

Dartmouth Park, West Bromwich

Design collaboration with Bryant Priest Newman Architects for a new community pavilion.

A History of Dartmouth Park, West Bromwich

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Purpose

The following text is additional to the histories of Dartmouth Park already provided in the 2001 Statutory Historic Environment Designation GD3379, and in the Conservation Management Plan prepared by LDA in 2005. This new text corrects some factual errors, brings new information into play, and, usefully, provides a starting point for understanding and interpreting the original design for Dartmouth Park in West Bromwich.

Scene Setting

“The park is naturally so fine a situation, with such good views and beautifully undulating varieties of ground and has already such great advantages from containing so many trees which give it at once a park-like character, that much less is needed or even desirable, in the way of planting than would otherwise be the case, this is doubly advantageous when the cost of planting is considered...” [Exsuperius Weston Turnor]

Exsuperius Weston Turnor, land agent from Brereton, near Rugeley [note 1], advised the 5th Earl of Dartmouth and the West Bromwich Improvement Commissioners on both the location for the park and on the appointment by competition of John Maclean, landscape gardener of Castle Donington [note 2], as the park’s designer.

Turnor’s assessment of the site’s “park-like” qualities is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it indicates something of the desired design aesthetic for the finished park. Good views, beautifully undulating ground, and many trees suggests something within the English Landscape tradition [note 3], summarised by Frederick Law Olmsted [note 4] as broad, sweeping lawns defined by groves of trees, with some trees standing apart from the main group so that their noble features might be observed; illusions of great distances created through the use of long vistas, middle-distance plantings; undulations in ground form for interest, winding, peripheral paths and drives, which gave the illusion of great breadth. Certainly Maclean’s design for the Williamson Park in Lancaster, completed just prior to his starting work in West Bromwich, is very much in line with Olmsted’s palette of ingredients – and it is these same ingredients in Dartmouth Park that we can associate most closely with John Maclean.

Secondly, Turnor’s statement suggests that little additional work was required to create a public park from the 22.7ha of the Earl of Dartmouth’s estate set aside for the West Bromwich Improvement Commissioners in 1876 on a 99 year lease and at a nominal rent of £1 per year. That the setting out costs for the park came in at just over five times the original budget of £2,500 contradicts Turnor’s assessment of “much less is needed or even desirable” – indeed, this was obviously a case of much more being needed or desired for reasons not yet fully understood.

Dartmouth Park Original Components

As the 1890 first edition Ordnance Survey shows, the original park was set out to include a main entrance at the Mayer’s Green road junction, a lodge (designed by local architect Elliott. J. Etwell), a wide avenue (at some time known as Jubilee Avenue) leading to a fountain donated by the Earl of Dartmouth from his estate at Patshull. Beyond this, a north-south driveway along the ridge line looping outwards to the eastern boundary, secondary footpaths, a woodland belt to the northern, western and, in part, southern boundaries, woodland clumps at path intersections, and a circular lake (constructed by local builder John Jeavons).

Although also shown on the 1890 OS, the Refreshment Rooms (designed by West Bromwich based architects Wood & Kendrick) and the Bandstand (donated by Alderman Reuben Farley) were added sometime after Dartmouth Park opened in 1878 but before 1887.

The 1840 Survey

The assumption that the layout of the public park was simply an enhancement of the site's already existing "park-like character" may be slightly misleading. About 1840, William Salter, a surveyor living on New Street, West Bromwich, made a complete plan of the Earl of Dartmouth's estates at West Bromwich and elsewhere [note 5].

Salter shows the 22.7ha later set aside for Dartmouth Park as comprising several distinct fields, areas of dense woodland blocks, a number of individual trees sometimes associated with field boundaries, a small pond, but no obvious footways, roads or tracks.

John Maclean's original design for Dartmouth Park does, indeed, make use of some of these existing landscape assets – the established woodland belt and clumps are retained in part, as is a tree line along one original field boundary, and Jeavons' small lake is situated on the site of an earlier pond and spring, but otherwise, everything else was designed in.

With the exception of the western boundary, which had to respect the line of Gregory Street running into Lloyd Street at the Mayer's Green junction, the other boundaries that enclose the 22.7ha area set aside for the public park do not follow existing field edges – indeed, they appear arbitrarily drawn through Salter's plots 40, 53, 55 and 66.

Of course it could be argued that the landscape was changed during the 35 plus year period between the Salter plan and Maclean's design, but this is unlikely. As a consequence of West Bromwich's industrial expansion, the 4th Earl of Dartmouth had abandoned Sandwell Hall by the early 1850s and moved to his recently acquired estate at Patshull near Wolverhampton where he died in 1853. It is unlikely that, through the 1840s, the Earl would have been investing in landscape improvements to an area blighted by increasing levels of industrial pollution carried on the prevailing winds from the west.

Moving Through The Landscape

On the whole, it can be seen that Maclean's design for Dartmouth Park is an enhancement of the the existing landscape asset, with additional planting as necessary to achieve an agreed English landscape experience, plus driveways and footpaths necessary to allow the site to function as a public park.

This moving through (driving or walking) what appears to be a 'natural' landscape is at the core of the English landscape aesthetic, and clearly guides Maclean's design for Dartmouth Park (and earlier for Williamson Park in Lancaster). Dartmouth Park is arranged as set piece framed scenes or views, revealed or hidden by visitor movement in real time and space.

Essentially, this is the vocabulary and syntax of landscape painting made real, and the artistry of 'natural' landscape design lies in how scenes are framed and set up. It should be noted here that John Maclean always described himself as a 'landscape gardener', a term invented by Humphrey Repton to explain the skills required for successful landscape design as "the united powers of the landscape painter and the practical gardener" [note 6].

That having been said, though, Dartmouth Park is more than the expression of the English landscape tradition - there is something else at play here.

Nothing But The View

"It led to nothing but a view at the end...[.] It was a sweet view – sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive." [Jane Austen: 'Emma' 1816]

The Dartmouth Park Avenue, running almost exactly west to east, would have delivered the visitor to a magnificent view over the River Tame valley – today this view is obscured by the dense tree canopy.

In 'garden' design, the use of a tree-lined avenue to emphasise vista (long, narrow view) predates, and is not essentially part of, the English landscape tradition. The avenue as strong axial line, usually aligned upon an important feature in the distance (which doesn't seem to be the case at Dartmouth Park), was very much part of Baroque garden design in mainland Europe, particularly in Italy and France.

As a design contrivance in European formal garden design, the Avenue sits uncomfortably within the more informal (or 'natural') vocabulary of the English landscape tradition, as expressed elsewhere at Dartmouth Park. It certainly does not appear to be part of John Maclean's design repertoire.

The Pythagorean 'Y' & The Choice of Hercules

"...theory gives fresh meaning to old places, connects the seemingly unrelated, and grounds action." [Anne Whiston Spirn: "The Language of Landscape"]

At Dartmouth Park the Avenue was designed to terminate at the fountain donated by the Earl of Dartmouth, before forking north and south to lead the visitor along the ridge line. This arrangement of a forked long, narrow path is known in garden design as a Pythagorean 'Y' and, unlike the rest of Dartmouth Park, is best read in plan form.

It should be kept in mind that, as a consequence of the West Bromwich Improvement Act, the creation of Dartmouth Park was about both physical AND moral improvement – "the weary toiler may delight and invigorate himself whilst moralizing on the beauties of nature so profusely spread around him" [note 7]. Consequently, if understanding the design of the Park is only focused on its physical attributes (its buildings, landscaping, footpaths, etc.), a possible landscape metaphor may be overlooked.

In garden design (the original scheme for Villa d'Este at Tivoli, for example), the Pythagorean 'Y' is used to reference the 'Choice of Hercules'. After pursuing the straight and uneventful path of youth and on the verge of manhood, Hercules contemplates his future when two women appear to him. One, Vice, eager and seductive, shows him a path which seems to offer easy progress to a life of indolent pleasure. The other, tall and beautiful and identified as Virtue, warns Hercules that what is truly good can only be obtained through hard effort – and only then can Hercules gain supreme glory. It should be noted that the "straight and narrow" Avenue at Dartmouth Park has increased in width over the years – it was originally designed as a narrow 6.8 yards width and its subsequent widening possibly relates to the installation of the War Memorial in the 1923.

Given the instrumental intentions behind the creation of the new Park, is it possible that a landscape metaphor taken from Xenophon's 'Memorabilia or Memoirs of Socrates' was being introduced into the design as moral guidance to the Dartmouth Park visitor? It is more than likely.

In 1870, Frederick Law Olmsted [note 8] clearly linked the importance of the public park to mitigating "the special evils by which men are afflicted in towns", and in later versions of the story of the Choice of Hercules, vice is reinterpreted as 'active', and virtue as 'reflection'. Even today, we expect our public parks to give us opportunity to be active or to reflect.

They Knew Their Onions

"[the 2nd Earl] had a great fondness for the Axe, freely pruning the Sandwell Park trees. One day when he climbed one of them, some persons having business with him, were passing and being strangers personally, and doubtful if they were on the right track for the hall, seeing a plainly dressed woodman in the tree, as they supposed, shouted out "My man, can you tell us if we are going right for the Hall". The Earl (of Dartmouth) quietly, directed them, then

descending the tree rapidly, and by a short cut, reached the Hall before them to transact the business they came upon, doubtless to their surprise and confusion." [Handsworth Chronicle 5th April 1890]

The 17th century gardens at Villa d'Este, Tivoli were dedicated to Hercules, and the central axis was terminated by a fountain at which point the visitor had to choose between paths leading left or right. Certainly the 5th Earl of Dartmouth donated the fountain that completes the arrangement of the Avenue at Dartmouth Park, and this fountain was located exactly where the path forks. Is this just coincidence, or is this indicative of an additional something beyond Turner's original assessment of the site's "park-like character" and his "less is needed or even desirable"?

The Earls of Dartmouth are closely associated with landscape design and horticulture [note 9]. Sandwell Park's 'cultivated lawns', praised in verse in 1767, were laid out by the 2nd Earl who had travelled with the landscape painter Richard Wilson through Italy in the mid-1750s. Wilson, sometimes recognised as the founder of the British landscape school, made 68 drawings and watercolours of the great gardens in and near Rome (including Tivoli) for the 2nd Earl's collection.

When William Walter Legge, Viscount Lewisham MP acceded to the title the 5th Earl of Dartmouth in 1853, he began to introduce terraces, formal gardens, fountains, and new walks in to the landscape set out at Patshull by Capability Brown in 1768. In doing this, the 5th Earl of Dartmouth was 'adjusting' the 'natural' landscape design aesthetic appreciated by his ancestors by using J. C. Loudon's 'Principle of Recognition' [note 10] – "Any creation, to be recognised as a work of art, must be such as can never be mistaken for a work of nature".

This shift towards Loudon's notion of the Gardenesque, in which the 5th Earl was advised by William Broderick Thomas, the landscape gardener at Sandringham House, could be the reason why the 'natural' design of Dartmouth Park includes a formal avenue characteristic of the Baroque.

The Avenue As Mathematical Conundrum

"...of all is number and the belief that certain numerical relationships manifest the harmonic structure of the universe." [Pythagorean Concept]

Baroque gardens of the 17th century make use of mathematics and science, particularly geometry, optics and perspective – and numerical relationships determine the design of the Avenue at Dartmouth Park.

Entering the Park from the Mayer's Green entrance, the visitor passes through a wide 'extended threshold' that leads to the "straight and narrow" section of the Avenue. The Avenue, originally terminated by a fountain at the point where the path forks north and south, gives access to the views of the River Tame valley along the ridge line that runs north to south through the Park.

The width of the 'extended threshold' is 11 yards (or 2 poles), and this functions as the basic dimension by which the proportions of the Avenue can be understood.

The width of the Avenue (the "straight and narrow" part of the Pythagorean 'Y on the 1890 OS) is the golden ratio of this basic dimension – i.e. 0.618 the width of the extended threshold (11 yards x 0.618 = 6.798 yards).

The overall distance of the axis from the Park gates to the north/south driveway along the ridge line is 220 yards or one furlong in length – this is exactly the midpoint of the original area of the Park. The natural ridge line was originally some distance short of this length, the natural topography dropping away just at the point where the Avenue begins to fork. That the overall length of the axis was extended to achieve the 220 yards or one furlong length was probably not a chance decision. The basic dimension of 11 yards run through the Fibonacci sequence of 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 is 220 yards or one furlong.

Concluding Comment

"The want of a public park at West Bromwich has long been felt and would indeed be a great boon to the hardy sons of toil whose life it is to dwell here." [Reuben Farley to the Earl of Dartmouth]

It is unlikely that today's visitor to Dartmouth Park would recognise the Avenue as either a work of art or as a mathematical conundrum. Or even as something of an enigma within the overall 'natural' ambience of the rest of the Park. The appearance of a particular landscape changes over time, it matures and moves further and further away from the intentions of its original designers. Dartmouth Park now appears more natural than originally intended, and this conceals the social and cultural agendas of its first authors and commissioners.

It is more than likely that the meaning and associative possibilities that may underpin the original design of Dartmouth Park are today obscured by our mass media induced need for the immediately intelligible. And anyway, a park is just a park. Isn't it?

The idea of a public park today is still to do with social responsibility, citizenship and neighbourliness, and we still visit parks to be active or to reflect. We still need, as Woollaston said, the opportunity "to delight and invigorate [ourselves] whilst moralizing on the beauties of nature...". Good design still engages with these issues. Particularly so in the context of the Heritage Lottery Fund's 'Parks for People' restoration and regeneration programme.

Notes

1. Exsuperius Weston Turnor (1831 - 1909) was a 'land agent' or 'estate agent', and not a landscape gardener as stated in the Statutory Historic Environment Designation. He was the son of Michael Turnor, land agent to the Lane family estate at Abbot's Bromley, near Rugeley.
2. John Maclean, landscape gardener of Castle Donington, was born in Scotland about 1833. Although he lists his occupation as 'Market Gardener' in the 1871 Census, in all other Census Returns and Directories he is listed as 'Landscape Gardener'.
3. For the purposes of this text, the English Landscape tradition is understood as being the "progress of taste" associated with Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and the publication in 1780 of Horace Walpole's "The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening".
4. Frederick Law Olmsted (1822 - 1903) designed many parks in the USA, including Central Park and Prospect Park in New York. In 1850 he travelled to England to visit public gardens and was greatly impressed by Joseph Paxton's Birkenhead Park (the first public park in England), and subsequently published 'Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England' in 1852. This text references Olmsted's 'Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns' of 1870.
5. Staffordshire Record Office, Document Reference Number 575: 'Plan of Estates in the Parishes of West Bromwich, Handsworth, Harborne, Wednesbury and Aldridge, belonging to the Earl of Dartmouth' nd [c1840]
6. Humphrey Repton (1752 - 1818) succeeded 'Capability' Brown as head gardener at Hampton Court and was the first to assume the title of landscape gardener. Repton outlined the four principles of landscape gardening as: 'The perfection of landscape gardening consists in the four following requisites. First, it must display the natural beauties and hide the defects of every situation. Secondly, it should give the appearance of extent and freedom by carefully disguising or hiding the boundary. Thirdly it must studiously conceal every interference of art. Fourthly, all objects of mere convenience or comfort, if incapable of being made ornamental, or of becoming proper parts of the general scenery, must be removed or concealed.'
7. From Thomas Woollaston: 'Review of Dartmouth Park' 1889.

8. Frederick Law Olmsted 'Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns' as read before the American Social Science Association, at the Lowell Institute, Boston, February 25, 1870

9. Beyond the 2nd Earl's support of English landscape painting and his setting out of Sandwell Park, the 3rd Earl was the first President of the (Royal) Horticultural Society, and the 4th Earl was the first president of the Birmingham Botanical and Horticultural Society. Besides Dartmouth Park in West Bromwich, the 5th Earl also 'created' a Dartmouth Park in Morley, West Yorkshire and a Dartmouth Park in Hampstead, London.

10. John Claudius Loudon (1783 - 1843) was a prolific writer on horticultural and landscape design, and published *The Encyclopaedia of Gardening* in 1822 and founded the *Gardener's Magazine* in 1826. He was a great advocate of public parks and published important works on glass houses, architecture, horticulture and agriculture. He also reintroduced into English landscape gardening aspects of earlier European gardens that had been out of favour in Britain for more than a century.

Appended Note – The Pythagorean 'Y' & the Choice of Hercules Pythagorean 'Y'

"Pythagoras of Samos was the first to fashion the letter Y into a pattern of human life. The straight portion at the bottom signifies the first, uncertain age, which at that point has been given over to neither vices nor virtues. The bifurcation at the top, however, begins at adolescence. The path to the right is difficult, but it tends toward a blessed life. The path to the left is easier, but it leads to ruin and destruction." [Isidore of Seville c.560-636 CE]

The Choice of Hercules

The earliest source for the story of the Choice of Hercules is the *Memorabilia* or *Memoirs of Socrates*, II.1.21-34, by the Greek historian Xenophon (c428-c354 BC), where it is presented as a summary by Socrates of a lost poem by Prodicus of Ceos. Hercules, on the verge of manhood, is contemplating his future. Two women appear to him. One, eager and seductive, shows him a path which seems to offer easy progress to a life of indolent pleasure. 'My friends', she says, 'call me Happiness (eudaimonia), but to those who hate me I am known as Vice (kakia)'. The second woman, tall and austere beautiful, is identified as Virtue. She warns Hercules that what is truly good can only be obtained through hard effort; only by following the rougher and steeper path she indicates can Hercules gain supreme glory. Which path Hercules chooses is not directly stated, but Xenophon's readers, knowing that Hercules had gained a place in the heavens as a reward for his many heroic deeds, did not need to be told.

The story became a fairly popular subject for Renaissance and Baroque painters (including Paolo Veronese, Nicholas Poussin, Peter Paul Rubens, Annibale Caracci and Sebastiano Ricci) and was made accessible to English readers in a paraphrase by Joseph Addison, published in *The Tatler* of 22 November 1709. Handel's one-act dramatic cantata, *The Choice of Hercules*, was first performed at Covent Garden on 1 March 1751.

You get into conversation with the older visitors and ask them about the Park, and they tell you about their youth. As if they mean to say, 'If we forget, we get lost'.

"I love above all else the appearance of people who have grown old without breaking with old customs." [Cézanne to Jules Borély – The Courtauld Institute Gallery]

Memory is place orientated: "The very materiality of a place means that memory is not abandoned to the vagaries of mental processes and is instead inscribed in the landscape – as public memory." [Tim Cresswell: 'Place' 2004]

John Maclean, the original designer of Dartmouth Park, was in the business of making landscape – a very visual idea, "...that which can be seen...and the way it is seen" [Cresswell]. He never described himself as a Landscape Architect, even though that's what he was and the term had been in common use, for sure, since Gilbert Laing Meason's 'Landscape Architecture of the Great Painters of Italy' of 1828.

"...there was the most exquisite green fringe to that fire-rotted, smoke-stained, dirty mantle of a Black Country" [David Christie Murray, novelist and journalist, born High Street, West Bromwich 1847]

Maclean was not a place-maker (except in the same way that Capability Brown was), and nor was he interested in 'place-memory' [E. S. Casey: 'Remembering – A Phenomenological Study' 1987].

The view is indeed important – but it is the bigger view ("the horizon of a new temporality that frames an action") that makes us morally responsible characters.

We should keep in mind that the creation of Dartmouth Park, as a consequence of the West Bromwich Improvement Act, was about both physical AND moral improvement - "the weary toiler may delight and invigorate himself whilst moralizing on the beauties of nature so profusely spread around him" [Woollaston]. Consequently, if we only focus on the physical attributes of the Park (its buildings, landscaping, footpaths, etc.), we miss its equally important (and much richer) historical significance as landscape metaphor.

"It allows...the self to be recast in a new perspective brought about by the cultural content to which the motion in the garden points. Thus it creates an opportunity for self-development." [[http:// www.doaks.org/Motion/10Motion.pdf](http://www.doaks.org/Motion/10Motion.pdf) - p31]

The locating of the War Memorial, in 1923, at the mid-point of the original avenue (which obviously destroyed the design intention of creating landscape vista) is a careless intersection of remembrance and...well, place-ment.

On a final note, J. B. Priestly says this in his 'English Journey': "I would rather spend a holiday in Tuscany than in the Black Country, but if I were compelled to chose between living in West Bromwich or Florence, I would make straight for West Bromwich."