

BELFAST SOCIAL INQUIRY SOCIETY.

ON PUBLIC PARKS

IN

CONNEXION WITH LARGE TOWNS,

WITH A SUGGESTION FOR

The Formation of a Park in Belfast.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY ON THE 2ND MARCH, 1852.

BY

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THIS Society was established in December, 1851, for the purpose of promoting the scientific investigation of social questions of general interest, including inquiries in the sciences of Statistics, Political Economy, and Jurisprudence.

The Meetings are held once in each month, from December till April, inclusive, at 8, P. M.

The business is transacted by Members presenting to the Society written communications on social questions of general interest, or on any branch of the sciences of Statistics, Political Economy, or Jurisprudence, and reading the communications at the meetings of the Society.

No communication is received by the Society involving topics likely to produce discussions connected with religious differences or party politics.

No communication is read to the Society unless two Members of the Council certify, in writing, that they consider the paper accordant with the rules and objects of the Society.

The reading of each paper, unless by express permission of the Council previously obtained, is limited to *half an hour*.

The Council may form special Committees for promoting the investigation of any particular subject.

Some of the papers read before the Society are selected by the Council for publication, and, by an arrangement with the Dublin Statistical Society, all the publications of each Society are sent to all the Members of both Societies.

Applications for leave to read papers should be made to one of the Secretaries at least a week previously to the meeting.

Proposals of Candidate Members should be sent to the Secretaries at least a fortnight previously to the meeting.

The subscription is *ten shillings* a year, payable in advance.

On Public Parks in connexion with Large Towns, with a suggestion for the Formation of a Park at Belfast. By James Thomson, Esq.

THE importance of public parks and other open spaces in large towns is such as scarcely to admit of debate, yet the consideration of some of the advantages resulting from them cannot fail to be a matter of interest. They have a great effect in improving the atmosphere of the districts around them, by allowing of the change of air so much needed where many human habitations are closely packed together. Thus the beneficial influence of the parks of London extends to multitudes even of those who seldom use them as places for recreation and exercise. When, however, one leaves the hot and crowded streets of London on a summer day, and, entering one of the parks, passes along pleasant walks among flowering shrubs, green grass, and ornamental patches of water enlivened with numerous water-fowls of various kinds and colours, he feels practically some of the advantages of open spaces in large towns. When one walks in the Glasgow Green, as being the best place for exercise within the town, or the best outlet from it to the country, and when he sees himself surrounded on all sides with tall chimneys vomiting smoke which is wafted past him in clouds, although he may not feel disposed to congratulate himself on the freshness of the air, yet still his reason convinces him that the state of the town, bad as it is, would be much worse were this extensive space covered densely with mills and other buildings like those with which it is surrounded. When the continental tourist visits on a fine summer evening the promenades which surround the city of Frankfort-on-the-Main, and enjoys the balmy freshness of the air and the perfume of the flowers, while he watches with pleasure the fire-flies as they float before him in the dusk, he is forcibly struck with the contrast between the present condition of the place, and its former state, when it was allocated for the fortifications of the city. He rejoices that the modern system of warfare has rendered all such fortifications unavailable, and admires the good taste which has turned to such a useful and agreeable purpose the space thus left vacant. Of all the thoroughfares of Paris,

the Boulevards are among the most agreeable, on account of their spaciousness. These are also due to ancient fortifications, which surrounded the city when it was much less extensive than at present. Now, it is well worthy of remark, that the original conservation of most of the open spaces at present existing in towns has been due rather to accidental circumstances than to a wise foresight in the allocation of the land and the arrangement of the buildings. The open spaces in Frankfort and Paris, to which I have just alluded, are examples of this fact. Most of the parks of London, too, were originally the private property of the Crown; and, besides, they were formerly not open spaces preserved in the city, but they were far away from it in the country. It is only in later times that the town has spread itself round them so as to include them within its precincts. The name of the church at Charing Cross, St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, affords a striking indication that at the time when it was built it was outside of the metropolis; and yet, the whole line of parks, comprising St. James's Park, Green Park, Hyde Park, and Kensington Gardens, lies still farther away from the original city. The Dublin College Park was not, at the time of the foundation of the University, within the town. The charter of Queen Elizabeth, establishing the college, designates it as the College of the Holy Trinity, *near* Dublin. The Glasgow College Green, also, was originally outside of the town; and, even at the present day, the college, though surrounded by the town, is still a separate corporation, not being subject to the municipal authorities.

Although, then, in former times very little foresight was applied in the disposition of the buildings and open spaces of increasing towns, yet in our own times better methods have been commenced. Great good has already resulted from the labours of the Health of Towns' Commissioners, and I may be allowed to read their report and recommendation, respecting public parks and open spaces, given about seven years ago; especially as considerable improvements have been effected, since that time, in some of the places referred to in the report.

"In the course of our inquiries into the sanatory state of large towns and populous districts, where a high rate of mortality and much disease is prevalent, we have noticed the general want of any public walks, which might enable the middle and poorer classes to have the advantage of fresh air and exercise in their occasional hours of leisure. With regard to all open spaces, especially well ordered squares, ornamented by trees or gardens, which already exist in the metropolis and large towns, we strongly recommend their preservation from any encroachment by public or private buildings. Although not open to the public, they contribute largely to the general salubrity of a town; and it has too commonly happened that, as population has increased, almost every open space has been enclosed; thus, at the same time, ex-

cluding the people from their former places of exercise and recreation, and preventing that ventilation which would otherwise have been preserved.

"We have found this state of things very generally lamented by the inhabitants of large towns, and a very prevalent desire existing in many of them, and shared by benevolent persons of the more opulent classes elsewhere, to repair this deficiency.

"The great towns of Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, and very many others, have at present no public walks. Shrewsbury, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Derby, and a few more, possess them.

"The metropolis, except at the west and north-west, where the different parks minister so much to the comfort and health of the people, has no public walks, though the Victoria Park, now in progress, will supply this want towards the east.

"The large population of Southwark and Lambeth, to the south of the Thames, are yet without such a source of enjoyment and salubrity.

"This subject was considered by a Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1833, who strongly recommended steps should be taken to supply the want. In 1840 the sum of £10,000 was voted by Parliament, to assist local efforts for this purpose in provincial towns; and a few places have had grants from that sum for this purpose.

"In any attempt to carry out these objects, we do not anticipate so much difficulty as has by many been apprehended. It sometimes happens that there is a common, or waste lands, in the vicinity, which, by an alteration of the law, and proper compensation given, might be made available for this purpose. The formation of a public walk would, in such case, at the same time minister to the comfort and improve the health of the inhabitants by a proper drainage of the lands in their vicinity. In many cases local exertion and munificence would accomplish the object, if some moderate assistance were given.

"We therefore recommend that, for the purpose of aiding the establishment of public walks, in addition to the legal facilities adverted to, the local administrative body be empowered to raise the necessary funds for the management and care of the walks when established."

Manchester, I am glad to say, has now three public parks, though at the time of the report it had none. Victoria Park, in the east of London, is also now opened, and it confers a great benefit on that locality. The case of Manchester may serve as a very important lesson to other towns of smaller size. While, on the one hand, its three parks, obtained in so short a time, may afford great encouragement, on the other, their situation, so far distant from the centre of the town, ought to be taken as a very

serious warning. The town was allowed to extend itself uninterruptedly outwards from a centre, no open space being preserved; and then, when parks came to be imperatively demanded, sites for them were not to be obtained except in the suburbs; and the central parts of the town are but little benefited. Thus, although their formation constitutes a tardy acknowledgment of past error, it provides no adequate remedy for the evil consequences.

With the manufacturing system, which has sprung up so wonderfully in the last fifty or sixty years, and which has caused the rapid extension of so many towns, there has also arisen a greatly increased want of space for ventilation of the towns, and for healthful recreation of the inhabitants. While, on the one hand, it has greatly augmented the wealth of many classes of society, and has supplied the wants of almost all more abundantly than would otherwise have been possible; it has still, on the other hand, entailed on the inhabitants some discomforts or inconveniences to which they were formerly not subject. Of these, the principal are, smoky air, and an increased distance of their residences from the country. Why then, I would ask, when manufactures have done so very much to increase riches, why should the possessors object to spend some small part of those riches in obviating the concomitant evils of the manufacturing system? They do already frequently spend large sums for the sake of enabling themselves and their families to escape from town for greater or less portions of their time. Many of them, however, still find themselves obliged to live entirely in town, or, at least, to spend the greater part of their time in it. Would it not, then, be well that they should do their best to render town a pleasant place of residence? To effect this desirable object, the establishment of public parks is certainly one of the most important steps.

Now, where does the difficulty lie? It must be attributed, in a great degree, to the fact that the want of a park in any particular locality is but little felt at the time when the land can be easily procured, and that, when the want is felt, the space, being already covered with valuable property, cannot be obtained unless at a cost which practically amounts to a prohibition. Persons residing at the outskirts of an increasing town can commonly make their way to the country when they want exercise, and in their houses they get a tolerable share of air fresh from the country. The individual proprietors of land at the outskirts wish to make the most of their property, and so they usually build closely, or, at most, leave vacant only such small patches of gardens and shrubberies as will remunerate them by increasing the value of their adjacent houses. The building operations commonly proceed without any consideration for the previously existing interests of the owners of property in the interior of the town, which, in respect to suitableness for dwellings, is deteriorated the

farther it becomes swallowed up among dense masses of houses. Of so much importance does this matter appear to me that I have long been of opinion, that we ought to have a legislative enactment, laying a moderate tax on all land adjoining a town as soon as, in virtue of the increase of the town, it comes, for the first time, to be built on. The object of the tax would be to supply funds for the establishment of permanent open spaces wherever they would be judged most suitable, as a compensation in kind for the sanatory evil to which I have referred, as being inflicted on the interior of the town by buildings erected at the outskirts. Even the proprietors round the outskirts, as a body, need not complain of the system of taxation which I have proposed. Their land is constantly receiving accessions of value as the town spreads; and this is not in consequence of any exertions of their own, but rather of the industry and energy of the people already established in the town. Besides this, they should recollect that, for every portion of land preserved open, nearer than theirs to the town, the buildings will advance outwards the more quickly, communicating to the land an increased value by their approach.

Although I would advocate the propriety of a legislative enactment such as I have briefly described, yet, as long as it is wanting, I consider that we should by no means stand idly waiting for it, but that we should adopt the best modes of procedure within our power for the accomplishment of our ultimate object. Let us not exemplify the fable of "*Rusticus expectat dum transeat amnis;*"—(The clown stands waiting for the river to flow past.) The recommendation of the Health of Towns' Commissioners, which I have already quoted, contains what, in the present state of the law, appears to me to be the best mode of procedure available—that, namely, of private subscriptions, aided by public grants.

Having said thus much on remedial measures for the smoky atmosphere of towns, I may be excused in adding here a few statements in regard to preventive measures against the smoke itself.

Numberless have been the schemes proposed and tried for procuring a perfect combustion of coals in furnaces. These, however, have, in general, proved so unsatisfactory as to create the idea that any farther attempts are likely to be fruitless; and that the only thing to be done is to let the fireman bring about the combustion as best he can, by carefulness and regularity in supplying coals to the furnaces. There is no doubt that much can be effected by skill and care on the part of the fireman; but still it is exacting too much from him to demand that he must send out no dense black smoke from the chimney. Using very good coals, and having a furnace large in comparison to the quantity of coals consumed, he may succeed tolerably well in

avoiding smoke; but, in ordinary cases, he will be unable to attain anything like a perfect combustion. Whatever impression may be made on people's minds by the numerous failures which have occurred, the application of correct scientific principles to this subject has, as is usually the case, led to the most favourable results. One smoke-consuming furnace, at least, has for several years been in successful operation; not only avoiding the generation of smoke, but also, as I am convinced, economising both fuel and labour. I refer to Juckes' patent self-feeding furnace. The perfect combustion is effected simply by a more regular process of firing than is possible on the part of an attendant, this regularity being combined with the principle of making the coals burn from their upper surface downwards, no black coals being thrown on the top of red-hot ones, and so no air passing from the red coals through the black.

I come now to the part of my subject in which I feel by far the deepest interest—the proposal for the formation of a public park in the town of Belfast. The present condition of this town, and its prospects for the future, seem to me to render the establishment of open spaces highly desirable; and I consider that, just at the present time, the town possesses, for such an undertaking, one of those golden opportunities which are seldom met with, and which, if allowed to pass, must be lost for ever.

During the progress of the town, an extensive space of ground, situated between the Linen Hall and Donegall Pass, has, through the pestiferous influence of a most intolerable nuisance, been kept nearly free from buildings. The best dwelling-houses have been effectually repelled from it by the dam on the Blackstaff, and as yet only a few buildings have been erected in its vicinity, while the town has sent out a branch on each side, and is now spreading itself out beyond in the neighbourhood of the Botanic Garden and the Queen's College. On the nearly vacant space under consideration manufacturing establishments have already begun to rise, and it is clear that, if this process be not stayed in time, the best parts of the town for the transaction of business will become almost completely hemmed in with mills and second or third rate houses, all good approaches from the country being cut off. The people of Belfast have thus the future destiny of the town placed in their hands. They cannot help fixing, within a very short period, whether the town is to become a densely built and smoky place, good enough, indeed, for the prosecution of work, but not fit for the enjoyment of life, or whether it is to possess a public ornament which will be a source of admiration in all time to come. One very desirable requisite for a park is possessed by the ground in question. It has on it at present a considerable number of trees already well grown. The importance of this may be judged from the high value set by the people

of London on their trees. We all know that rather than condemn a row of lofty elms to the axe, to make room for the Exhibition Building, they preferred to carry a spacious arch of glass over the summits of the trees. With reference to this subject, too, it may be well to recollect that one of the most attractive and most admired features of the Belfast Botanic Garden is due to the selection, at the time of its formation, of a piece of ground on which trees were already growing. While pleading for the conversion of the effects due to the baneful influence of the Blackstaff into a source of increase to the amenities of the town of Belfast, I may direct attention to one case in which a permanent benefit has been derived by this town from the former existence of a nuisance. The wideness of High Street was determined by the presence of a dirty stream which formerly flowed uncovered down the middle of the street. Let us hope that the evils of the Blackstaff may be turned to good in a tenfold degree.

With reference to the extent of the proposed park, I wish here to state that I would not confine my views to the space between the Linen Hall and Donegall Pass. There lies a most tempting piece of additional land between Donegall Pass and the Lagan, in the direction towards Ormeau Bridge and the Queen's College. The exterior limits of the park may, however, be safely left for future consideration.*

The subject I have now brought before you shows the necessity of attending early to projected public improvements, which can be effected only by the combined action of many persons, and which are of such a kind that the advantages to result from them, if carried out, would be shared in various degrees by multitudes of individuals, as much by those who would give no aid in the undertaking as by those who would make the greatest sacrifices, whether of their time or of their money. It may be, that the entire cost would prove almost inappreciable if compared with the benefits which would accrue; and yet, from the difficulty of apportioning the burden of the undertaking among those who are able and who ought to bear it, the improvement too often remains neglected till the time for effecting it is past, and it has become no longer possible. When this has been the case, regret for the past is vain, unless it impel us to employ more foresight, and to apply more vigorous exertions for the future.

All inquiries into the advantages of such improvements, into the difficulties and impediments which obstruct their introduction, and into the best means of removing these, are essentially social questions, and fall peculiarly within the province of a Social

* At the meeting of the Society, in a discussion which followed the reading of the present paper, several other desirable sites for parks were mentioned by various members.

Inquiry Society. The discussion of such questions, I may be permitted to say, is not to be looked on as a mere barren debate. The ultimate purpose is a practical one ; and when persons meet together in a true spirit of candid inquiry, and with a genuine wish to promote good objects, their efforts are sure to be, in many cases, crowned with success.