

FRIENDS OF BRAIDBURN VALLEY PARK WEBSITE

HISTORY

Origins

The distinguished geologist, Louis Agassiz of Neuchatel, studying grooves on a rock near the eastern end of the Hermitage of Braid, concluded that they had been formed by ice. It was confirmed by Professor Gordon Davies of Trinity College, Dublin that the valley from Comiston along the Braidburn Valley, the Hermitage and on to Liberton Dams was carved out by glacial action and, later, by powerful waters from melting ice.

Three hundred years ago

Braidburn Valley Park lies in a triangle of suburban development. However, early records show that a large area of land was purchased (we know not from whom) by a Mr Andrew Brown in 1719. It included Plewlands, Greenbank and a large area of land near Grange House, which eventually became part of the extensive Mortonhall Estate. The land was far beyond built-up Edinburgh and was farmed until the late 19th Century.

Water Works

Edinburgh's earliest piped water supply came from the Comiston Springs and there is much evidence today of the infrastructure started in 1681. Just to the south of the Braidburn Valley Park, off Oxfords Avenue, lies Cockmylane, where a small stone building stands. Here the water from the various springs (called the fox, hare, swan and peewit springs) was collected and piped into Edinburgh. The first pipes were wooden and an example can be seen at Huntly House Museum in the Canongate, along with the lead figures of the appropriate animals. These pipes were superseded by lead pipes of various diameters, laid one foot under the ground and two pipe markers can be seen to this day in the Braidburn Valley Park on the eastern side of the valley opposite the Braid Hills Hotel. Eventually, the Comiston Springs scheme was superseded by more sophisticated reservoirs and pipes in the Pentland Hills and beyond and the old supply now runs into the Braid Burn just inside the southern entrance to the park.

The area is absorbed into the City

By 1897, the built-up City was spreading south and, in that year, the Braid Hills Hotel was built. From then until 1937 houses were constructed along the east side of Pentland Terrace to Riselaw Crescent. The area to the west of the Braidburn Valley became Greenbank, and started with the building of Greenbank

Crescent in 1908. Building continued in stages so that the tenant farmer might be paid compensation as his land was taken up for housing. The third side of the triangle is the area known as Comiston Springs, Pentland Gardens being the street backing on to the park's southern boundary. Building started in 1935 and continued until the 1960's.

The Braidburn Valley, with its steep sides and its water course, was not considered suitable for building (fortunately) and negotiations were begun in 1933 by Edinburgh Corporation to purchase the valley from the Mortonhall Estates with a view to turning the area into a public park. One of the conditions was 'that the ground shall be kept as an open space for all time coming and shall only be used as a public park'.

History of Braidburn Valley Park

Ian Nimmo, in his book *Edinburgh's Green Heritage* published for The City of Edinburgh Council in 1996, describes the park as follows:

This delightful elongated park forms a natural hanging valley below the busy Comiston Road. A stroll through the Braidburn Valley Park is like a walk in the countryside with its steep sides, the Braid Burn overhung in parts by brambles, willows and hawthorns and with the Pentland Hills spreading across the southern horizon.

Acquired in 1933 for the city, a handsome pair of iron gates, once the entrance to Comiston House, with the initials of King George and the Queen Mother [*sic*] set into them, forms the northern Greenbank Crescent main entrance. Some say the contours of the valley at this point create an optical illusion to give the impression that the Braid Burn is flowing uphill, before it disappears from sight under Comiston Road to continue its way through the Hermitage of Braid.

Trees are one of the features of the park and landscaped sensitively so that the sense of countryside is enhanced. Groves of cherry trees, a stately fringe of Wheatley Elm along Comiston Road, a miniature woodland of elm, beech, sycamore, holly and a shrubbery at the main gate, lend the park interest and depth. The wilderness area of hawthorn, elder, bramble, ivy and dog rose on the bank behind Greenbank Crescent gardens is a natural habitat for wildlife and the park is full of birdsong. A notable feature is the hornbeams which form a frame to what was the old open air stage. Country style paths run on both sides of the burn, across three bridges and the grassy ridges on the western bank marks what was once the seating when Braidburn Valley Park had its own open air theatre. A close look at the quiet pools in the burn reassuringly confirms that that

minnows and small trout continue to thrive there. With the rolling Pentlands as a backdrop, the sound of the burn, the country paths and the attractive treescape it could be a Peeblesshire glen.

It is a much used and attractive park, a favourite strolling area for local people, those with dogs to exercise and family outings. Benches are placed at intervals along the main path. The Braidburn Valley Park is a natural extension of the Hermitage of Braid and a possible site for a municipal arboretum, where indigenous trees could be established. It is another of those important Edinburgh parks which continues the green linkages between the hills to the south to the sea.

That was the 'snapshot' view in 1996 but much water had passed through the Braid Burn between 1933 and then – and much more has followed since.

Notable events

The first event of any note (and one which was to give the Park one of its two most prominent features) took place on Saturday 2nd November 1935, when 5,000 Girl Guides, Brownies and Rangers congregated in the Park and planted 400 cherry trees in the shape of the Guide Trefoil as a gift to the City. This act commemorated the Silver Jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary. Although the King wasn't present, he sent a message, which was read out by The Lord Provost, Sir William J Thomson, who received the gift on behalf of the City from Miss Dalmahoy, the County Commissioner for the Guides.

In 1937, as part of the coronation celebrations for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (latterly referred to as The Queen Mother until her death in 2002), a thousand school children gave a massed display of dancing and gymnastics before an audience of 3,000. The other major feature was inaugurated at this event, namely, the open-air theatre with its stage and orchestra pit on the right bank of the burn and the amphitheatre on the left bank. The latter, with its tiered seating, is in the shape of the Royal Crown.

World War II intervened and the eastern slopes were turned into allotments, some of which were not reclaimed for Park use until the 1960's.

The stage continued to be used after the war by several drama groups and opera companies. Notably, in 1945, the Phillip Barrett Company performed *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Performances of *Rob Roy*, *A Country Girl* and *Merrie England* followed in 1946, the latter as a pageant, using the whole of the area. The Council assisted by providing shrubs and flowers for the stage and by damming the burn to give sufficient depth of water for Queen Elizabeth's Royal Barge. Finally, in 1947, the

Southern Light Opera Company performed *The Vagabond King* in awful weather conditions.

In more recent years, the Park has hosted sheep dog trials, dog shows and some performances took place at Edinburgh Festivals. However, ambient traffic noise and the weather meant that the park hosted fewer and fewer such ventures.

A Renaissance

In 1998, the City Council received funding from the Millennium Forest for Scotland and proposed that some of the money should be used to establish an arboretum in the Park. The main thrust would be that indigenous trees would be planted on the north western slopes in two spreads near to Greenbank Crescent, with other groupings of trees on the eastern slopes below Pentland Terrace. Rowans and silver birch would be the mainstay, which would give lush colours in spring and enhance the autumn tints. Not surprisingly, there was opposition from several residents, who feared the loss of their views across the valley and an impediment to activities on the occasions when there was sufficient snow for sledging.

At the suggestion of the Head of Parks, with input from the Local Councillor (who had taken the brunt of the opposition) a working group of residents and officials was set up to plan the planting and to suggest other improvements which could be made to the Park. A bridge was washed away during a severe storm in 2000, which prompted the realignment of two paths, replacing steep descents with gentler inclines, linking with a new bridge. Resurfacing of the main path followed, by which time word was spreading that local involvement was proving 'a good thing'. In the summer of 2002, a historic meeting took place at Hermitage House with local residents, politicians and officials from the Park's Section of the Council. From this emerged the formation of 'The Friends of Braidburn Valley Park' which has heralded a new era for this historic area.

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