The Whitworth Park Community Archaeology and History Project

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The Whitworth Park Community Archaeology and History Project aims to investigate the social history of urban public parks and their changing meaning for local communities. The project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and involves collaboration between the Friends of Whitworth Park (Ken Shone, Chair) and the Archaeology Dept at the University of Manchester (Hannah Cobb, Melanie Giles and Siân Jones). By excavating historic features of Whitworth Park we gain new insights into the buildings and landscape, as well as learn about how people used the Park on a daily basis. Our excavations are complemented by research on archival records and oral history. We are also using archaeology as a way of engaging contemporary residents with their heritage and increasing the social value of Whitworth Park.

The Whitworth Park Community Archaeology and History Project started in 2011 and will run until 2014. When it was first built, Whitworth Park was a very different, more elaborate place. It had a large lake with a fountain and ornamental islands, a lake-side pavillion and other shelters, a band stand, beds for plants, and an elaborate series of paths to encourage people to take exercise, a past-time known as promenading by the Victorians.

Many of these features were demolished or removed in the mid-twentieth century leaving an open woodland landscape. In 2011 and 2013, we conducted excavations with the help of our students and community volunteers. We opened five trenches focusing on Victorian/Edwardian park features and were very excited to find the foundations to the bandstand, a park shelter, the lake and its deposits, and the remains of former paths. The excavations have recovered assemblages of ceramics, glass, clay pipes, and metalwork. The glass and ceramic assemblages are substantial. The 2013
season also produced a significant quantity of organic material from the waterlogged boating lake deposits.

Our CBA Challenge Funding contributes towards the cost of specialist artefact analysis. This is important to gain insight into the daily practices associated with the Park, thus revealing the hidden working and middle class histories of such urban public spaces. In particular, a precise understanding of the origins, value and use of the artefacts will be essential for interpretation of practices of consumption and display, as well as the role of material culture in the production of identities within the Park. The artefact analysis will also play a key role in terms of the public outputs, informing our general understanding of the social history of the Park, but also allowing us to gain detailed insight into specific artefacts that can be used to tell key stories in the exhibition and public leaflet.

About the Project

The Whitworth Park Community Archaeology and History Project is funded by a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, with additional funding from the University of Manchester, Manchester City Council and the Council for British Archaeology. The Project is led by the Department of Archaeology at the University of Manchester and the Friends of Whitworth Park, in association with Manchester Museum, the Whitworth Art Gallery, and Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Centre

For more information about the Whitworth Park project visit our blog: http://whitworthparklife.wordpress.com/