

The Lawns history

The character of today's open space gives few clues to the area's colourful history, apart from the boggy nature of the ground and the name of the adjacent road - Spa Hill.

A mineral water spring was at the centre of the Spa and its properties had been known by local people for many years. Eminent physicians such as Sir Benjamin Brodie and Sir Astley Cooper praised its qualities and during a Court case it was established that the water contained more salts than the water at the Cheltenham Spa.

Beulah Spa could not rely entirely on the proceeds of people coming to "take the waters" and the invigorating air and on 1st August 1831, when the ground was owned by Mr J.D. Smith, it was opened by Lady Essex as a place of entertainment. The gardens were laid out by Decimus Burton, the noted architect, who also designed the Spa House and The Lodge.

Fine views were to be had from the 30 acres of grounds (and still are) and many "rustic edifices" were constructed. There was a circus ring, a rosery and an upper and lower lake with water fowl, a maze or wilderness and an "orchestra"; also a camera obscura with a telescope powerful enough to see Windsor Castle.

A Clerk at The Lodge controlled the entertainments which included serenading minstrels, daily concerts by military bands, dancing, astrology, acrobatics, archery (bows and arrows were provided), fireworks and illuminated polychromatic lamps. Floricultural exhibitions were also held, the Metropolitan Horticultural Society "Open to all England" being the first one.

Visitors and also gypsy parties were encouraged to bring their own food and wine and hire cutlery and plates at the site, these picnics could be eaten on certain lawns or in tents and marquees.

A publication called "The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction" described the entrance as "by a lodge of ornate rusticity". The carriages had to draw up inside the gate entrance and set down their company and from there a path led to small glade where they discovered a circular building used as a confectionery and reading room. A refreshment list was displayed in this building and in the Lodge.

The spring was nearby, within a circular rockwork structure under a thatched wigwam-shaped roof. The water, which rose up some 14 feet was drawn up in a glass urn-shaped pail. The water was bottled as Beulah Saline Water and sold at 2 shillings a gallon. It was also sent frozen in bottles by Masters Freezing Apparatus and in blocks.

On 28th November 1833 Madam Vestri's Olympic Theatre brought out a "new and original burletta" entitled "The Beulah Spa" which soon helped to popularise the Spa.

Subscriptions varied from £3. 3s. 0d. per annum to 10s. 6s. per week for a family, although other references state £2. 0s. 0d. per annum. The charge for one person was £1. 0s. 0d. a year, or 10s. 0d. a quarter. The gardens were also open to non-subscribers at 1s, 0d, or 6d. on Mondays. Servants in livery were not admitted.

Horse drawn coaches ran three times a day from Charring Cross but in 1839 the London and Brighton Railway opened and visitors disembarked at "The Jolly Sailor", now Norwood Junction.

Events at the Spa were widely advertised including:

- 18th August 1836 - Grand Fete Al Fresco, with celebrated Grotesque Dancers performing a Chinese comic dance and an Old English Maypole Morris dance.
- 1st September 1836 - A concert in the "Rustic Orchestra" and an Archery Festival.
- 13th July 1838 - Grand Fete for the benefit of the Distressed Polish Refugees.
- 16th September 1834 - A Grand Scottish Fete with a tightrope performance by Pablo Fanque , gymnastics, a leopardess with dogs, military bands, illuminations and fireworks.

The Spa's popularity started to decline at the time Crystal Palace opened in 1854 and other "types" of amusement were provide to attract visitors. In May 1858 the estate was put up for auction and much was subsequently developed.

In 1939 "The Lawns Estate" was conveyed to the Corporation by the All Saints Missionary Union Incorporated and in 1940 a Deed of Covenant was made between the "Mayor Alderman and Burgesses of the Borough of Croydon of the first part The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association of the second part and The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty of the third part". The Covenant held by the Corporation ensured that the area would remain as open space under the Open Spaces Act 1906 and that it would not be built upon and would be used as public open space in perpetuity.

A large mansion called "The Lawns", was built after the estate was sold in 1858 but was demolished after a fire in the mid-1960's. The original Lodge beside Beulah Hill still exists and today is a private house called Tivoli Lodge.