

Bishop Hervey and Wells Recreation Ground



Bishop Hervey

The Wells Recreation Ground was the brainchild of Bishop Hervey of Bath and Wells, who served the diocese from 1869 until his death in 1904. At a banquet on 9th November 1886, he was a guest of the newly elected Mayor John Giffard Everett. During the event the two discussed how Wells should mark the occasion of Queen Victoria's Silver Jubilee the following year. A fortnight later he wrote to the Mayor saying that having given the matter a great deal of thought, that apart from a dinner for the poorer inhabitants, no more appropriate celebration could be devised than the presentation to the city of Wells of a piece of land for a playground and public walk. He suggested the allocation of one area for cricket in the summer and football in the winter and another laid out with gravel walks, trees, flower beds and seats for the free use of the people of Wells. He envisaged the following:

"Summer evenings passed in the beautiful open air with the amusement of looking at the cricket and perhaps with a band of music occasionally, would promote an innocent cheerfulness of spirit which is almost a step towards godliness."

Quote from Wells Recreation Ground plaque

The Bishop proposed Bell Close with an extension eastwards towards Moat Walk as this would be readily accessible to the inhabitants of both St Cuthbert's and St Thomas's parishes and was close to open countryside. He suggested the Bishop's Barn could be used as Summerhouse and would provide shelter in inclement weather. The land belonged to the diocese and the Bishop thought that the Ecclesiastical Commissioners could be persuaded to sell for a reasonable price. As an opening gesture he would contribute £50 towards the cost.

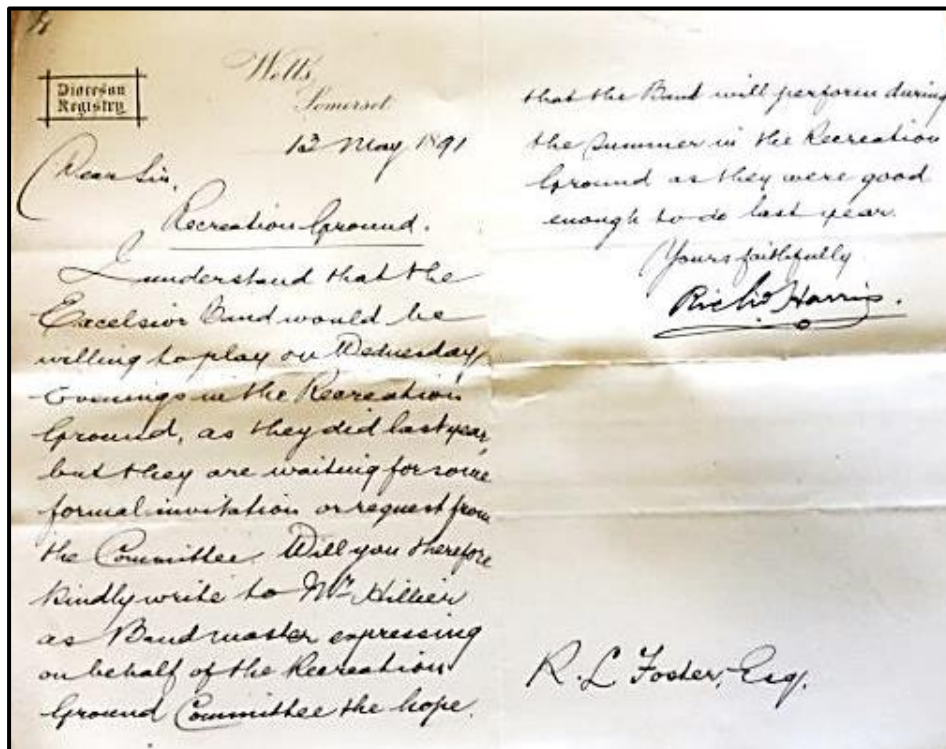
The Mayor responded enthusiastically and arranged a public meeting on 21st December. Here it was agreed that it was desirable to set aside land dedicated to the public for a pleasure ground as a means of promoting healthy recreation and amusement for all classes. A committee was duly set up to raise funds for this and other Jubilee celebrations, but the income was slow. The Bishop then added another £50 to the cause and the Mayor followed suit.

As fund raising continued to be a struggle the Bishop published a handbill urging the citizens to contribute and stating that it would be very mortifying to lose the money already promised for want of a little exertion on the part of the inhabitants. He also reminded the people of the benefits of a Recreation Ground. The principal idea he said was to provide for the working classes of Wells and their children a good playground for cricket, quoits, football and other healthy and manly exercises. At present they had no such amenity. Other classes had their private gardens and leisure to walk in his beautiful park or the other beautiful surrounding of the city, but working men needed a public ground close to the City where they could amuse themselves when their days work was done, or on holidays.

Eventually the amount needed, to purchase the land, was reached. However this included two further subscriptions of £50 each from the Bishop and the Mayor, together with yet more input from the Bishop to raise the total in the fund from the £866 3s 1d that had been donated, to the £1,100 required.

After the Bishop and Mayor's tireless campaigning to raise more funds Bell Close and its adjacent paddock, known as the Conygre, were duly purchased. The Recreation Ground was then laid out and was opened at a grand ceremony in 1888 at which the Excelsior band played. It subsequently became a regular venue for concerts performed by them, which initially took place in the open air.

Once the Recreation Ground was opened the Excelsior Band continued to play there, on an annual basis during the summer, as the following letter, dated 13th May 1891, indicates. This contains instructions for a formal invitation to be issued to the band to play regular concerts as they did the previous year. As it originates from the Diocesan Office it was presumably sent, on the instructions of the Bishop.



Letter copyright Wells City Council Archives

Letter from the Diocesan Office to the Recreation Ground Committee secretary.

The trustees of the Recreation Committee undertook to build an entrance gate at the north east corner but found their funds were insufficient and again launched a public appeal to which the mayor and Bishop Hervey once more contributed £50 each, on condition that the remainder was found within the year. After some difficulties this duly took place.

The plans for iron gates were drawn up by Edwin Hippisley and it was agreed that shields, carrying the arms of the City of Wells and Bishop Hervey, should be placed on the gate posts on either side of the entrance.

These were drawn by Edward Ebbelwhite of London and the moulds were carved by Edwin Halliday. The freestone pillars were constructed by Joseph William Merrick at a cost of £23 0s 0d.



Main entrance gate to the Recreation Ground

Coats of arms on the gate pillars:



Left: Bishop Hervey of Bath and Wells, with his name below



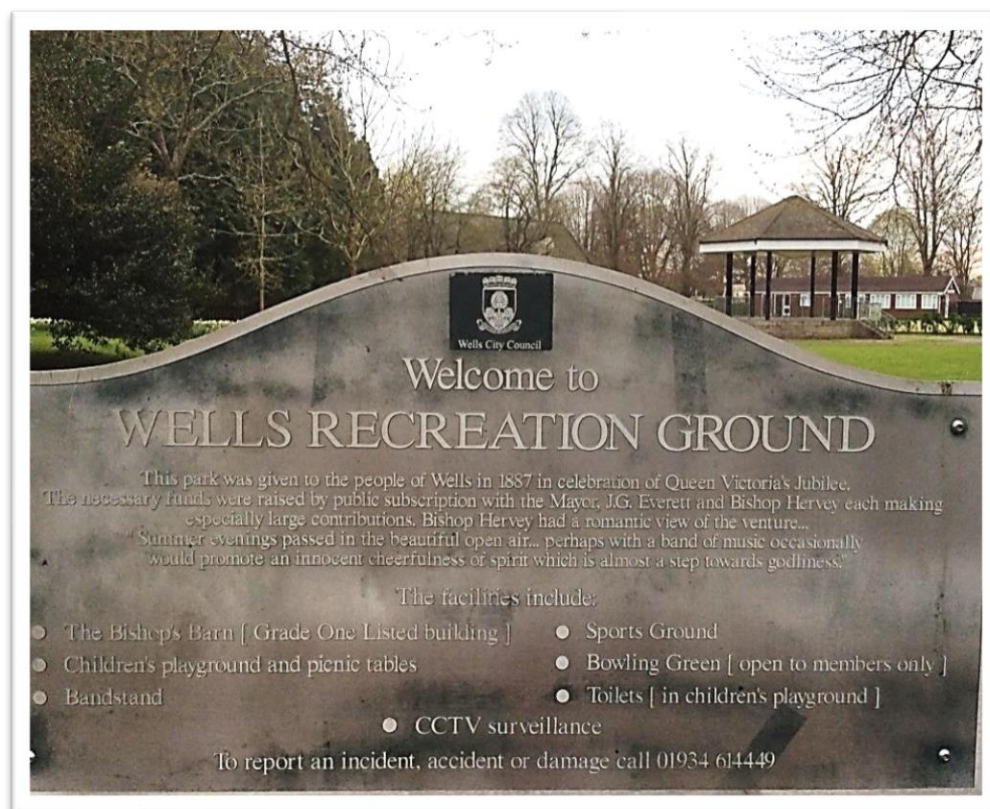
Right: City of Wells with the Mayor, John Everett's name below.

In 1894, on the death of Bishop Hervey, the Recreation Ground committee wrote to his widow, Lady Patience Hervey, recalling how often the Bishop had watched young and old enjoying themselves in the Recreation Ground.

“The remembrance of all this will lead the City to preserve it in its widest usefulness and to hand it on to future generations as a memorial of our late lamented Bishop’s loving care for his poorer neighbours.”

To commemorate Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897, Wells City Council accepted an offer to transfer the Recreation Ground to them. The deed of conveyance stated that the Recreation Ground was to be held in trust forever, for the use of the inhabitants of Wells. The clerk of the Council wrote to Lady Patience Hervey informing her of the new arrangements, from which she apparently derived great satisfaction.

In 1997 changes in government legislation resulted in the control of the Recreation Ground being handed over to Mendip District Council. However in the spring of 2020 this decision was reversed.



Plaque in Wells Recreation Ground, detailing a brief history

Photo: Susan Caola

Within the confines of the Recreation ground stood two properties, the bishop’s barn and a cottage.

The Bishop's Barn

The Bishop's barn is adjacent to the eastern perimeter. It was constructed in the 15th century and is a Great Barn - as opposed to a Tithe Barn. The latter term being applies to a place where tithes of a tenth of produce were stored having been paid by tenants of the Bishop's land. The former was part of the Bishop's home farm and was used for the threshing and storage of grain. It is Grade 1 listed and is scheduled as an ancient monument.

It was included in the sale of land by the Ecclesiastical commissioners and was initially managed by the Recreation Ground Committee.



View of the Bishop's Barn from the Recreation Ground.

Photo: Susan Caola

The barn has had numerous uses over the years especially in the 19th and 20th centuries when it was used as a venue for dances and concerts. It was also the home of Wells City band for over a hundred years. During World War II it was requisitioned and when returned at the end of the war it was found that many of the instruments stored there by the band had disappeared. The town clerk wrote to the War Office and an ex gratia payment of £73 was given for the band to recoup their losses.

The Bishop's barn was refurbished in 1967 when it was taken over by Mendip District Council.

Park Cottage



Also included in the sale was Park Cottage in the corner of the Recreation Ground below the main entrance. The opening of the Recreation Ground in August 1887 coincided with Bishop Hervey's 80th birthday the same year. The Diocesan clergy presented him with the sum of £172 5s 10d, as a gift. The bishop informed the committee that he intended to use this to repair or rebuild Park Cottage. Plans for two new cottages were drawn up by E. Cooke, a London architect and were passed by the City Council on 4th March 1889. They were completed by October, with one housing the Recreation Ground caretaker and the other let to Albert Walters, a postman, for the sum of 5s a week. A plaque was erected over the door of the south cottage which inscription reads as follows:

This cottage was built with a sum of money presented to the Bishop, together with an Episcopal ring, by the clergy of the diocese, as a birthday gift, on his attaining the age of 80, on 20th August 1888.



Photos: Susan Caola

Park cottage is now one property and is in private ownership.

Sources

Wells Recreation Ground Jean Imray and Mary Hembury

Wells Natural History and Archaeological Society 1987 and 1988 reports, pg. 49-55

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