

Mowbray Park



Mowbray Park in 1904

A brief history of Mowbray Park

Mowbray Park first opened in 1857, following a public health enquiry into the cholera epidemic of the 1840s. The enquiry recommended that a park should be built so that people in Sunderland could get more fresh air and exercise. Parliament gave the city £750 for land.

The original park covered the area of the modern park from the old railway line to Park Road, and the “West Park” where the Civic Centre stands. The Council bought the land from the Mowbray family and the park was named after them.

In 1866 an extension to the park was opened, from the railway line to Borough Road. It included a lake and terrace. A grand opening ceremony was held, with a procession of 17,000 children, councillors, soldiers and bands. Townsfolk were given a half-day holiday in celebration.

During World War II the park was damaged by bombing, and iron structures, such as railings and the bandstand, were removed to make weapons. Park staff also altered the layout in order to grow vegetables. After the war the park suffered from vandalism and neglect. In the 1960s the Civic Centre was built on the site of the West Park.



Mowbray Park today

However, in 1994, a £4 million Heritage Lottery grant allowed work to start on restoring the park to its former Victorian glory, and rebuilding the Winter Gardens. The Park re-opened in 2000, with many of its old features restored or recreated, alongside new and imaginative additions. Mowbray Park is recognised by English Heritage as a park of special historic interest, as it is one of the oldest public parks in the North East and an integral part of the heritage and daily life of the city centre.

What to see in Mowbray Park

The Entrance Gates and Lake

The Sunderland born jewellery designer, Wendy Ramshaw, designed the gates for the restored park.

The lake was returned to its original shape during restoration work and new water cascade, fountain and swan house, designed by Roger Dickinson, added. New stone lions replaced the originals on the North Terrace, and the Friends of Sunderland Museum erected a sundial. A life size bronze walrus, designed and cast by Andrew Burton, sits near the lake. Lewis Carroll was thought to have written his poem 'The walrus & the carpenter' after seeing the stuffed walrus in Sunderland Museum. However, the walrus had not been given to the Museum when the poem was written.



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The Drinking Fountain

The drinking fountain (left) was erected in 1878 by the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows. It is a memorial to William Hall, who was the oldest Oddfellow in the North of England when he died aged 75 in 1876.

The Railway Bridge and Bandstand

The recently restored and painted bridge crosses the old Penshaw Railway. The railway opened in 1852 to link the collieries of Durham with the South Dock. The bandstand is a replica of the Victorian original, opened in 1883.

Memorials and Statues

The War Memorial, a winged Victory on a granite column, was dedicated on 26th December 1922 and now commemorates the dead of both World Wars.

The Victoria Hall Disaster Memorial was erected after the disaster in 1883. 183 children died as they rushed to receive toys at the hall, which used to be opposite the park. In 1934 the statue was moved to Bishopwearmouth cemetery. It was restored and returned to the park in 2000.

The Havelock Memorial stands on Building Hill alongside two replica Sebastopol cannons (the originals were again used to make weapons during World War II). Sir Henry Havelock was born in 1795 at Ford Hall, and was the son of a shipbuilder. He became an outstanding soldier and successfully relieved Lucknow during the Indian Mutiny of 1857-8. He died of dysentery shortly afterwards. The memorial was erected by public subscription in 1861.



John Candlish was a successful businessman and Mayor of Sunderland, before he became a Member of Parliament. He was a deeply religious man and supported radical reform, working hard for the people of the city as their MP. He died in 1874 and his funeral was a day of great public mourning in Sunderland. His statue was unveiled in the park in 1875.

Jack Crawford served on HMS Venerable during the Battle of Camperdown. He was honoured for his bravery when he climbed the mast to nail the British flag back on while under heavy fire. His actions were said to have raised the morale of the men and spurred them on to victory. He died in 1831 and his statue (left) was unveiled in 1890 by the Earl of Camperdown.

Public art in the park

Six stone carvings were designed and created for the restored park by artist Alec Peever and poet Linda France. Linda France also worked with local people to produce 80 brass plaques on the benches, reflecting people's thoughts about the park. Richard Caink used elm trees, felled during the redevelopment, to carve sculptures to decorate the children's play area. While craftsman, Karl Fisher created a new oak door for the medieval arch at the foot of Building Hill.

Find out more

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has books including

- 'Mowbray The People's Park' by John Ruttley.

The park is open daily.