

Andy Anderson, born 1928

An edited version of an interview made on 21 October 2009

Interviewer: Christine Wilson

My first memories of Eaton Park are getting on the bus on Sundays, coming into Norwich, getting off at Eaton Road, walking through Mile End Road and then seeing the tram standing at the entrance to the Jenny Lind, as it was then. Then into South Park Avenue and into the park through Sandy-Winsch's fine entrance, along past the fountain which made a great impression and along the avenue of trees to the bandstand where we used to sit and listen to the band. The other things I remember about Eaton Park was the sheer busyness of it. I remember the park in its splendour - boats being brought out of the yachting pavilion and put on the yachting pond. I also remember the games going on – tennis, cricket, and bowls of course. A place of great vitality. Later I discovered the great man, Sandys-Winsch, who had constructed these parks, using unemployed men, and bringing to the City a quite wonderful resource.

*What was it about Captain Sandys-Winsch?* I heard of him by reputation. He was seen as a bit of a martinet. I bumped into him one day when I was in the gardening class at the junior technical school when we had free choice period and mine was gardening. I fondly remember the maths teacher, Jesse Hammond, [who] was suggesting we cut some beansticks I think, and this military man very politely stepped out from somewhere or other and Jesse realised we'd transgressed. We were cutting down things which weren't to be cut down. I spent my youth in Norwich, both at school and then my first occupation was working at Lawrence & Scott. I then joined the Metropolitan Police on leaving the army in 1948 and decided I would return to dear old Norwich, and I did so in 1951 by transferring to the then Norwich City Police. And then I got to know the parks again. We moved into Norwich in 1940 and went again to Eaton Park and Waterloo Park so I got to know the parks.

*So how did you get involved with the Norwich Society and into writing a book about Norwich parks?*

I'm a long-time member of the Norwich Society and I became a member of the executive committee. I've served on most committees with the exception of traffic, been chair of many of them, and I'm now a Vice-President. I was chairman of the Society between '94 and '96, and it was all about the heritage lottery grant. The parks were in a pretty poor state. I mustn't relate it to any period of political control, but there was a period, I think we would accept, in the 1980s when central government's attitude to local government changed a little bit and I think, at that time, that local government perhaps was compelled to look more at what it had to do rather than what it would be rather nice for it to do. And I think the parks suffered at that time. It was a question of money. I think there'd been, perhaps even without central government pressure, a realisation that parks were costing a lot of money. There were days when you would have gangs of people who would hoe before the weeds appeared; we moved into a period where labour in local government was much more tightly controlled so the parks didn't get the attention, there were all sorts of economies being made.

One of them which I think was very important was that the park-keeper seemed to disappear so discipline went from the parks. Changes took place within the floral displays, not only perhaps the same attention, but also rosebeds, rose gardens, were becoming rose-sick. It was also very much the spirit of the times that people ran riot - you don't go round on the path, you just walk where you will. All of these things I think were destructive. People got very worried about the parks. They saw what a mess they were getting into. People valued the

Norwich parks and it culminated in the application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant which would enable work to be done on the parks, particularly I think to the structures within the parks. Round about the turn of the century we thought in the Norwich Society that it would be a good thing perhaps to produce a book which, I think, in the words that are probably in the book itself would be a useful accompaniment to what we hoped was going to be a successful bid and that's in fact what happened. The book was not really intended to be more than that. It's certainly not an in-depth look at the Norwich parks. It tells a little bit about each of the four parks which were the subject of the grant and one hopes it's useful.

So that's really how my involvement came about. I was aided by another member of the Norwich Society, Sarah Cocke, a professional photographer, and her photographs made a marvellous contribution to the book. And also of course we used the archive photograph which says a lot about the construction of the parks and the methods used. It was, I think, it was a magnificent achievement on the part of the City and on the part of Sandys-Winsch.

*People often ask about the buildings? Was it the fashion of the time to have buildings constructed in that style?*

There are all sorts of theories. Sandys-Winsch had been involved in the First World War. He'd seen the horror and devastation of that at first hand. There's also the contrast between this lovely old rambling medieval city of ours which after all is the largest in area of the English walled medieval cities. After all the plan of Norwich is not really to have one, is it? Like topsy it just grewed. So there's a contrast between that and what he produced in the parks. I think it's more likely that he was influenced by his early days when he worked with Thomas Mawson. We have the famous architects Fielden and Mawson. But I think it's much more likely that Sandys-Winsch was influenced by his early days and the classical style came quite naturally to him. I think it works really well. Eaton Park, which is a big area - look at an aerial photograph of Eaton Park. It gives you a very vivid impression of the man's thinking, the concept. I think it's quite wonderful. He's been criticised I think for too many straight lines and all the rest of it. I think he's left us this great legacy which we ought to try and retain.

*Coming back to your memories, do you remember any particular events like the circus which used to go there, and the facilities?*

Well, I certainly remember the circus. My first memory of the circus in Norwich is being taken to Bertram Mills, the Big Top, which actually used Chamberlain's Meadows which I've spoken off as a site for the City College. But then the Big Top moved down to what was referred to as the Third Field, Eaton Park was laid out in that way, and the Third Field I think now was used for the pitch and putt, and that's where the circus was held in the 1950s.

*Other people remember the elephants parading through the streets.*

I remember that very well. The elephants used to be brought I think from the station. I also have a memory which I'll just put in purely for entertainment. At St Stephen's Plain, that is to say what many people think of as Marks & Spencer's corner at the bottom of St Stephen's, the City police used to be on point duty there. A circus was held at the Theatre Royal and one elephant used to be exercised in the morning down Theatre Street past St Stephen's church with a man sitting on its back. I remember being on point duty one morning and this elephant coming along past Woolworths as it was then, seemed to get its beady eyes on me and I thought what is this elephant going do? I had visions of being hoisted aloft but it didn't - that's another memory of the elephant in Norwich!

*What about other events in Eaton Park?*

Well, there used to be events but I can't remember going to them. The size of Eaton Park allowed the city to meet the requirements of the National Playing Fields Association which said there should be a certain acreage per thousand population and Eaton Park did that in a grand way – hockey, cricket, football, everything really. But then a period came along when leading sports clubs, like the Norfolk Wanderers Hockey Club - I've taken off the top of my head, wanted their own premises and they went. But I think it left an enormous gap in the parks. The cricket seemed to go – the cricket has never come back. The car had a terrific effect on the usage of the Norwich parks. Whereas my mother had brought me in from Bracon Ash to visit the Norwich parks, then the population of Norwich got into their cars and went off to find the coast. It was a complete reversal really, much, I think, to the parks' detriment. The thing I think which safeguards parks is when they're being thoroughly used by a range of people. If they get badly and sparingly used then it seems to me the way is open to vandalism and all the rest of it.

*What about the park since the Heritage Lottery-funded work was done? Have you seen it?*

Yes, I admire what's been done. I mean the state of the decorative lily pond – that piece running out to the yacht pavilion – that's a wonderful restoration I think – the long bridge – and to see the model yacht pond in being. I was reading the other day that someone had launched a model aircraft carrier in it. That really brings back memories to me of the '30s – being there with my mother and seeing two men carrying a model warship from the yacht pavilion where they used to be stored.

[ends]