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The Future Prospects of Urban Parks

The Life, Times and Social Order of Victorian Public Parks as Places of Social Mixing

Dr Anna Barker, Principal Investigator



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Research team

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Introduction

- Two year research project, 1 November 2015– 31 October 2017
- Combines history, criminology, sociology, law, cultural and urban studies.
- Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under priority theme of '*Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past*'.
- Leeds City Council Parks and Countryside Department are Project Partners
- Advisory Network





Aims and objectives

1. To understand the social significance, role and prospects of Victorian public parks in urban futures.
2. To examine the official governance and lived experiences and expectations of urban public parks in the past and the present.
3. To reveal and expose to what extent the Victorian ideal of the park as a place of civilising influence over the urban poor and labouring classes was realised and experienced.
4. To broaden and extend historical research of the governance of urban public space beyond a focus on major city streets and squares.
5. To contribute to a reinterpretation and reinvigoration of the vision, governance and sustainability of urban parks in cities of the future.



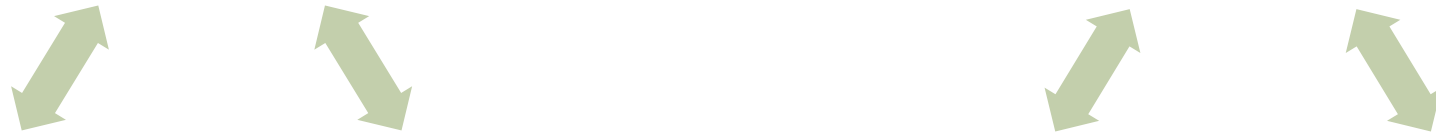
The past, present and the future: Linking themes

1. The future prospects of Victorian public parks in the present day and at the time in which they were created
 - ‘Spaces of experience’
 - ‘Horizons of expectations’

} Histories of the future
2. The function of parks as places of social mixing
 - Possibilities for conflict around behaviour, anxieties of otherness and the potential for crime.
 - Other-regarding outcomes that co-mingling may facilitate.



Conceptual framework



Drawing on Koselleck, R. (2004) *Futures Past*. Columbia University Press



Research questions

‘Spaces of experience’ in the past

How did historical subjects experience and interpret their everyday lives, events and relations, in particular Victorian city parks?

To what extent do experiences depart from/shaped by expectations?

‘Horizons of expectation’ in the past

How did historical subjects (governors and governed) envision the future?

What did they expect parks might become in terms of their social promise and desired effects?

What do those visions reveal about the urban imagination of the Victorians?

‘Spaces of experience’ in the present

How do contemporary subjects experience and interpret their everyday lives, events and relations, in particular Victorian city parks?

To what extent do experiences depart from/shaped by expectations?

What new social roles and functions are public parks expected to play in the multi-cultural city?

‘Horizons of expectation’ in the present

How do contemporary subjects envision the future?

What are the (new or changed) expectations about and visions for the future promise of public parks? To what extent are these multiple or contested?

Are these visions socially sustainable, romantic or idealistic, and what do they reveal about the contemporary age?



Research methods

- **Historical analysis (1857 – 1914)**
 - Local authority and police archives
 - The British Newspaper Archive
 - Open space byelaws
 - Photographs of parks
- **Contemporary study**
 - Focus groups with young people
 - Interviews with park users
 - Large-scale public survey
 - Interviews with key stakeholders



A picture by George Walker c. 1817, depicting a game of knor and spell. Image courtesy of Kirklees Museums & Galleries



Case studies in Leeds, West Yorkshire

- Roundhay Park, Woodhouse Moor and Cross Flatts Park
- Opened for public use during the Victorian era
- The selection of parks draw out the diversity of:
 - Ideals concerning the social purpose(s) of parks
 - Size and social profile of users and stakeholders, with consequences for governance and regulation
 - Experiences of park life, from the more ceremonial through to the familiar and informal



Photograph of Woodhouse police station, corner of Woodhouse Lane and Reservoir Street (now Clarendon Road), undated (before 1898). Source: Leodis, C LIHP Wood (3).



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Project outputs

- Public exhibition
- New collection on Leeds photographic archive
- Policy seminar
- Academic conference papers and publications



Potential impacts and benefits

- To inform public policies and practices at a local and national level on the significance, role and place of urban parks in cities of the future, supporting safe, sustainable and inclusive societies.
- To contribute to public knowledge about the social and cultural heritage of parks and the social role that city parks played and play in the past, the present and the future.
- To engage the public in research about key public spaces in the city that impact on their well-being, quality of life and capacity for social cohesion.
- To promote public parks as places of value to present and future generations.
- To draw in visitors to a public exhibition and, in doing so, develop cultural and social benefits for visitors and financial benefits for the local economy.



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Thank you

Any questions?



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