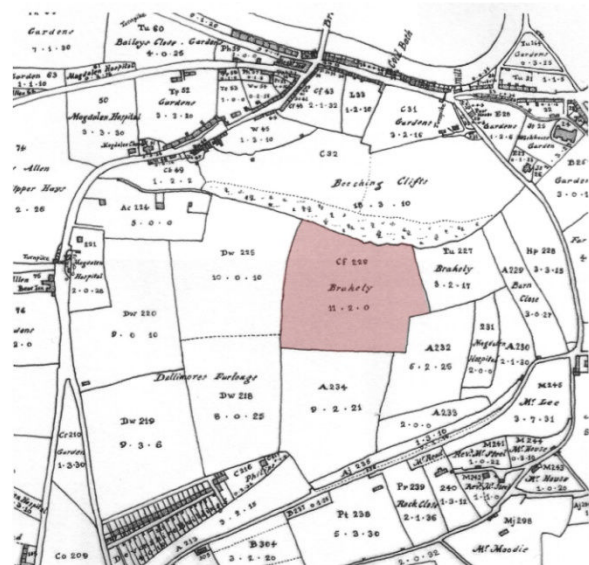


In 2010 a number of residents, in the area around the Council-owned Alexandra Park and Lyncombe Hill fields, formed an organisation to preserve and help maintain the park. On 10 July 2011 they held a special festival. The views are spectacular and, but for the enthusiasm of some councillors in 1896, the area could have been covered in houses.

The idea of a public park was first discussed at a meeting of the Pleasure Gardens Committee. The owners of Holloway Farm, mostly Mr. Hole, adjacent to Lyncombe Hill fields and adjoining Wellsway, were taking steps to develop their land for housing. Not much happened until 1898 when the Council resolved that the Committee should ascertain 'upon what terms a portion of land could be acquired by the corporation for the purpose of a public park or cliff drive or both'. Such a spectacular viewpoint should be freely available to the public.

The surveyor to the owner of a plot (Mr. C F Hole) offered to arrange the sale of a field of about 11 acres (4.5 hectares) at the rate of £300 per acre and some building land at £500 per acre. This was exactly the plot shown on the Charlton map of 1799 then owned by a Mr. Colthurst and still the same shape today. It was then the major part of what was known as Blakeleigh, leased out as grazing land.

It wasn't until July 1899 that a provisional agreement was made with Mr. Hole to purchase the land for £2750. The surveyor estimated that a further £1000 would be needed for the drive encircling the land and for fencing, and £250 for laying out the park with plants and trees. By January 1900 a loan was agreed and sanctioned by the Local Government Board for all but £40.



Work was soon going ahead and in August tenders were sought for a fine pair of gates for the entrance. In 1877 the centenary Bath and West Agricultural Show had been held on the fields close to the plot.

Another show was planned for 1900 and the council were concerned to arrange with the show promoters to fence off the park to protect it. They hoped that at 5 feet it would be an 'unclimbable fence'. The circular drive was completed by 1901 with an area set aside in the middle of the park for children to play.

Extract copied from the Charlton map showing plot 226 'Brakely' (shaded), later the site of Alexandra Park. Plots 218, 219, 220 & 225, 'Dallimore's Furlongs', were the grounds occupied by the Bath and West Agricultural Show in 1877.

The Council had realised the need for a vehicle route up to the park and had agreed with the owners of the building land, mostly Mr. Hole (once Dallaway's land) for access from Wellsway. This was to be Shakespeare Avenue and by 1901 the first few houses were completed.

Near by the park, bordering Holloway, the wood and land above the horse trough were called Magdalen Gardens, purchased by the Council in 1868 from the Bruton Estate, who had owned them since the death of Hugh Sexey early in the 17th century. The gardens had always been leased out for grazing and for the springs. The Council had leased it because of the water and at times sublet it but maintained rights over the springs. Cotterell's map of 1854 shows the water tanks and adits under the ground, used until the building of the Somerset and Dorset railway led to pollution and the drying-up of the springs. By 1901 the land was in need of a 'tidy up'. Members of the Council suggested that the Pleasure Gardens Committee should take charge of it and turn it into a park linking up with Alexandra park above. A zigzag path was to be made and shrubs to be planted.

By April 1902 Alexandra Park was almost ready. Bye-laws were very strict. Hardly any games were allowed and it wasn't until much later that a bandstand was built, and a bowling green in 1914. The plan was to call it Beechen Cliff Park but then King Edward's Park was suggested. This was followed by (Queen) Alexandra Park. The opening was planned for 26 June, the day of the coronation. The King was taken ill with appendicitis and the nation feared for his health. The opening was delayed but

only until the following Monday. It was felt that 'the inauguration of so acceptable an open space should no longer be delayed'. Messages were sent to Edward wishing him a speedy recovery and on 30 June the opening ceremony took place.

A procession led by the Mayor (Mr E E Phillips) in his scarlet robe and chain of office, with the city swordbearer, the mace bearers, the Town Clerk and various councillors, approached the gate at the top of Shakespeare Avenue. The chairman of the Pleasure Gardens Committee (Colonel Arnold Davis) presented the Mayor with a special gold key bearing the civic crown and enamelled arms of Bath, with which to open the gate. The Mayor addressed the company, saying, 'We must congratulate ourselves- on the splendid weather, which I feel sure is a happy augury for the enjoyment which will be given to those who use the park. The park will be open for ever to the public of Bath.' The Mayor then planted an oak tree with a special spade.

The Mayor and City Council decided to use Henrietta Park and Alexandra Park for the next coronation ceremony after King Edward, that of George V and Queen Mary. At 7 a.m. on 22 June 1911, people in the new avenues were awoken by the royal salute of 21 guns fired from Beechen Cliff, while simultaneously a peal was played on the Abbey bells. The spectacular evening event took place in the park. At 9 p.m. a torchlight procession assembled in Queen Square and proceeded up Wells Road entering the park through the Shakespeare Avenue gate. There were 500 men organised by the Friendly Societies, half carrying Japanese lanterns and half with torches (paraffin guaranteed to last 1¾ hours). They formed a circle round the bonfire which covered an area of 12ft x 12ft. It was lit at 10 p.m., as well as coloured fires to light up the foliage. Then there was a firework display. This was probably the biggest event ever to take place in Alexandra Park. There have been other bonfires to mark special occasions.

In April 1942 bombs fell in Beechen Cliff Road and the Poet avenues, destroyed the toilets in the park and damaged trees. (The big air-raid shelter in the park had saved the lives of up to a hundred people.) A week later George VI and Queen Elizabeth visited the park to view the damage done to the city.



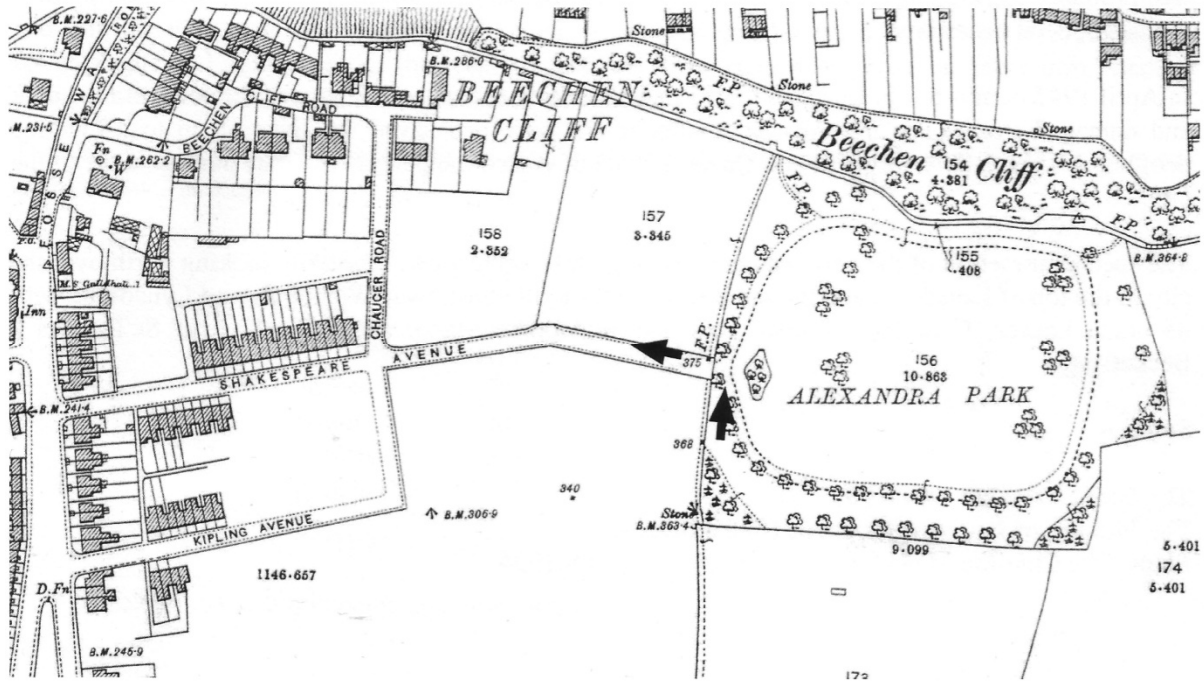
An early postcard view of the Alexandra Park Gates. Although postmarked 1906, the original photograph was probably taken soon after the opening of the park, similar to the view of the approach road shown below. (Courtesy of John Brushfield)



The same view of the above today.



Photo by) ROAD LEADING TO ALEXANDRA PARK. (W. Housier. A photograph of the approach road to the new park (Shakespeare Avenue), published in the August 1903 edition of the Bath & County Graphic.



Detail from the 1902 OS 25 inch map. The two views shown above are marked with arrows

The special attraction of the park was the amazing 360 degree view, especially looking north over the city to the top of Lansdown and the more rural views to the East, over Widcombe and Lyncombe with its grand houses, Prior Park, Crowe Hall and Widcombe Manor and the church of St Thomas à Becket.

Sources

The *Bath Chronicle* 1901-1903

The Minutes of Bath City Council, 1896 onwards.

Maps: The Charlton Map of 1799: Cotterell 1854, O.S.1904.

Author: Margaret Burrows

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