

PEOPLE HEADINGLEY



Bear Pit, Cardigan Road

Tommy Clapham 1817 - 1895 Showman

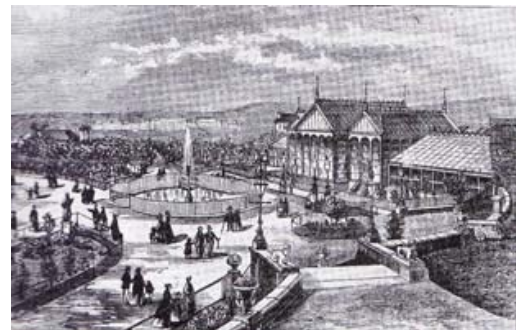
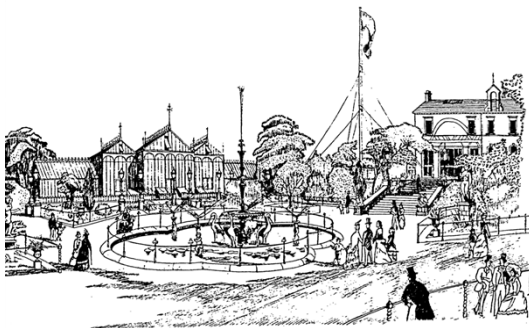
The old Bear Pit in Cardigan Road, between Headingley and Burley, is a familiar local landmark and an extraordinary survival. Cared for now by the Civic Trust, it is one of the few reminders of an idealistic and ambitious project: the Leeds Zoological and Botanical Gardens, which from 1840 until the 1860s occupied this whole area. There was no road then, only lawns and shaded paths, fountains, lakes, tall trees and colourful flowers, enclosed within high stone walls. The bear pit was home to a solitary Russian brown bear, with only a fox, a racoon and a few swans for company – lions or elephants had proved too expensive. Founded with high ideals and stern rules against Sunday opening and alcohol, always under-funded and dogged by problems, the Gardens failed to make money and were closed after only eight years. At this point one of the original investors, a young entrepreneur called Thomas (Tommy) Clapham, offered to take them over – only 30 years old, and bursting with fresh ideas, he was confident he could make the Gardens a popular success.

Tommy was originally from Keighley, drawn to Leeds by all the opportunities the growing town offered. He saw his chance when the new Leeds-Thirsk railway opened in 1849, linking Leeds with Harrogate and Ripon and passing right by the Burley end of the Gardens, where trains could stop. He set himself up as a railway excursion agent, took on the lease of the Gardens, changed the name to 'The Royal Gardens', and switched the emphasis to popular entertainment and fun – monkeys whose antics made people laugh, firework displays, balloon ascents, military bands, spectacular galas – all at a lower entrance price to bring the crowds in. He tried everything, but even he could not make the Gardens pay, and ten years later, in 1858, he was forced to close. Even the elderly bear was auctioned off, with the lawnmowers and other equipment [see Note 1].



Zoological & Botanical Gardens and Victoria Cricket Ground, 1851

Undeterred, Tommy borrowed money and bought several plots of land next to Woodhouse Moor, including the Victoria cricket ground [see Note 2], and set up the 'Royal Park', with an eye to popular appeal. The Park, 20 acres in extent, could boast 'the biggest dance platform in the world', sports and races, clay pigeon shooting, spectacular fireworks and shows, even a visit from the famous Blondin, hero of the Niagara tightrope crossing (though he proved rather tame and disappointing). Tommy built a house for himself next to the Park gate in the new road he had laid out and named Clapham Road, and kept a close eye on his enterprise. A distinctive lively figure, tall and red-haired, sporting tight check trousers, he was a popular character about town, and in 1870 was elected a Town Councillor.



Leeds Royal Park

Crowds came to enjoy his Park (though many chose to watch from the Moor without paying), but it was the subject of numerous complaints about noise and immoral behaviour, and it failed to make enough money to pay off his heavy mortgages. He sold off some of his additional land, then offered to sell the whole Park to the Council as a sports ground, but all to no avail. He tried setting up as a limited company but was overwhelmed by debt, and in 1871 his creditors foreclosed and forced him to put everything up for sale [see Note 3]. By then he had already planned his escape to London, where in 1871 he took on the management of the once successful but now ailing Royal Surrey Gardens in Kennington. Meanwhile he had to continue running the Royal Park in Leeds while he tried to find a buyer, his problems compounded when he was fined for allowing betting on games of knurr and spell and lost his license. He finished up bankrupt both in Leeds and then in London, where he had to close the Royal Surrey Gardens in 1877. He remained in London for the next few years making his living as an estate agent, and finally retired to Hull with his young third wife. He died there in 1895, aged 78.

The Royal Park is still remembered in local street names but Tommy's house has gone and his road was soon renamed Brudenell Road (no one wants to celebrate a failure). Tommy Clapham was a disaster financially, leaving many creditors behind him, and he attracted much condemnation from the high-minded, but he was remembered affectionately by others for the colour and entertainment he tried to bring into the drab, grim lives of people living and working in the smoke and squalor of Victorian Leeds.

Eveleigh Bradford

Local Historian, 2014

The original article is on The Thoresby Society website, at <https://www.thoresby.org.uk/content/people/clapham.php>

Notes

1. Headingley Old Gardens Estate, developed 1869-1902 [along Cardigan Road, between Spring Road and Cardigan Lane]

In the possession of HC Marshall, the Gardens were opened on occasions to the public until 1869 when they were finally sold for building development. When finally developed they became the Headingley Old Gardens Estate. [pp62, 64]

2. Victoria Cricket Ground, c1830s-1858

Two fields adjoining Woodhouse Moor had by 1846 been purchased by Robert Cadman ... In 1858, Clapham purchased the two fields which Robert Cadman had turned into the Victoria Cricket Ground ... [*The puzzle is, this was later the site of ...*] the construction of steep and dangerous slopes like Royal Park Road on the Royal Park Estate. [pp61, 62, 78]

3. Royal Park Estate, developed 1876-1898 [between Brudenell Road and Royal Park Road, and Hyde Park Road and Queen's Road]

From 1870 onwards the Royal Park was losing money ... put up for sale by auction in 1871, the park ... was not sold but again offered for sale in 1872 and 1873. It was finally sold in February 1874 ... the ten-acre estate was sold by Thomas Hattersley to the Leeds Horticultural Gardens Company Ltd in 1875 ... The new Company attempted to attract visitors by new facilities such as an indoor ice rink ... But the Gardens were not a financial success. They were offered for sale in October 1884 ... From 1886 onwards the sale of lots was rapid and ... the plants of the Gardens were soon uprooted and the soil covered with bricks and mortar ... In 1892 the Leeds Industrial Cooperative Society erected three through houses and a group of shops, including a grocer's shop and a butcher's shop, both facing Brudenell Grove. [pp67-72]



Notes extracted from Frank Trowell, 'Speculative Housing Development in the Suburb of Headingley, Leeds, 1838-1914', *Publications of the Thoresby Society*, Volume 18, Part 1, No 129, 1983, pp50-118.

For more on the Zoological & Botanical Gardens, go to the [gallery](#).