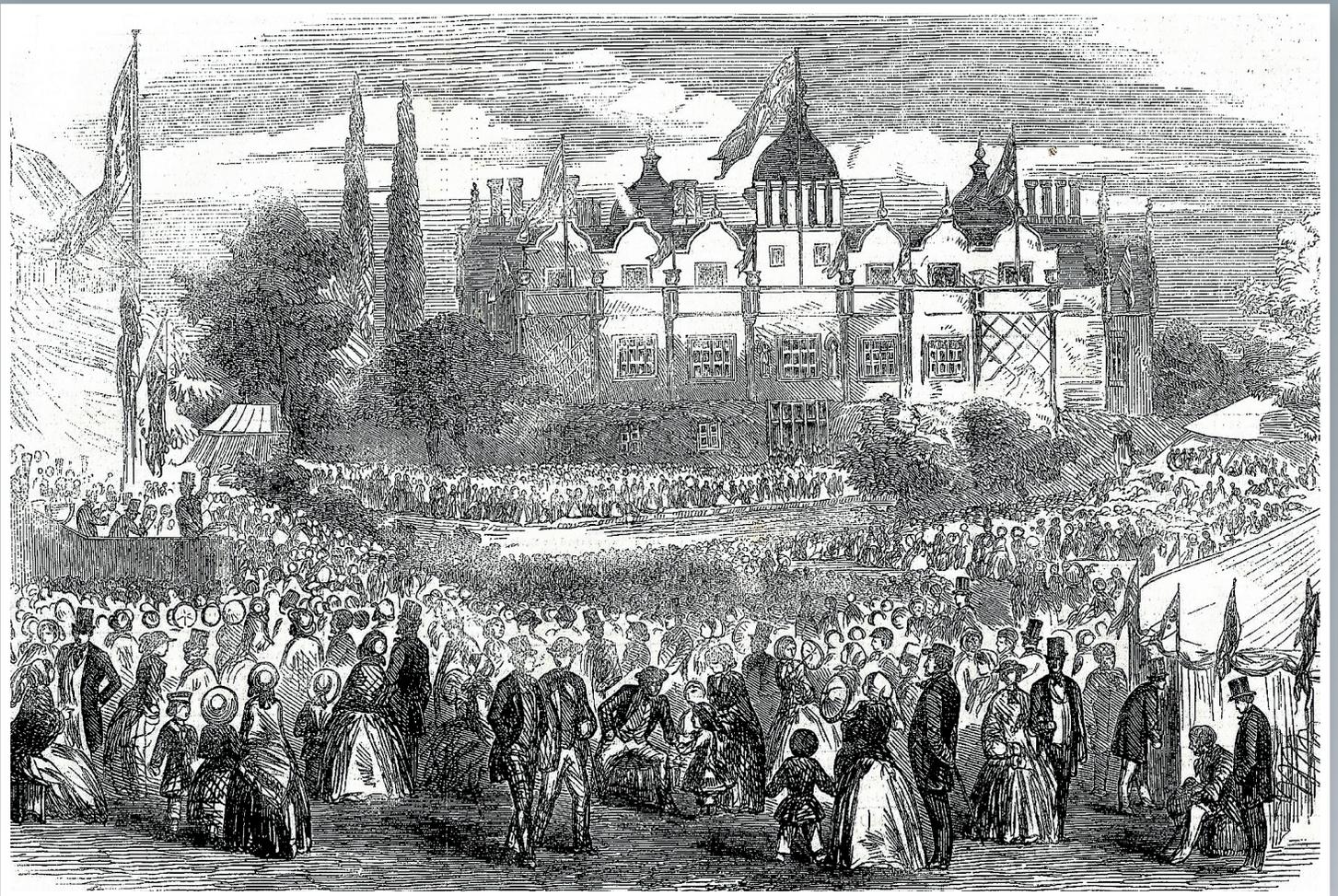


FREE TO ALL ASTON HALL AND PARK

PEOPLE POWER IN VICTORIAN BIRMINGHAM

Carl Chinn

Aston Hall is a magnificent example of Jacobean architecture on the periphery of central Birmingham built between 1618 and 1635. The house was damaged in the English Civil War during an attack by the Parliamentary army in 1643. Subsequently, Aston Hall and the surrounding park were rented by James Watt Jnr, son of the pioneer of steam power, James Watt Snr. As Birmingham's population grew massively in the early nineteenth century, much of the parkland was built upon and there was a real danger that this architectural gem might be knocked down and lost forever, whilst the remainder of its park would be developed. But the working people of Birmingham were not prepared to lose their treasured asset. This is the story of how the 'People's Park Company' saved Aston Hall and its grounds.



Fête at Aston Hall, Birmingham, in Aid of the General Hospital Fund (nineteenth-century wood engraving).

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Grand Events at Aston Hall and Park

'Fête Champêtre at Aston Hall' – it was a fancy name for a grand event in a splendid setting that was held on Monday 28 July 1856. More prosaically it was a huge garden party to raise funds for the Queen's Hospital in Bath Row. Queen Victoria herself and her husband, Prince Albert, were amongst the long list of royal and aristocratic patrons – although they did not attend. Advertisements for the fête declared that it would be held in the 'beautiful park and grounds of the ancient baronial mansion', and the *Worcester Chronicle* proclaimed it as 'a wondrous success'. So it was. Nearly 50,000 people paid one shilling (5p) to attend and after paying out entertainment expenses, the Committee was able to pass over the sizeable sum of £2,329.

In his fascinating account of *Personal Recollections of Birmingham and Birmingham Men* (1877), Eliezer Edwards recounted how the memorable event had come about. The 'Woodman' in Easy Row was an inn popular with councillors, aldermen, manufacturers and more prosperous shopkeepers. Amongst the regulars was the glass manufacturer and soda water producer, John Walsh Walsh. He was also a councillor and compared with many others 'much might be said of the energetic manner in which he opposed all weakness in action, and of the manly vigour of his advocacy of all schemes for the benefit of the town'.

In particular, he had worked hard 'to induce the Council to buy Aston Park for the town, when its price was low'; and in later years, he would 'chafe at the thought that double the present area of the park might have been purchased for less money than was ultimately paid for the portion now held'. One spring evening in 1856, he was in the 'Woodman' and he led a discussion on the Council's folly 'in refusing to buy a portion of Aston Park, including the Hall, which had been offered to them, as he said, "dirt cheap".'

Another member of the group mentioned that the financial affairs of the



Aston Hall from the east – the direction from which it was approached by the crowds on the occasion of the 'Fête Champêtre' in 1856.

Queen's Hospital 'were in a lamentable state of collapse'. Hearing this, Walsh asked: 'Why not borrow the park and give a picnic for the hospital?' A decisive man as he was, 'with him, to conceive was to act'. Within days, a provisional committee with Walsh as chairman was appointed and a deputation was sent to the proprietors of the park. They granted permission to hold a fête.

Walsh energetically took up the matter and resolved it would be no mere picnic but 'such a fête as Birmingham had never witnessed, and would not readily forget'. Nor did it. Huge numbers of tickets were sold and as the day approached:

The refreshment contractors were advised of the vastly increased number of hungry customers they might expect. Bakers were set to work to provide hundreds of additional loaves. Orders were given for an extra ton or two of sandwiches. Scores more barrels of ale and porter came slowly into the park, where, within fenced enclosures, they were piled, two or three high, in double lines. Crates upon crates of tumblers, earthenware mugs, and plates arrived. Soda water, lemonade, and ginger beer were provided in countless grosses, and in fact everything for the comfort and convenience of visitors that the most careful forethought could suggest, was provided in the most lavish profusion. Monday 28 July was 'delightfully fine' and was taken as a general holiday locally.

Aston Village was gaily decorated, the Royal Standard floated from its parish church – whilst its bells 'chimed out in joyous melody'. The Elizabethan gateway to the park was hung with bunting and 'the sober old Hall had a sudden eruption of colour, such as it had probably never known before'. Flags of all colours were everywhere and as noon approached, train after train 'deposited at the Aston station hundreds and thousands of gaily-attired Black Country people'. To their number were added the hosts that came from Birmingham on special trains or who were crammed into 'omnibuses, waggons, cabs, carts, and every other imaginable vehicle; whilst thousands upon thousands of dusty pedestrians jostled each other in the crowded roads'.

Aston Hall was thrown open, and outside there were platforms for dancing, pavilions for musicians, swings, merry-go-rounds, Punch and Judy shows, games and other amusements. Importantly:

All classes were represented at the fête. Here you might see a group of well-dressed folks from Edgbaston, next to some pale-faced miners from the Black Country, and then the nut-brown faces of some agricultural people. All seemed intent upon fun and pleasure, and so, throughout that long summer day, the crowd increased, and everyone seemed to be in a state of absolute enjoyment.

FREE TO ALL: ASTON HALL AND PARK

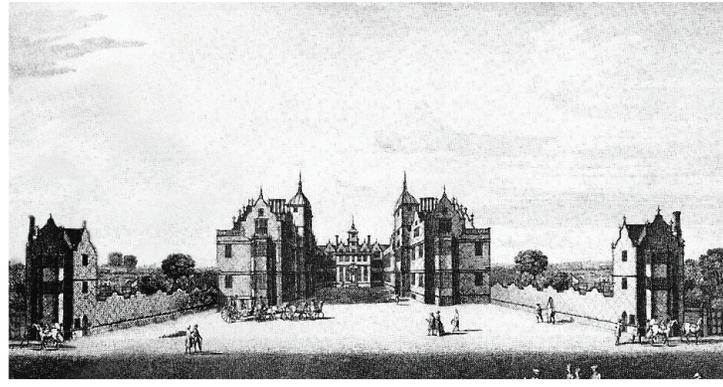
In the evening the Sycamore Avenue was lighted up by innumerable coloured lamps to conjure a fairylike scene and 'then came the fireworks! No such display had ever before been seen in the Midland Counties. The lights of rockets, the marvellously-ingenuous set pieces, and the wonderful blue lights, gave intense delight'. The finale was as spectacular; the words 'SAVE ASTON HALL' came out in glowing fire to the acclaim of the vast crowd.

The remarkable achievement of the first Aston Fête encouraged Walsh and his committee to organise another 'Grand Fête Champêtre' for the General Hospital in Summer Lane, which they boasted would surpass the Queen's Hospital event. Amongst the entertainers would be 'the orchestral union band of thirty of the most eminent instrumentalists of the day'; the 'far-famed and superb band' of the Royal Artillery Corps; 200 of the Birmingham Orchestral Society; 'the splendid band' of the 10th Hussars; 'the justly celebrated band' of Chance's Brothers in Smethwick; the Worcestershire Band; Harvey and Synner's 'celebrated six-horn band'; and five quadrille bands.

There was also 'a grand archery meeting'; illuminations in the Sycamore Avenue consisting of 30,000 'variegated lamps'; and 'a magnificent display of fireworks on a scale of grandeur unsurpassed by any previous exhibition in the kingdom' supplied by the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich. Tents for wines, spirits and refreshments were put up that were capable of holding 40,000 people.

Fortunately that Monday 15 September, the weather was fine and it was reported that double that figure attended. So excited was Birmingham and the district at this second fête and so good was the charitable cause that employers happily closed large factories and works. The *Birmingham Gazette* reported that 'the demand for every description of vehicular accommodation was something extraordinary to witness'; whilst the special trains laid on from the mining districts 'were literally packed with eager pleasure seekers'.

Within Birmingham, it was as if 'the whole population seemed on the move'. There was an unbroken procession from Dale End



Aston Hall from the east – an engraving of 1744 by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck.



A portrait of Sir Thomas Holte with Aston Hall in the background.

along all the roads that led to Aston and soon 'the town began to wear a deserted appearance, showing unmistakably that Birmingham had made up its mind for once to indulge in a holiday'. According to the *Morning Chronicle* the neighbourhood of Birmingham was 'the scene of great gaiety and high festivity'. The London-based newspaper went on

to stress that two miles from the town centre, Aston Hall was surrounded by a well-wooded park, interspersed with stately avenues and was an admirable place for a Fête Champêtre. So it was but that wonderful setting was under threat.

Aston Hall and Park Threatened

Aston Hall had been built for Sir Thomas Holte between 1618 and 1635. A magnificent Jacobean mansion with wide lands, it was inherited by the last of his name, Mary Holte. She was married to Abraham Bracebridge of Atherstone, but unhappily he was spectacularly irresponsible and a failure in his business affairs. In anticipation of his wife inheriting the Holte property, Abraham Bracebridge used it to raise mortgages. By 1798, he owed the massive sum of £55,000 and, oblivious to his shortcomings, he

continued to make disastrous financial decisions.

Unable to discharge his loans, in 1818 he obtained an Act of Parliament allowing the partition and sale of the Holte lands to raise funds to pay his creditors. Aston Hall and about 327 acres of parkland were bought by a firm of Warwick bankers. They leased it to James Watt the younger, the son of the celebrated engineer, who lived there until 1848. His departure signalled the development of much of the parkland. Building plots were sold and new roads were quickly cut.

The imminent disappearance of the last of the park seems to have energised some of Birmingham's councillors who were more committed to providing facilities for the people they represented than were the Economists, councillors who wished

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to spend as little as possible so as to keep the rates on property owners as low as possible. Alderman J. H. Cutler was chief amongst those who strove for a more proactive Council. Battling away against the prevailing misers, in August 1856 in the Town Council he moved that the General Purposes Committee be authorised to communicate with the proprietors of the Aston Park Estate to ascertain upon what terms it might be 'acquired as a public park and place of recreation for the inhabitants of the town'.

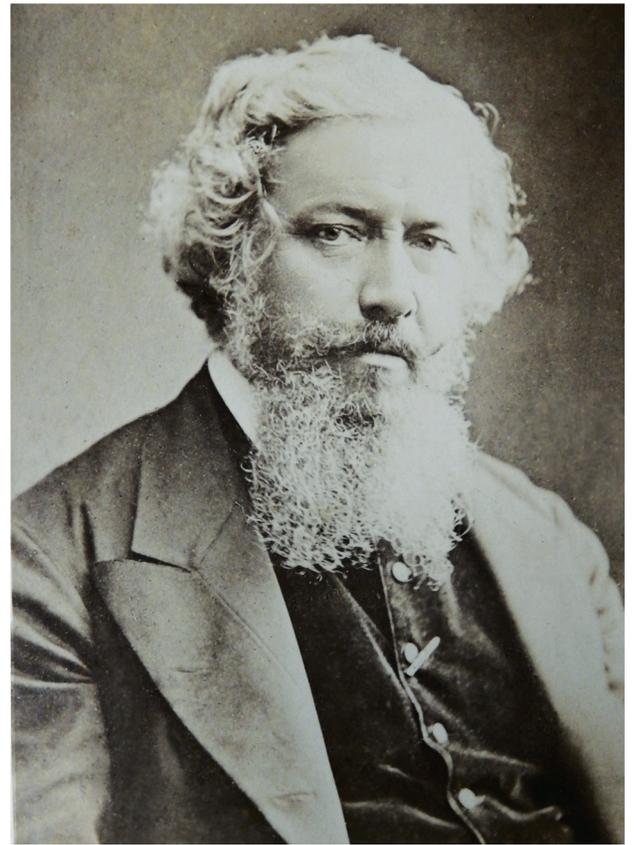
Cutler explained that he had been approached by one of the proprietors who had 'expressed an anxiety that the park should be possessed by the Council, as this was the only means by which it could be maintained in its present state of entirety'. Alderman Cutler pointed out that six years before the Council had made inquiries about the park but it had not been able to proceed because of the cost and the Council then had no power to borrow money for such a purpose. Now it did thanks to the Birmingham Parks Act of 1854. This authorised borrowing up to £30,000, a sum that could be supplemented by a rate of one penny per property per year so as to purchase a park.

Alderman Cutler did not believe that the proprietors would ask an exorbitant amount for Aston Hall and a certain amount of the park. He emphasised that the people of Birmingham felt 'a deep interest in the preservation of the building, and he would go still further and say a deep interest in becoming possessed of it for the benefit of the inhabitants generally'. Much had been spoken about gin palaces and their demoralising effects and in his opinion 'if they wished effectually to remove these evils and empty them of their visitors they must provide the people with other and more rational pursuits. Give them a museum and a good Park and he felt confident these advantages would do much towards weaning them from grosser amusements.'

Moreover, Cutler was certain that Aston Park would 'afford the opportunity for carrying out projects in aid of their charitable institutions, most of which were in a state of poverty'. This had been made clear by the recent fête for the Queen's Hospital, an event that had also shown that 'immense assemblages could meet without drunkenness or damage to property being the result'.

Interestingly Alderman Allday, the high priest of Council frugality, supported the motion. It was likely that this was because he and his supporters had been denigrated for their lack of activity in providing parks – and, of course, Adderley Park was due to be opened soon, on 30 August, thanks to the benevolence of Charles Bowyer Adderley. Allday's statement suggested self-interest, for 'he hoped the resolution would be carried unanimously, so that the noblemen and gentlemen connected with the town would see that the Council desired to co-operate with them in providing places of recreation for the people'.

In December the General Purposes Committee reported that the proprietors wanted £24,500 for Aston Hall and 30 acres of parkland; and £36,400 for an additional 52 acres selected by the Committee as the most eligible. Unfortunately, a surveyor engaged by the Council valued the total of 82 acres at only £23,000 and the 172 acres that was left of the original Park at £50,000. Toing and froing between the Council and the proprietors continued but matters were soon to be taken out of the hands of the local authority by the people.



George Dawson (from a photograph taken by George Whitlock).

Save Aston Hall and Park

The day after the first 'Fête Champêtre' for the Queen's Hospital, the redoubtable and visionary preacher George Dawson had launched a 'Save Aston Hall' campaign in the *Daily Press*. Started only the year before, this was the first daily newspaper in the town and Dawson was a chief shareholder. One of the most charismatic and influential figures in the history of Birmingham, he was born in London. A preacher and pastor, he had come to Birmingham in 1844 aged just 23 to take charge of the Mount Zion chapel. Markedly independent of mind, Dawson soon moved on to his own Church of the Saviour in Edward Street, later the 'Lyric' Picture House. Here worshippers of all denominations were pulled in by the appeal of this extraordinary man.

Of middle height, robust and broad set, Dawson's black hair cascaded down over his ears and his forehead, and a thick beard flowed over his neck and to the top of his chest. Dressed in a long velvet coat that stretched to his knees and a colourful necktie, he was one of the most powerful speakers of the age. He declared that Jesus had not died for man but lived for him, and he exhorted his listeners to follow Our Lord's example and not think of what should not be done but of what more could be done.

Dawson chastised those who did not live their beliefs daily and who felt they need act as Christians only on a Sunday. He urged each citizen to strive 'to clothe the naked, to feed the

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The Lyric Picture House in Edward Street, formerly George Dawson's Church of the Saviour.

hungry, and to instruct the ignorant'. And he proclaimed that 'a great town is a solemn organism through which should flow, and in which should be shaped, all the highest, loftiest and truest ends of man's intellectual and moral nature'.

In the 1870s, Dawson's preaching and passion would deeply affect Joseph Chamberlain and others to act on this Civic Gospel and to transform Birmingham into 'the best-governed city in the world'. Now, though, in the Birmingham of the early 1850s that was dominated by lacklustre councillors, he was struggling to push forward his radical message of social reform through political actions. A campaign to save Aston Hall and Park was an opportunity for him to publicly press both his message and his belief in 'Free Parks for the People' – green areas for the tens of thousands of Brummies who were living in badly-built and insanitary back-to-back houses with neither gardens nor open spaces to enjoy.

In his article in the *Daily Press* Dawson urged the public to raise the money to purchase Aston Hall and Park, and in the subsequent months his appeal was printed as a handbill and posted on all the blank walls in and around the town. The appeal roused a group of 'gentlemen' to action. On 20 May 1857 they held a private meeting at which they suggested the formation of a company, which would raise the necessary capital to buy Aston Hall and part of the park through the purchase of shares that would cost a small amount each. A subsequent meeting was held on 30 June.

It was chaired by Charles Holte Bracebridge, the son of Mary Holte and Abraham Bracebridge. He was the antithesis of his father. A clever and caring man, Charles Holte Bracebridge was involved in prison reform and he and his wife played a vital role in helping Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War. Bracebridge was as crucial a figure in saving the home of his ancestors and in providing part of its grounds as a park for the people.

At this meeting it was resolved that it was 'desirable to purchase 43 acres of land in Aston Park, including timber and the Hall, for the sum of £35,000'. To these ends a company should be formed. A prospectus followed quickly. It proposed to raise £42,000 by the sale of 40,000 shares at £1 1s each (£1.05). The aim was 'that Aston Hall may ultimately become free to all'. Crucially, the promoters of the company proclaimed that they were 'actuated by a desire to preserve from destruction the venerable edifice of Aston Hall, with its historic associations, and at the same time to afford to the town the advantages of a park and place of recreation and amusement'.

An Appeal to the Working Class

John Alfred Langford was a compiler of Birmingham's history and as he described, 'somehow the thing was not enthusiastically taken up. One promoter after another resigned. The machine did not run well.' Then someone was inspired to make an appeal to the working class. Workers at the leading manufactories were invited to send delegates to a meeting on 26 June 1857 in the committee room of the Town Hall. George Dawson was called to the chair and Langford reported proudly that 'the meeting was unanimous and enthusiastic; the object was approved'. A committee was appointed with Dawson as chairman, Langford as vice-chairman, and Daniel J. O'Neill as honorary secretary.

A writer and journalist later in life, Langford had benefited from only a few years of education before he started working for his father, who was a chair-maker in a small way of business and was one of the many small gaffers in Birmingham. Langford, however, had a passion for learning and books and as a teenager he had enrolled at the Mechanics' Institute, Birmingham. Although he laboured for fourteen hours each day, he strove to improve his education by learning mathematics, English grammar, Latin, French, and German after work. Following his marriage in 1842, he had lived first in a back house in Bradford Street and then in one in Cheapside, but wherever he lived he maintained his involvement in causes that strove to improve the lives of working-class men and women.

A teetotaler, peace advocate, and a member of a people's library, Langford was keener on social than political agitation. He believed that 'a happy future for man was built on a general, thorough education of the people – the elevation of the masses into men'. The new co-operative movement also attracted him and in 1846 he was appointed honorary secretary of the recently established Birmingham Co-operative Society. The next year he began contributing to *Howitt's Journal*, an organ for co-operators. Then in 1848 Langford started to attend Dawson's Church of the Saviour, continuing to combine his work with his writings and issuing *Religion, Scepticism and Infidelity* in 1850. During that winter, he taught evening classes in the schools attached to the

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Church and gave up chair-making to open a small shop in New Street, selling newspapers and books.

A supporter of radical causes, Langford was a great admirer of Lajos Kossuth, the Hungarian patriot, and in 1851 he became honorary secretary of the Birmingham branch of the 'Friends of Italy', formed to support the Italian patriot Mazzini and his followers. An avid writer of political pamphlets and poetry, Langford was a prime example of a self-taught working man who endeavoured to better himself and his class and his involvement in the Public Recreation Society was just one of his many activities.

As for O'Neill, he was a Dubliner who had settled in Birmingham. He was hailed in his obituary in the *Birmingham Gazette* on 21 July 1914 as 'The Friend of the Poor' and 'as one of the most interesting personalities in the public and social life of Birmingham for upwards of half a century'. From when he first entered public life there were few movements with which 'he was not connected in some way, or other. He was a friend to all, especially the "little prisoners in the slums" and was respected by all classes of the community'.

O'Neill had come to Birmingham from Ireland in 1852 as a young man of twenty. A silversmith and art metal worker, he had gained an important clerical position at R. W. Winfield's in Cambridge Street – now the site of the Library of Birmingham. Winfield's was one of the most important firms in the city and its workers had sent representatives to the first meeting called by workers to campaign for public parks in 1853.

In his publication, *How Aston Hall and Park Were Saved* (1910), O'Neill stated that he became involved in the campaign 'to endeavour to get Birmingham a Park worthy of the name; to save a grand historic building from being carted away, as so many thousands of old bricks; and to prevent the magnificent trees being felled for jerry-building and roads. The grand building was Aston Hall.'

Langford stressed that from the first working-men's meeting the work of saving Aston Hall and Park 'may be said to have begun in earnest'. Their committee members quickly found that 'there was no active organisation, and that there was no money for carrying out the preliminary business of starting and enrolling a company'. Consequently they called a public meeting, employed canvassers, gave talks, and arranged for a fête to be held at the Park to raise the funds for the purchase.



Courtesy of the Birmingham and Midland Institute

John Alfred Langford in 1863 from a portrait by the artist H. C. Manns.

This took place on 17 August 1857. Unhappily, the attendance was disappointingly low and it produced a profit of £569 11s 1d, which was considerably less than the sums raised for the local hospitals at their fêtes. Langford regretted that the working class, 'for whose especial benefit the project of purchasing was devised', had not given 'a very encouraging amount of support, or displayed an inordinate amount of enthusiasm on the occasion'. Still the sum was a large one 'and the working men deserved the warm congratulations of all for the tact and energy with which they began their labours'.

Yet it seemed that the plan to save Aston Hall and Park once again was 'in deadly peril'. Immediately after the fête the proprietors ended negotiations, stating that the time that they had

allowed the original promoters of the company to reach an agreement to purchase had now elapsed. The working men were undaunted and took 'prompt and decisive action'. In September they sent a deputation to speak with the owners, who agreed that negotiations could be renewed. There was one important proviso, though: the terms were to be the same as before.

This meant a price of £35,000 for the Hall and 43 acres of park, although the proprietors agreed to take £4,200 worth of shares instead of money upon the completion of the contract. By the end of 1857, a deposit of £3,500 had to be paid over and the company had to take possession. Two years were then allowed for completing the purchase, with the money owed to be paid in quarterly instalments of £4,000.

The Aston Hall and Park Company Limited

The Working-Men's Committee agreed and suggested their body should amalgamate with the original promoters of the company started to save Aston Hall and Park. This proposal was accepted. Langford was appointed secretary of the new Committee which included Dawson, Bracebridge and fourteen other 'gentlemen'. Their number was matched by working men and this committee became the interim managers. The company was registered with the simple object of purchasing Aston Hall and Park as a place of recreation and amusement. The contract was then signed with the proprietors and a deposit of £3,500 paid on 12 February 1858. Four days later the Aston Hall and Park Company Limited took possession of the property.

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A gardener at work in Aston Park in the 1950s, with the imposing structure of Aston Hall behind him. Such a view would have disappeared had it not been for the campaigning of men like John Alfred Langford and Daniel J. O'Neill.

It was aimed to raise £42,000 through the sale of 40,000 guinea (£1.05p) shares payable by half-crown instalments. 'A' shareholders would be admitted to the Park and Hall on all ordinary occasions, including Sundays, Good Fridays, Christmas Days, and legally appointed holidays, but they would not be entitled to dividends or admission either to extraordinary fêtes or charitable or public events.

'B' shares were donations and did not entitle the donors to privileges or profits. Instead the money was to be vested in trustees for the purpose of eventually making the Park free. Finally, 'C' shareholders were entitled to dividends, but not to privileges. Salaried officers were to be elected annually. They would include a manager who 'would provide museums, exhibitions, concerts, lectures, fetes, and do all things that may forward the objects of the company'.

It was expected that the shares would be redeemed out of the profits of refreshments and entertainments, and that this would then allow the transfer of Aston Hall and Park to the Corporation. With this in mind, on 9 March Langford applied to the Council for the appointment of four councillors as Borough Trustees. It was referred to the General Purposes Committee, which in turn appointed a sub-committee to investigate the issue. The result was a lengthy document which recommended that the application be refused. The Council was still dominated by those motivated only by lowering costs and by enforcing a policy of economy through efficiency. This meant that councillors would not take on a project

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Girls playing at what seems to be a maypole in the early 1900s. They would have been unable to do so without the group of working men who played such a vital role in saving Aston Hall and Park.

that may have cost money even if it were for the well-being of its citizens.

Before the Council could formally refuse the application, however, the owners of Aston Hall and Park withdrew their offer in mid-April 1858. By now Langford was share and donation manager of the Aston Hall and Park Company. He was replaced as secretary by O'Neill, who had resigned his position at Winfield's, and he reported on behalf of the Interim Managers at the first shareholders' meeting at the Town Hall on

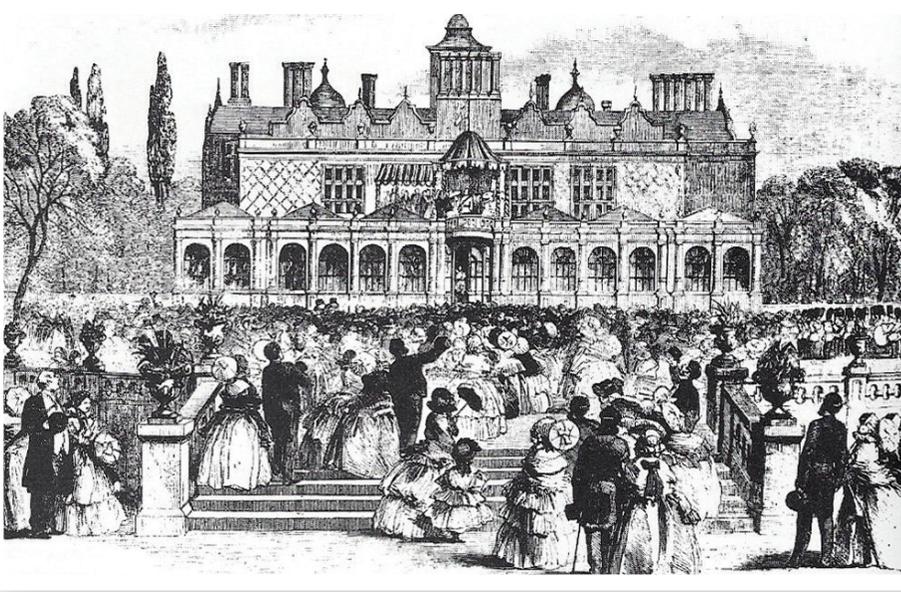
30 March. It was well attended with between 400 and 500 people present, most of whom were working men, and several speakers announced to cheers that Aston Park was to become a Free Park, a People's Park.

Queen Victoria's Visit

O'Neill indicated that from the first the Working Men's Committee had 'a strong feeling upon the necessity of making an extraordinary display at the opening of the Park'. As soon as 'the success of the movement was placed beyond a doubt, the working men thought if a proper representation was made to her Most Gracious Majesty of the purposes for which the Park and Hall were adapted, and the means by which they were obtained, her Majesty might be pleased to accept an invitation to inaugurate the People's Park'. O'Neill was certain that this honour would be 'the crowning success of their undertaking'.

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© Birmingham Museums Trust



Queen Victoria opening the house and park to the public on 15 June 1858 from D.J. O'Neill's *How Aston Hall and Park were saved* (1910).

The Mayor, John Ratcliff, had undertaken the initial steps and to the surprise of many, Queen Victoria had accepted the invitation. Robert K. Dent, a late nineteenth-century historian of Birmingham, believed that she did so because she was persuaded that she would be supporting in effect ‘an association originated by the working classes for the purpose of acquiring a Park, the ultimate destination of which is, that it shall be free for the inhabitants of the Borough’.

Langford and others on the committee of the Aston Hall and Park Company were keen that Aston Hall itself should become ‘the great pattern card of all our artistic and manufacturing skill, a perpetual exhibition of the works of our manufacturers and artists’. To that end, for the Queen’s visit, there was to be an exhibition of fine arts in the building itself. Sir Francis Scott of Great Barr Hall made an appeal on their behalf.

Published in the *Birmingham Gazette* on 19 April, it praised the working men of Birmingham for their united action and ‘energetic canvassing and unsparing sacrifice of time and exertion of many men of influence among their body’. Aided by the contributions of local gentlemen they had purchased Aston Hall, and ‘thereby rescued from destruction one of the most picturesque and unaltered of our Jacobean buildings; and with it secured the possession of the terrace, gardens, and about forty acres of the beautifully situated and well-timbered Park’.

Scott also urged not only the loan of artefacts and paintings but also financial contributions to the company ‘as not being entered into with a view to the profit of a few, but for the permanent benefit of the entire Working Class of Birmingham’. It was intended to form a comprehensive Museum of Fine Arts and Manufactures in Aston Hall, and a glass building attached to it, which was to be built. Overall it was expected that ‘while the beautiful grounds will afford a place of innocent bodily recreation to the artisan and his family, his mind may, at the same time, gather materials from the observation of nature, and the study of works of art, wherewith to improve his taste, correct his design, and render him (as all experience justifies me in asserting) both a better man and a better workman’.

The great day itself was Tuesday 15 June 1858. It was the first time a reigning monarch had visited Birmingham officially. Given the egalitarian nature of the town’s citizens and their longstanding and steadfast support for democratic campaigns, some of the upper class locally and nationally were worried at the reception that the Queen and

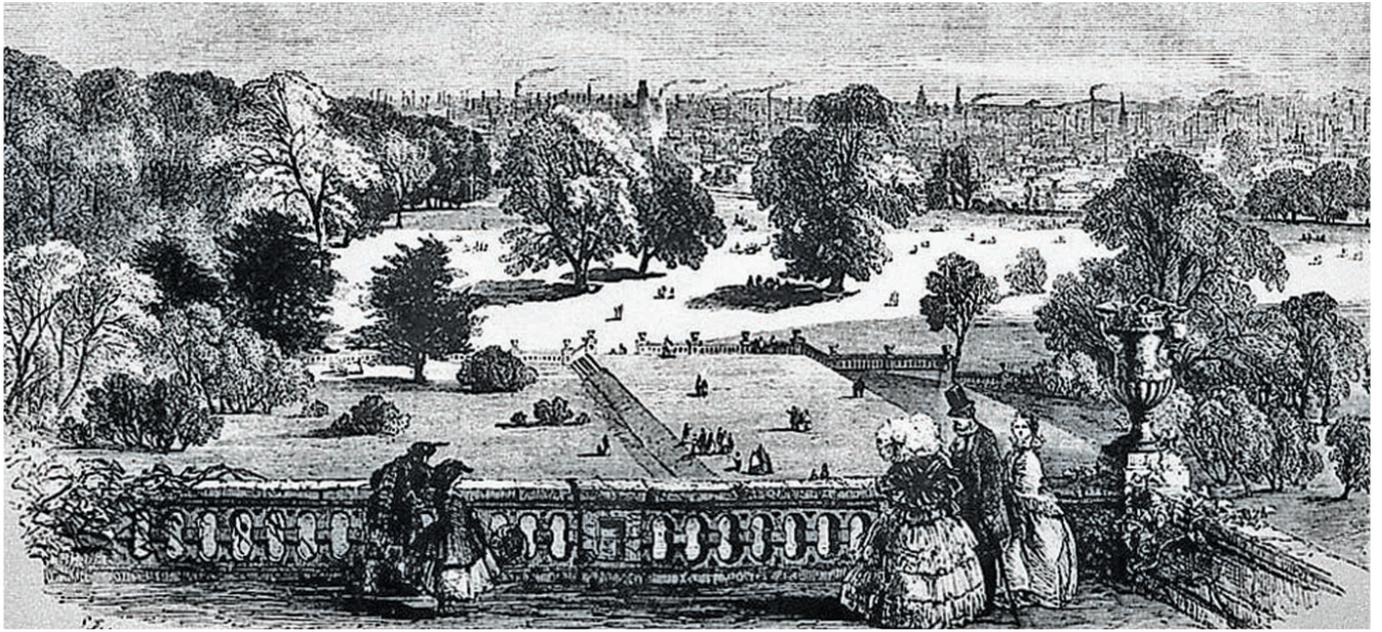
Prince Albert would receive. But even *The Times* had to concede that ‘dark insinuations of danger’ were an atrocious libel on the people of Birmingham. They acclaimed the Queen enthusiastically, a theme picked up by the *Morning Post*.

Its correspondent affirmed that ‘Manchester, Liverpool and Edinburgh have boasted the loyal expenditure in welcoming the sovereign’s occasional visits, but it has been reserved for the “Queen of the Midland Counties” to show what could be accomplished when good taste and unsparing zeal combined to offer a loyal reception to Her Majesty, upon the occasion of her first visit to the neighbourhood’. Indeed there may have been equally gratifying displays of loyal affection elsewhere ‘but assuredly none ever worked harder or more effectively than the loyal inhabitants of Birmingham, which for once put on holiday attire, and lost for a period its reputed work day and sombre character’.

A reporter for the *Globe* was as fulsome in his praise for the Queen’s welcome by half a million people ‘gathered from the great city and the adjacent districts’. The last time a sovereign had come close to Birmingham was in the English Civil War, when Charles I had stayed at Aston Hall. He left to fight the Battle of Edgehill and ‘Birmingham sallied forth and laid siege to the royalist stronghold’. By contrast, multitudes now lined the streets whilst ‘the house-fronts and house-tops were alive with warm-hearted subjects’.

As the *Manchester Examiner* revealed, large sums of money were spent by the principal tradesmen and residents in dressing up the fronts of their premises. Even in the back streets, every shop and dwelling had at least a flagpole or a bit of bunting. Everywhere was a cacophony of joyful noise, the lusty cheers of the onlookers vying for supremacy with ‘the musical clangour from many a steeple and tower’ and with the strains of military and other bands.

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A sketch of a view of industrial Birmingham from Aston Hall on the day of Queen Victoria's visit.

Queen Victoria arrived by rail just after 12 noon, and was escorted to a reception at the Town Hall, where the Mayor presented a loyal address to her. The Queen replied that:

It is most gratifying to me to have the opportunity of visiting this ancient and enterprising town, the centre of so much of our manufacturing industry; and I trust you may long remain in the full enjoyment of that liberty and security without which even industry itself must fail to reap its appropriate reward. I desire you will convey to the vast community which you represent, my sincere thanks for their cordial welcome, assuring them at the same time of the pleasure I have derived from witnessing the great and increasing prosperity of Birmingham and its neighbourhood.

After a second address to Prince Albert and his response, the Queen knighted the Mayor. Sir John Ratcliff then escorted her to Aston Hall. The *Morning Herald* was thrilled that over the two-mile journey 'the streets presented the appearance of a grand floral arcade – every house had its flags and ensigns, and at intervals the scene was rendered the more imposing by the erection of grand triumphal arches, upon the decorations of which neither time nor expense had been spared'. Many newspapers commented particularly upon the gunmakers' arch.

For the *Liverpool Daily Post* the most important feature was the preservation of Aston Hall and its noble grounds as 'a public park and museum for the people'. If Liverpool could proudly boast of a great public benefactor in William Brown, then Birmingham, too, 'can turn with pride to the munificence of a private individual, whose chief characteristic is to be the fit representative of a numerous class – a working man grown rich by industry'.

This theme was brought to the fore at Aston Hall in the address to the Queen by Sir Francis Scott. He stressed that:

In some towns in your Majesty's dominions public parks have wisely been provided by wealthy Corporations; in others by the munificence of philanthropic citizens; here, also, we are indebted to private liberality for two places of recreation for the people but to Birmingham alone has it been given to secure by her own exertions an ancient Park for the physical relaxation – an ancient Hall for the mental cultivation – of her variously employed and laborious population.

Your Majesty will, we believe, be gratified to learn that Aston Hall and Park have been acquired for the most part by the industry and economy of the people themselves. Of the money required for this purpose a very large proportion has been subscribed by the working classes, a circumstance which we venture to hope will not be without interest and satisfaction to your Majesty.

Four of the interim managers were presented to the Queen. They were W. Lucy, T. Lloyd, J. P. Turner, and J. A. Langford. Her Majesty also 'showed her appreciation of the part which the working men had taken in this work by having Messrs T. Twiss, G. Tarplee, C. Hawkesford, H. G. Quilter, H. Bourne, M. Lees, D. J. O'Neill, and S. Partridge, all members of the committee of the Aston Hall and Park Company, called before her'. She recognised 'with pleasure the labour you have undertaken in providing thus worthily for the physical and intellectual improvement of the working classes, and I sincerely hope that this Hall and Park will prove a boon and a comfort to the people of Birmingham'. After more presentations, Queen Victoria passed from the grand gallery to the balcony. She was received with the most deafening of cheers by the assembled thousands and then pronounced the park open.

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Queen Victoria's Intervention

Regrettably, following the royal visit the public take-up of both shares and donations dropped off, whilst some existing shareholders failed to keep up their payments. The managers of Aston Hall and Park realised that a large amount of money was needed soon to keep up the disbursements to the vendors. Thomas Lloyd, a banker from the wealthy family that founded Lloyd's Bank and a keen Liberal, was treasurer of the Aston Hall and Park Company. In December 1858, he approached the Mayor, Sir John Ratcliff, to lead a campaign to raise £10,000 and to make a significant contribution himself.

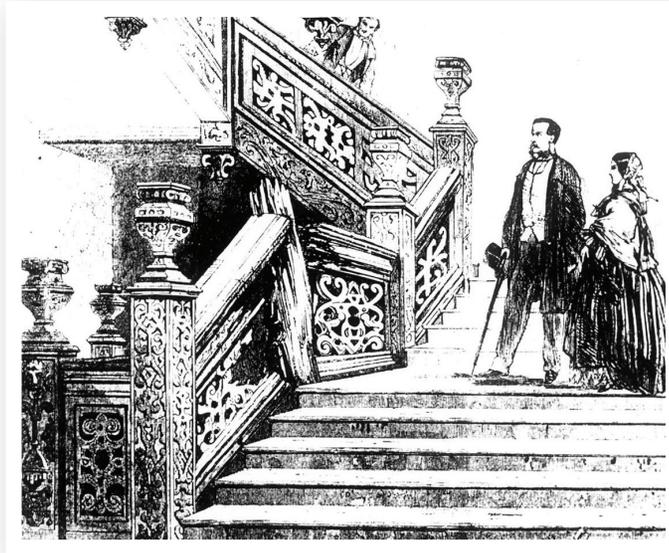
As for Lloyd he would gift £1,000. He felt that none could refuse such an appeal for 'with a little self-sacrifice we shall perform our promise to the Queen; for everyone who took part in the reception of the Queen did promise to make Aston Park a Free Park'. Lloyd had one condition. The whole venture had been 'a workman's affair, and the workmen have done well; but I would make the payment of the subscriptions depend upon the co-operation of the employed, and their subscribing half the amount required'.

Despite the fact that he had been knighted because of the Queen's visit to Aston Hall and Park, Sir John Ratcliff failed to take up the challenge. The response was as muted from the general public. A canvassing committee was then appointed which organised a highly successful fête in July 1859. It raised almost £2,000 but problems continued. Too few people bought shares, or could afford to do so; mismanagement led to lower profits from big events; several thousand pounds had been spent on repairs and decorations to Aston Hall; and as Langford stressed, 'with a few honourable exceptions, wealthy citizens were conspicuously absent in their support'.

By early 1861, the new Committee for the Aston Hall and Park Company had the difficult task of re-negotiating terms with the vendors as it was impossible for them to make the required payments. In an effort to make money quickly, the famed tightrope artiste Blondin was engaged to make his first appearance in

Birmingham at a two-day fête on 8 and 9 June 1861. Nearly £2,000 profit was made, but this only allowed a payment of £1,080 interest to the proprietors and £920 on account of the purchase.

A similar fête was held the next year, but Langford recorded gloomily that 'the attractions of Blondin were no more what they had been. The first keen edge of excitement was gone, and the fête was a comparative failure'. It raised only £200. The



Queen Victoria and Prince Albert on the staircase of Aston Hall on the occasion of their visit.



Boys playing on what looks like a type of climbing frame in the early 1900s – thanks to the campaign to save Aston Hall and Park. This and another set of 'gymnastic apparatus', as they were called, were donated in 1900 by Edward Ansell, of the family of Aston brewers. The previous year, Frederick Smith, a member of another firm of Aston brewers, had gifted the park with a bandstand.

general working of the Aston Hall and Park Company was good, amount owing was too great. Then in 1863 there came a crisis. The Foresters' Fête on 20 July featured 'the Female Blondin (Mrs Powell)'. Tragically, as she was performing on the high rope it broke 'and the poor woman was killed on the spot'.

This terrible accident prompted the Queen to have a letter written on 25 July to the Mayor, Charles Sturge, the brother of Joseph, the campaigner for peace and working-class rights. She wanted to make known 'her personal feelings of horror that one of her subjects, a female, should have been sacrificed to the gratification of the demoralising taste unfortunately prevalent for exhibitions attended with the greatest danger to the performers'.

Such exhibitions were deemed demoralising, and the Queen trusted that the Mayor, 'in common with the rest of the townspeople of Birmingham, will use your influence to prevent in future

the degradation to such exhibitions of the Park which was gladly opened by her Majesty and the beloved Prince Consort, in the hope that it would be made serviceable for the healthy exercise and rational recreation of the people'.

Chastened, the mayor hastened to give the Queen 'my humble assurance that there is not in the kingdom an individual who laments more sincerely than myself, not only the melancholy accident to which you refer, but the depraved taste for a barbarous species of amusement which unhappily has

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become popular, not only in the Metropolis, but in all parts of her Majesty's home dominions'.

As for the future, although Aston Park was beyond Birmingham's jurisdiction, he hoped that 'their influence and that of their fellow townsmen, will henceforth limit its use exclusively to the healthy exercise and rational recreation of the people, so that the gracious intentions of her Majesty and her revered Consort may not be frustrated but realised'.

The Secretary of State, Sir George Grey, also addressed a letter to the Managers of the Aston Hall and Park Company expressing his 'hope that after this melancholy occurrence you will not allow a repetition of such dangerous performances in the Park'. The managers concurred with these sentiments and stated they had 'endeavoured, as far as possible, to provide healthful recreation and instruction for the people'. On this particular occasion the Park had been let for a charitable purpose and the managers had not reserved any right to control the performances.

It was now obvious that Aston Hall and Park could not be bought by the Aston Hall and Park Company – in spite of the best efforts of all concerned. Only £9,000 of the purchase money of £35,000 had been paid; and it was feared that if the Company collapsed, as was a possibility, then Aston Hall and Park would be lost to the people for ever. The Managers realised this and on 4 August sent a resolution to the same Council meeting at which the Queen's letter was read out. It stated that they were 'desirous that steps should be taken to arrange with the Corporation for the completion of the purchase'.

Allday, the chief protagonist of the Economists, had lost his position on the Council four years before, in 1859, yet still the Council was characterised by lethargy. It dithered and prevaricated; worse than that, according to the *Birmingham Daily Post*, the application

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A superb view of industrial East Birmingham from the vantage point of Aston Hall. (Library of Birmingham) In the foreground a gardener works on the flower beds; on the left is Aston Parish Church; and on the right are the gas works in Nechells Place. This scene from the 1950s is similar to the sketch from the time of Queen Victoria's visit and emphasises the point she made about the need for Aston Park 'as a place of healthy exercise and recreation' in the midst of a hive of industry.

from the Managers 'was received coldly'. It was referred to the Baths and Parks Committee – a grand title for a body that oversaw only two parks, both of which had been donated to the town by benefactors. Moreover, the motion in favour of acceding to the proposal was rejected by 40 votes to 11.

On 8 October the Mayor then wrote to Lord Leigh in the latter's capacity as Lord Lieutenant of Warwickshire – given that Aston was not then part of Birmingham and was a parish in that county. The Mayor stressed that 'unless means are used, without delay, to secure the property in perpetuity for the rational recreation of the people, possession will be resumed by its former owners'. This would be a catastrophe and could only be averted if Aston Hall and Park were vested in a responsible public body, in particular the Corporation of Birmingham. It would cost £28,000 'to effect this desirable object', on top of which 'a considerable additional outlay must be incurred in fencing, restoration, and otherwise, to render the Hall and Park suitable for the contemplated purpose'.

Ironically, given the Council's longstanding antipathy to providing municipal public parks and its ill-favoured reputation for procrastination, the Mayor declared that 'redemption is even now not impossible, if prompt and energetic measures be adopted'. He believed that the money could be raised by the combined efforts of the Corporation, Lord Leigh and the justices and gentlemen of Warwickshire; 'in short, if the County will move in the matter promptly and energetically, as they will I am sure on your Lordship's call, I will move the Council for a vote of £20,000, and I am satisfied I shall not move in vain'.

Lord Leigh did indeed approach the magistracy of Warwickshire to call a meeting to raise the £8,000 sought by the Mayor. They deemed it inadvisable to do so. The Mayor had their decision conveyed to the Queen. Now alerted to the ominous situation of

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The Great Hall at Aston Hall (now the entrance hall) where on 22 September 1864 the Mayor of Birmingham, W. Holiday, gave a banquet to celebrate the opening of Aston Park as a Free Park and the saving of Aston Hall.

the Park she had opened, in early November 1864 she instructed another letter to be sent to the Mayor. It was strongly worded and in effect chastised the Council for its lack of action:

The Queen regretted very much to hear that there exists a possibility of the people of Birmingham losing the enjoyment of Aston Park as a place of healthy exercise and recreation. In such a hive of industry, an open area for relaxation and amusement after toil must be most valuable.

Her Majesty had hoped that this requirement had been permanently provided for; and Her Majesty is still unwilling to believe that, in a locality in which so much wealth is found in proximity to the hard labour by which it is produced, funds can be wanting to secure to the population an enjoyment the value of which they have been taught to estimate by the temporary use of Aston Park.

Aston Hall and Park Saved

The intervention of the Queen and the bad publicity that it engendered for Birmingham stirred a group of philanthropic men to do something. They included longstanding supporters of public parks such as Thomas Lloyd and the Reverend Dr Miller of St Martin's. Other prominent members included John Skirrow Wright, an ardent reformer and Liberal councillor, and George Dixon. A recently-elected councillor, Dixon was passionately concerned with opening up education to children of all classes and would become a Birmingham MP who is still recalled in a school named after him.

Dixon and his brother donated £1,000 to a new fund; as did Thomas Lloyd, George Frederick Muntz, and Louisa Anne Ryland, the heiress of the wide Ryland estates. Several other leading men gave between £100 and £500 so that a total of £7,000 was raised. This sum was added to that which the Aston Hall and Park Company had already paid towards the purchase, and was offered to the Town Council if they would complete the undertaking. Langford wrote that 'after several long and weary discussions', on 2 February 1864 the Council finally voted £20,000 for that purpose.

The Company's last meeting was held in May, when a testimonial was presented to Langford, in recognition of his services as honorary secretary. This consisted of 'a handsome gold watch, a copy of Knight's *Pictorial Shakespeare* in seven volumes, and Robert Bell's *Golden Leaves*. The Company was then wound up and the purchase was completed by the Council on 12 September 1864. Ten days later Aston Park was at last opened as a Free Park by the Mayor, W. Holiday, who gave a banquet in the Great Gallery of Aston Hall in celebration.

The next day the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that the Aston Hall and Park movement had been brought to a successful conclusion. For the previous seven years it had been one of the prominent items of local agitations 'but its rate of progression has become more and more feeble with each succeeding year'. After the great fêtes of 1856, 'the whole community seemed animated with the sentiment "Save Aston Hall"'. A perfect whirlwind of enthusiasm then arose in favour of securing the old mansion and its appurtenances for public use.'

Importantly the newspaper maintained that 'the pioneers of the cause were a body of working men'. Their vital efforts were soon to be forgotten, as was the working-class campaign for public parks that had begun in the early 1850s. Langford himself wrote with some sorrow that:

Although the names of the donors of the £7,000 are very properly exhibited on a tablet in the entrance hall, no allusion is made to the working-men who gave up their shares, or to the company who had paid £14,000 towards the purchase of the Hall and Park, and who expended a large sum in beautifying the park, and collected at considerable cost, aided by donations, the exhibition which is now one of the chief attractions of the place. The shareholders generously gave all this to the town, and up to this time have received no word of recognition or of thanks for their act. Let us hope that impartial history will reverse this injustice, and render honour to whom honour is due. The time to do so is well overdue.

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An inspection in 1926 of Aston Park by the Parks Committee, which held annual inspections of each municipal park.

The acquisition of Aston Hall by Birmingham Corporation is thought to be the first instance where a major historic building was saved by a municipality – although in reality that municipality was tardy and reluctant in its actions. The greater part of the Hall's contents, however, had been sold in 1817 and 1849 so that only a few portraits and pieces of original furniture were returned after the Council took ownership. As a result, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery furnished the building as much as possible in accordance with its inventories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Still, Aston Hall itself is one of the finest Jacobean houses in England and as such is Grade I listed, whilst the Park is Grade II listed on the Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Interest.

Until 1911, the administration of Birmingham's parks came under the Baths and Parks Committee; in that year, however, the two elements were separated. Then in 1924 the Birmingham Civic Society re-planned a large area of the park. It also carried out the work with the Parks Department, ensuring that the gardens would reflect the style that may have been contemporary to the Hall when it was built. This approach introduced formal bedding schemes to the east and west fronts and ensured that these gardens had views. Other work included the partial screening from the

Hall of the park's sports facilities, which included tennis courts, bowling greens, playing fields, and children's playground. Within the building paint was removed from the panelling and stone chimney-pieces, whilst modern glass in the windows at the end of the Long Gallery was replaced by leaded glazing given by the famed glassmaking works of Messrs Chance Brothers in Smethwick.

Since they were saved, Aston Hall and Park have been vital features not only of Aston but also of Birmingham. Their importance was recognised early in the twenty-first century when Birmingham City Council, Aston Pride New Deal for Communities and the Heritage Lottery Fund came together to provide for a multi-million pound scheme of building and landscape works to secure the future of the Hall and Park both as a major cultural heritage asset locally, regionally and nationally and as a significant resource for the local community. Now managed by the Birmingham Museums Trust as a community museum, Aston Hall has become not only a wonderful historic building to visit but also an engaging centre for education, a stunning wedding and conference venue, and an exciting activities centre. ●

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Aston Hall today.

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Professor Carl Chinn is a well-known author and broadcaster on the social history of Birmingham, the Black Country and the urban working class.

Further Reading

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To visit Aston Hall: <http://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/aston>

Also listen to Carl Chinn's audio podcast: Saving Aston Hall and Park: The story
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