

Lord Leverhulme and the Croal-Irwell Valley

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Originally published in the 'Croal Irwell Valley No.11 Winter/Spring 1989/90' newsletter. Revised by the author June 2018.

The great Boltonian, William Hesketh Lever, First Viscount Leverhulme, (1851-1925), joint founder of the famous soap business which bears his family name and joint founder of the model village of Port Sunlight in the Wirral, is well known for a number of connections and benefactions in the Bolton Area: There are Hall i'th Wood and Blackburn Road Congregational Church; Bolton School and Lever Park at Rivington, but less well known are some of his connections with the Croal-Irwell Valley area.

For a short while in the early 1870s, before he married, Lever lived at the new family home at Harwood Lodge [across the road from Harwood church] and he would have explored the upper reaches of what is now the Kingfisher Trail in country walks with his great friend throughout life, Jonathan Simpson, [1850 – 1937] who later became an architect in Bolton.

Lever's parents had ten children and one of his older sisters, Eliza Emma, as Mrs Arthur Bromiley, lived for a while at Thicketford House on Thicketford Road, just west of Bradshaw Brook, Arthur Bromiley [1819 -1888] being a manufacturer and author of a paper on 'social regeneration'. Sadly the house, which was said to be "...in the region of 300 years old..." was later demolished and the site is now occupied by part of the Thicketford Close housing development. In 1888 Lever had moved to the Wirral to be near the new soap factory and Port Sunlight and he was later joined there at Thornton House by his brother and father, and five of his sisters, including Mrs Bromiley, who named her house "Thicketford" after her earlier home in Bolton. This still remains, complete with the original name, having been later occupied for a time by one of Lever's Bolton-born architects, James Lomax-Simpson, son of Jonathan Simpson and architect of Unilever House, London.

South from Thicketford Road in Little Lever, where Lever opened the Local Reform Club, is the Little Lever Reform former Congregational Church. Its first member was one of Lever's wife's grandparents [There were long family connections of the Lever/Hulme families with Stopes, Stand and Prestwich], but its interest here is that the graveyard is where John Joseph Talbot (1871-1902) was buried [the graveyard is now part of the King's Church]. Another architect and friend of Lever's, Talbot was responsible for important groups of buildings in Port Sunlight, where he lived briefly, and was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy. In practice with W.G. Wilson, the firm had architectural offices in Liverpool and Bolton.

Not far away is the forgotten site of Darcy Lever Old Hall, a partly timber- framed, probably sixteenth century house of some distinction. It had been illustrated in the Batsford book, *English Village Homes*, by Sydney Jones, a noted topographical writer and artist, who also sketched Hall i'th Wood. Sadly, Lever's collection of drawings by Jones, whom he knew, was destroyed in the 1913 fire at the Rivington Bungalow. But a reminder of the Old Hall still remains however in the form of its central decorative half-timbered gable, which was carefully copied by another of Lever's architects, Edward Ould, [1846 – 1910, better known perhaps for his Wightwick Manor, a National Trust house] and the design used as the basis for the entrance front of Lever's brother's house at Thornton Hough in the Wirral, Thornton House, where it can still be seen.

But Lever's most lasting connection with the area is Leverhulme Park: Lever had engaged Thomas Mawson (1861-1933) in 1910 to put forward proposals for replanning Bolton, and these proposals were expanded in a series of lectures by Mawson later published in book form. Mawson was one of the leading landscape architects of his day, author of a popular book on garden design, and later, as an early exponent on town planning, first president of the Town Planning Institute. His practice expanded from the north west to include offices in London and Vancouver with commissions ranging from planning studies for Salonika, and Calgary, to the design of the gardens at the Peace Palace in The Hague and the royal gardens at Hvidovre, near Copenhagen. In the Bolton area, for Lever he designed much of the gardens and park layout at Rivington and the small, now much altered, garden layout around Hall i'th Wood. His lectures on Bolton introduced ideas of Park systems around the town with interconnecting open spaces and parks surrounding and penetrating the town in the manner of some American cities, seen and admired by both Lever and Mawson. As the first step to such a scheme Lever acquired 68 acres at Darcy Lever in 1915 and with later acquisitions, donated the area as a public park to the town, formally opened by Lever during his term of office as Mayor of Bolton on 3rd September 1919, and named Leverhulme Park. It was planned by the Mawson firm and at the time of Lever's death Bradshaw Gass and Hope of Bolton had prepared plans for a pavilion to be erected at Lever's expense in the park.

Undoubtedly Lever would have greatly approved of recent Croal-Irwell Valley improvements as well as The Kingfisher Trail, so very much following on in spirit from his earlier ideas and it is fitting that Leverhulme Park forms a vital connection in the overall Scheme.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank staff at Bolton Library and Archives; Port Sunlight Heritage Centre and the Lady Lever Art Gallery as well as the late Edward Morris and Edward Hubbard. My thanks are also due to Stephen Cartwright for helping and encouraging me to update this text in 2018

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