

A.G.K. Leonard

## The Genesis of Shirley Recreation Ground

The genesis of Shirley Recreation Ground – now known as St. James’ Park – is to be found in the minutes of the meeting of the Public Lands and Markets Committee of Southampton Borough Council held on 22 February 1907, when it considered ‘a letter from Alderman Cawte J.P. respecting the provision of a Public Park at Shirley and suggesting a suitable site for the purpose’.

This was referred to a sub-committee, which Alderman Cawte was invited to attend. It met at the site on 22 March and reported that ‘having inspected the gravel pit near Shirley Church [...] (it) resolved upon the motion of Alderman Cawte, seconded by Councillor Lewis, to recommend that a sum of £1,000 be offered for the land for the purpose of a Recreation Ground.’ Its report was endorsed by the full committee, although Councillors Beavis and Line voted against it.

The amount offered was then a considerable sum, worth about a hundred times as much in today’s money. The land in question was six acres, shown as ‘Nursery’ on the 1867 Ordnance Survey map. It was one of the areas from which gravel had been dug out – primarily for purposes of highway maintenance.

The Shirley Local Board of Health, established in 1853, was the highway authority; to keep unmade roads, lanes and paths in passable condition, it required large quantities of gravel on a regular basis for seasonal operations involving digging it out in the summer, then carting and spreading it out in the autumn and winter. Loose gravel surfaces needed frequent attention, particularly to counter the effects of storm water dispersal and deepening wheel ruts.

The highways and other community functions undertaken by the Shirley Local Board of Health in 1853-1895 are surveyed in the booklet ‘Shirley Nuisances and Services’ by A.G.K.

Leonard, published in 2003 by Southampton City Council – available from Central and Shirley Libraries,

### **Councillors and Aldermen**

Henry Cawte (1852-1930) actively identified himself with Shirley through half a century. Born at Twyford, he served his apprenticeship in Winchester, then spent the years 1872-1880 gaining experience on his own account in the United States, before returning to marry and settle in Shirley. There he developed a family business as an enterprising building contractor, whose projects included the Infirmary at Shirley Warren, Western District Schools and the Harbour Board Offices.

He joined the Borough Council in 1895, topping the poll as one of Shirley’s first councillors following its incorporation into the borough that year. Cllr Cawte became Sheriff in 1904 and Mayor in 1905: the following year he was elected an Alderman, serving until he retired in 1920. A magistrate from 1905, he was also active in various trade and welfare associations and at St. James’ Church, where he was people’s warden for 28 years until retiring in 1923 – to be succeeded by his son Charles.

Henry Cawte was widely respected as a man of business ability and integrity. Politically a dedicated Conservative, he displayed shrewd judgement and independence of mind, always ready to serve the people of Shirley.

To end duplication, Union Road, Freemantle, was renamed as Cawte Road in 1903. Thomas Lewis Way is a recent City Council commemoration of the man who seconded Alderman Cawte’s motion in March 1907.

‘Tommy’ Lewis (1873-1962) was elected for St. Mary’s ward in 1901 as Southampton’s first Labour councillor. He remained a Council

member for nearly sixty years, as an Alderman from 1929, and became its Leader in 1945 when his party gained control. He was likewise a long-serving member and later chairman of the Harbour Board, besides serving as a magistrate for many years. He also worked busily as a trade union organiser and as national president of the British Seafarers Union.

Elected at his fifth attempt, he became Southampton's first Labour M.P. in 1929. He lost his seat in 1931 but returned to Parliament in 1945; he retired in 1950, at 76, but remained active in local government until just before his death at the age of 88.

William Beavis, who followed his father as a councillor and alderman, was elected to the Council in 1900; made an alderman in 1911, he served until his death in 1924, aged 65.

Himself an enthusiastic swimmer, he was chairman of the Baths Committee for 21 years. In business he was partner, later principal, in the firm of Haddon & Beavis, High Street shipping agents and coal merchants.

He is remembered for the annual 'Beavis Treats' provided for local schoolchildren from 1920 with the income from his £10,000 gift made to the Corporation in thankfulness for the Victory and Peace of 1918.

### **Purchase**

The opposition of councillors like Beavis presaged marked differences of opinion about the desirability of a recreation ground for Shirley and the expenditure involved in providing one.

At the Council meeting on 24 April, Mr E.A. Young presented 'a memorial containing 1,300 signatures from residents and rate payers in Shirley District in favour of the provision of a Recreation Ground.' The Council deferred consideration until its next meeting on 8 May, in conjunction with the notice of motion on the agenda in the name of Alderman Cawte.

It was then resubmitted by the Town Clerk, who also read a letter from the secretary of the Shirley Conservative Association forwarding a resolution approving the proposed purchase of land for a Recreation Ground.

Alderman Cawte formally moved that 'the recommendation of the Public Lands & Markets Committee meeting of 22 March to offer £1,000 for purchase of certain land at Shirley for the purpose of a Recreation Ground be adopted.' This was eventually carried by a vote of 23-13, indicative of some cross-party divisions on the contentious issue.

The report of the Council debate on this issue occupied nearly two close-printed columns in the following Saturday's issue of the *Southampton Times*, the local weekly published at one (old) penny.

Alderman Cawte referred to 'the crowded population at Shirley, where there were now 20,000 people and in a very few years there would be 30,000. There was no piece of ground where the children (nearly 1,000 at three schools) could go to play away from the roads. He remarked on how well off the older parts of the town were in respect of parks and open spaces and reminded the Council that Shirley ratepayers helped to pay for these advantages, although they were too far away to enjoy them ... he hoped the Council would act fairly towards Shirley.'

His seconder, Councillor Weston, 'considered it was true economy to purchase six acres of land for £1,000 and if a recreation ground for Freemantle could be secured on the same conditions he would hold up both hands in favour of it.'

Alderman Gayton hoped that 'the syndicate of gentlemen who owned this land would have had a kindly feeling towards the inhabitants of Shirley and the district, seeing that the land was useless to them for building and they had taken out of it all they could get, by making a present to the Corporation of the land. He argued that the nearness of the Common made a recreation

ground unnecessary for Shirley – a view later echoed by other speakers.

Cllr Hamilton thought that ‘it was not enough to say that a recreation ground would cost £1,000 because a great deal of extra expense would be necessary to make a proper ground. He suggested that recreative accommodation might be provided by a large playground attached to the proposed new schools at Shirley.’

Several other members spoke in favour of the proposed land purchase. Cllr Park recalled that the Council had paid £6,000 for a gravel pit at Bitterne, while Cllr Etheridge ‘considered members representing the older parts of the town by opposing the proposal showed they were intensely selfish.’ Cllr Pitt elicited the fact that not all the gravel had been extracted from the pit and that if the Council purchased the ground they would be entitled to any gravel remaining there. It was also said that the tenants of the land were obliged by their lease to level it before they gave up possession.

Other members advocated economy in Council expenditure, fearing purchase would involve future maintenance costs that would increase the rates. Cllr Lewis foresaw further development at Shirley and thought they would soon have difficulty in securing open space there if they did not adopt the present proposal. After more members had spoken for and against, a recorded vote was taken in favour. ‘The result was received with applause.’

Following this vote, application was duly made to the Local Government Board for sanction to borrow £1,000 for purchase of the land. ‘Having considered the matter from a financial standpoint,’ the Council’s Finance Committee resolved in June that ‘it saw no objection to the proposed expenditure, subject to loan sanction being first obtained.’ Two councillors dissented.

Meanwhile, the Council meeting of 22 May had been informed that the owner was willing to accept the sum of £1,000 offered for the land. His solicitors Messrs Goater & Blatch facilitated

progress of the sale by providing a draft contract.

At its next meeting on 28 June the Public Lands and Markets Committee received a report from the Town Clerk saying that he had consulted Counsel about the restrictive covenants contained in an indenture of 1851 limiting use to pasture, arable or garden land, with no building whatsoever to be erected thereon. Notwithstanding these restrictions, he advised that the Corporation could buy the land for its statutory purposes, under the provisions of the Public Health Act 1875 and ‘lay out, plant, improve and maintain’ it ‘for the purpose of being used as pleasure grounds.’

In October the Committee was duly notified that the Local Government Board had given sanction ‘to the borrowing of the sum of £1,000 for the purchase of land situated between St. James Road and Wordsworth Road, Shirley, for the purpose of public walks and pleasure grounds.’

### **Layout**

Purchase having been achieved comparatively speedily, the laying out of the ground proved to be a more prolonged process.

The Distress Committee took an interest in the project and in January 1908 asked that ‘in the event of extra labour being required in the digging out of gravel from this ground, application be made to the Labour Bureau for such labour.’ The Public Lands and Markets Committee meanwhile ‘directed the Borough Engineer to remove such gravel as he may require, the committee to be credited with the value of the material removed, and to employ one of the men engaged on the roads in the District in levelling the land, an allowance to be made to the Distress Committee in respect of the labour of excavating and screening the gravel.’

In January the Committee ordered a bar or fence to be placed across the entrance but in June it received a letter from Dr. W.W. McKeith, concerned about ‘the condition of this ground for children.’ Following the Borough Engineer’s

report, it was resolved that ‘the Committee have taken every precaution for the protection of the children.’

At its meeting on 27 November 1908 the Borough Engineer submitted plans for laying out the ground; these were referred to a sub committee, which met on 6 January 1909. Next day the full Committee approved its report and the plans, directing the Borough Engineer ‘to continue the work of levelling the ground and making up the banks surrounding it [...] also that the footway leading from a site opposite Shirley Church to Stratton Road be closed.’ The Borough Engineer was authorised to ‘make good the fence around Shirley Recreation Ground at a cost not exceeding £20.’

At its next meeting, on 28 February, the Committee decided that ‘the work of levelling be continued as far as possible and the laying out of the ground be deferred until the Autumn.’

Before then, the Council again took a direct interest in the matter. At its meeting on 9 June 1909, upon the motion of the Sheriff, Councillor Weston, it resolved ‘that the Public Lands and Markets Committee be asked to place 8 park seats in the Recreation Ground at Shirley forthwith.’ The Council then went on to adopt a further resolution moved by Councillor Wood, ‘that the whole matter of laying out the Recreation Ground at Shirley be referred to the Public Lands and Markets Committee to report again.’

Meanwhile, Cllr Wood had secured the agreement of the Committee to the Southampton Town Band playing there on a Wednesday evening, 8 August, the performance being transferred from the Common. (A request for bandsmen in uniform to travel by ‘car’ at workmen’s rates was unkindly turned down by the Tramways Committee.)

In September, the Shirley Ward Conservative Association sent a letter to the Committee ‘expressing the opinion that no path should be allowed across the ground after the land had been properly laid out.’

When the Borough Council met on 24 November Councillors Weston and Wood unsuccessfully moved that the Committee ‘be forthwith requested to complete the Shirley Recreation Ground.’ Mr Weston said ‘there was no rhyme or reason in leaving the place as it was; it was a disgrace to all concerned.’ Instead of this, the Council adopted an amendment from Aldermen Hollis and Hutchins that ‘the whole matter be referred to the Public Lands and Markets Committee to consider and report upon, Councillor Weston to be added to the committee for the consideration of this special matter.’

Shirley Recreation Ground was becoming a ‘special matter’, the subject of an on-going mini-saga ... It was again considered by the Public Lands and Markets Committee, meeting on the last day of 1909, with the Mayor, Alderman Sharp, taking the chair. The Borough Engineer ‘was directed to report on the cost of levelling the ground and the carrying out of other necessary works.’

The Mayor also presided at the Committee’s next meeting, on 28 January 1910, when ‘the Borough Engineer reported that he estimated the cost of levelling the Recreation Ground at Shirley and the carrying out of certain works in connection therewith in accordance with the plan submitted at £450.’

Councillors Weston and Wood proposed that application be made to the Local Government Board for sanction to borrow the sum of £1,000 ‘for carrying out the scheme now submitted by the Borough Engineer and for completing the layout of the Recreation Ground.’ Upon a show of hands, this motion was lost and the Committee adopted the Mayor’s proposal ‘that the sum of £450 be expended [...] in accordance with the scheme submitted by the Borough Engineer.’

This was reported to the February meeting of the Council’s Finance Committee, which agreed ‘to concur in the expenditure’, but matters still progressed slowly. Nothing more is recorded until the Council meeting on 27 July 1910, when Councillors Ryder and Wood moved that

the Borough Engineer 'be instructed to forthwith carry out the improvements at the Shirley Recreation Ground, as sanctioned by the Council.' To this, the Mayor moved an amendment that application be made to the Local Government Board for sanction to borrow £450 to carry out the works envisaged. This was carried upon a show of hands, the votes not being recorded.

Receipt of loan sanction was reported in November – although in the reduced sum of £389, because the Board had deducted £61, 'which had been added in the event of work being carried out by unemployed labour.' Evidently the Recreation Ground was not to be regarded as a job-creation project ... although it had come to occupy many man-hours of Council, committee and administrative time.

The next step was taken at the Public Lands and Markets Committee meeting on 4 January 1911, when Councillor Kimber – newly elected for the Highfield ward in November – proposed that 'tenders be invited for the laying out of Shirley Recreation Ground.' This was duly carried, after rejection of Cllr Line's amendment that the work should be carried out by direct labour.

(Alderman Sir Sidney Kimber included reference to this meeting in his volume of reminiscences 'Thirty-eight Years of Public Life in Southampton, 1910-1948', published in 1949; see page 17.)

On 24 February 1911 three tenders were reported to the Committee 'for the whole of the proposed works in levelling, forming terraces and filling in banks in accordance with the plan, specifications and conditions prepared by the Borough Engineer.' It was resolved to accept the lowest, that of F. Osman & Co., at £480 – except for the portion relating to the provision and laying of turfs to terraces and slopes (this presumably to be undertaken by the Council's own labour force).

At the same meeting the Committee resolved to apply for loan sanction of £365, the estimated cost of providing and fixing iron railings and

seats. On 30 June it considered nine tenders received for supply and delivery of wrought iron fencing, gates and six garden seats. It accepted the third lowest, that of the local firm of W. Dibben & Sons, in the sum of £170 - £5 less than the the lowest from a Workington company.

The Committee also received a letter from the National Telephone Company about removing its pole from the centre of the Recreation Ground and replacing it with two new poles on the north and south sides of the ground. In July, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman met the Company's representative on site and agreed arrangements ... including an annual rental charge of 5 shillings for each pole.

There are no further references to the Shirley Recreation Ground in committee and Council minutes over the ensuing 18 months, so it would seem that all the proposed work on the ground had been carried out, without the need for further discussion. As there does not seem to have been any formal opening ceremony, it is likely that local people simply extended their use of the area and enjoyed its newly created amenities as they became available.

In January 1913 the subject of planting trees in the Recreation Ground was raised by the Public Lands and Markets Committee. A sub-committee met on the site on 23 January and recommended that 'ornamental trees be planted on each side of the main entrance at the end of each flight and beds of variegated shrubs be planted at the NE and SW corners of the Ground.'

It was also agreed that 'trees be planted along the banks encircling the grounds at a distance of 30 yards apart, the selection of the trees to be left to Alderman Oakley and the Superintendent.' Another decision was that 'the gravel path be continued around the ground and that the entrance opposite Didcot Road be removed southward to a site opposite Stratton Road.' Committee business at the meeting on 28 February included a resolution that 'provision of a small iron fence for protection of shrubs at