

CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL
CHELMSFORD

ADMIRAL'S PARK, TOWER
GARDENS AND WEST PARK

TL 695 073

Admiral's Park and Tower Gardens are a composite of town centre parks located in the historic core of Chelmsford where the evidence of Victorian landscape can be traced along with history going back still further.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Admiral's Park is named after John Faithful Fortescue, a Rear Admiral in the Navy, who owned Writtle Lodge, previously known as Great Waterhouse, sited near the entrance to the Pitch and Putt course in West Park.

In 1596, Sir John Petre, Kt. settled properties on his son William on his marriage. Among these were the capital messuage called the Lodge in Writtle, then known as Great Waterhouse Farm (ERO, D/DP F12). Writtle Lodge was built in 1712 by George Bramston, Esq., (Whites Directory, 1848). It could not be ascertained if it replaced Great Waterhouse Farmhouse or was a completely new build. The 1777 Chapman and André map recorded Great Waterhouse Farm, part of which became Admiral's Park. There was no date found in the records as to when George Bramston ceased to be the owner of Writtle Lodge. Writing in 1978 Stan Jarvis extracted from Peter Muilman's *New and Complete History of Essex...by a Gentleman* (1772) the following passage:

Besides those already mentioned there are two very good estates in this parish (of Writtle), one called Great Water-House, the other the Little Water-House: and are both the property of – Frane [Fraine], of Serjeant's-inn...- They are so named from their low situation; in particular the former, which in times of very great rain is surrounded by water, and the passage to and from it rendered it impassable unless in a boat.

A description by a traveller in 1772 (cited in Chelmsford Planning Survey, 1945), 'The Chelmer and Cann [note spelling] form here an angle along which lie many pleasure gardens, etc., and some are agreeably laid out. On the banks of the rivers various temples and summer houses are built, some of which are so pretty in their construction as to display an elegance of taste in the projectors.' This Plan also stressed the importance of the preservation and maintenance of public open spaces and 'demanding constant vigilance' to retain them.

The 1777 map charts that the River Can had been channelized at some point but that the meander was still intact. Great Waterhouse estate, south of the meander, was most likely the site of Writtle Lodge. A comparison between the c1800 black and white print of Writtle Lodge depicts what appear to be two rivers at a lower level in front of the house; one straight and one sinuous, validating the siting of the house and the two courses of the river.

In the appendix of Thomas Wright's 1831 *'History and Topography of the County of Essex'* he describes a plate of Writtle Lodge as 'The seat of Vicesimus Knox, Esq.. This elegant mansion is enclosed in a park, which extends to the extremity of the large parish of Writtle and is distant nearly a mile from the town hall of Chelmsford. After this estate and house had been sold by the original proprietor, it was successively in the possession of various purchasers and remaining some time the property of Captain Frasier, was given in marriage with his daughter to Admiral Fortescue. The park is ornamented with finely-formed trees, of luxuriant growth; and the surrounding grounds, chiefly consisting of rich meadow lands, are exceedingly fertile. This seat is near the River Can, and lying rather low, is subject to be flooded when a sudden and heavy fall of rain occurs. On this account it was formerly called Great Waterhouse, as a farmhouse lower down the stream is named Little Waterhouse. The present owner of this estate is John Faithful Fortescue, Esq., the nephew of the admiral; and it is occupied by Vicesimus Knox, Esq., as his tenant.'

Admiral John Faithful Fortescue (1755-1819) changed the name of Great Waterhouse to Writtle Lodge and after his death, the estate eventually passed to his nephew John Faithful Fortescue (1805-1881). The house was then bought by John Attwood, owner of Hylands House, and he had it demolished about 1843-1848 as it spoiled the view. Writtle Lodge stood on high ground and was within direct line of sight of Hylands House.

In 1875 Admiral's Park was open parkland with scattered trees as shown in the 1875 ordnance survey map. Two springs and a gravel pit are charted in the north-west of the site. The pond shown on the 1843 Tithe map had, by 1875, gone and the area of the springs is marked as marshy ground. There are lines of trees concentrated on the eastern and western boundaries, in the area of the springs in the north-west and along the paths in the south-west. There are two paths; one crossing diagonally from south-west to north-east, and one bordering the inner edge of the spring and gravel pit area, running north-south. The River Can old course or meander was still present but annotated as marshy ground. There were three footbridges over the river; one on the western boundary, one over the new stretch of river and one over the old course. Great Waterhouse south of the river is marked and has several rows and avenues of trees. Bundick's Hill and Rainsford Road, which border the Park to the north, have some roadside development. To the east of the Park (but not adjoining the Park) and south of Rainsford Road were two to four properties with extensive gardens. West of the spring area there was a gravel pit. The vast majority of the land around Admiral's Park was open countryside. Water from the springs in Admiral's Park was one of the sources tapped and used for Chelmsford.

There are no discernible differences to either the park or surrounding land between the 1875 ordnance survey map and the 1881 ordnance survey map. By 1896, however, there were major changes in evidence. Within Admiral's Park, the trees in the area of the spring and gravel pit were gone and the Chelmsford Corporation Water Tower and Reservoir are shown. The path running north to south had gone. To the south of the river, most of the meander had dried up with only a small pond area remaining under the footbridge. Some marshy ground in the vicinity of the meander next to the river was still charted. Most notable, however, was that there were now no trees in this area and that Great Waterhouse was no longer there, only Little Waterhouse remained. The gravel pit to the west, in what is now Tower Gardens, was substantially larger, indicating that it has been worked. There was a large property and garden outside the eastern boundary adjoining the Park. A substantial

development has been built north of Rainsford Road, Admiral's Park Estate (ERO, D/DDw T23/4). With the exception of the building along the Rainsford Road, the countryside surrounding Admiral's Park was still open.

A 1906 Watercolour painting of a footbridge over the River Cann at Writtle Lodge Park depicted a wooden bridge that was elevated. This was most likely due to the frequent flooding in this area and elevating the bridge would offer some measure of protection from damage.

Admiral's Park had been described as an 'enclosure studded with beautiful elm trees and has a natural slope down to the River Cann' (ERO, D/B7 C 5/3). A photograph of Admiral's Park dated 1919 shows mature trees, most likely the elms. Around this time Admiral's Park, containing in area around fourteen acres, was coming up for auction. Chelmsford Council agreed unanimously to buy the whole park if possible, if only to protect the water supply, and negotiated with the owners and applied to the Local Government Board for loan sanction which was approved on 12th May 1919 to be repaid within sixty years.

1921 is the next ordnance survey map. This shows that within the Park, there was another building next to the water tower and a tank. The building was most likely the Engineer's cottage. The development around the Park was substantial, with new properties along the eastern boundary, more houses around the Admiral's Park Estate and houses west of the area that is now Tower Gardens.

In 1926 it was recorded that it had been necessary to fell three to four large elm trees in Admiral's Park that had become dangerous (ERO, Recreation Ground & Baths Committee Minutes 19 October 1926), which would have changed some of the character of the Park.

In the period between World War 1 and World War II, a large number of playing fields were constructed (Conway, 1995) and Chelmsford's contribution, for Admiral's Park, can be seen on the 1949 ordnance survey map (ERO, New Series Sheet No 54.10). This shows there was a cricket ground with pavilion in the north-west segment of the Park. A new path had been constructed that skirted the cricket ground and exited opposite Park Avenue. Tower gardens with its recreational facilities of a bowling green and tennis courts, paths and new tree planting had been developed, while the sprawl of Chelmsford had continued to spread west and north.

During the Second World War, a barrage balloon was flown in Admiral's Park, primarily to protect the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company that was south west of the Park (Air of Authority, 2010). The Balloon Hut remained *in situ* until 1963 when the Parks Committee recommended that it be demolished (ERO, Minutes 3 Dec 63)

The Chelmsford Planning Survey in 1945 noted that there was an 'undesirable rubbish dump' on the south bank of the river opposite Admiral's Park, the original site of Writtle Lodge, and there were concerns about impurities draining into the river as well as its 'unpleasant appearance'. The supply of water from Admiral's Park continued for many years. The tower was taken out of service in 1947 (Minutes, 13 Feb 1952) when a submersible borehole pump was installed. This was reported by the Water Committee who recommended disposal of the old pumping station (Minutes, 6 May 1947). In

1952 the water tank was deemed to have deteriorated to the point of being dangerous. The cost of dismantling and demolition to a height of 15ft was £1000 to be offset by £500 from the sale of the iron). By 1964 the tower had gone, and that area was being used as a car park but the springs were still a source of water in 1968 (Minutes, 22 May 1968). Admiral's Park no longer supplies water to Chelmsford (Chelmsford Borough Council, 2008) but the springs still flow. They are now directed through an underground pipe and discharge into the River Can.

The 1949 ordnance survey map shows three sets of tennis courts in Tower Gardens as well as a monument (the conduit moved from the High Street), while Admiral's Park has a cricket ground and several buildings. In the 1950's the site of some tennis courts in Tower Gardens was redeveloped for a bowling green. A wooden scout hut was obtained and used as a clubhouse. In the mid 1970's the hut was replaced by a purpose-built building and ten years later the facilities were further extended and improved and have more recently undergone modernisation.

In the County of Essex Development Plan 1952, under Parks and Playing Field, Admiral's Park was described, once again, as 'an attractive piece of grassland with some fine elm trees', but these would all have been dead by the 1980s due to Dutch Elm Disease (Forestry Commission, 2011). However, this fine piece of grassland was threatened in 1973 when a car park between the cricket pitch and the River Can was proposed. The Chelmsford Society voiced an objection (Society Newsletter, Vol 2, No 2) and ultimately the car park was not constructed

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION AREA, BOUNDARIES & LANDFORM

Admiral's Park is one of a riverside series of connected parks in Chelmsford. It is 14.63 hectares in size and is bordered by the River Can to the south and Bundicks Hill/Rainsford Road to the north. The land slopes from the road to the river. Tower Gardens cover 1.91 hectares. West Park covers 12.86 hectares.

ENTRANCES & APPROACHES

The main vehicular access to Tower Gardens is from the A1060 Roxwell Road and leads into a small car park. The boundary wall to the entrance is mid C20. Vehicular access to Admiral's Park is from the Rainsford Road and Bundicks Hill. These areas are also accessible via the Riverside Walk Network. West Park is also accessible from Waterhouse Lane.

ADMIRAL'S PARK

The boundary of the park has remained essentially the same. There are no apparent ancient boundary hedges or tree lines. The north-west corner, the original site of the water tower, is now a car park with entry/exit to Rainsford Road. There is an iron fence between the car park and what was the cricket ground; possibly an early to mid C20 century fence. South of this is rough ground and then a fenced off area with no public access which was the site of the old reservoir. The original north-east to south-west path of the park is still there but with a modern surface. The footbridge at the western boundary has collapsed into the river. It does not look like the original bridge as the remains are

concrete and the remains of the bridge rails hollow metal, probably mid to late 20th century. The second remaining footbridge looks to be late 19th/early 20th century in style and material. It is arched and the balustrades/side walls are of red bricks that have a slightly uneven texture and shape. There is one football pitch and a beech hedge round the boundary of what was the cricket pitch. The lower end of the Park has a children's play area and the northern bank of the river is somewhat overgrown. All that remains of the third footbridge are a set of steps that lead down to the river. There are three mature oak trees on site, estimated at around 100 years old. All other trees seem to have been planted within the last 50 years.

Culturally, there was a community-led project to explore the history of Admiral's Park and to celebrate its successful completion; Chelmsford Borough Council planted an avenue of *Quercus spp* along the original path that cut across the Park. The council also erected Interpretation Boards at strategic points, outlining the history of the Park and more specifically that of Admiral John Faithful Fortescue (Activ Chelmsford, 2010).

Chelmsford City Council, despite the current economic climate, is keen to maintain, improve and promote this locally historically important park. Following an application, Admiral's Park in conjunction with Tower Gardens and West Park was awarded Green Heritage Status by English Heritage for 2010-2011. 'The aim of Green Heritage Site status is to promote the value of and best practice in the care and upkeep of historic sites. This can give added benefits to a site by generating community interest and securing a long term future for the site that will be valued and cherished by all who use it'.

TOWER GARDENS

A stone domed Grade II listed conduit stands on raised grounds in Tower Gardens. The Conduit has a stone dome on six circular Doric columns and is inscribed 'This conduit was erected AD 1814 by the parish, aided by subscription of one hundred pounds by Robert Greenwood, Merchant' and on the other side it says 'Rebuilt by the Parish AD 1852'. Originally the Conduit was sited in the High Street near the junction with Springfield Road and relocated to the park in the early C20. This area of the park is particularly well landscaped and near to the conduit is a late C20 mosaic, from recycled materials, in a serpentine path leading to a sundial which is dated 2006. In the 1950's the site of some tennis courts in Tower Gardens were redeveloped for the bowling green. Adjacent to the bowling green there is a mid C20 retaining wall built from reused C19 stock brick.

WEST PARK

West Park is set in a mature landscape and adjoins the River Can. West Park is a delightful small park with a popular 18 hole pitch and putt and 9 hole crazy golf course. It can be accessed from Waterhouse Lane and from the riverside walk network. Beach's Drive is named after the Beach family who operated Writtle Oil and Leather Mills and then Beach's Brickworks, following a fire which destroyed most of the old mill. Clay for the bricks was mined from the area we now know as West Park Pitch and Putt. It is still possible to see old clinker and bricks near Tower Gardens bowling green and evidence of the narrow gauge railway that carried raw clay to the pug mill that operated next to 'three weirs'.

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