

## Mughal Garden, Lister Park, Bradford

### Green Space of the Month — September 2003

#### Contact

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#### Introduction

This historically important park in a famous old Yorkshire mill town cost over £4 million to restore. A key new feature introduced to this award-winning park is the Mughal garden designed to reflect the rich Asian cultural heritage of Bradford. Used by local communities for walking, school trips etc, the park appears to be very inclusive. But some residents feel there could have been more consultation at the planning stage. Various developments are now addressing the views of users and a mul-cultural programme of activities is ongoing.



Bradford is a mill town with strong links to the Indian sub-continent and the money behind Lister Park originally derived from Manningham Mill, whose great chimney still dominates the area. In 1870 the Lister family sold the family seat, Manningham Park as it was called then, to Bradford Corporation on condition it be used as a public park. Once a deer park, Lister Park is on the English Heritage register of Parks and Gardens of Historic Interest in England, and it contains six listed buildings, including Cartwright Hall, a grade II listed art gallery. Other features include the boating lake, bandstand and a botanical garden added in 1903. In its Victorian heyday the park was often packed with people enjoying a range of traditional pastimes.

But towards the end of the 20th century Lister Park, like so many other beautiful parks in Britain, had fallen into disrepair as a result of neglect brought about by funding cuts. It welcomed far fewer visitors. Dense shrubbery surrounding the park became a haven for undesirables. Rival gangs of youths engaged in fierce territorial disputes and threatened to 'tax' (ie rob) passers by. It's no wonder many people felt unsafe to use the park on a day to day basis. Meanwhile the park had played host to the annual Mela, festival of Asian culture, which grew bigger year on year until it had really outgrown the space. Converging cars caused parking

chaos in neighbouring residential streets and local Asian communities complained of the noise and disruption. The Mela has now moved on to pastures new, and that is another story.

### **Time for change**

Recognising that something needed to be done to improve Lister Park, the local authority consulted 15,000 local people, who said they wanted a café, an improved boating pavilion and a children's play area. The restoration plan put forward by the council also included designs for a Mughal garden to reflect the cultural heritage of the area's large British Asian community.

In 1997 the Heritage Lottery Fund gave a grant of £3.2m to support the restoration project, with a further £1m of partnership funding. The work is now complete and has obviously made a big difference to the park. Shrubs have been removed, opening up wider vistas through the mature trees, and CCTV cameras give a heightened sense of safety. Bollards have helped to curb traffic nuisance. And what was once the over-spill car park of Cartwright Hall has been completely transformed into a key new feature – the Mughal water garden. This spectacular water feature has raised the profile of the park significantly, both locally and nationally, reflecting as it does the rich cultural diversity of Bradford's history. It formed a central element in Bradford's recent 'Capital of Culture' bid, and helped to win Lister Park its prestigious Green Flag award.







This design feature is followed through in the way that Council services are structured. Instead of being a quite separate building, incidentally situated in the middle of the park, Cartwright Hall is now integral to the park and activities are planned to connect the gallery with the surrounding landscape and wider communities. (See below for details of current activities in Lister Park and Cartwright Hall.)

### **The importance of inclusive consultations**

However, even though the idea of the Mughal garden was intended to reflect the cultural heritage of the area, some local residents did not feel that local communities had the chance to be involved in developing plans for the park.

Naweed Hussain, a local community activist, with a key role linking Muslim communities to the mainstream, explained to me that green space is very scarce in the inner city wards inhabited by the Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Kashmiri communities. And although everyone uses the park now, especially in the summer mornings and evenings, there is still a feeling among many residents that they could have been more fully included in the consultations. It seems there were no attempts made to target consultations specifically towards different language groups or faith-based organisations.

Naweed pointed out that the old mill workers' houses in Manningham have very small gardens. So Asian families, who have a passion for gardening, are keen to tend allotments, if they can find land nearby. In one back street, the residents association have reclaimed a pocket handkerchief of derelict land to create a toddlers play park with a bench and attractive flower border. He suggested that the park could play host to gardening fairs to raise awareness of issues and opportunities in horticulture for local people. But he felt that local people would not know how to go about putting their ideas into practice. “There is too much red tape,” he complained.

### **Friends of Lister Park**

Friends of Lister Park (FLIP) has been set up since the development of the Mughal Gardens. It aims to ensure that its own membership is representative of all users of the park; to promote the park as a safe and freely accessible space; to represent users views and play an active role in the day to day management and strategic development of the park. Following a public meeting, the group is prioritising links with young people and residents on the park's perimeter, many of

whom are elderly. A reminiscence project is underway to document older people's memories and archive photographs of the park.

FLIP is an inclusive group, with members representing the various ethnic communities who use the park, but Naweed Hussain believes that it needs help with capacity building, like so many friends groups.

A youth consultation event in 2002, including free boat rides and ice cream, attracted a large number of young people from a wide range of backgrounds (albeit twice as many boys as girls). They mostly seemed very keen to join the friends group and have their say about the future of the park. Many of them said they felt unsafe after dark and would like to see more staff in the park. I asked Park Keeper David Elcock about this and he told me there were originally 24 staff. At one time that number was reduced to 2, but at present there are 7 employees, including wardens and rangers – all of whom are very friendly.



### **All walks of life**

Hawarun Hussain used to work as a community link worker to the Bangladeshi community, supporting the development of one of the UK's first Asian women's allotment projects, Growing for Health. That group is now self-organising and Hawarun has moved on to work in Walking for Health, supported by Bradford City Primary Care Trust. On the bright but chilly Autumn morning when I visited the park, I saw a great many Asian people walking. Some ladies walked in groups set up through Hawarun's walk leader training programme and others were walking independently, perhaps encouraged by primary healthcare professionals or simply by increased awareness within the community of the importance of exercise. Hawarun told me they feel safe because of the friendly presence of park keepers. She said, "This park is just too good to waste!"

Hawarun's latest initiative is an Arabic dance class in the new bowling pavilion. I joined this women-only group for an evening of very enjoyable exercise and fun. It felt Immensely empowering to participate in such a profoundly feminine, ancient tradition in what was formerly an older-white-male dominated setting. At first the men were uneasy about sharing the space, but the two groups are gradually learning to trust one another.

In the afternoon I saw a number of older Asian men, singly or in small groups, taking a gentle stroll on the grass or resting on a bench in the sunshine, enjoying a moment of peaceful contemplation. But they seemed just as likely to sit in the formal gardens by Princes Gate,

facing a statue of the pagan hunter-goddess Diana, as by the paradise fountains of the Mughal garden.

I saw a party of multi-cultural school children savouring the delights of the Mughal garden. One can easily imagine how wonderful a water garden would appear in a hot, dry country. Here in the North of England, the symmetry of the fountains was off-centred in a brisk autumnal breeze and the children laughed to receive a sudden cold shower!

It was then that I noticed the sign, translated into, I believe, Urdu, saying that paddling in the water garden is forbidden for health and safety reasons. Now I am assured that this is very sensible advice, since the water is changed only once a year and may contain slimy algae, broken glass and goodness knows what. But I can't help wondering why there was no equivalent translation of the interpretation board, telling the tale of the Mughal dynasty, the Emperor Jahingir and his consort, the Empress Nur Jahan?



### **Activities in Lister Park and Cartwright Hall**

There will be a Cultural Diversity Conference and Festival during October in Cartwright Hall. Activities include storytelling, turban tying, music, dance, theatre, body art, crafts, poetry, food stalls and a bouncy castle. An exhibition entitled "Meeting God: elements of personal devotion in India" introducing the Hindu and Jain religions runs until January 2004. A Big Draw event in the run up to Divali focuses on Aarti, a technique using powdered pigment on oil, to make a communal design. And in Jan-May 2004 Tim Smith's photos of many of the 2 million people making up South Asian communities in Britain will be on view. Entrance to all museums and galleries in Bradford is free.

On 19th October there will be a fungus hunt in the park, starting at 10am. In November you can enjoy a tree walk, learn the names of trees and their history. Also discover the wildfowl on the lake, and winter berries in the botanical gardens. December brings a Christmas stroll and decoration demonstration, with mince pies and mulled wine in the boating pavilion.