

A SHORT HISTORY OF HEDGEMEAD PARK, WALCOT, BATH

Land slippages (1875-1883)

From the mid 1870's a number of earth slippages were recorded in the area immediately north of what is now called the London Road opposite St Swithin's Church. At the time this area was quite densely populated with artisan dwellings for Bath's rising working-class population. While some of these landslips were relatively serious, resulting in burst water mains, sewers and gas leaks, it was the one that happened in June 1881 that resulted in many homes being judged unsafe. The Council deemed it prudent to have the people evacuated and the houses pulled down.



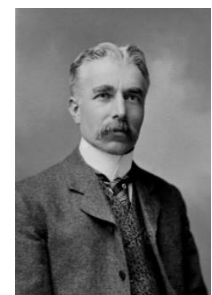
London Street Demolitions 1881

Bath in Time

However, it took a further land slippage in 1883, before calls were made for the creation of an 'open space' and a further two years for a public meeting, chaired by the Rev. Bernard, Rector of St Swithin's Church, to demand that the Council purchase the land and lay out a formal 'Pleasure Ground'.

Hedgemead Pleasure Grounds (1887-1904)

Under the direction of the 'Hedgemead Committee' the local architect Thomas Silcock was employed to draw up suitable plans as shown here. Supervised on site by Theophilus Riddle, the newly appointed park Superintendent, work commenced on the first phase of what we now know as Hedgemead Park and was opened on the 19th July 1889. The opening ceremony, reported in detail by *The Bath Chronicle*, was presided over by the Chairman of the Hedgemead Committee, Cllr. J.S. Turner and duly opened by the Mayor, Mr H.W. Freeman, their speeches being interspersed with selections by the Walcot Military Band.



Thomas Silcock



Thomas Silcock's Original Plan for Hedgemead Park c. 1888

Victoria Art Gallery, Bath & NE Somerset Council

As can be seen from the map below, the Park was developed between 1887 and 1904 as various plots of land became available and were offered to and/or were bought by the Council.



Hedgemoor Park c. 1895

Bath in Time

Being one of the earliest of the Bath “Pleasure Grounds”, the park’s maintenance base was on site in the area now occupied by the children’s play area.

Here, over the years up to the 2nd World War, there were expansive glass houses that for a time supplied not only the Park itself, but the Pump Room and other Council Buildings, bringing much praise to Theophilus Riddle and his team. Mr Riddle became Superintendent of all of Bath’s parks and pleasure gardens by the time of his retirement in 1927.



Glass Houses c.1909

Akeman Press (Detail)

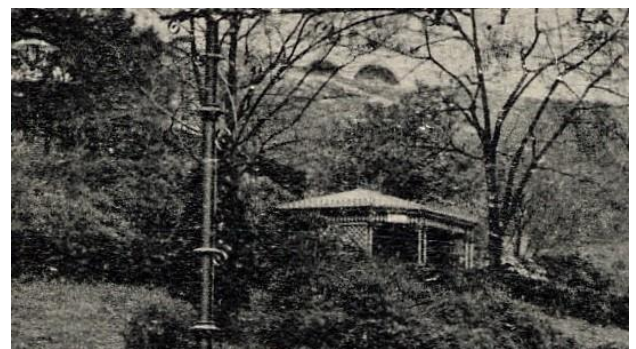


S. POOLE

Watercolour by Samuel Poole, c. 1910

From the Collection of Samuel Poole held in the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath & NE Somerset Council

Following extensive war damage in 1942 to not only the glass houses, but also the lower shelter and the public lavatories down on the London Road, all were eventually removed, and on the site of the glass houses, the long-promised Children’s play area was finally created in the 1950’s.



Lower Shelter c.1909

Akeman Press

Listed structures

The Park contains a number of structures listed by 'Historic England' and therefore worthy of attention.

The first are the cast iron '**Coalbrookdale**' Gate Pillars on the Paragon which were bought from the renowned Shropshire Company in 1888 for £17.



'Coalbrookdale' Gate Pillars 1888



'Macfarlane' Drinking Fountain c.1889

The second cast iron item, is the beautiful '**Macfarlane**' Drinking Fountain, cast at their famous Saracen Foundry in Glasgow and given to the park by an anonymous donor.

Re-painted in 2018 by the *Friends of Hedgemoad Park* and the eagle re-gilded with a grant from the *Bath World Heritage Enhancement Fund*, it can now be fully appreciated in all its glory.

The third item is the **Bandstand** which is a further example of Glaswegian craftsmanship, this time from the Sun Foundry of '**George Smith & Company**'.

Originally thought to have been 'recycled' from Royal Victoria Park, it is now believed to have been bought especially for the park, although no account of its purchase has yet been found.



'George Smith' Band Stand c.1889

Another listed structure, this one designed and made locally in Bath is the **Battlemented look-out Tower**, designed by Thomas Silcock in Bath Stone. This was probably erected just four months before the official opening following a further serious landslip in March 1889 which moved an already 'extremely massive (retaining) wall' that had just been completed!

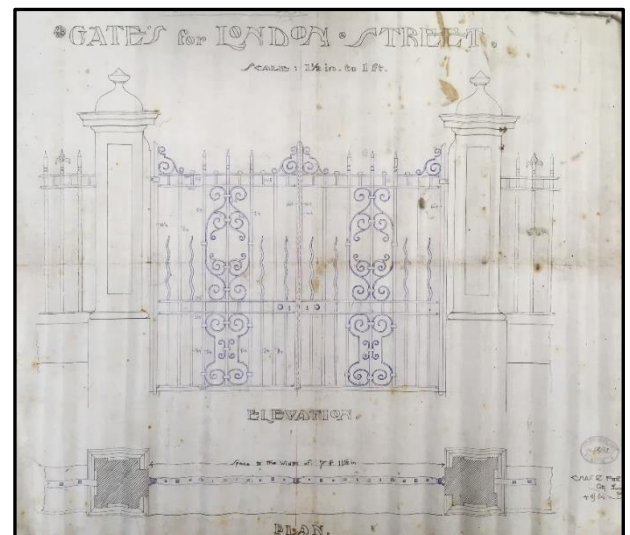


Battlemented Tower, Designed by T.B.Silcock & Built c. 1888/9
Bath in Time

The remaining listed structures cover the wealth of other Victorian and Edwardian **Piers, Gates and Railings** that surround the park, and which are of varying dates from 1889 to 1904. All were designed by either Thomas Silcock, or the later City Surveyor, Charles Fortune and sourced or manufactured here in Bath.



Lansdown Road Gates
Designed by T.B. Silcock & Erected c. 1890/91



London Street Gates
Drawing by Charles Fortune 1904
Bath Record Office

The manufactured article from the drawing on the right can still be admired to this day at the eastern end of the Park, down on London Street opposite the Methodist Chapel.

As can be ascertained from the aforesaid history, the eastern section of the park was the last to be developed in 1904, at the beginning of the Edwardian era.

Thomas Silcock had resigned from his architectural work for the Council and had stood and been elected as a councillor while the post of City Surveyor had been passed to Charles Fortune.

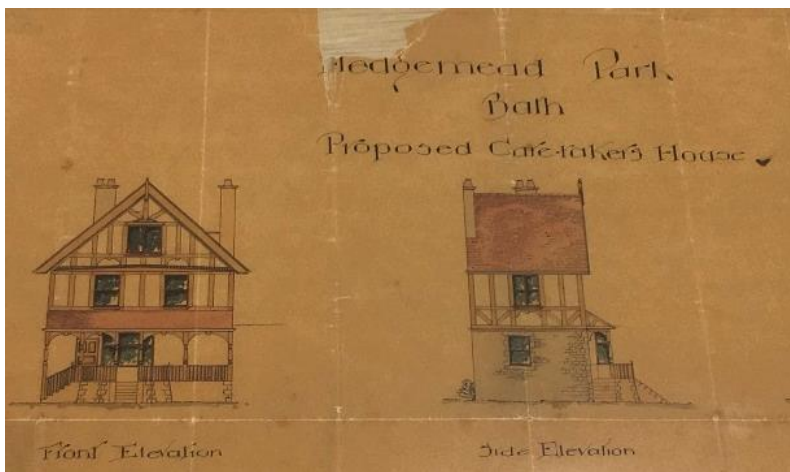
Local Resident makes good

However, continuity had been assured by the continued overseeing and planning of all works by Superintendent Theophilus Riddle who was a regular attender at what was then called the 'Walcot Wesleyan Chapel' across the road. He later rose to become the Superintendent of all Bath's Pleasure Grounds and Parks and finally retired in 1927. His glass houses, here in Hedgemoor Park on the site of the Children's Play area, supplying all the award-winning plants and flowers to the Pump Room and other public buildings around the city.



Theophilus Riddle

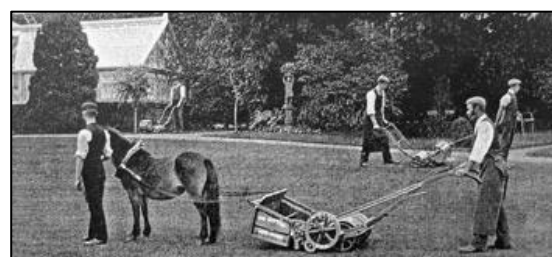
In Thomas Silcock's preliminary plans of 1888 shown on Page 2 an imposing park keeper's house can be clearly identified down on London Street. However, a more modest home is shown in the adjacent drawing dated 1891 showing what was then intended as the home for Theophilus Riddle and his family to be built at the bottom of Guinea Lane. However, on excavation of the foundations, it was deemed too risky and he was instead given a home higher up Guinea Lane at No. 19 where he stayed until 1905 when he moved across the river to Powlett Road in Bathwick.



Drawing by T.B. Silcock 1891

Bath Record Office

Like father, like son; his eldest boy Edward also became a Gardener working in Bath's parks starting as a 'pony boy' looking after the pony that pulled the grass cutter.

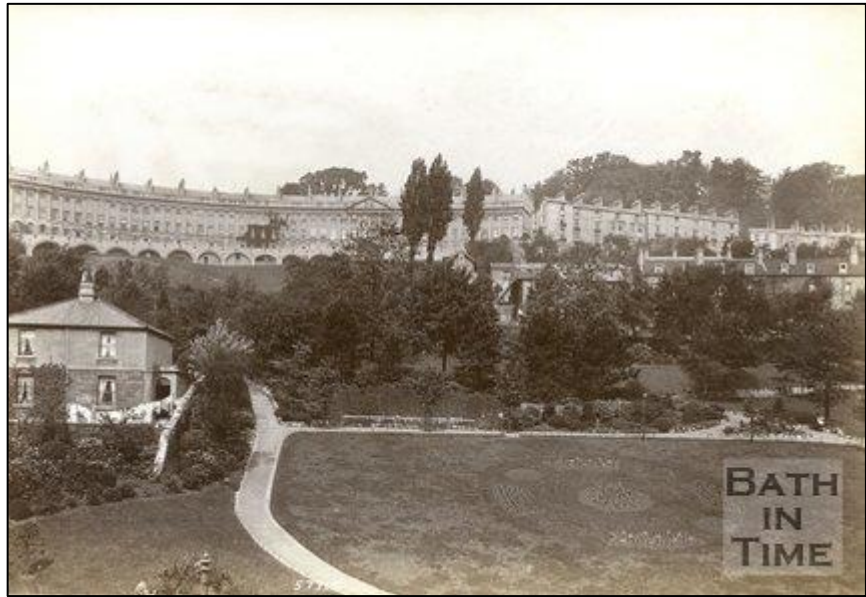


Advertisement for 'Sutton' lawnmower c.1910

Vegmead Community Group

The circular plot seen in this photograph of 1907 is clearly one of Theophilus Riddle's well-tended flowerbeds on the site Vegmead now occupies.

Vegmead began life in 2011 when Bath Parks Dept. gave over the circular flowerbed to **Transition Bath** who transformed the space into a vegetable and fruit plot.



Gardening was undertaken informally at the site until August 2016 when Vegmead Community Group was formed to manage this 'edible garden' and improve its productivity and community outreach.



Now, in 2019, working together with **Wild Walcot** it continues this work together with further support from the newly formed '**Friends of Hedgemoor Park**', which brings more community involvement to this wonderful city Park.

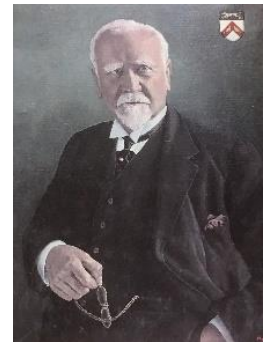


What Might Have Been – A Proposed Gradient Tramway – 1894-5

In December of 1894 Mr G. Croydon Marks, AMICE, MIME. “In accordance with instructions” sent a Report to the Bath Corporation for a “PROPOSED BATH GRADIENT TRAMWAY”.

George Croydon Marks (later to be knighted and made a Baron) was an English engineer, patent agent and Liberal (later Labour) politician. Noted by many as a disciple of Brunel. His engineering speciality was Cliff Railways of which examples can be seen at Aberystwyth, Lynton & Lynmouth and at Clifton Spa in Bristol, to name but three.

The one he surveyed for Bath was to start from London Street and terminate at the back of Camden Crescent Gardens on a level with St Stephen’s Road.



Proposed route of Tramway showing suggested Stations.

The route proposed would have involved the purchase of one house facing London Street, No 17 Camden Crescent together with its back garden, and a parcel of land on St Stephens Road. If the land behind the Crescent couldn’t be bought, then a tunnel under it was envisaged. No. 17 Camden Crescent was to become the Mid-Station complete with a waiting room, and rooms above utilised for the servants of the said railway.

The adjacent map shows what is believed to be the proposed route and stations, while the image below, of the completed and still functioning, Aberystwyth Railway, give an idea of what it might have looked like.

While the Council was happy to allow passage across Hedgemoor Park, it was the land in front of Camden Crescent that became the stumbling block.

As can be imagined, there was much local concern, mostly negative, and when the covenant on the land in front of Camden Crescent was confirmed as disallowing any such building, and a Mrs Theobald who had offered to sell the field, was found to have no right to sell it, the whole scheme was abandoned.



What might have been: The Aberystwyth Cliff Railway