

Liddington Lake - Leckhampton's Pleasure Ground

By John C Milner

[Illustration]

Liddington Lake, from a postcard dated about 1905

Pleasure gardens became highly popular resorts in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Cremorne, Vauxhall and Ranelagh, in London, set a fashion copied elsewhere. Food, drink, music, dancing and other entertainments were on offer in illuminated gardens. By day, the gardens looked rather tawdry, tinsel revealing itself for what it was. In the evenings they sprang to life. Dancers, clowns and troops of acrobats were all part of this make-believe world providing escape from the daily grind. Secluded walks and grottos offered privacy for family parties or dalliance. In Cheltenham, Regent Gardens (where Regent Street is today) was a short-lived example.

From being highly respectable, and patronised by the fashionable, all such gardens deteriorated in terms both of entertainment and behaviour. Pick-pockets, card-sharpers and others operated easily in dimly lit grounds. The Old Well, Montpellier, Imperial Gardens and Pittville were gardens of a different kind. Subscriptions and tickets of admission were aimed at excluding 'members of the lower orders'. When the spa fashion declined, these gardens, too, offered more than mineral water. There were many special events such as balloon ascents, flower shows and band concerts. However, even after municipal ownership, charges of 6d and 1/- offered a barrier to families living on weekly wages of about £1.

Cheltenham people had some advantages. Leckhampton Hill was a place for picnics and walks on holidays. In the 1890s, right of access to Cleeve Common was gained. There the Rising Sun offered open grounds and dining rooms. When the electric trams began to run, the Geisha Tea Rooms and other establishments offered refreshments. Stalls would open on public holidays. The Grotto at Mill Lane, Prestbury, was another favourite resort until the behaviour of some patrons spoilt the atmosphere.

Fresh air and exercise were increasingly seen to be beneficial. The Bank Holiday Act of 1871 made August 1st a holiday and a Supplementary Act of 1875 extended the statutory holidays. Footpath and open space preservation became an issue. A legal obligation was placed on local authorities to provide allotment gardens. Thanks to pneumatic tyres, cycling became an 1890s craze.

Municipal ownership of Pittville and Montpellier, the gift of the Agg-Gardner Recreation Ground and the successful campaign for a similar facility in South Ward (Naunton Park) were part of a general recognition of public need. Private initiatives were not lacking. Liddington Lake, close to Leckhampton Road and the railway station, was a low-cost mecca for people from the narrow streets. Before the coming of horse buses and the trams, people walked to Liddington, pushing their prams, just as many did to Cleeve Hill. Admission prices were kept at 2d for adults and 1d for children. Liddington Lake was not advertised widely except in the pages of *The Cheltenham Mercury* newspaper which carried weekly notices and reports of special occasions. Later on, the guide books included advertisements and even illustrations.

Leckhampton had many brick, tile and pottery works, kilns and yards. Extraction of clay for these works left holes which soon filled with water. Some ponds may have been dug as ornamental features, though some of those may have originated by digging for on-site brick making. A couple of small pools are shown on the site on the Ordnance Survey 25-inch plans of

the 1880s. Early in the next decade these pools seem to have been joined and extended to make a lake with an island, and a house named Liddington was erected near by.

The house is first mentioned in the *Cheltenham and Gloucester Directory* of 1894, though no occupier's name is given. From 1895 to 1901 Mrs E Newby is named as the occupier. From 1902 to 1912, when the property was up for auction, the occupier was Mrs E Lewis. From 1901 to 1911, though not afterwards, the land was defined as 'Pleasure Gardens'.

The Cheltenham Mercury of 1 April, 1893, reports the opening of the gardens for 'Easter Amusements'. William Smart is named as the proprietor. He it was, we must assume, who enlarged the lake and established the enterprise. The paper said he 'should deserve a good share of patronage'. That same issue of the *Mercury* included an advertisement, which read:

<p>BOATING! BOATING! BOATING!</p> <p>GREAT ATTRACTIONS FOR THE EASTER HOLIDAYS AT</p> <p>LIDDINGTON LAKE ADJOINING LECKHAMPTON STATION</p> <p>On and after THURSDAY, March 30th, 1893, Two Splendid</p> <p>SCREW STEAMERS,</p> <p>"PIONEER" and "MAYFLOWER," will Ply on the Lake Daily, from 10 until dusk.</p> <p>Also CANOES and SMALL BOATS by the hour. Likewise the ARIEL FLIGHT.</p> <p>Light Refreshments at Moderate Charges. Tobacco and Cigars.</p> <p>Admission---Twopence, including a Ride on Steamboat.</p> <p>WILLIAM SMART, PROPRIETOR.</p>

For the rest of that year no further advertisements seem to have appeared. 6 July was the wedding day of the Duke of York and Princess Mary of Teck and saw the opening of Naunton Park. No notice of winter closure appeared in the *Mercury*.

1894 saw weekly advertisements with more detailed ones for Bank Holiday events. These show that a variety of activities was being organised and that attractions had been increased. For example, on Easter Monday there was a

'Canoe Race - 1st Prize, Watch; 2nd Prize, Gold Pin; 3rd Prize, Silver Pin; 4th Prize, Knife.
For Boys under 16. Those who wish to enter should give their names to Mr Smith, Liddington Lake before March 20th. Entrance Fee 3d.
Greasy Pole Climbing - 1st Prize Watch. Anyone allowed to enter. No charge made'

August Bank Holiday, 1894, saw another canoe race for boys under 16, though no entrance fee was charged this time. There was also a steam boat race, plus tub racing, water polo and walking the greasy pole across the water. That day began with pouring rain but things improved by mid-day. 'Man-in-the-Moon' (the *Mercury* columnist) recorded that '... something like 1700 went to Liddington Lake where they had a capital entertainment'. An advertisement published on 18 August 1894, said that the Lake was 'well stocked with Perch, Roach, Bream etc. Terms for fishing 6d per day'. From then on, fishing was another attraction offered by the management. A mild Christmas and New Year were followed by severe frost in February 1895. Liddington Lake opened for 'Skating! Skating! Ice Just Flooded. In Grand Condition. The Town Band will be in attendance on Wednesday from 3pm to 5pm (weather permitting). Admission - All Day 6d; from 6 till 9.30 3d. At night the Gardens will be Illuminated. E. Newby Proprietress'. Clearly, the new

year had brought new management. Takings on Sunday 10 February were given to the Poor Relief Fund. In those days Sunday trading was socially unacceptable. Joseph Hall, the Borough Engineer, had attracted severe censure for charging for Sunday skating at Pittville when the number on the ice appeared dangerous. 'Man-in-the-Moon' commented on 16 February 1895 that '... if there was no skating at Marle Hill (the sluices had been raised and the ice unsafe) there was plenty at Liddington Lake, the fine sheet of water pronounced to be one of the best in the district and in splendid condition, offering every facility'. The Poor Relief Fund benefited by £6-1s-1d. He was writing of the week before, but on 16th February itself the Cheltenham Rifle Band was in attendance, admission was only 3d and all takings were given to the Poor Relief Fund. Thus another tradition was established.

The main 1895 season began on 13th April with many visitors coming on the 15th (Easter Monday). Whit Monday was a great success with the Cheltenham Rifle Band again in attendance. There were canoe, flat, hurdle and novelty races, with prizes, for boys under 16. Swings, seesaws and an out-door gymnasium were all free. Tea and light refreshments were on offer. All-day admission cost only 3d (6 to 9 pm only 2d) with children under 10 at half price! Liddington had established itself! 'Man-in-the-Moon's' comment on 8 June summed it up: 'As a popular resort Liddington Lake now ranks amongst your fully established institutions of your town and as Mrs Newby, the spirited proprietress, has spared no pains in expense to make it attractive, it will be found one of the pleasantest spots in the neighbourhood to pass an hour or two at holiday or any other time.' Steam boats plied every Wednesday. A strong band played on August Bank Holiday. A procession of illuminated boats, and dancing on the lawns to a quadrille band added to the pleasures of the day. 9 November saw closure for the winter.

Early 1896 was too mild for skating and a wet March was followed by drought until late July. Fishing was available again at 6d per day with tench and eels added to the possible catches. Some 1600 visitors came on one day in late May. However, 1896 saw the abandonment of many local events, including a visit to the town by the Prince of Wales, because of a smallpox epidemic in Gloucester. Ripples of concern ran far beyond the county town. Widespread vaccination and restrictions on public assembly seem to have led to a waning of the epidemic by May and the problem was over by the August Bank Holiday. In the *Mercury* of 8 August a very significant comment was published: 'I was pleased to see the great advance that continues to be made in the general, good behaviour of the masses. A holiday not so long ago used to be fraught with drunkenness, rows and general bad behaviour; but now drunkenness was almost conspicuous by its absence, and there was not a single "run-in" during either the day or night'.

Clearly, the simple pleasures of places such as Liddington were having beneficial effects. The late 19th century suffered a severe drink problem, the temperance movement having arisen for very good reasons. Men had always gone to the pub. Women and children were left at home. Now, places such as Liddington offered family entertainment with non-alcoholic drinks and other refreshments available. If people wished to take their own picnics they were free to do so, knowing that they could buy cups of tea when there. Liddington was very much a place for family enjoyment. On 19 August 1896, the gardens at Liddington Lake were the scene of a temperance societies' garden party and Band of Hope festival. We have to look at Liddington Lake against a wider background of social progress. The entertainments on offer may seem charmingly innocent to us, but they represent a great step forward from the brutalities of working and lower middle class life and entertainment of earlier decades.

In 1896, Liddington Lake remained open until 21 November, three weeks later than usual. This was, presumably, to make up for a worrying spring and indifferent summer. By the season of 1897, the Lake had been deepened slightly, though it was always advertised as being safe for children, being only three feet in depth. On Easter Monday that year the Cheltenham Brass Band, under the direction of Mr Charles Preston, performed at Liddington Lake. Some 2300 visitors came that day and Mrs Newby ran out of refreshments! The Brass Band came again at Whitsun

when there was a water polo match at 3.30 pm in addition to the usual sports and attractions. Advertisements stressed that the 'bus passed and repassed every half-hour up to 9.30 pm!

June 22nd 1897 saw the grand celebration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, concluding with a procession of illuminated boats, balloon ascents at intervals and a display of fireworks by Messrs Pain and Sons of London. There were bonfires in the gardens and those present could see the huge beacon bonfire on the top of Leckhampton Hill. A whole programme of sports had taken place during the day. Men swam for the prize of a musical clock. Ladies had a canoe race for the prize of a pair of bracelets. Competitors could climb the greasy pole for a 12lb ham (a frequent prize). A sack race for boys had prizes of 3s 6d, 2s 6d and 1s 6d - but then one could buy a lot of chocolate, sweets or ice cream for those sums! It proved to be a very successful day at Liddington Lake in spite of all the other attractions in the town, including those at nearby Naunton Park. The rest of the year saw the usual pattern of events. An attendant was always present to row ladies and children.

When the season of 1898 opened, a tricoloured bandstand and two new rustic summer houses had been added to the attractions, together with fairy lamps and bunting. Re-opening on 11 April, all the usual entertainments, including climbing a greasy pole for a ham, were laid on once more. The Brass Band played and there was dancing on the lawns. Although Easter Monday was one of indifferent weather, 2000 people were admitted. 'Man-in-the-Moon' commented '... the above place is laid out with boweries and quiet corners; just the place to have a quiet half hour's spooning. If you don't believe it, go and see for yourselves!'. On Whit Monday a tug-of-war was added to the sports and that greasy pole was there to climb 'for a magnificent ham of Stroulger's celebrated cure'. One tug-of-war, at 4 pm, for a 10/- prize, was between the Cheltenham and the Leckhampton Married Men. Another, for 5/-, was between the Cheltenham and Leckhampton Boys of under 16. Temperance drinks at moderate prices were available.

The Easter Monday of 1899 was one of perfect April weather so that Liddington Lake attracted a record attendance. A skipping competition was arranged for the under-16 girls. Many of the sports seem to have been for men and boys, so this came as a pleasant change. To celebrate Whit Monday a 'Cycle Parade in Fancy Costumes' was arranged for 1 pm. All cyclists were invited to join the parade and could enter the gardens free of charge. The Parade went via Bath Road, High Street, Clarence Street, Manchester Street, Lower High Street, Swindon Road, Fairview, Promenade, Montpellier, Tivoli and back to Leckhampton. It was a good way to pull the crowds in and to advertise Liddington Lake!

In early July 1899, the Band of Hope Treat was held in the gardens, the children being joined by adults. The fun was spoilt for a small boy named Wixey who broke his wrist attempting to stand on a 'tint-a-tant'.

[Illustration]

Liddington Lake, c 1908

By the turn of the century, guide books began mentioning Liddington Lake amongst the attractions of Cheltenham. For example, E J Burrow (also responsible for the illustration on the front cover of this bulletin and for some of the postcard photographs) summed things up by saying 'Liddington Lake, although a private enterprise, occupies the same position in the Leckhampton district that Pittville Lake does at the other end of the town'. Even the *Cheltenham Annuaire* carried an advertisement for Liddington Lake in 1900 and onwards. Advertisements changed little over the years.

A pattern of entertainments had been set by Mrs Newby, who was being assisted by a Mrs Evans in 1900. When Mrs Newby took over the management in 1902 little changed, although there seems to have been more emphasis placed on the lake itself, the boating and fishing and the

skating when the ice was thick. Experienced boatmen were employed for rowing ladies and children. Rowing lessons were given. So standard did advertisements become that the words 'The Boating Season has Begun' were used every week from Easter until seven days before the November closure!

Singing competitions were introduced in 1900 with five shilling prizes for the best comic and the best sentimental songs. Potato races were added to the athletic events. Ices were included amongst the refreshments on offer. Giant strides and see-saws were added for children. (One who recollects 'giant strides' being in use at Naunton Park describes them as consisting of a 15-foot high central post like a telegraph pole with a wheel bearing at the top. Ten chains were suspended from the bearing, each having a wooden crossbar handle about 3 feet from the ground. Children would run around the central post - faster and faster - until they would literally 'take off' - *Ed.*)

Refreshments in the early 1900s appear to have been supervised by Mrs Crump who lived in Short Street. The boatman, in the later years, was Mr Cribb who lived in Moorend Street. When the pleasure grounds finally closed, Mr Cribb emigrated to Winnepeg in about 1912.

Picture postcards of the lake could be obtained by visitors while there. One of these [1] was sent as a Christmas card by the above-mentioned Mrs E Lewis. Posted on Christmas Eve, 1907, it was sent to Miss Woodward of 17 Cambray - the daughter of A E Woodward the music dealer. Delivery was on Christmas Day!

[Illustration]

An advertisement dated 1908

The final years of Liddington Lake saw a continuation of the entertainments established by Mrs Newby. A letter to *The Cheltenham News* of 11 February 1988, from Mr C. Palmer of 58 Pennine Road, casts light on the Liddington scene. He writes:

My father [William] and my uncle [George] were noted for their clowning act there on Bank Holidays when special entertainments were arranged. My father used to walk around on high stilts while uncle amused the spectators dressed up as a clown. Brock's fireworks arranged an evening spectacular and father and uncle also assisted in this show. One year they were known as the Palmer Brothers and the next show they became the Remlap Brothers.

The Pleasure Gardens were listed in *The Cheltenham and Gloucester Directory* of 1911 but the lake and gardens were up for sale by auction in March 1912. Bidding at Messrs. Cornelius and Boulter's sale began at £500 and went to £600. No further bids were forthcoming, so the property was withdrawn, the vendors putting in a bid for £750. The Directory lists no occupants between 1913 and 1916.

Dr J H Garrett, Cheltenham's famous Medical Officer of Health, wrote in the earlier editions of his *Cheltenham: the Garden Town of England* as follows: 'The gardens around the lake are prettily laid out and in the summer months are much used for festive gatherings of various kinds.' The 5th (1906-07) edition made no reference to Liddington. However, Dr Garrett's words sum up Liddington's charm.

The Directory of 1916-17 shows that Mr Leigh James was in occupation. Mr James was a farmer and butcher with a well remembered shop in Great Norwood Street. Part of the attraction of Liddington for him appears to have been that some grazing was possible. He also appears to

have had fears for the safety of his children, however, and over a period of time set about filling in the lake.

The 1921 revision of the Ordnance Survey plan shows the north-eastern part of the lake to be still there. The island was no more, though the outline was still evident, with paths marking the old shore. A suggestion has been made that the doubling of the railway track from Andoversford to Cheltenham (completed on 28 September 1902) resulted in a problem of seepage, with the possibility that the embankment might collapse. On the face of it, this seems likely, but the 1921 plan shows that the last part of the lake to be filled in was that closest to the embankment. An end had come to an amenity that had given pleasure to thousands. In a way, Liddington Lake and gardens typified a style of living that could not have survived the First World War. By 1919 motor coaches were taking parties to Weston. Private cars had become increasingly common, as had motor cycles and sidecars, and people went further afield on Bank Holidays.

What survives? The house is still there, serving as offices for Moss Construction, builders. The lake and grounds now lie under storage sheds. A local street name, Liddington Close, perpetuates the name but it lies far from the site of the Lake and Gardens, and it should not be confused with the lake, the location of which is certain. Photos, drawings and advertisements help to fill in the background, giving us a glimpse of another Leckhampton of a hundred years ago.

Footnote

[1] Kept in the Gloucestershire Collection at Brunswick Road, Gloucester. It was previously held at the County Archives Office, Gloucester under the reference number D4761/16.

Sources

- Anderton's *Pictorial History of Cheltenham*, Publisher unknown, c.1908
- Burrow, E.J. *Way About Cheltenham*, E.J. Burrow, c.1901
- Burrow, E.J. *Cheltenham: the Midland Educational and Health Centre*, E.J. Burrow, 1897
- Cheltenham Annuaire*, 1900-1907
- Cheltenham and Gloucester Directory*, 1891-1917
- The *Cheltenham Examiner* newspaper, 22 March 1912
- The *Cheltenham Mercury* newspaper, many issues April-November 1893-1900, advertisements and column by 'Man-in-the-Moon'.
- Letters and photograph in *Cheltenham News*, 12 and 19 February 1987
- Clarke, M. and Anley, E (Eds.), *Leckhampton: the story of our village within living memory -1850-1957*, Leckhampton Women's Institute, c.1958
- Garrett, Dr J H, *Cheltenham: the Garden Town of England*, British Medical Association, 1901
- Gibson, A (Ed), *A Brief History of Naunton Park*, Cheltenham Borough Council, 1998
- Ordnance Survey, 25 ins-to-1 mile plans, Sheet XXVI, 11 and 12, 1888, 1903 and 1921 editions
- Palmer, C, Letter in *Cheltenham News*, 11 February 1988