



MUSEUM, STAMFORD PARK, ASHTON-U-LYNE.

## Then and Now An Edwardian Walk in Stamford Park



# An Edwardian Walk

Welcome to Stamford Park and imagine that you have just arrived in a time machine back to 1905 during the Edwardian Era. It is a bright sunny afternoon, you are dressed in your Sunday best typical of the period, as a gentleman you might be sporting a striped blazer and boater accompanied by your partner wearing a fashionable dress down to her ankles carrying a parasol to protect her from the sun. You may have travelled on one of the new electric trams and got off at the stop by the Mellor Road entrance ready to take a stroll through the Park ending up impressing her with your rowing skills on the boating lake.

Maybe you work in one of the many cotton mills in the district and walked to the park with your family just to enjoy the fresh air and listen to the bands. Stamford Park was a people's park free to all then as it is today for everybody to enjoy whatever their status.

Allow this guide to take you back to 1905 by using a series of Edwardian Postcards to experience what you could have seen then, and learn a little more of the History behind the founding and development of the Park over the years from its opening in 1873. So before you set off on your walk first a little of about the events that took place that determined why and how you are standing on this spot today and not on Ashton Moss, possibly where the cinemas now are.

## Origins

The idea of having a park for the people of Ashton was first mooted as far back as 1844 when a report by J R Coulthart on the sanitary conditions of Ashton was published in which he recommended that:

“convenient space for exercise...all classes of the town, particularly the operative classes would derive much physical and moral improvement from an enclosure of the kind, it is exceedingly desirable that Lord Stamford should grant land sufficient for such purpose”

So why did it take another 39 years before a park was to be opened? By the mid-19th century the towns of Ashton and Stalybridge had grown rapidly on the back of the cotton industry with multiple mills along the Tame Valley. This in turn resulted in the domination of the mill owners in local politics and the running of the Councils. There was, however, a deep divide between Anglican/Tory and the Non-Conformist/Liberal factions the latter lead by Hugh Mason and the former supported by the Earl of Stamford. This split added to the cotton famine of 1861-65 delayed any progress towards establishing a park for the people.

It took the death of Samuel Oldham in 1858 to kick-start the project. His Will included the provision of the income from £7,000 (just under £1 million today) for the foundation of an infirmary and the upkeep of a Park. Henry Darnton was Oldham's solicitor and played a crucial role in the acquisition of the Highfield Estate in 1871 after the death of Abel Harrison. Another of the trustees supporting the “Highfield Project” was George Mellor, both from the Tory faction.

In opposition was Hugh Mason who wanted the park to be located at Ashton Moss close to his mills in the West End. To this end he offered £500 (£63,000) towards the purchase of the land. At this point Francis Dukinfield Astley offered £2,000 (£250,000) which when added to other donations, and generous support from the Earl of Stamford, secured the purchase and initial development of the Park where stand today. Hugh Mason took no further interest in the project and his statue can be seen in the West End. Underlined are people whose names have been given to the four streets that surround the Park.

## Design

So after 39 years of waiting it only took only a year to transform the Highfield Estate into a park without any JCBs in sight. Supervision of the design was in the hands of Henry Darnton. As is often the case the contract for the design went to Gregory Gill of Stalybridge, who came second in a competition, whose designs were considered “more practicable, especially on the grounds of expense” put simply cheaper. Considerable use was made of the existing grounds and planting around the Highfield House.

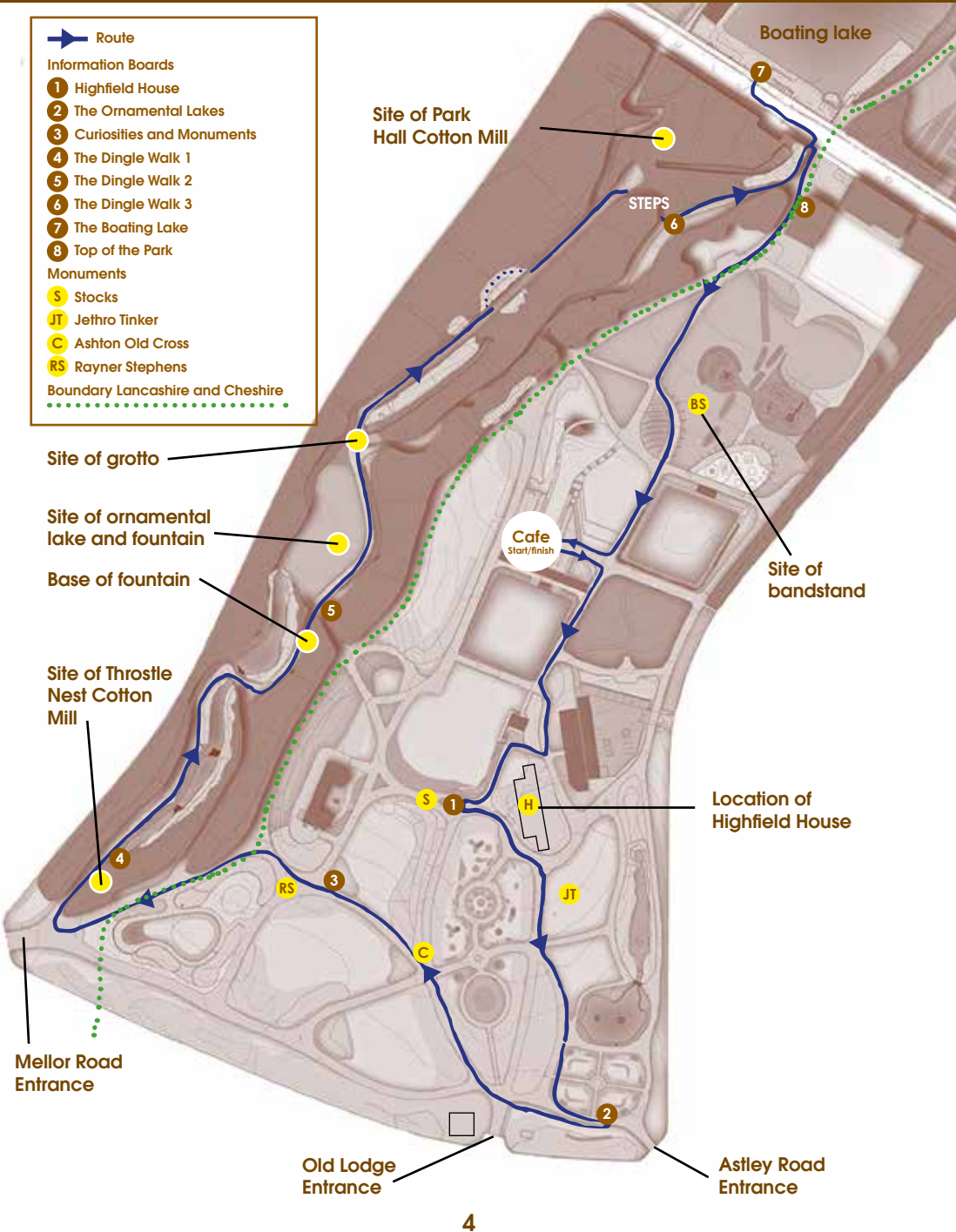
Earth from the new walkways for example was used to form the mounds at the Stamford Street end which provides an environmental barrier today from the traffic. The overall effect was to make the Park seem larger than it was before later extensions were made including the Dingle and Boating Lake. The Park was formally opened on the 12th of July 1873 by the Earl of Stamford with a crowd of 60,000 – 80,000 to watch all the events of the day.



Please click the QR code  
for more information

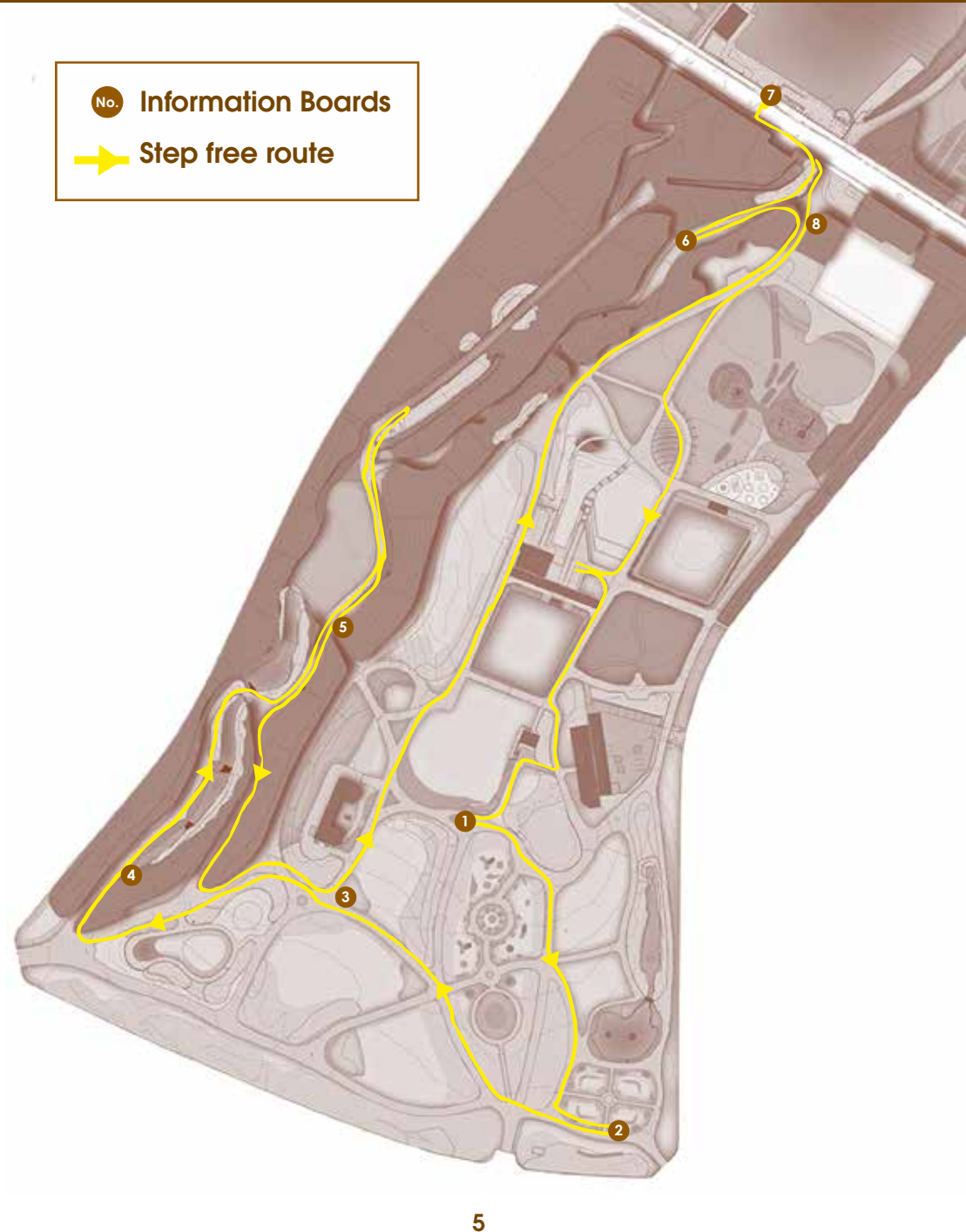
# An Edwardian Walk Map

-  Route
- Information Boards
- 1** Highfield House
- 2** The Ornamental Lakes
- 3** Curiosities and Monuments
- 4** The Dingle Walk 1
- 5** The Dingle Walk 2
- 6** The Dingle Walk 3
- 7** The Boating Lake
- 8** Top of the Park
- Monuments
- S** Stocks
- JT** Jethro Tinker
- C** Ashton Old Cross
- RS** Rayner Stephens
- Boundary Lancashire and Cheshire



# Alternative Step Free Walk Map

- No.** Information Boards
-  Step free route



# The Walk through the Lower Park

So let us start our walk leaving the café in the Highfield Pavilion go straight ahead and turn right down the path past the bowling green. This one of the original features in the design of the park and you would have seen games being played in 1905 as today. After a short distance turn immediately past the bottom of the head gardener's cottage, today used by the (veteran's) Bowling Club, and stop by the Old Ashton Stocks.

These were constructed in 1769/70 and originally had the name of John Wood, the constable responsible for their construction. They were last person recorded as being held in them was Richard Clough in 1825, accused of "boisterous and unruly behaviour" or today drunk and disorderly. Rescued from a scrapyard by local engineer Isaac Watt Boulton for display when the park opened. As you can see the stonework one side of the Stocks has had to be replaced. Young children still enjoy sitting with their legs through the holes.

You are now at the start of display board 1, now turn completely around with your back to the stocks and look straight ahead and in 1905 you would be looking at Highfield House (The Museum).



The former home of Abel Harrison a wealthy Stalybridge cotton manufacturer built in the 1830s. Whilst the rest of his Estate formed the core of the Park when it was opened in 1873 entry into Highfield House had to wait until 1875 when it became the Museum and Tearoom.

It housed the extensive collection of local botanist Jethro Tinker. On Saturday afternoons, up to the start of the Great War in 1914, members of Field naturalist Clubs, botanical Societies and the like would meet and study the numerous exhibits. His collection of botanical specimens remains in the Tameside Museum Collection

Also on display were paintings, photographs and portraits of old worthies! One special exhibit at the entrance to the museum was a model of Ashton Parish Church constructed out of 96,000 corks, the five years labour of love of one John Hadfield of Hurst!

By the 1950s the Museum fell into disrepair and was demolished in 1955. On its site was built an aviary, a miniature garden for children, and a sensory garden for the blind. These in turn were replaced by the modern aviary that you can see in front of you today. The footprint of the House can still be identified by the pattern of the paths that were around it which have remained unchanged since the Park opened.

Time to move on so follow the path with the flower beds on the right, many of these are in the same location as they would have been in 1905. Carry on down the hill and you will pass the monument to Jethro Tinker, unveiled in July 1874 on your left.

Stay on the left hand path past the duck pond until you reach the very bottom and then turn left to the next information board, board 2. You are now standing in the South East corner of the park between the Astley Road and the Lodge Entrances. Once again the view you would have had in 1905 is dramatically different to what you see today. The Victorians had something of an obsession with ornamental lakes and fountains. No self-respecting park could be built without at least one. At the time of your walk Stamford Park could boast no less than four ornamental fountains including one in the Boating Lake!

Immediately in front of you would have been the largest of three ornamental lakes, divided into four segments, with a fountain in the centre. All that remains today is the indentation in the ground and a bush in the centre of the old rose garden beds. Only the duck pond and the old fish pool remain today.

Highfield House is again prominent in this postcard. One of the beneficiaries of the construction of the Park was the Earl of Stamford. In giving his support to the development of the park he anticipated the construction of middle class villas in the roads surrounding it on his Estates as was the case with Astley Road.



Time to move on again and to your left you will pass the original entrance to Highfield House guarded this imposing Lodge with the carriage road going straight up the hill. It was demolished in the 1980s.

Continue along the path taking the right hand fork back up towards Ashton Old Cross, also rescued by Isaac Watt Boulton. This was constructed in the 1790s by constables Thomas Walker, John Knight & Robert Lees whose names can just be made out. The holes are thought to be for irons holding flares or torches at night. During its life in the town it was damaged during various riots during the early 1800s. Ashton was not always the peaceful place it is today!



Now follow the path past the John Neild Conservatory which was not built until 1909 so would not have existed at the time of your walk.

The obelisk ahead of you is the most notable monument in the Park, dedicated to Joseph Rayner Stephens, was unveiled in May 1885. Born in 1805 in Edinburgh he was the son of a Wesleyan Minister who followed him into the Church. Appointed to Ashton in 1832 when he saw the living and working conditions of the poor led him into a lifetime campaigning to improve them.



He became active in the movement for factory reform and in the anti-Poor Law movement. A brilliant orator in both sermons and speeches he denounced the practices of mill owners and the intentions of the new Poor Law as un-Christian. He was imprisoned in 1839/40 in Chester and carried on his work whilst in jail. Heavy sureties had to be given for his good behaviour for the next five years before being bound over! This did not deter him in supporting "just causes" to improve the conditions of mill workers.

You have now arrived at display board 3, the monument was erected in 1888 was by public subscription amongst the factory workers of Lancashire and Cheshire.

Now carry on past the Obelisk and you will see another of the curiosities that abound the Park. This the smaller of two granolithic boulders originally deposited elsewhere in Stalybridge during the Ice Age but donated to the Park as being "something really old".

Follow the path once more towards the Mellor Road entrance to the Park and have a look at the Coronation Gates made to replace those melted down during WW2 before turning back and heading down into the "Dingle".



## The walk through the Dingle

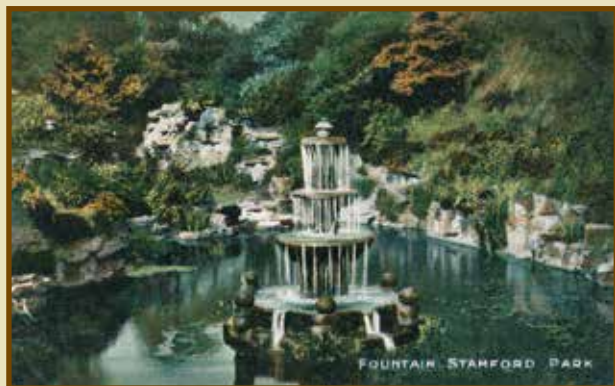


You have now reached display board 4 and the start of what would have been one of the most popular walks in Stamford Park during the Edwardian era. Sometimes called a Pretty Walk and even Lovers' Walk. It is most likely that when you had got off the tram you would have gone directly for a walk through Dingle.

But first let us go back into our time machine and set the dial to 1840. You would not experience today's tranquillity but the sounds and smells of no less than three water powered cotton mills employing over 200 people in the Cock Brook Valley! Just to the left of where you are standing stood the Throstle Nest Cotton Mill which was the earliest known cotton mill in Ashton established by 1779 and powered by a waterwheel some 27 feet in diameter! All traces of the mill were obliterated by all the embanking you see around you today.

Now back to 1905 the most noticeable feature is how open the pathway was when most of today's trees were saplings. Take a closer at the rustic stonework in the foreground of the first postcard where the stream flows underground to reach the River Tame. Now compare it to the amount that can be seen today. The path back then was over a foot lower than today.

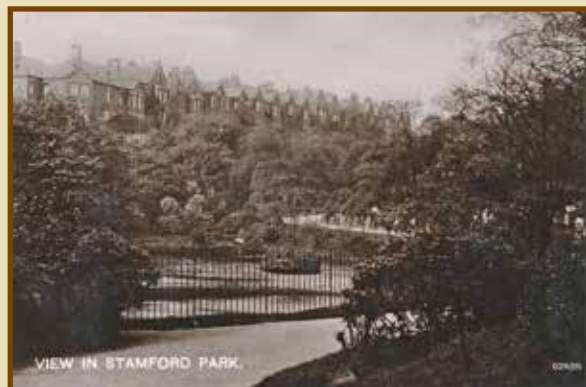
The oversize urn to the right started life as the base of the original Thompson Cross and subsequently was made into a drinking trough for horses before finding its resting spot here.



Whilst the Park was opened in 1873 initially it didn't include the Dingle which was laid out from around 1891. The course of the Cock Brook was altered to form a series of small lakes linked by a series of cascades between 5 and 7 feet high. This included a very attractive fountain the base of which can still be seen on the left hand side of the bridge you cross over the Cock Brook further ahead. This was discovered underneath silt and mud in several pieces during the restoration work of the park during 2012.

Considerable effort went into the stonework, some of which was reused from the Ashton Parish Church which was being renovated at the time, forming rustic bridges, rockeries and a "grotto" which we come to later. Time has been unkind to most of the stonework be it through weathering or vandalism.

You have now reached a large open space with several trees growing in the middle. Stop for a moment at display board 5. The area in front of you was the site of the largest of the lakes in the Dingle, complete with another fountain, back in 1905.



By then a row of middle class houses had been constructed and are clearly visible along Mellor Road in the picture. The ground today remains very soggy underfoot where lake used to be.

Beyond this point the path would have taken you past the "Rockery" on the right hand side to the "Grotto" which featured in many postcards including the one below.

It included two archways with a short series of steps beyond. These have been replaced by a slope and the remaining pile of rocks on the left remains a favourite spot for children to climb. Sadly the rustic bridge with all the faces was replaced when the arch was demolished.

Further along the path you will come to a flight of steps with four supersize urns at each corner leading up to the Terrace. Apart not being planted with flowers they remain very much how they were in 1905. Prominent in the background you can see the Union Jack flying on the top of the giant flagpole next to the boathouse at the Boating Lake.



Either walk up the steps or use the path on left, made for wheelchair users, until you reach the miniature amphitheatre with a modern overflow at the far end of the walk in the Dingle.

Once again you need to go back in your time machine to the 1863 map below. Where you are now standing was the site of Park Hall Cotton Mill, the largest of the three water mills in the Cock Brook Valley.

Built and operated by the Chadwick family it stood five stories high employing 96 people in 1840. A second mill was built in 1856. Following a fire in 1884 both mills were abandoned and demolished by 1892 when the Dingle was being laid out. The overshot waterwheel was removed and a waterfall was constructed in its place.

# The Boating Lake

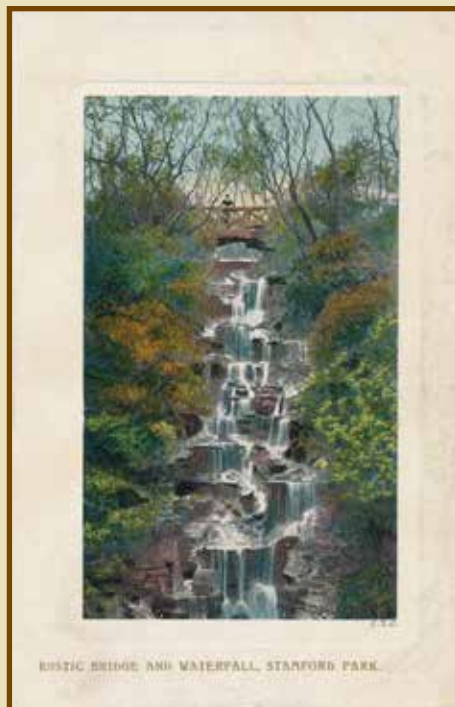


By 1905 this open space was used by a wide range of entertainers, including minstrels, choirs and on one occasion even an orchestra have performed here. The main attraction, however, would have been the sight and sound of water tumbling down the cascades. Today the remains of the rocks forming the waterfall can be seen on the left hand side.

To continue your walk there is a step free path, albeit steep, to Darnton Road to the left as an alternative to the flight of steps to the right. At the top of the steps turn left and stop at display board 6 to get a better view across towards the site of the Waterfall.

Continue to the Darnton Road Park Exit.

Use the pedestrian crossing to reach the Boating Lake on the other side.



Across the road you will see the boating lake and display board 7. This was not opened until the 14th July 1894 in time for the Stalybridge Wakes. A crowd of 30,000 watched the dignitaries performing the opening ceremony!

It was created from the two reservoirs constructed to supply the water to cotton mills along the Cock Brook in the Dingle. There is a drop of 100 feet from Darnton Road to Stamford Street. The bottom reservoir was extended and lowered to a depth of 4 feet, complete with an island for boating. The upper one, still known as Chadwick's Dam, was retained for fishing.

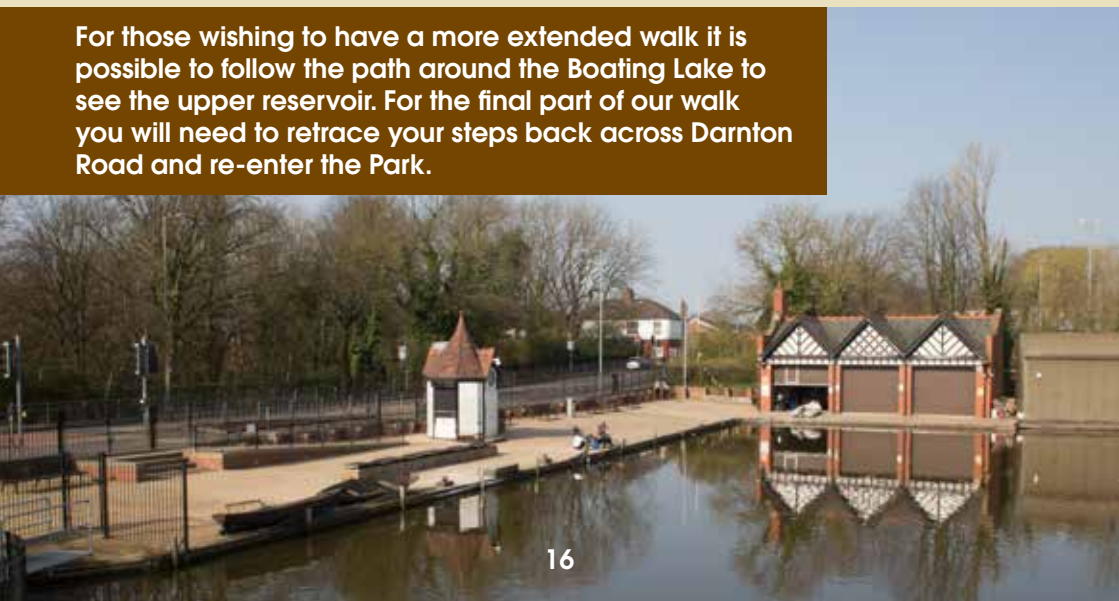
In front of you is the landing stage and Ticket Kiosk for boat hire or a ride on the steam boat "Sunflower". To the left is the original Boat House constructed in 1894. A notable feature was the flagpole in the form of a sailing ship's mast flying the Union Jack. In the Edwardian era, boating was a very popular activity in public parks especially by young gentlemen trying to impress the ladies. This was a period when ladies' boating clubs were also being set up and thus enabling women to row on the lake themselves. A ride on the steamboat was a special treat for children with their parents.





The Victorian Tearoom opened in 1897 to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee, built in a matching architectural style to the Boathouse as shown in the postcard. At night it provided additional storage for the rowing boats during busy periods. It was demolished in 1995. The island in the middle of the lake was used by bands to provide music and fireworks. Another feature to be seen in the middle postcard was a fountain powered by the overflow from the upper lake.

For those wishing to have a more extended walk it is possible to follow the path around the Boating Lake to see the upper reservoir. For the final part of our walk you will need to retrace your steps back across Darnton Road and re-enter the Park.



## The walk through Top of the Park

As you reach display board 8, look out for two stones protruding from the ground on your left and stop. As previously mentioned Stamford Park was located between the Municipal Boroughs of Stalybridge in Cheshire and Ashton in Lancashire. The MB stone is one of a series that run through the Park. So if you stand looking down-hill you would be in Stalybridge on the Left and Lancashire on the Right.

Look out for two more MB stones towards the Mellor Road entrance. The right hand stone is marked on the 1863 OS map as a Police Boundary Stone and probably marks the edge of the Stalybridge Police or Improvement Commissioners area set up in 1830.



The North East corner of the Park when it was built was left very much as an open space to play games and only these stones would have been seen then. The tennis courts are first shown on the 1932 map. By the time of your walk in 1905 a bandstand had been erected further down toward the bowling green, approximately where the big slide on your right is today.



Stamford Park, Ashton-Under-Lyne, Childrens Lake

Regular popular concerts would be played by Army Bands. Ladysmith Barracks was nearby on Mossley Road, and afterwards they would “Beat the Retreat” back along Darnton and Mellor Roads. So imagine finding a deckchair and sitting down for a relaxing hour with music drifting across before setting off back down the hill to catch your tram home.

The bandstand along with railings and the park gates were dismantled for melting down during WW2.

We are now on the final part of our walk. Follow the path through the play area with a zip wire on your right. Unlike today a proper children’s play area with swings and roundabouts had to wait until 1931 when the Peter Pan Playground opened and even this was on the other side of Darnton Road behind the Tearooms!

The Victorian view was that children should benefit from the fresh air, educational aspects and opportunities for sport along with their parents.

When the Park was opened two separate boys and girls play areas were shown on the map for sports. A children’s lake for sailing model boats was opened in 1900 just north of the Bowling Greens where the café now stands.

With the café in sight complete your walk through the children’s play area, and if they are in operation on the day of your walk, look out for the modern day fountains for children to enjoy splashing in unlike those in 1905 when paddling was not allowed!



We hope you have enjoyed this walk through time and place and complete the Edwardian experience with a cup of tea or coffee and cake.





This walk and guide has been written by Ken Morris as part of the Tameside Community Champions Programme. It has drawn upon earlier works of John Cassidy and Alice Lock with additional assistance by her and staff in the Tameside Local Studies Centre. It is dedicated to the late Barbara Morris who was a champion of Stamford Park and its history for whom the collection of Edwardian Postcards was undertaken.

## Other Walks and Routes in Tameside



Click the QR code to see the Couch to Out & About Stalybridge Walking Map



Click the QR code to see the Tame Valley Loop