

VICTORIA PARK, HAYWARDS HEATH

The following research piece is an abridged version of a report prepared for Mid Sussex District Council by Shirley Penny, and mentioned in Sally Walker's Chairman's Report.

At the heart of Haywards Heath is Victoria Park, bounded on one side by South Road and on the other three by mature trees. The 14.5 acre (5.4 hectare) site is used extensively for recreation, and its natural amphitheatre shape lends itself to public events. Besides the climbing frames and paddling pool, there are three tennis courts and an area for cycles and skateboards. Benson's Family Fair has been a regular visitor to the park for many years, and for music lovers there have been concerts, featuring well-known names such as Katherine Jenkins.

The park, with its trees and hedges, railings and pavilions, and web of pathways sits where less than 200 years ago there was just heath and common land, surrounded by a few scattered farms and other land-holdings. The Cuckfield Tithe Map of 1843 shows that some of this land was owned by the Sergison family, some by Elizabeth and Ann Kenwood. But it also shows the London to Brighton railway line which had been opened just two years earlier and which was to lead to the development and growth of the modern town.

Development of the area brought the need for a Local Board which was created in 1872, collecting payments of rates and taking on responsibility for the public drains and sewage. Richard Pannett was the Board's first chairman.

As the town expanded and its population grew so the demand for public amenities increased. In 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, a scheme was put forward to acquire a piece of the heath and convert it into a recreation ground. The owner of the land was Major Sergison who agreed to sell for a reasonable price, which was raised by public subscription. This became the 'recreation ground' and on part of it a cricket pitch and pavilion were established for the newly-formed cricket club.

A few years later, in 1889, the Haywards Heath Horticultural Society was set up and its first show, which incorporated a programme of sports, was held in Mr Richard Pannett's meadow. Regarded as a 'brilliant success', the event was repeated two years later and then became an annual fixture.

The area known as Pannett's Meadow became a popular site for such activities and so the Council in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, decided to buy the land. The public were invited to subscribe to its purchase as a memorial for the Diamond Jubilee. Some people opposed the proposal as they considered that the recreation ground was sufficient public space. However, the scheme went ahead, the land was purchased by the council for the sum of £3,000 and it was named Victoria Park.

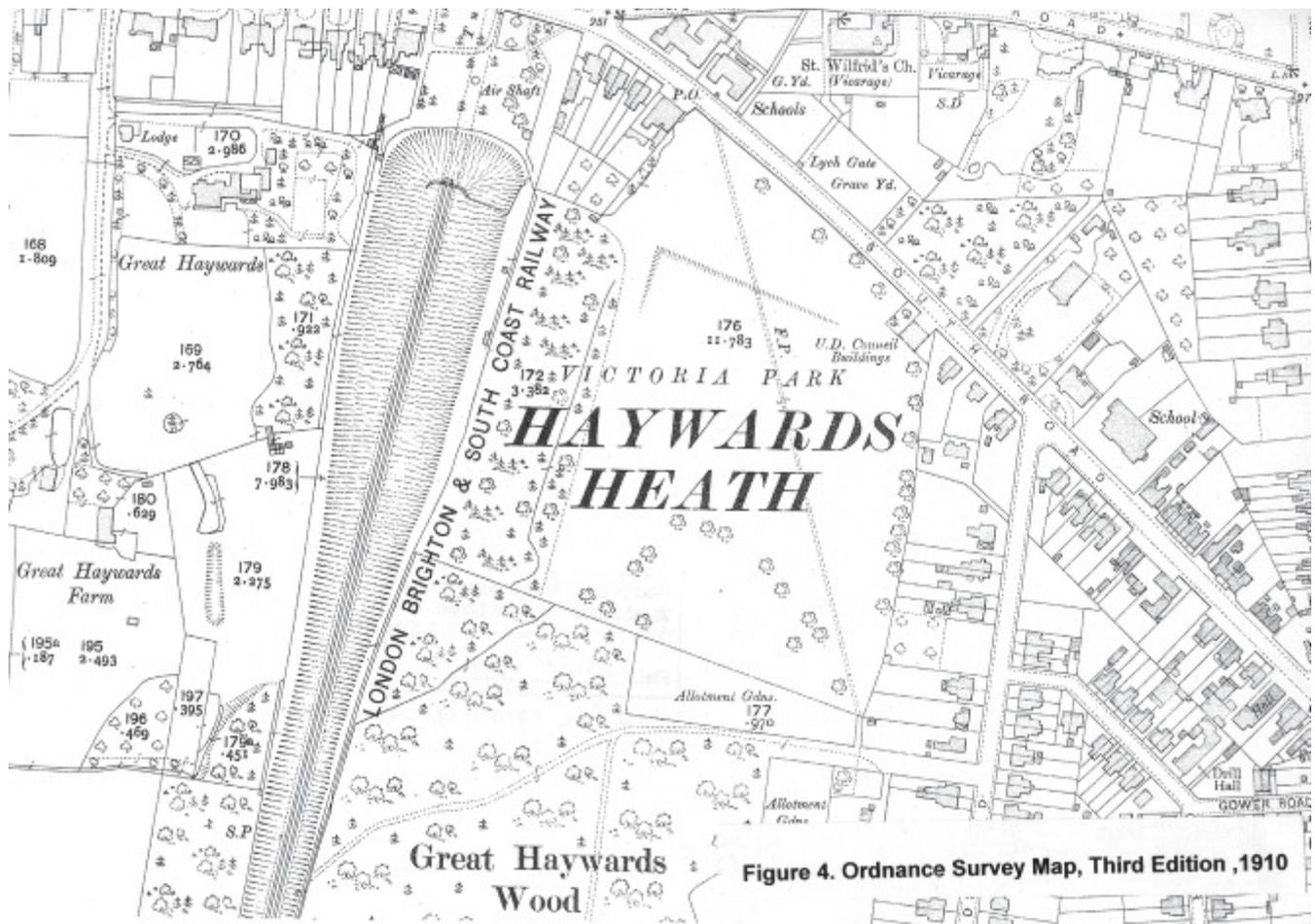


Figure 4. Ordnance Survey Map, Third Edition, 1910

Victoria Park on the OS Map of 1910

The park appears on the Ordnance Survey Map of 1910. This also shows the Plantation, a mound created from the earth thrown up when the railway company was excavating the area to provide a tunnel and deep cutting for the London to Brighton line. The mound was later planted with larch and Scots pine trees.

Having a park in which to celebrate, the town was going to do so. In 1902 the coronation of King Edward VII provided for just such an occasion. The festivities began on 26 June with church services, and clowns played a cricket match on the recreation ground. In the afternoon there was an assembly in the park followed by a display of fireworks, an illumination of the grounds, and a battle of confetti. The following day there was a cricket match on the recreation ground and in the evening the townspeople were invited to assemble in Victoria Park, bringing their own Chinese lanterns, torches and all the other paraphernalia for a grand and imposing procession through the principal streets. Nine years later, in 1911, a similar event was held to celebrate King George V's coronation

The horticultural show continued and the sporting event developed and became an annual athletic meeting attracting competitors from all parts of the county. A horse show and gymkhana were added in 1900 and the whole event was always very well supported. Unfortunately, the second world war interrupted these annual shows (as it did the activities of the very successful Haywards Heath Football Club which had begun life in the park) and some were never reinstated. However, in 1956 the Haywards Heath Round Table revived the Dolphin Fair, essentially a physical fitness event but with a carnival procession through the streets and various attractions in Victoria Park. This went on until the 1980s when the park was affected by a period of wet weather which created such muddy conditions that the Dolphin Fair was moved elsewhere.



The Horticultural Show in 1911

In recent years the children's play area has been redesigned and the part of the park enjoyed by cyclists and skateboarders has been revamped, partly with money raised by the participants themselves. There have also been new developments as far as the planting is concerned. In the eastern part of the park, a number of tree slips of mixed species were planted in 1998 to provide a shrubby area and they are growing well. Nearby the grass is being left uncut until autumn to allow wild flowers to establish themselves.

In the Great Storm of 1987 many of the larch and pine trees on the Plantation came down and since then many others have been thinned out, having considerably passed their prime. Some of the oak trees on the top of the mound are now about 80 years old. Here the area has been partially cleared and is kitted out with wooden climbing furniture.

In the South Road area, four oval beds were established in 1989 for seasonal bedding plants and since the 1990s new ornamental trees have been planted along one of the paths.

The built features of the park include an octagonal pavilion surrounded by paving and ornamental planting in the children's play and BMX activity area. In the centre of the park is the Millennium Beacon which was erected by the Town Council, and for the future it is hoped that a bandstand will be constructed to replace the one originally erected, with voluntary labour, in 1920 but demolished in the 1960s.



A postcard showing the 1920s' bandstand in Victoria Park