is possible they would have sold off more of Christchurch Park for development had it remained in their hands.

1895 Ipswich Corporation buys the central part of the Park, Clarke's Arboretum, along the lower part of Fonnereau Road and the area by Westerfield Road. The Park officially opened to the public on 11th (or 24th?) April. £300 is initially earmarked for Park upkeep in 1896 but this is later revised to £500.

1895 The Cabman's Shelter is moved into the Park, near the Bolton Lane entrance, from the Cornhill where it had stood since 1803.

1896 Sir Bunnell Burton gives the Burton Drinking Fountain to the town and it is placed by the Ancient Avenue in the Park.

1903 The Martyrs' Memorial is unveiled.

1922 The Lower Arboretum is bought by the Borough for £1,568 14s 3d and the area is completely redesigned to include tennis courts and a croquet lawn.

1924 The Ipswich War Memorial (Cenotaph), close to the Fonnereau Road entrance, is unveiled and the Boer War Memorial is moved on rollers from the Cornhill and placed nearby.

1928 The Corporation acquires the Upper Arboretum for £8,500.

1932 The Wolsey Gallery Garden is laid out.

1980 The Brett Fountain is restored by the Ipswich Society.

1986 The Peace Garden is opened between the Wilderness Pond and the Cenotaph.

1987 235 trees are lost in October's 'Great Storm', and the Bird Reserve is created.

1995 The Cabman's shelter is 80% destroyed by fire set by vandals.

1998 The Cherry Avenue is planted in the Upper Arboretum by the Ipswich Horticultural Society to launch the Christchurch Tree Trail.

2001 The Play Area is refurbished and reopened.

2005 The Arts & Crafts Shelter is restored under the Heritage Lottery Fund Project.

2006 The Cabman's shelter is restored and moved to the Westerfield Road entrance.

2008 The Park is officially 'reopened' following the £4.2 million Heritage Lottery Fund restoration project and the new Reg Driver Visitor Centre is opened.

2008 The Park is awarded the prestigious 'Green Flag' by the Civic Trust, and again in 2009 and 2010.

2011 The Cobbold Family History Trust interpretation panels are installed in the Reg Driver Visitor Centre.