

The River Gardens, Belper

Britain, unlike many other countries, is noted for the presence in its towns of parks, gardens, open spaces and recreational grounds. These have played an important role in the lives of millions of people during their leisure time. Such facilities were often created in the Nineteenth Century by public-spirited persons. Derbyshire towns are highly representative of this idea, and Belper can boast a significant and prominent recreational site.



The Strutt family were instrumental in developing the idea of public gardens. Long before George Herbert Strutt (1853-1928) developed the River Gardens, his great uncle Joseph Strutt (1765-1844) donated the Arboretum to Derby and promoted its use in the 1840s. Following this, similar schemes started to proliferate throughout Britain, until, in 1906, George Herbert Strutt provided the River Gardens for Belper.

1905: The Belper Boating Association and early developments

By 1905, the Strutt family had sold on their business to the English Sewing Cotton Company. On 15th February, George Herbert Strutt was approached by a deputation wishing him to allow them to use the river above the weir for recreational boating. He agreed, and the Belper Boating Association (BBA) was formed. On 4th April, Strutt granted land for a boathouse and gave boating rights to the association for a three mile stretch north of the mill weir.

The boathouse was built on an island on the east bank of the river, previously used for the growing of osiers (a type of willow tree) to make baskets for use in the mills. The land had previously been known as Pickles Meadow, a name derived from the Middle English word "pichel" meaning "small piece of land". A landing stage was created and paths made through the osiers. On the east side of the island was the mill lade for the first Strutt mill of 1776, and bridges were used to access the site.



The BBA's official opening took place in Wakes Week, on 4th July 1905, with George Herbert Strutt performing the opening ceremony for a Grand Water Carnival before 2,500 people. Swimming, boating races, music from Belper United Prize Band and a decorated boat competition followed. Later that month the number of boats for hire was raised to 16.

1905/6: Creating the River Gardens

By the end of the season, £200 profit had been made on boat hire, offsetting the £807 start-up costs of the BBA; but it had become clear to the BBA that the boating events were attracting far more people than they had anticipated. It was agreed the river be dredged, creating a wider pool for boating and a larger land mass for the public to use. It was decided this land would be converted into a formal water gardens, similar to those at Battersea Gardens in London and Belle Vue at Manchester. Additions over the winter of 1905/6

included an improved entrance, new formal paths, landscaping, a platform for use by musicians and a permanent refreshment building. Strutt paid for all this work, also proposing the creation of an arboretum. He saw the project as an opportunity to provide a recreational and educational facility for the town.

During the changes made that winter, a stone wall was discovered 54 inches below the river level. Strutt ordered this be raised and capped with concrete, and the material dredged from the river placed behind it, creating a promenade at the water's edge. Seats were provided, and rustic arches were created, to be planted with climbing red roses. Between the paths, conifers, hollies, yews, rhododendrons, thorns, cherries, barberries, azaleas and brooms were planted.

The appearance of the original boathouse was heavily criticised by Strutt, who had offered to improve the exterior at his own expense. But the need for a refreshment building and a larger boathouse resulted in a decision to move the boathouse closer to the mills and a tearoom to be placed on the site of the original.

The tearooms were created in the Swiss style by Strutt Estate architects Hunter and Woodhouse, and built by Belper's Wheeldon Bros. Custom-made, it was T-shaped with black and white timber framed elevations and roof hanging over a front veranda. The roof was thatched with heather to emulate the crofts on Strutt's Scottish estates. A service area and kitchen at the rear and toilets on either side made for an attraction for those not boating.

A man-made channel, which had provided water to the Strutts South Mill since 1776, ran along the east side of the site, and was transformed into a water garden designed by George Herbert Strutt himself. The channel was dammed to prevent water draining away and a new bridge provided over it to allow an easier route on to the island. Islands were created in the water for plants to grow, and a straight path created along the western side.

When the newly-named River Gardens were officially opened on Easter Monday, 16th April 1906, 6,000 people attended, each paying a shilling entrance fee (or threepence after 5pm).

The success of the boating at this time encouraged George Herbert Strutt to provide an experienced boatman to look after the boats belonging to the BBA and its members. He appointed John MacArthur, who originated from the Isle of Skye and was a capable boatman, to do this work. John MacArthur is the great-great-grandfather of Dame Ellen MacArthur.

1906/7: Growth and improvements

Further landscaping of the River Gardens continued throughout 1906 and early 1907, so that by the start of the new season in 1907, the final layout was in place. Over the 1906/7 winter period, further dredging took place to provide an extra acre of space for visitors, this time using a mechanical dredger. The promenade was widened and supported by deep piles. A dock was created for the mooring of the boats at the northern entrance of the old mill lade.



By the Whitsun fete of 1907, a new walk along the base of the exterior eastern wall had been completed, and named Lion Walk. Rustic fencing was placed along the walk to prevent people falling into the mill lade.

It was decided a fountain and rockwork pool would be an attractive addition to the promenade area, and Pulham and Sons of Broxbourne were appointed to create it. This company also carried out extensive landscaping over the winter of 1906/7, changing the straight path by the mill lade into the winding 'Serpentine Walk', adding further planting and adding their speciality artificial rockwork, despite the ready availability of local stone which had already been used the previous year. The artificial stonework was known as 'Pulhamite' and frequently mistaken for the real thing.

Also that winter, a new entrance was created from Matlock Road - an arch high above the Gardens from which visitors would have an initial overview of the site before descending by a sloping ramp to a rustic bridge at the southern end of the water channel, which was by then a formal water garden with rockery islands.



Work was also finished on the rustic arches and fences in the central section of the site, and the platform for musicians replaced by a bandstand, again designed by Hunter and Woodhouse, and the wooden section built by Belper's Wheeldon Bros. The copper roof was provided by Messrs Ewart of London, costing £238.

Changes were made to the Swiss Tea Rooms at the close of the first season, as the roof leaked badly and the building was too small to meet demand. It was dismantled and moved nearer the water, the veranda was enlarged and red tiles replaced the heather roof.

A greenhouse was added at the southern end of the site, close to the boathouse, for the growing of bedding plants, and a shelter built for the boatman who issued tickets for boat hire. By this time metal labels had been provided for each plant on the site.

Over 8,000 visitors turned out for the 1907 re-opening on April 1, immediately proving the increase in size for the Swiss Tea Rooms was inadequate.

After 1907: The Final Phase and beyond

The need for a second refreshments centre had been proven, and a pavilion was created over the winter of 2007/8 on a triangle of land at the southern end of the site, surrounded on each side by the water channels to the mills. A metal footbridge was created by Andrew Handyside and Co for £339 to provide access.

The following winter, the Matlock Road wall running along the eastern edge of the site was heightened by nearly two feet to discourage people from climbing the wall to see the gardens and entertainments without payment. The Belper Boating Association Committee

insisted this was as much for safety reasons as forcing people to pay an entrance fee. The higher wall replaced canvas screens used in 1907 and 1908 to block the view.

In 1911 changes had to be made to the pavilion, removing the southern tip so that the new East Mill could be built beside it. The pavilion was extended on its eastern side to recompense, with the provision of an open veranda.

During the First World War, the gardens were adapted for use as allotments. As the war entered a fourth year, the Belper Boating Association was forced to dissolve. George Herbert Strutt decided to give the River Gardens to the English Sewing Cotton Company (ESCC), and a deed of conveyance was signed in March 1918, although full managerial control wasn't implemented until 1923.

The Gardens continued to be used for entertainment after the war, and turnstiles were erected for entrance at the southern tip of the site in the 1920s.

In 1955, the ESCC offered the gardens to the Belper Urban District Council, but their offer was declined. They tried again in 1961, and received the same refusal. Only after the demolition of the pavilion in 1965 and the provision of a new landing stage did the council finally agree to take on ownership in 1966. It was at this time the Swiss Tea Rooms were closed.

The change of ownership finally saw the penny entrance fee abolished. In 1970, the council decided to fill in the northern end of the mill lade to provide a children's playground. Ownership changed again with local government re-organisation in 1974, and the formation of Amber Valley District Council, who have cared for the River Gardens ever since. Interest in the gardens has steadily increased, with a 15-seater pleasure boat offering rides from 1992, and the town's well-dressing festival being based in the gardens from 1997.

