Rotten Row (8)

Southport Heritage Park & Gardens Trail.qxp_Layout 1  01/03/2017  08:26  Page 1

The borders seen in Autumn (4)

Stephenson’s Guide to Southport of 1905 notes that one of its attractions was “an ornamental Park, called the Biddulph Victoria, which has been beautifully laid out, and already affords an excellent example of landscape gardening”. The text makes no reference to Rotten Row suggesting that this was yet not considered a feature of note or merit.

This remained the case until after the amalgamation of Southport with Birkdale in 1911. At that point Victoria Park and the Biddulph Recreation Ground which had been separated by a large hedge and a stretch of water were joined together. Through the same works Rotten Row previously described as a very indifferent thoroughfare, was re-shaped into a magnificent half-mile landscaped border: further enhancement was delayed until the early 1920s.

The 1922 edition of Stephenson’s Guide to Southport included special mention. It refers to Birkdale and Rotten Row as a continuation of the Western Promenade at its south westerly end. Rotten Row … is a continuation of the promenade at its south westerly end. This herbaceous border is about half a mile in length, with an average width of 26 feet, and in the height of the season it can be dated to the mid-1880s, with the lengthened policy of the Biddulph Local Board in insisting that the building of the line should enhance the visual amenity of the area.

The construction of the northern section of Rotten Row was only finished in 1898 by the Biddulph Local Board. The grant released for Rotten Row was to re-align the existing footpath and to provide a verge and specimen planting along the edge of the green belt. The work was completed and trees were planted along the long and narrow strip of land lying between the line of Rotten Row on the one side and the Victoria Park on the other. Here there were some planting and ornamental walks in the park, but the rest of the area was featureless grassland.

The Landscape Group, an extensive programme of replanting began that year under the direction of Eyre Corner. The text makes no reference to the building of the line should enhance the visual amenity of the area.

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In 2012, the gardens were awarded funding as part of the People’s Programme. At the time this prestigious scheme was the largest single investment in parks by the Heritage Lottery Fund in the North-West. The gardens have since been restored to their former glory with Victorian shelters and the Venetian Bridge showcasing the beauty of the park.

The gardens sprang to life with an array of colourful flowerbeds and displays, longed for by the community.

**Hesketh Park**

Hesketh Park covers no less than 30 acres of land making it one of the biggest parks in Southport. The land, upon which the park lies, was originally owned by the Reverend Charles Hesketh who donated a large share of his property to create a welcoming place for public recreation in the 1860s.

The Southport Commissioners set about bringing the park into existence through the easing of the Second Southport Improvement Act, 1865, and the employment of the renowned Victorian landscape gardener Edward Kemp. His designs saw the creation of the park with an oval layout, similar to the design of Birkenhead Park in Wirral on which Kemp worked under the stewardship of Sir Joseph Paxton.

Hesketh Park was formed from an area of land hills and its topography was exaggerated using spoil from the construction of the large lake. This allowed for the creation of small secluded gardens of differing character between the hills and a system of winding paths allowing for continuously changing prospects. The lake with its irregular outline surrounds three tiny islands situated in a hollow slightly west of the centre of the park. The lake is home to a mixture of wildlife with numerous bird species breeding here.

The total cost of creating the new park amounted to £12,000 with its official opening taking place in the summer of 1868.

A decade later a large conservatory was erected and housed an array of rare and exotic plants. It had originally been part of Brunswick Villa on Lord Street, but was purchased by the corporation and moved to the park in 1878. Today the conservatory still stands and remains a fantastic addition to the park.

During the years, the formal American Garden containing the floral clock was also replanted to its original 1930s design. The surrounding planting incorporates species of American specimen shrubs, bulbs and herbaceous plants with the clock face planted with carpet bedding.

**THE BOTANIC GARDENS**

The Botanic Gardens are situated in Churchtown, the ancient village that spanned the nearby resort of Southport. The garden first began to take shape in 1874 when a number of discerning Southport gentlemen leased an area of land from the Lord of the Manor the Heskethes of Mossy Hall.

These forward-thinkers banded together to form a company for the establishment of a Pleasure Gardens at Churchtown. A number of park architects along with landscape gardener John Shaw were commissioned to develop the 20 acres of green space into a welcoming floral utopia. The formal opening of the Botanic Gardens took place on 10 May 1875, with the service performed by the Reverend Charles Hesketh of St. Guthlac’s Church, and the Mayor of Southport, W. W. Walton Smith. For over 50 years these new and beautiful gardens, featuring a large conservatory museum and cafe were open to the public on payment of a small fee.

As befits a botanical garden, its crowning glory is the many seasonal floral garden beds and award-winning displays to be found within.

In addition to the work of Council staff, a local resident’s volunteer group known as the Botanic Gardens Community Association help with gardening, maintenance and general upkeep. They also run a successful bucket sponsorship scheme and organise year-round events, as well as developing an educational Wildlife Nature Trail following the latest paths. All involved are determined to help in preserving the rich heritage of the Botanic Gardens and its public benefits as was envisaged by its founders over 140 years ago.

As the years passed the garden fell into a state of neglect and were later sold to a private investor who had the intention of transforming the site into streets and housing. This notion displeased many of the town’s well-to-do residents who in no uncertain terms aired their opposition to the scheme. Thankfully the Southport Corporation came to the rescue and the gardens were bought back into public ownership in 1936.

The Corporation had previously acquired the lake and adjoining walkways, providing for all time the preservation of the Botanic Gardens for free public enjoyment. This was further enriched in 1937 by the laying of park sections under the King George’s Playing Field Scheme to provide recreational facilities for young people. A new side entrance was also built to mark the occasion, complete with splendid Memorial Gates and outstanding commemorative panels built into the piers.

As a visitor to the Botanic Gardens you can enjoy the many specialist open days. During the works the formal American Garden containing the floral clock was also replanted to its original 1930s design. The surrounding planting incorporates species of American specimen shrubs, bulbs and herbaceous plants with the clock face planted with carpet bedding.

The gardens were reopened by Roger Restorick Hesketh, Esq of Mossy Hall in 1937 and have flourished ever since. The Botanic Gardens boast a beautiful tree-lined serpentine lake with Victorian bridges, and plentiful examples of contemporary architecture.

Today its fame is ranked No. 1 in England, and sits alongside a very popular area as a perfect place to visit and enjoy.

**The Botanic Garden’s Floral Clock (22)**

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