

Re-ordering the Landscape: Landed Elites and the New Urban Aristocracy in Manchester

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Article abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the landed aristocracy in the vicinity of Manchester and the “urban aristocracy” of the municipal authority and their role in the development of municipal parks in the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It contests the view that landed elites had little impact on the development of the environs of Manchester during this period and argues that their social and economic influence was gradually replaced by that of the municipal authority in a reordering of the social landscape. It also re-examines the role of debt in the decline of the traditional landed elites and argues that, in the case of the two families studied here, debt became a problem much earlier than others have suggested and was often chronic and persistent.

The aristocracy of the Manchester area and the sales of their estates have been marginalized in existing histories, as this group has been perceived as peripheral to the city's development. It is the contention of this paper that they played a more active role in their localities than previously believed and that they forged significant networks with local authorities, families, businesses, and institutions. Their economic relationships with the new business elite in Manchester, represented primarily but not solely by the municipal authority, provide an opportunity to examine the reordering of the social landscape as the landed elite sought to remove themselves from the city.

Having symbolized the social and economic power of the aristocracy, the land now represented the civic pride and enterprise of the municipal authority. This paper reveals the complex interplay of power between these elite groups and sheds a unique light on urban land usage and the formation of leisure spaces in the city.

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Le présent article examine la relation entre l'aristocratie propriétaire de terres, dite « foncière », dans les environs de Manchester, et l'aristocratie urbaine du pouvoir municipal ainsi que leur rôle dans la création de parcs municipaux à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle et au début du vingtième. Il remet en question l'opinion selon laquelle l'aristocratie foncière aurait eu peu d'effet sur la création des environs de Manchester durant cette période et soutient que l'influence sociale et économique de cette classe a graduellement été supplantée par celle du pouvoir municipal dans le cadre d'une réorganisation du paysage social. En outre, l'article jette un nouveau regard sur le rôle de l'endettement dans le déclin de l'aristocratie foncière traditionnelle. Il soutient que, dans le cas des deux familles étudiées, le manque

d'argent est devenu un problème bien avant ce que d'autres auteurs ont suggéré et qu'il était souvent chronique et continu.

L'aristocratie de la région de Manchester, ainsi que la vente de ses domaines, a été marginalisée dans les comptes rendus historiques, où l'on a dit que cette élite était en marge du développement de la ville. Dans cet article, il est soutenu que les membres de l'aristocratie foncière ont joué un rôle plus actif que ce qu'on a cru et qu'ils ont forgé des réseaux importants avec les dirigeants, les familles, les entreprises et les institutions locales. Leurs relations économiques avec la nouvelle élite de gens d'affaires de Manchester, qui représentaient principalement, mais pas uniquement, les dirigeants de la municipalité, permettent d'examiner la modification du paysage social, par suite du départ de l'élite foncière.

Autrefois symboles du pouvoir social et économique de l'aristocratie, les terres représentent désormais la fierté communautaire et l'initiative du pouvoir municipal. Le présent article révèle les jeux de pouvoir complexes entre deux groupes et jette une nouvelle lumière sur l'usage de l'espace urbain et la création d'aires destinées aux loisirs.

Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between the landed aristocracy in the vicinity of Manchester and the “urban aristocracy” of the municipal authority and their role in the development of municipal parks in the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The focus is on two landed families—the Egertons, Earls of Wilton, and the baronets de Trafford—and contests the view that landed elites had little impact on the development of the environs of Manchester during this period. It demonstrates the complexity of the commercial relationships between the two groups, focusing on the sale of the Wiltons' Heaton Park estate to the city in 1901 for use as a public park. It argues that the reordering of the social landscape that occurred in Britain with the transfer of power from the old landed elites to the new urban aristocracy was reflected in the reordering of the physical landscape as aristocratic estates were sold to local authorities for use as public parks. This will be illustrated by the acquisition of Heaton Park by the Manchester City Council for this purpose.

The focus of this paper is primarily economic and political, rather than cultural. It outlines the commercial relationship

between the municipal authority of Manchester and two local landed families, whose influence was already declining. Heaton Park remains one of the largest municipal parks in Europe, and the story of its evolution from private, aristocratic estate to municipal public park is representative of the social and political change that Britain was undergoing at this time. The social landscape was in flux, as was the physical landscape as municipal authorities in Britain's largest and most populous cities undertook programs of social reform and municipal expansion. It does not seek to focus on the detailed cultural history of the municipal park, as this has been documented already by others.¹ The economic relationship that predated the establishment of many municipal parks and the mechanisms of their acquisition from private ownership has been neglected in the British context.

It has been argued that the 1880s mark a major turning point in the political authority of the landed elite.² This was the period of the introduction of county councils and corporations, which profoundly changed the relationship between the local aristocracy and the urban areas that they had hitherto been involved in governing. It has also been suggested that municipal developments in Britain from the 1830s onwards tended to diminish the aristocracy's role in expanding urban areas and to prioritize the new forms of local government, while some cities like Birmingham had local aristocratic families that exercised rather too much influence on municipal developments.³

Manchester provides a unique opportunity to study the impact of landed elites on the urban landscape as a result of the distance of their estates from the city boundaries. By 1825, Manchester was almost entirely devoid of a resident aristocracy partly for lack of a parliamentary seat in the town and also because of religious and political schisms between the local commercial classes.⁴ Acts of 1835 and 1888 created boroughs and county boroughs respectively, while Manchester became a borough in 1838 and obtained city status in 1853. The industrial revolution and the subsequent growth of both industry and population meant an expansion of the suburbs around Manchester, but especially to the south of the city.

A further crucial element in the expansion of Manchester's suburbs was the arrival of the railway in the 1840s, which encouraged development of dormitory suburbs along the major routes around the city, to the south and north. Suburbanization and the development of the railway had both positive and negative effects, offering more opportunity to increase land values or to sell land to railway companies and threatening the physical landscape of the aristocratic estates. Suburbanization on this scale did not occur in American cities at this time and, in Britain, it was often facilitated by the sale of land by the aristocracy for the construction of the railways. In this manner, the landed elite could play a significant role in the process of urban expansion.⁵ Suburban development also affected the composition of the City Council and a perception that the city's "natural leaders" had removed themselves from its immediate environs.⁶ The loss of these businessmen led to Beatrice Webb's disparaging remark about Manchester City Council as a group

of "hard-headed shopkeepers," which became an influential, though inaccurate, view.⁷

The new City Council had taken on the power, prestige, and patronage relinquished by the aristocracy, and indeed contemporaries referred to middle-class urban leaders as the town's "aristocracy."⁸ Historians such as Briggs and Fraser have developed the idea of an urban aristocracy in towns without a resident aristocracy proper, like Manchester.⁹ There is evidence to suggest that the aristocracy did not surrender these assets easily, nor always to municipal bodies. In reality, there was no causal relationship between the rise of the urban bourgeoisie and the decline in aristocratic political power.¹⁰ Another approach sees this period in municipal development as characterized by decline in local and regional political influence exercised by the aristocracy and a corresponding increase in the local significance of the middle classes. The aristocracy as a group was not especially cohesive, and some aristocrats maintained their close links with towns, like the Calthorpes in Edgbaston near Birmingham, but it was not the case in Manchester.¹¹

While Manchester City Council did not constitute an elite in the aristocratic sense, it was composed primarily of members of the professional classes, who counterbalanced the decline in the numbers of business and mercantile representation, as Kidd has demonstrated.¹² This finding is also borne out by Law's work, which showed the continuing influence of members from occupational groups such as wholesale and retail merchants and professionals until 1903.¹³ Even with a later influx of independent and Labour councillors and those coming from occupations like trade unionist and draper, most members of the City Council in the early decades of the twentieth century continued to come from the professional class and can, therefore, be said to have constituted an urban elite. Webb's disparaging remarks about the shopkeeping influence in Manchester are not entirely satisfactory. The category of shopkeeper was diverse, ranging from small independent retailers to major multiple store owners and are a characteristic of Manchester's burgeoning trade and services industry in the mid to late Victorian period.

The type of power exercised by the new urban elite was very different from aristocratic power, being based on consensus and negotiation rather than inheritance and social position. However, the local political power and influence they wielded makes the comparison with the landed elite an effective one for analyzing the gradual transfer of power in the urban context. In reality, very few Manchester businessmen managed to emulate directly the landed aristocracy, with the exception of Samuel Loyd, the Manchester banker, created Lord Overstone in 1850.¹⁴ The new urban elite were more focused on social progress and ameliorating the quality of urban life than the landed elites in Manchester had been. They were less interested in individual acts of charity and patronage than cultural and educational improvement, exemplified by the abundance of art galleries, parks, museums, and public libraries that characterized the British Victorian city. Instead of it being in country houses and

estates, their power was signified by the town halls of Birmingham (1834), Leeds (1858), Bradford (1873), and Manchester (1877).

Not only was the social landscape of political and economic power changing, the physical landscape of the city was undergoing profound changes also. The large-scale sale of British aristocratic estates was widespread during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to pressures of debt, a desire to escape rapidly expanding urban centres, the introduction of death duties (a tax on inherited wealth), and a decline in the legal apparatus of strict settlement that governed the inheritance of these estates by the eldest son.¹⁵ The abandonment of primogeniture facilitated the sales of large estates when buyers could be found, but this process was not always a smooth one. Fundamental to an understanding of the dynamics of the land sales is the role played by the accumulation of debt in aristocratic families and the commercial relationships that developed between the landed elites and the municipal authority in Manchester.

Aristocratic and Municipal Elites in Late-Nineteenth-Century Manchester

Two aristocratic families are central to this study: Earls of Wilton, of Heaton Park, Prestwich (650 acres), to the northwest of the city, and the de Trafford family of Trafford Park (1,200 acres) to the west of Manchester. Their estates, while symbolic of the social and economic power of the two families, were also commercial entities that were relied on to generate income and to secure future generations. Bateman's *Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* lists the Wilton holdings as a total of 9,871 acres with a value of £32,490, consisting of 8,013 acres in Lancashire, 775 acres in West Yorkshire near Batley, 853 acres in Staffordshire, 196 in Somerset, and 33 acres in Leicestershire.¹⁶ This places them within the top ten landowning families in Lancashire. Bateman lists the de Trafford's total landholdings in 1879 as 9,800 acres in Lancashire (7,300 acres) and Cheshire (2,500 acres), with a value of £36,510.¹⁷ During the late nineteenth century, Lancashire was second only to Yorkshire in number of landed families in the county.¹⁸

Thompson has defined the landed elite as a social group comprising mostly the larger, aristocratic owners of great estates, whose lives were centred on inherited wealth and peerages in large, rural country house estates, and who dominated British social, economic, and political life from the Tudors to the late nineteenth century.¹⁹ However, this was a far from cohesive social class, which also included medium-size landowners and the minor gentry. The estates produced the income on which this inherited wealth was based, primarily from rentals, agriculture, or mining. Such local prominence was commonly linked strongly to national political influence, many of the landed elite making their way into the highest political offices such as prime minister.²⁰ Neither of the families discussed here achieved national political prominence, however, demonstrating the internal diversity of the aristocracy as a class.

The debate among academics about the nature of aristocratic indebtedness began in the 1950s between F. M. L. Thompson and David Spring and was subsequently developed further by John Habbakuk and David Cannadine.²¹ The crux of this debate centred on the nature, extent, timing, and impact of aristocratic debt on individual landowners, their families, and their estates. Both aristocratic families in this study experienced high levels of debt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, hence the relevance of this question. Crucially, they began to accumulate debt at an earlier stage than that proposed by many historians.

Both families survived into the twentieth century and beyond, in spite of considerable levels of debt. This supports Thompson's contention that debt alone was rarely ruinous and that families could, over the longer term, find ways of accommodating high levels of debt and of repaying it.²² Both families also tried to diversify their income sources to include stocks and shares and benefited from increased rental income from land that was close to urbanizing areas. While it is possible to regard the sales of aristocratic estates as primarily a response to rising levels of debt, it is equally dangerous to make this inference as a matter of course. Land sales and purchase were a regular feature of aristocratic estates and did not necessarily reflect a diminished financial position.

Debt eventually forced both families to try to sell their estates in 1896. Both public auctions failed for lack of suitable offers, and the families turned to Manchester City Council as a potential purchaser. Briggs and Gatrell have demonstrated the existence of a bourgeois-dominated local elite—an "urban aristocracy"—of merchants and manufacturers in Manchester.²³ This elite allowed the civic life of Manchester to develop in circumstances where the local authority functioned more as an equal than a client in relation to local aristocrats. The negotiations between the Wiltons, the de Traffords, and Manchester City Council are an apt illustration of the dominance of the municipality at this time. The final purchase of Heaton Park was achieved with many additional concessions acceded to by the Wiltons, while the de Traffords failed to convince the City Council that their estate represented a worthwhile investment. This was primarily the result of its distance from the city boundary and its large size. Manchester City Council had considerable entrepreneurial expertise—running its own gas and tramways departments successfully and profitably. They were thus well placed to take advantage of the availability of aristocratic land at an advantageous price for the provision of public parks.

The relationship between the local aristocracy and the urban development of Manchester was not always amicable. Sir Humphrey de Trafford opposed the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal in the 1880s. The canal was intended to reduce Manchester's dependence on the port of Liverpool for the importation of cotton and the worldwide export of its products. Manchester City Council made a major investment in the Ship Canal, thus acquiring a dominant role in its future. Sir Humphrey's major objections were related to the impact that the canal would have on the physical layout of the de Trafford

estate. He worried about the damage to the estate drainage and to the Barton entrance and that the waterway would affect the boundary of the park.²⁴ The original plans had to be altered to avoid the de Trafford estate, which was essentially pasture land. His son and heir, Humphrey Francis, the third baronet, reopened negotiations with the Ship Canal on his father's death in 1886, and the plans were redrawn once again, and a new bill was brought before Parliament.²⁵ These delays to the Ship Canal ensured not only frustration for those desirous of exploiting the industrial potential of Manchester but also contrived to bring business people and investors into direct conflict with local aristocratic families, who were trying to protect their estates that had been in family ownership for centuries.

The resulting Manchester Ship Canal Act of 1885 contained many clauses that were negotiated to protect the Trafford Park estate and to provide opportunities for the de Traffords to exploit the canal for their own purposes. This demonstrates that aristocratic families could successfully use their powers to lobby the Ship Canal company to respond to their objections. Similarly, in 1899, Lord Wilton opposed plans of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company to build a new line linking Manchester, Blackley, and Middleton, which was proposed to run through part of his Blackley estate. His petition to the House of Lords against the railway cited the Blackley land as "eminently adapted for development as a building estate" and the threatened presence of the railway as "seriously and prejudicially" affecting his interest.²⁶ During the latter half of the nineteenth century, local and municipal authorities became more acquisitive and confident about buying land, water rights, and properties, previously the preserve of the aristocracy.²⁷ The acquisition of these elements gave added legitimacy to the new local authorities and ensured the decrease in aristocratic power in the new towns and cities. However, this process was not instantaneous and did not apply to all such urban areas. The Wiltons and the de Traffords did not always challenge the new municipalities, their interests having either moved on elsewhere, in the case of the Wiltons, or having ended up in a degree of mutual compromise, as with the de Traffords.

Traditionally, the power of the Wiltons and the de Traffords lay in their local communities, their charity work, and in their landownership. Patronage and charitable works rooted them in the local community in ways that their landowning or lack of political role denied them. It also brought them into a mainly collaborative rather than a confrontational relationship with the new urban presence in such proximity to their estates. There is little evidence of deference in their economic relationships with local authorities and businessmen, and the Trafford Park estate in particular was adversely affected by urban developments like the Manchester Ship Canal. The attempts by both families to sell their estates in their entirety at this time provide further evidence of their isolation from the area.

This relationship has not previously formed part of existing histories of Manchester, perhaps due to the fact that both families lived outside the boundary of the city proper. At the local level,

their direct influence as magistrates and lords of the manor was replaced by more indirect forms of influence such as social, cultural, and charitable leadership, and the evolving relationship with the new municipalities as landowners. All of these aspects can be observed in the case of both the Wiltons and the de Traffords. Their symbolic role remained in the community as their political power changed both nationally and locally. Their patronage and participation remained crucial to the success of events such as the Manchester Art Treasures exhibition held at Trafford Park in 1857 and again in 1887. While the principal organizers of these exhibitions were the business elite of the city, the main lenders of works of art were the landed families such as de Trafford and Lord Wilton, who were prevailed upon by the organizers to arrange for the loan of paintings from other members of the aristocracy.²⁸ The aristocracy had ceased instigating such projects, but their support and patronage remained important, especially in the field of art collecting, where their own possessions were the fruit of past generations. The exhibition attracted over half a million visitors, making Manchester's mark on the national cultural stage.

The importance of the civic rituals that attended the opening of the Art Treasures Exhibition and other new civic amenities such as libraries and museums in the establishment of local identity and municipal pride is significant. They have been referred to as a key element in the "invention of tradition," a term used to refer to a formalization and ritualization that was designed to establish or legitimize authority.²⁹ Such events had replaced the symbolic significance of the old landed elites, whose weddings and funerals had once formed an important part of civic life in their local towns and cities and were a key component of a reordered urban environment in which the new urban aristocracy sought to establish and maintain their legitimacy.

The reordering of the social landscape was typical of much of the accommodation that continued during the nineteenth century between the old aristocratic class and newer social groups such as army officers, manufacturers, and merchants. Entry and acceptance into the aristocracy was not widespread. Accommodation and compromise also characterized the relationship with the new municipalities. These reciprocal relationships were mirrored in other British cities, such as those of the earls of Dudley and Dartmouth in the Black Country, west of Birmingham.³⁰ Both the de Traffords and the Wiltons had cordial dealings with Manchester Corporation, while dealings with the railway companies and the industrialization of Manchester were sometimes more fractious, especially between the de Traffords and the Manchester Ship Canal Company. Some of the most fruitful business dealings between the landed families and Manchester City Council would prove to be the sale and acquisition of land for public parks.

Elites and the Urban Park

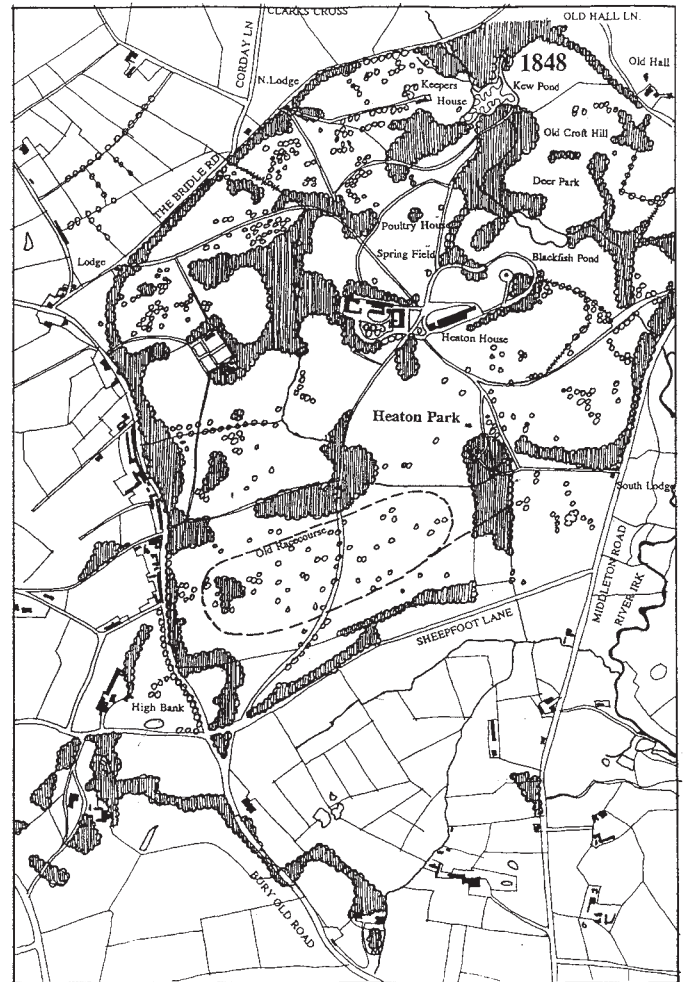
The word *park* referred initially to the deer park beyond the formal gardens that abutted a country house. This definition of a park was later expanded in the eighteenth century to describe

a landscape park, which was an open expanse of land with occasional clumps or belts of trees that was designed to provide a view for the owner or visitor, as can be seen in the 1848 map of the Heaton Park estate (figure 1). The aim of this kind of landscape was to demonstrate the wealth and power of the owner and to create a space that appeared “naturally occurring” to the spectator. Some of these private, aristocratic landscapes such as Heaton Park later formed the basis of some of Britain’s public parks, through either land donations to the municipality or land sales. As they were already designed and laid out, they were ideally suited to a new public purpose. The alteration of these spaces from private use to public reflects the change in social and political influence from the aristocratic families to the municipal authorities. While the aristocratic park represented the wealth and social status of its owner, similarly the public park reflected the social reform aspirations of the new urban aristocracy.

The development of public parks in Britain was prompted by the investigations of the national Select Committee on Public Walks in 1833. This singled out Manchester as especially in need of public spaces for recreation because of the alleged prevalence of drinking and gambling among the working classes and the poor quality of the living environments of the urban poor in the city.³¹ Manchester was slow to acquire land for public recreation. In part, this was due to a lack of philanthropic donations of land, which had occurred in some cities such as Leeds, Liverpool, and Glasgow. This meant that Manchester had had to purchase or acquire by public subscription the land for her earliest public parks opened in Bradford (a suburb of Manchester) and Harpurhey in 1846. However, the city was expanding rapidly, and the creation of new publicly funded parks had not kept pace with the growing population. Parks were identified at the time as a vital “green lung” for the overcrowded city and as serving a useful moralizing purpose to keep the working classes from the twin evils of gambling and drinking.³²

In 1851, the influential American parks designer Frederick Law Olmsted visited one of Britain’s first municipal parks at Birkenhead, near Liverpool. He observed that “the privileges of the garden were enjoyed about equally by all classes” and referred to it as a “People’s garden” and “the People’s own.”³³ Public parks were regarded as emblematic of the wider Victorian project of providing leisure activities as an alternative to other, less acceptable pastimes. These original ideas were also being continually refined and enhanced throughout the twentieth century. The idea of the public park as having a civilizing affect on its users (or “rational recreation”) has been a popular one among academics, growing out of an attempt to provide role models for public behaviour and to encourage adoption of the values of a new urban middle class, which considered itself culturally and morally superior.³⁴

Liverpool City Council’s purchase of land for two parks, Sefton Park and Stanley Park, in the 1860s, was controversial because of their sites: Sefton Park was located in a middle-class area, while the smaller Stanley Park was in a working-class district of



Source: Prestwich Local History Library

Figure 1 – Heaton Park as an aristocratic estate in 1848

the city.³⁵ Similarly, Leeds City Council had purchased the 800-acre Roundhay Park in 1871 for £139,000.³⁶ The initiative for the purchase had come from the mayor of Leeds, John Barran, who funded part of the purchase cost from his own money.³⁷ Tram-lines to the park were not laid until 1891, by which time it was being described by opposers as “a big white elephant.”³⁸ Parts of both Sefton and Roundhay Parks were sold for building land, to recoup some of the purchase and development costs. Both councils were active in the purchase and laying out of major public parks earlier than Manchester.

The disadvantage, for Manchester, of being the origin of the industrial revolution was the decline in the quality of life in the city, especially for the urban poor. Living conditions in some parts of the city propelled a progressive social reform movement from the early nineteenth century. This movement was not solely the product of the municipal elite, for it also involved prominent philanthropic families who remained outside municipal authority, such as the Philips family. They partly financed one of Manchester’s first public parks, Philips Park, named after MP Mark Philips. Like that of similar local families, the

Philips' wealth derived from the cotton trade. Mark's nephew Herbert devoted himself extensively to philanthropic activities in Manchester, including campaigning for the provision of public parks. Men like Herbert Philips played an important role in mediating between the landed elite with estates to sell and the municipal authorities, demonstrating that the exercise of such influence could and did originate outside a municipal body. Philips was, however, unsuccessful in persuading Manchester City Council to support the purchase of land for a children's playground, for which he had raised over £9,000 through public subscription.³⁹ Such philanthropists acted as external pressure-applying forces on the local authority when it was prioritizing urban social reform.

These external forces could not always guarantee the success of such ventures. Manchester City Council, like its counterparts in other British cities, made decisions slowly, especially those that involved significant spending. The committee system, a characteristic of British civic administration, was often hampered by the "angry eye of the ratepayer" and profound divisions of opinion among committee members.⁴⁰ In Manchester, decisions about the purchase and management of public parks were made by the Parks and Cemeteries committee,⁴¹ and it was to this committee that the de Trafford and the Wilton families turned when their financial pressures began to increase in the late nineteenth century.

Heaton Park and the New Urban Elite in Manchester

In the late 1890s, Trafford Park and Heaton Park were offered for sale to Manchester City Council. Both estates had been the subject of failed public auctions and both families had been under increasing financial pressure. This pressure on the Wilton family had resulted from the accumulation of death duties after the deaths of the 2nd earl in 1882 and his two sons (the 3rd and 4th earls, respectively) in 1885 and 1898. Jointures to the surviving dowager countesses of Wilton, coupled with the preference for their Melton Mowbray estate, meant that the sale of the Manchester estate was the only solution to their financial position. The rejection, by the voters, of the 5th Earl of Wilton, who stood as an MP for the Gorton area of Manchester in 1899, convinced the family to leave the city permanently. Meanwhile, the de Trafford family was under threat of foreclosure by the mortgagee of Trafford Park for the acute gambling debts of the third baronet, Humphrey Francis de Trafford and his wife, coupled with his habit of arranging secret loans from moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates.⁴²

The customary response of the City Council to the acquisition of land was to establish a special subcommittee to investigate the offer in terms of the price and location. The Special Subcommittee on Trafford Park was re-established under the chairmanship of Sir John Harwood.⁴³ Harwood was a Liberal who made his money from a paint business and had been a strong proponent of the Manchester Ship Canal. He had been chairman of the Waterworks committee during construction of the Thirlmere pipeline from the Lake District to Manchester, which opened in

1894. Experienced in supervising large municipal projects, he was regarded as a "long-standing municipal reformer."⁴⁴

The City Council's financial position in the late nineteenth century had become the subject of much public debate. The principal outlay in previous years had been a loan of some £5 million to ensure the completion of the Manchester Ship Canal. This loan consisted of £3 million lent in April 1891 and a further £2 million in October 1892 and caused a rise in rates of two pence to the pound, increasing Manchester Corporation's debts by 65 per cent.⁴⁵ During negotiations for Trafford Park in 1896, Alderman Clay reminded his fellow councillors that Manchester was "the highest-rated city in England" and that the city's debts had grown from £7.5 million in 1891 to over £15 million.⁴⁶ In later years, Manchester City Council's actions during this time would be lauded as a "flagship for municipal enterprise on a new scale," but the Ship Canal project, at the time of its construction and in the years immediately afterwards, was not always perceived so positively.⁴⁷

The spending of public money on land and projects outside city boundaries had precedent, for the City Council had built Thirlmere aqueduct in 1877 to transport water to the city from the Lake District in Cumbria. In so doing, they had acquired the manorial rights to the adjacent land, which required the chairman of the Waterworks committee to act as the manorial lord,⁴⁸ providing a clear illustration of the willingness of the local authority to function as an aristocratic elite when required. The scheme was also subjected to adverse comment from councillors and the local press on the grounds of price and the speculative nature of the enterprise.⁴⁹ Investments in municipal enterprise were becoming a significant part of municipal governance, notwithstanding the "municipal ebb and flow" that characterized local authority activity in many English cities.⁵⁰ City councillors were commonly responsible for greater assets and liabilities than other local bodies and were, therefore, burdened with many financial duties.⁵¹ However, both the Thirlmere and Ship Canal projects were instrumental in establishing the reputation of Manchester City Council as an enterprising body.

Both the de Trafford and Wilton families expressed a preference to sell to the City Council as opposed to a private buyer. The estates had already been the subject of failed auctions, so there was evidence that private buyers were not interested, especially at the prices being asked, and that both estates were too large to appeal to individual purchasers. Lord Wilton commented at a meeting with representatives of the City Council to discuss Heaton Park in June 1901 that "he was willing to transfer the estate on more favourable terms than he would let it go to any ordinary company or purchaser."⁵² Indeed, shortly after the failed attempt to purchase Trafford Park, Lord Wilton's London land agents wrote to the Lord Mayor of Manchester to remind him that their estate was available and to emphasize its advantages over Trafford Park. The letter, dated 30 June 1896, mentions Heaton Park's "advantages over Trafford on hygienic grounds, from its elevated position and being out of close contact with manufacturing properties such as are on the fringe of Trafford."⁵³

However, Manchester City Council did not have much experience of buying and keeping such large estates intact. They had either bought or been given gifts of much smaller parcels of land for public recreation and had no precedent in buying much larger spaces for public parks. Nor did they have much interest in historic building conservation. In 1896, the City Council purchased Clayton Hall, the home of Humphrey Chetham along with eight acres of land. In April of that year, they contemplated demolishing the house.⁵⁴ Hendham Hall in Queen's Park (acquired in 1846) was demolished in 1880 to make way for a new building. Given that Manchester City Council was involving itself increasingly in commercial enterprises such as the Manchester Ship Canal, this assumption that they would preserve the estates is surprising. It is noteworthy that, among the City Council's initial instincts when considering future usage of the estates, commercial imperatives were predominant, including plans to sell the strip of land at Trafford Park that bordered the Ship Canal and plans to build houses along the edges of Heaton Park.

A substantial portion of the wider business community in Manchester supported and lobbied for the proposed purchases. These men, who included Sir William Houldsworth, MP (a director of the London and North-West Railway Company), Herbert Philips, Sir Elkanah Armitage, and James Watts (of S. & J. Watts & Company) signed a memorial of 400 signatures to the Lord Mayor advocating the use of Trafford Park not just as a public park but "for judicious development for commercial and residential purposes."⁵⁵ The memorialists called themselves the Citizens' Committee (although they were citizens of a particular kind—the business elite of Manchester). Close association between prominent local businessmen and members of Manchester City Council was not unusual during this period, emphasizing the emergence of an urban aristocracy based on local economic power and influence. Indeed, much of this influence was the result of interactions between members of the municipal authority and those who chose to remain outside of it.

The City Council's history as an enterprising body with experience of substantial investments in projects such as the Manchester Ship Canal and the Thirlmere pipeline should have made the case for the purchase of either of the parks, but conflicting agendas and influences resulted in decision-making that lacked consensus. As a consequence of its cautious deliberations, Manchester lost the opportunity to acquire Trafford Park when it was sold to a private developer in 1896, and it subsequently became an industrial estate.

In March 1901, the Parks and Cemeteries committee again discussed the proposed purchase of Heaton Park at a price of £230,000. The lowered price was a reflection of the attempts by the Wilton family to make the estate attractive to the council and was effectively giving them free rein to use the estate as they wished.⁵⁶ In April 1901, the Parks and Cemeteries committee appointed a subcommittee to ask Lord Wilton to give the council three months to consider buying the estate and to lower the price further.⁵⁷ On 30 April 1901, a meeting took place

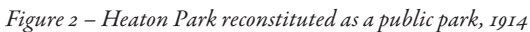
in London between Grover Humphreys (Lord Wilton's solicitors) and representatives of Manchester Corporation to discuss the price. The deputy town clerk for Manchester, Thomas Hudson, had doubts about the amount of coal under the property, the water rights, which prevented building on parts of the estate, and the dilapidated condition of the boundary walls and buildings generally.⁵⁸

A letter to Thomas Hudson from Grover Humphreys in July stated that the selling price would not go below £230,000 but that there was the possibility of including an extra 32 acres of land between the park and the city boundary at no extra charge. The effect of this additional land was to bring the park closer to the city boundary and to remove "a portion at least of the opposition offered to the purchase by the Corporation."⁵⁹ The 32 acres had been secured from Lord Wilton at the meeting with the Parks and Cemeteries committee in London to discuss the progress of the negotiations. In addition to the extra land, there was some commercial property on Middleton Road between the park boundary and the 32 acres. This meant that the City Council acquired not only 650 acres of Heaton Park but also the certainty of some rental income in the future. This was all achieved without any increase in the purchase price of £230,000.

At their meeting on 26 July 1901, the Parks and Cemeteries committee agreed to a motion to accept the offer of Heaton Park and the extra land for £230,000. The vote was evenly split—seven members for and seven against. Of those who voted, three Liberals and four Conservatives were in favour of the purchase, while two Liberals and five Conservatives were against the proposal. The chairman, Alderman Birkbeck, voted in favour of the motion and it was carried. The decision was approved by the full City Council, and the committee then agreed to inform the parliamentary subcommittee to include in the next act of Parliament the "power to sell, lease, appropriate and use Heaton Park as they see fit."⁶⁰

The remaining tenancies on the estate were also ceded to the council on their expiry, although the only tenancy was of the gardens and the greenhouse on twelve months' notice.⁶¹ The vendors included in the sale three-and-a-half acres that comprised the avenue in front of the park by the Grand Lodge. It is, therefore, not surprising that, at the conclusion of the negotiations, Alderman Birkbeck felt that "they had been met ... with great candour, more candour than was usual in a lawyer's office ... the vendors had been very straightforward."⁶²

Another obstacle arose just prior to the completion of the sale, over ownership of the water rights on the estate. They constituted a valuable resource for the nearby factories and bleaching mills, especially at a time when the rental income from Heaton Park was estimated at only between £1000 and £1500 per year.⁶³ The original assumption made by City Council was that both the mineral and water rights were included in the purchase price, but when it became clear that the water rights were not, the negotiations became deadlocked. As a way of resolving the apparent deadlock, J. H. Green, auctioneer and valuer to



After the acquisition of Heaton Park, City Council moved quickly to establish their new ownership. A series of iron boundary posts was erected around the perimeter of the park, while some local concessions accorded by the aristocratic former owners were lost. Employees of a nearby bleachworks were forbidden the use the park as a shortcut to work in the early hours of the morning, as they had been allowed to do by the previous owner. The owner of the factory, Robert Cawley, an influential local



However, the early years of the twentieth century did not mean a complete break with aristocratic involvement in events such as the opening of public buildings in Manchester. In 1904, Withington hospital was opened by Lord Derby, a member of the Stanley family who were more closely associated with the city of Liverpool, which was near their estate at Knowsley. Such well-known members of the landed class often continued to



Source: Local Image Collection, Manchester City Library

Figure 4 – Very popular bandstand at Heaton Park, taken in 1906

attract deference from the new urban elites, as on the occasion of the opening of this hospital. Alderman Fletcher Moss noted, “The ceremony was rather spoilt by the disgusting adulation and toadyism paid by a few of the performers ... to Lord Derby,”⁶⁷ indicating that strong feelings were often hidden beneath the surface in some interactions between the landed elites and representatives of the new urban oligarchy, and that the impulse to defer to the aristocracy could override a more egalitarian approach to these relationships.

The alteration of the physical landscape of Heaton Park during the first decade of the City Council’s ownership resulted in the refocusing of the estate around municipal priorities (figure 2). The carefully designed aristocratic landscape of the park did not prevent many local commentators from mentioning the “natural” beauty of the site in describing its attractions in its new guise.⁶⁸ The former Wilton family seat, Heaton Hall, was used as a branch of the Manchester City Art Gallery from 1906 (figure 3). Construction of a municipal golf course (one of the first in the country), a boating lake, and a bandstand in this period (figure 4) developed the new public park as a popular leisure facility, devoted to physical and psychological improvement—one of the cornerstones of the Victorian attitude and practised by municipal authorities in other British cities such as Birmingham.⁶⁹ The reservoir constructed in the northwest corner of the new park was a joint project with the Waterworks committee of Manchester City Council, to provide another water source for the expanding city, illustrating that this new park signified much more than an additional recreation space for an overcrowded city—a municipal resource to serve all kinds of urban needs, whose price had been skilfully and patiently negotiated by the new urban elite.

Conclusion

This paper has challenged the consensus that Manchester developed independently of the contiguous aristocratic land-owners and has provided evidence that the mostly harmonious

business relationships between these families and the municipality positively affected the ability of the city to develop new and existing resources. It complements the work of Young on Quebec and Montreal, and Schafer on Edinburgh and Leipzig during similar periods.⁷⁰ It contests the excluded consideration of relationships between local landed families in the vicinity of Manchester and the City Council and demonstrates not only that these relationships existed, but also that they were approached with sensitivity and diplomacy and a lack of overt deference. This degree of co-operation emphasizes the contribution to urban development facilitated by good working relationships between aristocratic families and the civic authorities. The ultimate consequence of these relationships in Manchester was the acquisition of Heaton Park as a public park for the city, which continued to test the entrepreneurial skills of the City Council during the early twentieth century.

The sale of aristocratic estates—for so long the symbol of the social and economic power of the landed class—to the “urban aristocracy” did not represent a straightforward transfer of that power and influence to the new urban elite. The complex negotiations for the purchase of Heaton Park illustrate the confidence of local authorities such as Manchester in dealing with the landed aristocracy and in securing the best possible deal for the city. The precarious financial position of the Wiltons made them vulnerable to the business acumen of the city councillors, who were not afraid to take advantage of the situation. The opening up of Heaton Park to the citizens as a public park (one of the largest in Europe) increased the accessibility of the space, but its use remained contested. The size of the park made it adaptable for diverse uses, but the evidence available suggests that there was little consensus about how it should be used, by whom, and for what purpose.

Much work needs to be done to further our understanding of the relationship between the new municipal elite and other influential groups in the urban environment and on the reordering of the social landscape after the departure of the landed elites. This reordering, in practice, meant more than a simple and direct transfer of power and influence from the rural context of an aristocratic estate to the complex and overcrowded Victorian city. The landed elite was primarily composed of social and political leaders, while the new urban elites were economic leaders, skilled in business but often lacking the local (and occasionally national) prestige of the aristocracy.⁷¹ This economic leadership made them, in the eyes of many, suited to local government, often viewed at this time as a kind of large-scale business.⁷² Yet it is undeniable that many Manchester philanthropists and campaigners chose to remain outside the municipal arena and to exert their influence from an external position. Joining municipal government was not the only means of accessing social power and exerting influence in the urban arena. Herbert Philips went on to establish the Noxious Vapours Abatement Association, as well as continuing to campaign for more open spaces in the city. He was made a freeman of

the city of Manchester in 1897—one of the highest municipal honours.

The sale of Heaton Park by the Earl of Wilton and its acquisition by Manchester City Council illustrates the dynamics of the relationship between the landed elites living on the borders of a major city and the new urban elite who governed these spaces. The transfer of private land to public ownership did not guarantee its easy accessibility to all—many of Manchester's urban poor remained unable to experience the benefits of Heaton Park for themselves. The cautious, patient approach of the municipal authority and the lack of deference to the Wiltons demonstrate the degree of consensus and negotiation needed to complete such deals successfully.

The Wiltons moved to a smaller estate in the southeast of England after the completion of the sale of Heaton Park, retaining some land and rental property in the Manchester area, most of which was sold during the early decades of the twentieth century in response to continuing financial pressures. The de Trafford family also relocated to southern England, where Sir Humphrey Francis de Trafford was declared bankrupt in 1907, having failed to restrain his personal spending.⁷³ The sales of both family estates, therefore, did not mean the end of financial difficulties, due primarily to excessive spending and lifestyle factors. Aristocratic debt was often a chronic and persistent problem, with longstanding consequences such as, in the case of both families discussed here, the sale of large, historic family estates. While both families moved to smaller estates, social appearances had to be maintained so as not to jeopardize social and elite status.

The reordering of the social landscape was reflected in the reconstitution of Heaton Park as a public park for the city. The economic significance of the estate endured as an infrastructural resource (the reservoir and its future use as a transport hub for city trams), as well as a recreational space. The interconnections between the social and the spatial in the city serve as an important reminder of the complex and organic nature of urban life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Manchester was never a city closely associated with a single, nationally significant, aristocratic family, but it would be an omission to neglect the important relationships between those landed families who lived on the outskirts and the new urban elite whose libraries, parks, museums, and art galleries symbolized their role at the heart of city life.

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