

SITE NAME:	Congleton Park				
Address	Park Road, Congleton CW12 1JG				
Unitary Authority:	Cheshire East				
Parish:	Congleton				
Location:	c. 500 m N of town centre				
Grid Ref:	SJ 862 634				
Owner:	Cheshire East Council				
Recorder	IBW	Date of Site Visit	29/06/2016 7/08/2016 17/09/2016	Date of Report	16/01/2017

Note: Detailed accounts of the park's historic development and its restoration are given in three recent documents¹. As no plans by Edward **Kemp** survive, this report concentrates on the search for contemporary evidence of Kemp's design and its principal remaining features.

Summary

Public park financed by public subscription and opened in May **1871**. The park's layout was designed by **Edward Kemp** in **1869** and realised by Town Surveyor William Blackshaw.

1880-1930s: Addition of several amenities, buildings and park furniture.

1953 Creation of a formal 'Jubilee Garden' with traditional bedding schemes.

2005 Completion of a major **restoration** scheme supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Principal remaining features of Kemp's design:

Network of paths and viewpoint in Town Wood

Promenade with rockwork and evergreen shrubbery

Ornamental evergreen trees

Possibly: **Circuit walk along river Dane**

Designations / Awards

Historic England Register of Parks and Gardens: Grade II, L.E.N. 1001530

Natural England: Town Wood listed as Local Wildlife Site A (former SBI)

Green Flag Award: every year 2008 – 2015

History

Congleton's first town charter was granted in 1272. In Tudor times the town prospered from leather working and lace making, but was devastated by the plague in 1641.

Congleton's first silk mill was built by the river Dane in 1752, and the town became famous for ribbon weaving. Cotton spinning began in 1784, and by the early C19 there were numerous textile mills along the river. Communications improved: Turnpike roads, the Macclesfield canal (1831) and the railway (1848).

Between 1801 and 1871, the population increased from 4,387 to 12,666².

In common with many towns and cities, Congleton Town Council began to look for an open space in which to lay out a **municipal public park** "for the purpose of health, recreation and improvement"³. A Park Committee was appointed in 1856 and established a potential site adjoining Town Wood. This woodland had been the Corporation's property for centuries⁴.

James Bateman, creator of the gardens at Biddulph Grange, was asked for advice. He considered the “spot admirably suited for the purpose contemplated”, but advised that additional fields be acquired in order to construct “a most beautiful park and walks”⁵. The Town Council obtained the required pieces of land by purchase and a 999-years lease. It is possible that Bateman recommended Edward Kemp as the future park’s designer⁶.

Kemp’s involvement with Congleton Park

Due to a fire at Congleton town hall in the late C19, no records of Kemp’s plans, his remuneration or any correspondence survive⁷.

Until now, the only piece of contemporary evidence for Kemp’s involvement was an announcement in *The Builder* of June 1870⁸, which names Kemp as the park’s future designer:

“...Mr. Kemp, the manager of Birkenhead Park, proposes to lay out the town wood in walks, and to form the whole land between the river Dane into a recreation and ornamental ground.”

As the park was completed and opened only 11 months later, Kemp’s commission and submission of his plans must pre-date June 1870.

Recent research found three newspaper reports pre-dating June 1870. (underlining by IBW; full transcripts in Additional Information).

These reports confirm Kemp’s engagement by Congleton Town Council in **1869**, the facts that Kemp visited the site and produced plans and an estimate of costs:

16/10/1869 *The Staffordshire Sentinel*: “Congleton. The Public Park. The Town Council of Congleton have engaged Mr. Kemp, of Birkenhead Park, one of the ablest landscape gardeners in the kingdom, to come and examine the capabilities of the Town Wood and grounds, to report thereon. Yesterday week Mr. Kemp arrived, and made his own observations of the Wood and land adjoining. He afterwards met the Committee of the Council at the Town Hall, when he gave a very encouraging prospect of his being able to prepare satisfactory plans for further progress in a very short time.”

20/11/1869 *The Staffordshire Advertiser*: “Congleton Public Park. We are glad to find, on good authority, that Mr. Kemp, landscape gardener, Birkenhead, speaks in the most eulogistic terms respecting the contemplated public park. He says that as nature has done so much, the rest may be accomplished at a trifling cost, compared with the advantages to be gained.”

But Kemp’s plans were not realised in their entirety. It appears that he had designed a much larger park including land South of the river. As the Town Council faced considerable economic constraints⁹, they limited Kemp’s design to the originally envisaged site North of the river.

28/05/1870 *The Staffordshire Advertiser*: “Congleton Public Park. “...While Mr. Kemp’s plans in their entirety contemplate the addition of several acres of land on the south side of the river, it is felt that however desirable such addition would be for the future protection of the park from nuisances, yet that so large a scheme would fail to be carried at once on the voluntary system; and that it is therefore better to limit the present effort to the land on the north side...which will place upwards of twenty acres of beautiful land, commanding splendid views of the surrounding scenery, at the service of the inhabitants of the borough for the purpose of health, recreation and improvement. To effect this object will require the outlay of £3,000. Several handsome subscriptions have already been promised ..”

It is likely that Kemp altered his plans accordingly. But it can no longer be determined whether Kemp's involvement ceased around May 1870, or whether he continued to advise the town surveyor **William Blackshaw** on any further alterations to his design, its execution and planting. Evidence points to the latter. A contemporary local historian sees the creation of Congleton Park as a partnership: "The plan of the grounds was from designs by Mr. Kemp, of Birkenhead, and Mr. William Blackshaw, at that time Surveyor of Congleton".¹⁰

Congleton Park was **opened** on 29/05/1871, "with a procession of local civic officials, Friendly Societies and the Macclesfield Volunteers Band. To make it a civic occasion a rural fete was held in the park. A Royal salute was fired from the Russian cannon."¹¹
(In 1859 this trophy from the Crimean war was purchased from the War Office for £30 and placed in the town centre. It was moved to a mock fort at the top of Town Wood, the site of Kemp's viewing point. In 1940 the cannon was given to the war effort.)

The park became a great success. Later decades saw the **addition** of further amenities, buildings and park furniture, several as donations from local citizens:

1880s Landing stage by the river (boat hire)	1920s Market Cross moved to park
1886 Circular fountain with rockwork	1937 Tennis courts and putting green
1887 Pavilion	
c.1896 Cricket pavilion	1953 Jubilee Gardens and lily ponds
1906 2 nd footbridge, access from the east	1956 Hankinson's Field south of the river
c.1909 2 nd bowling green	1970 Drinking fountain of 1887, moved from town centre
? Children's play area	
1914 Bandstand	

Decline and Restoration

Over the last 50-70 years the use of parks by the public declined nationally, and local government diverted or cut funds for their parks' maintenance and investment in personnel and machinery¹². Congleton Park did not escape this trend. By the 1990s it was dilapidated, suffered from vandalism and arson and was considered a dark and dangerous place by the town's population.

In 1996 Congleton Town Millenium Committee began to plan the park's **restoration** and **modernisation**. The local community was comprehensively and actively involved. Detailed research, surveys and feasibility studies led to an application for a Heritage Lottery Fund capital works bid. In 2001 HLF confirmed a contribution of 74% of the estimated cost.

Work began in November 2002; the final cost was £1.65 million¹³

The park re-opened in June **2005**.

A 10-year Management Plan was put into place and revised 2015.

2016

Management: As the owner, Cheshire East Council is responsible for the park's management.

Ansa Environmental Services deliver these services on the Council's behalf.

Maintenance is the responsibility of Congleton Town Council.

Since 2014 Streetscape, a devolved service, maintains the park to high standards.

The park has gained the 'Green Flag' award every year (2008 to 2015).

An active Friends of Congleton Park group helps to develop the site through volunteer services, activities and funding¹⁴.

Description (Letters refer to maps and numbers to images appended)

As Kemp's original plans have not survived, this description is based on the OS map surveyed in 1873, Kemp's book 'How to lay out a Garden'¹⁵, historic images and site visits.)

Access and boundaries:

The principal entrance to the park remains at the cast-iron bridge across the Dane, completed in 1871 and now restored (3). To the S and E, the park is bounded by the **river** Dane enclosing a level **triangular area** (c. 6 ha) sloping down to the river bank. The N and NW parts the park consist of the steep bank of **Town Wood** (c.4.5 ha) which rises c. 29 m above the triangular area¹⁶.

Town Wood

Based on the reference in *The Builder* (above), Kemp is thought to have "created a **network of paths** winding through the wood, many designed to create unexpected twists and views"¹⁷.

The map of 1873 (C) shows 3 paths running along the contours of the slope connected to several shorter paths with steep ascents. A flagpole marks the summit and highest viewpoint.

In 2001 the paths' original alignment was established during a detailed survey of the woodland. After drainage installations, the paths and steps have been restored (10-13).

Trees: Historically, the woodland was probably dominated by Ash and Oak. The presence of non-native species today, like Beech, Sycamore, Turkey Oak, and Rhododendron and Laurels at the base of the wood, is attributed to their "probable deliberate introduction ... when the wood was included as part of the park (in the case of Beech probably earlier)"¹⁸ - and thus to Kemp's influence.

A separate management plan for Town Wood has been in place since 2005. Beech and Sycamore saplings have been reduced, creating small glades; here 55 new Oaks have been planted¹⁹.

Kemp's design (C):

Kemp saw that '*Nature has done so much*'²⁰, providing a river and open grassland against the backdrop of a wooded escarpment. His design unites these features by means of a serpentine **promenade** with access to Town Wood, and continued as a tree-lined **circuit walk** along the river - thus enclosing the triangular **park landscape**.

Promenade:

From the bridge and entrance, the promenade runs a short way N. It turns NE and winds along the edge of the escarpment towards the end of the park (14,15).

Kemp on serpentine walks: "*It is the graceful contortion of line that at once pleases the eye and stimulates the fancy; carries the observer onward and continually rewards him with fresh beauties*" (p. 69).

Then and today: views to the visitor's right (SE) are sometimes framed by conifers and range across the open park landscape towards the river.

To the left (NW) lie the steep and shady banks of Town Wood. Here, the natural slope of the escarpment was cut back and held by a retaining wall of irregular upright stones of Millstone grit (16). This rockwork "*has the merit of presenting no bank which could crumble or be trodden away on the side next to the road*" (p. 154).

Rockwork also features in some small planting beds cut into the bank, and niches set back from the retaining wall and designed for seats and drinking fountains (17,18).

In 1873 the promenade offered 4 (now 6) access points into Town Wood. They are marked by dressed stone piers and stone steps with embanking rockwork (19).

Evergreens: The steep banks above this rockwork are covered with dense 'thickets' of evergreen shrubs, "*interesting for both their variety and beauty*" (p. 169). In his book, Kemp suggests "*Yew, Privet, Hollies, Rhododendrons, Portugal and Common Laurel, Cotoneaster and Ivy*" (p. 170).

As Kemp intended, his evergreen thickets remain to hide the woodland. Mature shrubs, now trees, are probably survivors from Kemp's time. Others were planted during the 2005 restoration of the park's historic features (14, 15, 20).

Park landscape of the site's triangular area:

Kemp had proposed to form this area into "a recreation and ornamental ground"²¹.

Recreation: In 1873 (C) the only sports facility was the **oval bowling-green** (25).

Today, a large children's play area and a rugby pitch have been added.

Ornamentation: In 1873, Congleton Park had none of the flower beds, statues or fountains of other public parks of the period; they were introduced later.

Kemp's influence may be seen in what was achievable in 1870: cutting back the natural slope of Town Wood to create the **promenade** with its gradual incline towards the NE and associated changes of level in the open parkland, and the planting of ornamental trees (15,20,23).

By 1909 (D) one side of the promenade was lined with conifers. Several veteran trees remain, including Common and Irish Yews, Hollies, Himalayan and Atlantic Cedars²² (27). They may have been planted from 1870 onwards, following Kemp's (lost) planting plan or his advice on evergreens: "*Such trees should be particularly sought after, and placed where they will exhibit themselves most strikingly and be backed by others that will help to throw out their colours by contrast*" (p. 76).

Circuit walk along the river Dane:

At the NE end of the park, the promenade returns SSE and becomes the circuit walk following the river back to the park's entrance. In 1873 the NE turning point was marked by a flagpole, today it contains a veteran Ash tree (23). By 1909 (D), there was a small building, probably a shelter, also a stone-edged path and steps leading down to what was then the children's play area. The steps have survived (22).

Kemp advised that "*Walks should be made to embrace particular views, to be at least partially concealed from each other, and to have a definite object*" (p. 146). His ideas were implemented: the E and S circuit walks are designed with gentle curves to draw the visitor forward, first to the bowling-green, then to an open area near the river and exit, site of the later landing stage.

Trees along the circuit walk:

E circuit walk: In 1873 and 1909 (C, D) a line of trees is shown along the E river bank - now replaced by fencing. The Lime and Horse-Chestnut trees, which line the E circuit walk today, appear to have been planted after 1909, and on the open grassland side (24).

S circuit walk: Historic photographs of 1890 (4,5) show this as an avenue with two rows of young Horse-Chestnuts, probably planted for, or soon after, the park's opening. A decade later, the trees along the river were replaced with a yew hedge and flower beds (6,7). Today there is modern fencing. 11 mature Horse Chestnuts remain (29,30), as well as 4 magnificent old Beeches near the bowling-green (28).

Several old Yews and Hollies appear to be the remains of a line of evergreen trees shown in 1909 (D), 28,31). They may date back to Kemp's time and influence:

"Evergreens should be placed where they will exhibit themselves most strikingly" (p. 76).

Kemp's design has stood the test of time. His layout of walks has remained unchanged and still contains many of ornamental evergreen shrubs and trees he recommended.

A memorial card distributed to mourners at **Kemp's** funeral in March 1891²³.

He made the Landscape meet the eye
With beauty; and turned the barren wastes
To noble Parks and Gardens of the Lord.
Thus Nature's rugged face
By art he wreathed with winsome smiles
That woo'd the children of the City, and the Sons
Of grimy toil and gave delight to all.

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Mr. Ian Doughty, Chair and Collections Manager, and the Archive Service of Congleton Museum.

Additional Information

I) Public Parks designed by Edward Kemp:

<i>Name / Place</i>	<i>HE Grade</i>	<i>Kemp engaged</i>	<i>Client</i>	<i>Official Opening</i>
Grosvenor Park Chester	II*	1864	Marquis of Westminster, gifted to City of Chester	1867
Newsham Park Liverpool	II	1864	Liverpool Corporation	1867
Hesketh Park Southport	II*	1865?	Southport Commissioners	1868
Stanley Park Liverpool	II*	1867	Liverpool Corporation	1870
Congleton Park Congleton	II	1869	Congleton Town Council	1871
Saltwell Park Gateshead	II	1876	Gateshead Corporation	1878?
Queen's Park Crewe	II*	1887	London & North Western Railway Co., gifted to City of Crewe	1888

II) Full transcripts of newspaper reports cited above:

• *The Staffordshire Sentinel* **Saturday 16 October 1869**

Congleton. The Public Park.

The Town Council of Congleton have engaged Mr. Kemp, of Birkenhead Park, one of the ablest landscape gardeners in the kingdom, to come and examine the capabilities of Town Wood and grounds, to report thereon. Yesterday week Mr. Kemp arrived, and made his own observations of the Wood and land adjoining. He afterwards met the Committee of the Council at the Town Hall, when he gave a very encouraging prospect of his being able to prepare satisfactory plans for further progress in a very short time.

• *The Staffordshire Advertiser* **Saturday 20 November 1869**

Congleton. Public Park.

We are glad to find, on good authority. That Mr. Kemp, landscape gardener, Birkenhead, speaks in the most eulogistic terms respecting the contemplated public park. He says as nature has done so much, the rest may be accomplished at a trifling cost, compared with the advantages to be gained. On Tuesday evening, a few friends held a pic-nic by moonlight on the grounds, and spent a pleasant hour by illuminating the north part of the town with a number of fireworks, which were greatly admired by many of the inhabitants. – *Communicated*.

• *The Staffordshire Advertiser* **Saturday May 28 1870**

Congleton. Public Park.

The joint committee of the Town Council and the inhabitants, for the establishment of a public park and playground, have made an appeal for subscriptions in aid of the object. Mr. Kemp, the manager of the Birkenhead Park, proposes to lay out the Town Wood in walks, and to form the whole of the land between it and the river Dane into recreation and ornamental ground.

The chief part of the land is already the property of the borough; and Sir Charles Watkin Shakerley, Bart. has kindly offered to place the remaining piece, which is his property, at the

disposal of the Town Council for the purpose of the park, on very favourable terms, on condition that the whole cost of the scheme be defrayed by voluntary subscriptions.

While Mr. Kemp's plans in their entirety contemplate the addition of several acres of land on the south side of the river, it is felt that however desirable such addition would be for the future protection of the park from nuisances, yet that so large a scheme would fail to be carried out at once on the voluntary system; and that it is therefore better to limit the present effort to the land on the north side, the acquisition and formation of which, including the wood, will place upwards of twenty acres of beautiful land, commanding splendid views of the surrounding scenery, at the service of the inhabitants of the borough for the purpose of health, recreation, and improvement. To effect this object will require the outlay of £ 3000. Several handsome subscriptions have already been promised, including £100 from Messrs. R. Beales (Mayor), J. Statham, J. Dakin, F.W. Warrington, M.D., D. Bradwell, and J. Wilson.

• ***The Builder June 1870*** (an abbreviated version of the above)

Congleton Public Park.

The joint Committee for the Town Council and the inhabitants for the establishment of a public Park and playground, have made an appeal for subscriptions in aid of the object.

Mr. Kemp, the manager of Birkenhead Park, proposes to lay out the town wood in walks, and to form the whole of the land between the River Dane into recreation and ornamental ground.

The chief part of the land is already the property of the borough and Sir Charles Watkin Shakerley, Bart. Has kindly offered to place the remaining piece, which is his property, at the disposal of the Town Council for the purpose of the Park on very favourable terms, on condition that the whole cost of the proposed scheme be defrayed by voluntary subscriptions.

To place upwards of 20 Acres of land commanding fine views of the surrounding scenery at the service of the inhabitants of the borough for the purposes of health recreation and improvement will require the outlay of £3.000.

Subscriptions have already been promised from R. Wilbraham, the high steward, and 50L each from Messrs. R. Beales (Mayor), J. Statham, J. Dakin, F.W. Warrington, M.D., D. Bradwell and J. Wilson."

Please note that this report contains the research and recording information available to Cheshire Gardens Trust at the time. It does not purport to be the finite sum of knowledge about the site as new information is always being discovered and sites change.

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- ¹ • Alcock, Joan P. 2006? *Congleton Park, Part 1: Its History and Restoration*. Congleton Museums Trust.
- Williamson, Margaret M. 2006? *Congleton Park, Part 2: The Heritage Lottery Restoration of Congleton Park and its natural and man-made environment*. Congleton Museums Trust.
- Historic England. 2001. *Congleton Park, List Entry Description* 1001530 www.HistoricEngland.org.uk
- ² Short history of Congleton (www.congletonmuseum.co.uk)
- ³ *The Staffordshire Advertiser*. 28/05/1870. "Congleton Public Park"
- ⁴ Williamson (see 1), p. 39: Town Wood is mentioned in Domesday. It was granted to the burgesses in 1272 and officially handed over to the corporation in 1583.
- ⁵ Alcock (see 1) p.15, quoting from *The Congleton and Macclesfield Mercury* of 27/10/1860 Bateman contributed £50 and offered the services of his gardener to test the ground.
- ⁶ They had met in 1857-62, when Kemp visited and published a series of articles about Biddulph Grange in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*.
- ⁷ Oral information from Mr. I. Doughty, Chair and Collections Manager Congleton Museum.
- ⁸ Quoted by Alcock (see 1), p. 16. Full transcript given in Additional Information.
- ⁹ **Financial constraints:**
- At the time, the town's silk industry suffered a severe decline.
 - The Town Council could not afford to buy yet more land from up to 5 different owners S of the river; £ 8000 has just been expended on the new town hall (completed 1866).
 - The lease for Sir Shakerley's land N of the river included 2 conditions:
 - "that the whole cost of the scheme be defrayed by voluntary subscriptions" in: *Staffordshire Advertiser* of 28/05/1870;
 - that the 999 year lease "should be forfeited if at any time the Corporation should expend more than £100 from the rates of the town towards its maintenance" in: (Head, Robert. 1887. *Congleton Past and Present*. p. 141).
- In 1946, the Urban District Council of Congleton acquired the freehold ownership of the land.
- ¹⁰ Head (see 9), p.141. William Blackshaw had been involved since 1867-68, when he began to clear the undergrowth in Town Wood and to construct some informal paths. He became Borough Surveyor for Stafford in 1882. His plan for Stafford's first public park was submitted in 1903 and executed from 1908. Victoria Park is lies on both sides of the river Sow.
- ¹¹ Alcock (see 1), p. 17
- ¹² Cheshire East Council. Congleton Park Management Plan. Last Revision January 2015. p.23.
- ¹³ Details of the restoration are given by Williamson (see 1).
- ¹⁴ www.friendsofcongletonpark.co.uk
- ¹⁵ Kemp, Edward. 1850 (1st edition), 1858 (2nd edition). *How To Lay Out A Garden*. This report uses a facsimile of the 3rd edition 1864, published by Nabu Public Domain Reprints, USA. Page numbers are given after each citation.
- ¹⁶ Historic England (see 1)
- ¹⁷ Alcock (see 1) p.20
- ¹⁸ Williamson (see 1), p. 41-44
- ¹⁹ Management Plan (see 12) p. 43
- ²⁰ Kemp quoted in *Staffordshire Advertiser* of 28/11/1869
- ²¹ *The Builder* June 1870
- ²² Williamson (see 1) p. 46
- ²³ Cited by: Davey, Elizabeth. "A Complete and Constant Superindendence" in *Cheshire History* No. 50, 2010-2011, p. 96