

## Accidental Environmentalist

*By Paul R. Swift B.A.*

It may be an odd title to refer to me as, but I became an accidental environmentalist as a member of the Friends of Woodthorpe Park and more recently as a member of Nottingham's Clean Champions.

Having lived all my life facing Woodthorpe Park and being born in the bedroom I sleep in I have seen so many changes to the park's natural environment. Time was when from the back of my house I had an unhindered view across the park and could see the traffic on the M1 Motorway. All that no has changed, as the bottom of the park is now a wooded area, which now blocks the view that was once taken for granted. However, despite all the changes I have seen it would be fair to say Woodthorpe Park is part of my DNA. Or, you could say, I am Woodthorpe Park centric, especially as Woodthorpe Park has the same historical significance as Highfields Park, the home of the University of Nottingham and the Victoria Embankment, as they are all public parks made possible by the generous munificence of Sir Jesse Boot, the founder of Boots the Chemist.



1977



2011

It was in July 1921 when an auction was held to sell off, in five separate lots, the 52-acre site we know as Woodthorpe Park to build houses on. With the Nottingham Corporation only being able to raise £5,000 Sir Jesse Boot stepped in by giving a further donation of £10,000 on the assumption that the whole five plots of land are purchased for public recreational use. So it was in July 1921, through Sir Jesse Boot's munificence that Woodthorpe Grange Park, to give it its full title, was born. All of which was officially opened to the public eleven months later on the 1<sup>st</sup> June 1922 by the Mayor of Nottingham, Councillor Frederick Berryman.

As a local historian, it was the involvement of Sir Jesse Boot that first drew me to Woodthorpe Park's history and ultimately to the Friends of Woodthorpe Park.



1<sup>st</sup> June 1922 the official opening of Woodthorpe Park

Having participated in many of the Friends of Woodthorpe Park's activities and becoming its vice-chair, after carrying out a little research I was able to draw to fellow members attention that on the 1<sup>st</sup> June 2022 Woodthorpe Park will be celebrating its centenary.

With celebrating the park's centenary in mind a decision was made to hold a public open meeting to discuss how best we can mark the occasion. With a date set for April 2020, everything seemed to be going according to plan when, unfortunately, Covid-19 stepped in and all the plans the Friends had for 2020 had to be scrapped.

With the plans, the Friends had for 2020 now in cold storage and with some members self-isolating, with time on my hands, I decided to keep the Friends of Woodthorpe Park's flag flying, as it were, by litter picking.

With the whole of the country restricted in its movement's parks became very popular. Therefore, places like Woodthorpe Park became a very popular place for family picnics especially during the first lockdown when the weather was exceptionally dry and sunny.

Recalling all the events of 2020, it was on three consecutive mornings during the month of June I was on the park picking up the debris from the previous night's partying that became part of the summer of 2020 due to pubs and restaurants being closed because of the government-imposed restrictions due to Covid-19. Indeed, it was on the first morning at 5:45am after one of four previous night's parties when there was so much rubbish left by the partygoers I remember thinking to myself, where do I start?



Just an example of the rubbish that was left lying about

Apart from all the litter that had been left lying around, it was all the other items left as well. For example, I found numerous pairs of shoes, sandals and other various items of clothing - so goodness knows what was going off. I even found a packet of unused condoms. I'll leave it to you the reader to draw up your conclusion as to why they were never used! Also, I came across numerous pairs of sunglasses, which also went straight into the plastic bag I was carrying. Not being fashion-conscious, so I wouldn't know if I saw a pair, but I am sure several pairs of Ray Bann's eventually made their way to the local landfill site courtesy of the local council!

That is just one of many incidents of partying on Woodthorpe Park that marked the summer of 2020. However, following the mass partying that took place on the Arboretum and Forest Recreation Ground during March 2021 and especially after the enforcement of the alcohol ban in public places, Woodthorpe Park was again the venue for a number of school/college leaving parties.

With Woodthorpe Park being more open than in places like the Arboretum, alcohol bans are not that easy to enforce. So, with relative safety guaranteed from the prying eyes of the law, this meant partygoers could drink in relative safety.

With living facing onto Woodthorpe Park, when there's a party in progress you can hear all the noise. All of which gets progressively louder as the evening wears on as more inhibitions are lost to the effects of alcohol consumption. However, it was one morning at 4:30 whilst clearing up the night before bottles

and cans etc. that I noticed two women making their way towards me. As they drew closer, I noticed one of them was the mother of one of the previous night's partygoers. Questioning her, I said: "Were you one of the partygoers from last night making all that noise?" "Yes", she replied, and continued with: "but I left at 11 o'clock" – if that was a suitable excuse!

As it turned out apart from losing her inhibitions to alcohol consumption, she had also lost her mobile phone, which turned out to be an iPhone, and mum was with her, with a tracking device on her "iPhone" trying to look for it! Apart from asking me if I had come across it, I wondered if it ever occurred to them who was left to clear up their previous night's mess, as they both trooped off in the opposite direction in search of the missing item – which was never found!

Come to think of it, it was a good job her mother was with her as I would have given her an empty bag and told her to start clearing up the mess she had helped to make!

This is, of course, just one of several examples of school/college leaving parties I have had the job of clearing up the next morning. However, it's what they put inside themselves that amazes me. Apart from all the takeaway and pizza boxes that are left lying around, it's what they wash it down with that surprises me judging by the vast assortment of bottles and cans I have picked up in the morning. Apart from empty bottles of cola and lemonade, there's also evidence of the enormous consumption of lager, cider, vodka, alcopops of various concoctions and course prosecco. One morning I even picked up an empty Moët & Chandon Champagne bottle. All I can say is, there must have been some very wealthy students partying that night!

Apart from being a member of the Friends of Woodthorpe Grange Park and lately a member of Nottingham's Clean Champions, all of these experiences I have spoken about has turned me into that "accidental environmentalist." For example, time was when I would walk in the park and think nothing of it. Now, I find myself walking with my nose fixed to the ground and grumbling when I see litter left lying around, which is one of the reasons why before I start work, especially when the weather is fine, I often do an hour's litter pick.

For me, I gain an immense amount of satisfaction from doing what I do as a volunteer, as I know it is appreciated by the park's employees especially those who have the unpalatable job of emptying the sometimes-overflowing bins in the morning. Also, from that appreciation, I have respect for the tasks the council employees have to perform when clearing up the mess left by those who choose, for example, to illegally fly-tip rubbish on the city's streets and parklands. Also, from the respect, I have gained friendship with them as well.

Finally, I would like to add by paraphrasing John F. Kennedy's line from his inaugural speech as president of America on January 20, 1961, which I feel stands as a benchmark for all who volunteer their time that benefits the whole of the local community, and that is: "Ask not what your community can do for you - ask what you can do for your community."

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