

SPENCER PARK

THE HISTORY

ECHO would like to thank local historian Mary Montes for contributing the following article on the history of Spencer Park.

"David Spencer gave Spencer Park to the people of Coventry". We've all been told that fact, and I, and I suspect practically everyone else imagined that Mr Spencer had actually owned the land and just handed it over to the city lock, stock and barrel.

However, as I found out in the course of some research I carried out a few years ago, that was not the case.

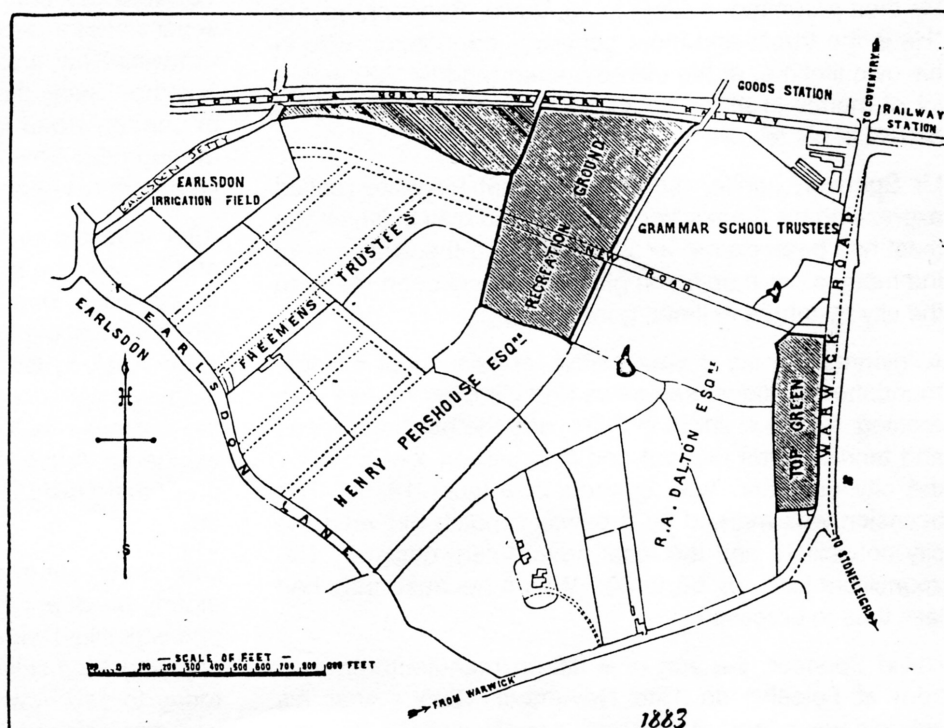
The story goes as follows:

In the 1880's public parks and recreational grounds had become *de rigueur*, for any self respecting city, and the subject had been brought up before the city council several times. It was finally decided to use part of Stivichall Common, and work was put in hand to drain and level about 4 acres of what is now Top Green. One day, whilst the work was going on, Mr David Spencer, an elderly local businessman, happened to be walking past and thought what an ideal location it would be, if the area could be increased, for a proper, good sized recreation field or people's park. It seemed such a good idea that he offered the city council 4,000 Guineas to pay for it if they would complete the project.

But although, disappointingly the owners of the adjoining land wouldn't sell, Mr Spencer was determined that the matter shouldn't end there - another area must be found - and found it was. A day or two later he was walking round the area with the Mayor, Alderman Marriott and the Town Clerk, when they found the very spot, a large meadow of just over 7 acres which belonged to the Free Grammar School Governors. They had acquired it as part of the land where it was intended to build their new King Henry VIII Grammar School, but was surplus to their needs, so they were only too glad to sell. The purchase money, moreover, would be a very welcome addition to their funds, enabling them to build a bit sooner than they had expected.

A further small field of 3 acres or so was also bought

from Mr R A Dalton, who was the owner of a large chunk of the surrounding land. This part was to become the bowling green area. An agreement was also entered into by the council with the city Freeman's Trustees whereby a new road was to be cut through from the Warwick Road to the Freeman's land at Earlsdon. This was to be in recompense for the common rights they were losing by the 'regulation' or taking over by the council of Stivichall Common and would give them better access between Earlsdon and the Railway Station and the city.



No time was lost in getting things organised and within a few weeks of the idea being mooted, the plan was drawn up and the Mayor was putting it forward for the council's approval, explaining that Mr Spencer proposed to bear the whole cost of the scheme himself, and indeed, he had Mr Spencer's cheque there in his hand, and if it wasn't sufficient, Mr Spencer would make up the deficit! The council only too happily accepted the gift.

The purchases were made and contracts exchanged. An extra, wedged shaped small area next to the railway line, called Quarry Close was also bought from the John Worth estate. This would give access for Earlsdon folk from the Earlsdon Jetty (Albany Road was not to be built for another 15 or 16 years).

The Common Seal was on 19th December 1882 affixed to the legal agreement at an official handing over cere-

(Continued on page 14)

(Continued from page 13)

mony and a luncheon held in celebration hosted by the Mayor and attended by the Corporation, Mr Spencer of course, and many other local worthies.

In his after luncheon speech, the Mayor included these words: "Fellow citizens, I think you will agree with me that today is a day of great rejoicing for the City of Coventry (applause). It attests with all the emphasis we can give, that we will not allow our local worthies to be consigned to a cold oblivion.

Byron says

*"There are deeds that shall not pass away
And names that must not wither".*

He then proposed a toast to Mr David Spencer, saying "He is the truest and most generous benefactor, who in his own lifetime, at his own expense (and £4,200 was a lot of money in those days) bestows his bounty for the benefit of his fellows".

Mr Spencer, gentle, modest man that he was, replied expressing his thanks "for the very kind way in which the toast had been drunk" and he reminded the audience of the many other munificent gifts which had been made to the city by others in times gone by.

A 'gymnasium' as it was called, consisting of swings, roundabouts, slides, see-saws and climbing frames was erected for the children in 1894, and the bowling greens and tennis courts laid out and the pavilion, designed by the city engineer, was opened in August 1915. The occasion was marked by a bowling match between the city councillors and the local government officers. The councillors lost - by 66 to 23. Was it because they had less time to practise?

David Spencer, the son of a ribbon manufacturer, was born at Foleshill on 19th November 1805. After his schooldays spent at a small private school he was apprenticed to William Browett, a general draper who

owned a shop in Cross Cheaping. Two years after serving his time, Mr Spencer set up business on his own account in Hay Lane with capital of £30. He was keen, extremely honest and his courtesy to his customers was legendary. No wonder that his business flourished.

Over the years he gradually discarded the drapery side of the business and concentrated on woollen goods and carpets. Throughout his life he was involved with charitable institutions, the Provident Dispensary, Philanthropic Societies, the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital and so on, but it was in connection with the youth of the city that he was most interested, among other things as one of the founders of, and the provider of the premises for, the new Technical Institute, now the Technical College.

Towards the end of May 1888 Mr Spencer suffered a severe stroke and died a few days later at his home in Warwick Row, just a year after the death of his dear wife, Tabitha. Sadly they never had any children. His funeral at London Road Cemetery was attended by thousands of mourning Coventry folk, so many of whom had benefited from his generosity.

After legacies of some £75,000 to his family members and friends, the bulk of his considerable fortune was left to charities, one or two of which are still benefiting Coventry people today. He also directed in his Will that John Anslow, who had been one of his assistants for many years, should, if he so wished, be allowed to buy the business for £2,500, and many of us remember the wonderful Anslow's shop on the corner of Hay Lane, proof that David Spencer's good business tradition lived on.

One early autumn day, the year before he died, the elderly Mr Spencer succeeded in walking up to the park and was 'filled with delight' to see so many young people enjoying themselves there. Would he be as delighted today to see how it is abused and neglected? As one who has enjoyed the use of the park for more years than I care to admit to, and remember with pleasure hours spent playing on those old swings and roundabouts, it does seem sad that now, in 1998, we are apparently too poor as a city to provide the same for today's children, and to care properly for Mr Spencer's invaluable gift.

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FLY YOUR KITE!

All kite flyers will be welcome at the fourth annual Coventry Kite Festival in the Memorial Park on Sunday 16th August, 10am to 5pm. The event organised by Leisure Services is rapidly becoming one of national importance and will have a number of special features this year. There will be the first demonstration in Coventry of Indian kite fighting, with the world champion Stafford Wallace from Leicester, plus kite 'buggies', stunts, racing and even a teddy bears parachute drop! There will also be entertainment from pop duo Djinni and a Kids Fair run by the Active Zone playscheme team.