



# Victoria Park

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# Victoria Park

## Key

	Gate Lodge		Children's Play Areas
	Folly		Multi-Use Games Area
	Mansion House		Bandstand
	Orangery		Skate Park
	Rose Garden		Tennis Courts
	Walled Garden		Duck Pond
	Ornamental Fountain		Wetland Habitat
	Community Garden		Bus Stop
	Bistro		Fitness Trail
	Stepped Access Only		





# A Brief History of Victoria Park

In 1847, a Mr John Ansdell inherited his brother in laws estate and promptly began changing the landscape of the Cowley area into what we see today. By 1850, John had built Cowley House and in the years before he died in 1885 he had also created the pond and folly areas that remain in the park to this day.

In 1886, the Cowley estate was purchased by St.Helens Corporation for £11,000, and at this time John Ansdells widow went to live with her sister in Rainhill. Local residents campaigned for the land to be opened up for public use and as such the park was officially opened up as the borough's second public park on June 14th 1886.

To celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887 the park was renamed Victoria Park. By 1892 the Mansion House had become the borough's first public museum. Three ground floor rooms had been dedicated to local and natural history, and to date many local residents remember visiting the museum, and being terrified of the stuffed tiger exhibit that resided in the museum's collection.





The museum remained in the Mansion House until 1965 when it was moved to the Gamble Institute in the Town centre.

During the 1940's, the local residents of the Cowley area requested that an air raid shelter be built within the park to help provide protection for the families that could not gain entry to shelters provided in the local factory grounds. The railings which surrounded the park were also taken down at this time and were used in the ongoing war effort.

On closure of the museum in 1965, St.Helens Council Parks and Gardens staff moved into the Mansion House, utilising the rooms as office space for their staff. The outbuildings were used as storage for the various items of machinery that were needed to tend the many flower beds and verges in the boroughs parks.

St.Helens Corporation eventually relocated their parks and gardens staff from the Mansion House which was then sold to the current owners Age UK in 1992.

# Meteorological Station

Now a distant memory, the park once had its own meteorological station to monitor the quality of the air and rainfall in St. Helens. Situated on the raised mound in between the Tennis Courts and the Gate Lodge, the station built by Boulton and Paul Ltd in 1899 provided evidential records of emissions from the nearby factories. The data collected confirmed later reports that trees within the park boundary had been damaged by fumes emanating from the local industrial works. Local school children would occasionally visit the station as part of the school curriculum, taking measurements and readings for their studies. In 1936, a combined wind direction and velocity recorder was installed in the station, this was to be monitored by Mr Hopkin the Park Foreman. Vandalism to the station eventually forced its closure and its subsequent destruction, and although proposals to recreate such an item in the park were considered, the advancement in modern technologies meant that the construction of a new station was deemed too costly and ultimately an unnecessary expenditure.



## Air raid shelter

Hidden within the park you would be forgiven for missing a World War 2 air raid shelter that once had the capacity to protect 622 people from the bombing raids that took place during the conflict. Under the grass and soil behind the floral display opposite St Marks Gate Lodge, the air raid shelter lies undisturbed with the only evidence of its existence being the raised contours of the land and steep sloping banks.

Local factories each had their own shelters for the workers, however the local families in the Cowley area were not permitted to enter the factory premises and as such the decision to build the shelter in the public park was made. Despite local residents recalling a number of entrances to the shelter, the only confirmed entrance was said to be in the middle of the banking which faces the Mansion House.

During the renovation work on St Marks Gate Lodge, excavators uncovered a concrete structure just below the surface of the soil which is most likely to be a coal bunker.

Numerous initiatives to try and open up the shelter have been proposed; sadly these have been hindered by the potential for noxious gases building up within the sealed structure.

# Orangery and Walled Garden

Once a disused summer house, the impressive new Orangery structure provides a stunning venue for a wide variety of celebrations and as a greenhouse for the community to use. Standing with the fountain at your back and facing the Orangery, the left wing forms the greenhouse area, while the centre section and right wing provide Age Uk with a stunning space where their events and activities take place.

Encompassed by the walled gardens it is hard to miss the impressive terracotta fountain and seat, both of which were donated to the park by Sir Henry Doulton in 1897. As part of the Heritage Lottery grant, both the fountain and seat have been painstakingly restored to their former glory. As the restoration process was taking place, it transpired that parts of the fountain had been repaired using fibre glass rather than the original terracotta materials. The fibre glass repairs have now been removed and replaced with terracotta material which have been lovingly crafted by Aura Conservation Limited of Stockport.





# Kings Gate

On the 8th of July 1913 King George V and Queen Mary visited St. Helens, and as part of their tour they passed through Victoria Park. The borough engineer was tasked with widening the gate so that their Majesties could pass through it when driving through the park.



Local school children lined the streets and the edges of the footpaths in the park to greet the King and Queen.

The gate was then renamed in honour of the royal visit. A commemorative plaque was created to mark the occasion and as part of the restoration of the park, the plaque was taken from the Mansion House Courtyard where it had been kept for safe keeping, refurbished and then replaced at the side of the new gate posts.

# Bandstand

Created by Lost Art as part of the Heritage Lottery restoration project, the Bandstand now proudly stands within ear shot of the Mansion House.

Historic records indicate that the park had benefited from a band platform area which old maps show as being on the grassed area between Bishop Road and the Mansion House. The platform has long since vanished from the park landscape, although the idea of having a formal area for bands to play remained at the forefront of the thoughts of the Heritage Lottery bid partners.

A number of bands from around the borough of St.Helens have graced the bandstand since it was completed in 2013. The bandstand has indeed taken centre stage during the Friends of Victoria Park 'Big Busk' event which attracted thousands of local residents to the park to listen to the sounds of local amateur artists.

Created from a fallen Oak tree, the wooden carving in front of the bandstand was created by artist and sculptor Thompson Dagnall at the request of St.Helens Council. The tiger part of the sculpture is a nod to the old stuffed tiger exhibit that was once displayed in the museum. The drum and sticks represent the musical tones which can now be heard when the impressive Bandstand is in use.



# Mansion House



Built by the then landowner John Ansdell in 1850, the Italianate designed Mansion house still provides the main focal point for Victoria Park. Once known as Cowley House, the Mansion was home for John Ansdell and his family until he died in 1885.

Very much a Victorian Gentleman's residence, the imposing entrance porch led to a spacious central hall and elegant staircase. The tile work which adorned the first floor was said to have been laid by specialists brought over from Italy.

Upstairs were six bedrooms and a dressing room. Four more bedrooms were on the second floor and two were situated off the top landing.

Upon John's death his widow sold the Mansion House and surrounding grounds to St. Helens Corporation. The Mansion House has since been used as the boroughs first public museum, to house Belgian refugees during WW1, as offices for St. Helens Council Parks and Gardens staff, and since its sale to Age UK in 1992, as a venue for their many different types of activities and events.

# St. Marks Gate Lodge

Once derelict and about to be sold off by the Council, the now fully restored Grade Two listed Gate Lodge provides a beautiful venue for small parties, exercise classes and a meeting room. The campaign to save the Gate Lodge formed the basis of why the Friends of Victoria Park was formed, and subsequently led to the full Heritage Lottery bid being submitted to restore not only the Gate Lodge, but the other historic features within the park.

The Council owned Gate lodge was once used by the Head Gardener as a place of residence with his assistant garden residing in the now privately owned Windleshaw lodge that still remains at the bottom end of the park near to Bishop Road.

The two Gate Lodges within the park were built in 1887 in the same Italianate design to stay in keeping with the impressive Mansion House structure.

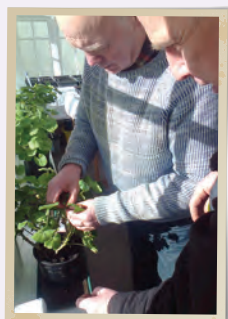
During the restoration of the St. Marks Gate Lodge, the courtyard area was extended and now includes a new foyer and public toilet facilities.



# Community Garden

Initially a disused bowling green, the Council decided to set up a Community Garden group with the sole aim to resurrect the defunct area. Local interest groups were invited to the Mansion House to discuss the formulation of such a group, and once formed, the group then set about converting the bowling green into what we see today.

St.Helens College horticultural students were invited to attend the early group meetings, and as part of their course work, provide some designs on how they would like the garden to look. On receipt of the entries the Community Garden group reviewed the college work and eventually decided that Stevie Browns submission was the most suitable and was in keeping with the surrounding environment.



Members of the new group then decided to approach the builders who were completing the restoration of the park for some



funding and for them to potentially do the hard landscaping as a donation to the project. Thankfully William Birch and Son agreed to undertake the hard landscaping and so the outline of the garden took shape. Formed in 2013 the Community Garden area now provides a peaceful place to sit and contemplate whilst enjoying the smells and colours of the floral displays.

# Pond and Folly

Built between 1847 and 1849 using the remnants from the local glass making industry, the Folly area has been lovingly restored. During the restoration process of the park, the pond was drained and any old wall material from the



folly was reclaimed from the pond bed, cleaned up and then replaced back into the Folly structure.

Sadly over the years between the Folly being constructed and the restoration project, large portions of the stonework had been damaged and in some cases stolen. Due to the unique makeup of the material used in the Folly's construction, replacement materials could not be located and so a decision was made to only reinstall what was



left of the original material, rather than using new materials which would not have been in keeping with the original structure.

The old walls of the Victorian style pond had to be demolished and after consultation with the Heritage Lottery, a decision to use stonework rather than simply replacing the old concrete with new poured concrete was made.



The steep sides of the pond are a characteristic of old Victorian style water bodies, and as such the Heritage Lottery were adamant that this feature was kept as true to the original designs as possible. Local people recall a bridge leading to the main island and duck houses being situated for the wildfowl to shelter and nest, imagery found in the archives supports these reports and whilst these features may have once been present, a decision was made that to replace them would not be suitable at this time.

## Victoria Park

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St.Helens Council

## Contact Centre

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