

A history of philanthropy and public parks in Leeds

Historically, Leeds Parks Fund donors are in good company – in fact, local philanthropists made a significant contribution to the network of public parks and green spaces we enjoy in the city today.

The oldest known philanthropic donation that still supports public green spaces in Leeds was from Thomas Wade in 1530 during the reign of Henry VIII! From his initial donation, which was added to by others over the years, Wades Charity was formed. Wades charity still operate today as land owners of parks such as Middleton and Gotts, and grant-givers whose stated aim is “providing and maintaining open spaces in the borough of Leeds, for the benefit and recreation or health of the inhabitants.

Victorian philanthropists in particular were keen to create public parks because they valued them for their many health benefits, much as we do today - especially for people living busy lives in crowded and polluted cities.

Public parks and other green spaces that were donated by landowners to the people of Leeds include:

- Chevin Forest Park, Otley
- Kirkstall Abbey
- Kirk Lane Park, between Yeadon and Guiseley
- Scatcherd Park, Morley
- Batty’s wood on Woodhouse Ridge
- Nethermoor Park, Guiseley and
- Nunroyd park in Yeadon

Jonathan Peate, local mill owner and philanthropist gifted Kirk Lane park to the people of Yeadon. The Peate family also gave Nethermoor Park and Nunroyd Park to the town at later dates.

Probably the most famous example of local philanthropy inspired by a strong conviction about the benefits of parks, was the work of John Barran in acquiring Roundhay park for the city.

As Lord Mayor of Leeds, John Barran worked tirelessly to persuade the Council to purchase the land that we now know as Roundhay Park for the people of Leeds, including making a financial contribution of his own and staking his personal reputation on it.

At one Council meeting he said: “Here we have an estate which would make an ideal playground for the people of this town. Future generations will remember us with gratitude as they stroll along the pleasant walks and enjoy the ease and shade of the trees.” That was in



1870 - and two years’ later the park was officially opened by Prince Arthur, youngest son of Queen Victoria.

It cost a lot of money to buy the land, and install the pathways and other features and facilities but Roundhay is now the most popular park in Leeds, hosting over 8 million visits a year, so it was definitely worth it!

Modern day philanthropy

Philanthropic donations to parks continue to this day, and although there isn’t space to list them here, one notable example worth a mention is that of Arnold Ziff JP OBE (1927-2004), the man who built the Merrion Centre, and his family have made a number of valuable contributions to Tropical World in Roundhay park.

In the 1980s, his generous financial donation enabled Leeds City Council to create tropical gardens in the greenhouses there, and his family have continued to support the development of Tropical World into the popular visitor attraction it is today – so much so, in fact, that it has been renamed, in grateful recognition by Leeds City Council, as the Marjorie and Arnold Ziff Tropical World. The attraction now provides an opportunity for up to 300,000 visitors a year to experience tropical plants and animals without leaving the city. And, as a result of its popularity, it generates an income that helps keep Roundhay park in such excellent condition that it was recently named ‘Best Park’ by Britain in Bloom competition judges.