

The story of Aston Park

Early background

Aston was the largest of the ancient parishes in the Birmingham area, which included what we know today as Bordesley, Castle Bromwich, Deritend, Duddeston, Erdington, Highgate, Lozells, Nechells, Saltley, Ward End, Water Orton and Witton. There was never much of a village near the parish church in Aston itself, and it was so remote from the other settlements that Deritend, Castle Bromwich, Water Orton and Ward End all had their own chapels by the 16th century. Before the Conquest, Aston belonged to Earl Eadwin, and by 1086 it was held by William FitzAnsculf by Godmund who probably, William Hutton wrote scathingly in 1781, built a manor house a hundred yards north of the church, "in a perfect swamp" next to the Tame. This location seems to have been abandoned very soon, and a more impressive site overlooking the river Rea was selected in Duddeston for a manor house, which by 1366 was occupied by John atte Holte, apparently the first of six generations of Holtes and Bagots, who dedicated themselves to accumulating land and wealth for over two centuries

As an agent for Thomas Cromwell, Thomas Holte was an eminent lawyer who profited greatly from the dismantling of religious property in the 1530s, and it has been suggested that he proved himself a useful and willing instrument to others besides Henry VIII. His grandson, also a Thomas, was born in 1571, and succeeded his father Edward Holte in 1592 and maintained the family tradition, becoming Sheriff for the County by 1598, and joining a deputation to welcome the accession of King James I in 1603. In return for cash to fight insurrection in Ulster, Thomas Holte of Duddeston was made the First Baronet on 25 November 1612 by James I.

Aston Hall

In 1618 Thomas Holte started building Aston Hall, and had land enclosed to lay out a park, taking over a highway in the process. The Hall was habitable by May 1631, when he moved in, but building work was not finished until 1635. Only seven years later, he was able to show off his property to the King, Charles I, who stayed there for two nights on Sunday and Monday 16-17 October 1642, after inspecting his new recruits at Kingstanding. By the following year the Royalists were less popular locally, and 1200 rebels attacked the hall, which was defended by royalist musketeers. Twelve Royalists were killed and the rest taken prisoner, with loss of 60 rebels. The staircase was damaged (evidence can still be seen today) and the Hall plundered and looted.



This view of Aston looking from Gravelly Hill in the early 19th century shows a small hamlet around the parish church, overlooked by the ornate towers of Aston Hall on the horizon to the right of the spire. The building in the middle

distance is a water mill



Aston Hall today, seen from the park itself.

Thomas Holte died in 1654, and was succeeded by his grandson Robert Holte, and the house remained in the family until the death of Sir Charles Holte, 6th and last baronet, in 1782, when Aston passed to his daughter Mary Elizabeth, who had married Abraham Bracebridge of Atherstone. After the death of Dame Sarah Holte, widow of Sir Lister, 5th baronet in 1794, the Hall was leased to the Hon Heneage Legge, and rented to James Watt Junior from 1818 for £358 12s p a. He restored the property and improved the gardens. Meanwhile the Park and manorial lands were purchased by Greenway, Greaves and Whitehead, bankers of Warwick from the last inheritor of the Holte family. After some delay, the firm started to lease plots in the 1820s for speculative building, the first stage of which was the middle-class estate known as 'New Town' in the 1830s. New Town later declined in status as more houses were built, and the richer people moved out to newer villas in Heathfield and Birchfields. The last of the Charles Holte Bracebridge died childless in 1872; the line became extinct and the manorial rights seem to have lapsed. Meanwhile, back at the hall, according to one story, 11-year old Princess Alexandrina Victoria was a visitor in 1830.

Aston Hall becomes public

When Watt died in 1848, the survival of Aston Hall and Park was in doubt. For a time it was occupied for a short time by James Shaw, but then it remained vacant, neglected and of little interest to the public. The hall and about 170 acres of the park were offered to Birmingham Corporation in 1850 for £150 000, and a committee was appointed to negotiate with the proprietors. However the council did not have powers to buy land for parks until 1854, and even then it was reluctant to use them. In July 1856 a fete was held in the grounds for the benefit of the Queen's Hospital, which produced £,329, and the same sum to the General Hospital. Following the popularity of this event, George Dawson campaigned under the title "Save Aston Hall", urging the public to raise means for purchasing the hall and park. The result was the formation of a company for the purchase of the park. The scheme of the company was to raise money in shares of a guinea each to buy the property, and then to redeem the shares out of the profits of refreshments and Company, entertainments, and ultimately to transfer the park to the Corporation for public use. The company secured the hall and 43 acres of land at the price of £35 000, towards which, at the time of its acquisition by the Corporation, they had paid proprietors the £9000, leaving £26 000 owing on the purchase.



The opening of Aston Park by Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort on 15 June 1858, from an engraving in the 'Illustrated London News'

The company took possession of the park in February 1858, and succeeded in persuading Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort to open it that June. For five years the company sought without much success to raise funds by giving entertainments in the grounds. Among these entertainers was a Mrs. Powell, who performed on a high rope, and called herself "The Female Blondin". On 20 July 1863 her tight rope broke, and she was killed in front of a crowd of spectators. The Queen then caused a letter, dated 25 July, to be written to the Mayor, expressing her regret that a place she had opened for public recreation should be devoted to dangerous exhibitions. As a result, the Council asked the County of Warwickshire to contribute £8,000, while Birmingham would find £20,000 to complete purchase of the. While the county was deciding what action if any to take, a second letter came from the Queen, dated 4 November 1863, stating that Her Majesty was unwilling to believe there could be any difficulty in acquiring the park for public use. The Town Council, at a meeting on 15 December 1863 voted was against the purchase by 40 to 12. This led to a private subscription being raised in aid of the purchase, and a sum of £7000 was contributed. The sum required being, this reduced it, and, after receiving a deputation of the donors, the Town Council agreed, on 2 February 1864, to pay the balance of £19 000 to purchase the property for £26 000. The purchase was been completed by the Corporation on 12 September 1864 and the company was formally wound up on 7 August 1866.



The main gateway to the Park and Hall, seen here in the 1850s

Birmingham Corporation takes over

On 22 September 1864 the park was officially opened as a municipal park, with a banquet given in the long gallery of the hall by the Mayor, Alderman W. Holliday. Since acquiring the property, the Corporation added about six acres to the park in 1873, at a cost of £4750, making the area of the grounds over forty-nine acres. The company had left various exhibits, most of them presented by various donors, and had also erected a glass pavilion at the back of the hall, which cost £1342, and had carried out £7000 worth of other improvements on the estate. Aston Hall was then used as an exhibition place for specimens of works of art, antiquities, natural history collections, and became what was claimed to be the first municipal museum in the country. Until the opening of the new Art Gallery in 1885, what few pictures the council owned were kept on display at either the new Free Library or Aston Hall.



Aston Hall in Edwardian times

As it became surrounded by houses, the park was an important place of recreation for the growing population of Aston, all too many of whom lived in very cramped and overcrowded conditions. Among private contributors to the park, Ansell's Brewery provided and maintained gymnastic apparatus in the children's play area.

By 1880s, this part of Aston was almost fully built up, and the park changed little for the next 80 years. In 1911 the Borough of Aston Manor was incorporated into the City of Birmingham, and the park ceased to be a 'foreign' enclave in an independent suburb. A major event in 1938 was the City of Birmingham Pageant to mark the centenary of the charter of the borough of Birmingham, which was held at the park and featured a lavish display.



The Aston Park Pageant was held in 1938 to celebrate a centenary of the Charter of Birmingham Corporation, and a number of historic spectacles were re-enacted.

During World War 2 public air raid shelters were built partly underground in the south-east corner, near Park Road, and I can remember exploring in 1944-45, when I had started at Aston Grammar School. I can also remember walking round the park the morning after an air raid in 1941 or 42, when part of the park was closed off, but I don't recall any serious damage being done.



A posed picture showing furniture being removed into store during renovation of the hall in the 1980s

The character of the park changed drastically when Park Road and the houses on the far side were all cleared for the Aston Expressway, which now forms a noisy and ugly boundary to the park.



A recent aerial view of the park.