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How to cite:

Layton-Jones, Katy (2013). A Commanding View: Liverpool's Public Parks, 1722-1870. Cultural and Social History, 10(1) pp. 47-67.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.2752/147800413X13515292098151>

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A COMMANDING VIEW

PUBLIC PARKS AND THE LIVERPOOL PROSPECT, 1722–1870

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ABSTRACT Over the last three centuries, the visual characteristics of a town, its structures, public spaces and atmospheric conditions, have been employed as the most immediate means of evaluating its failings and triumphs. Focusing upon Liverpool, this article uses a range of visual imagery alongside traditional written sources to identify and interpret the role that parks and urban green space played in defining the reputation of that town throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Keywords: parks, prospects, urban, print, Liverpool

Among the public places, the Terrace, at the furthest end of the town, called St. James's Walk, deserves to be particularly mentioned. It is upon an agreeable elevation, which commands an extensive and noble prospect, including the town, the river, the Cheshire land, the Welch [*sic*] mountains, and the sea.¹

Over the last three centuries, the visual characteristics of a town, its structures, public spaces and atmospheric conditions, have been employed as the most immediate means of evaluating its failings and triumphs.² The provincial urban environment has been a recurring subject in prints, souvenirs, gazetteers, urban histories and postcards. This array of imagery and visual description presents the historian with a chaotic and often contradictory picture of attitudes towards urbanization and urban green space.³ Nevertheless, it offers a telling account that reveals much about the expectations and values of those who encountered towns and cities. By the concealment or exaggeration of a particular physical aspect or urban quality, pictorial evidence can either confirm pre-existing chronologies of urban development or, by contrast, reveal disparities between a town's appearance and its perceived identity.⁴ Consequently, images constitute one of the most valuable resources for understanding past attitudes to built environments, their design, use and evolution.⁵ Yet, despite the potentially rich testimony offered by visual imagery, no attempt has hitherto been made to understand how attitudes to the town were informed by visual images of some of their largest and most significant features: parks and gardens. Focusing upon Liverpool, this article uses visual imagery alongside traditional written sources to identify and interpret the role that parks and green space played in defining urban reputation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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Liverpool was one of the first cities in the world to produce a comprehensive plan for public park provision, and its numerous developments informed an international movement. Princes Park (1843) was a precursor of Birkenhead Park (1847), which inspired Frederick Law Olmsted's plan for Central Park in (1858) and thereafter the American Parks movement.⁶ The array of public parks which followed in Liverpool became training grounds for many influential landscape architects who would come to define the shape and function of public green space in Britain and America for the next 150 years. The argument presented here is based upon research into dozens of images of Liverpool's parks and gardens produced between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, as well as an extensive range of images relating to urban parks and gardens across Great Britain.⁷ The sources originate from a number of archives, and the material used in this article represents only a small portion of that consulted. Drawing upon representative examples, this study traces three major phases in the development of Liverpool's parks and explores the ways in which changes to the design and representation of the town's green spaces shaped the popular image of Liverpool, from the creation of the town's early walks in the 1740s to the heyday of the metropolitan park system in the late nineteenth century.⁸

THE VISUAL CONTEXT

Prospects from, and views within, urban green space are part of a tradition of representation that dates back at least as far as John Speed's *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (1612).⁹ In the 1720s, the urban prospects produced by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck served to popularize the townscape as a distinct pictorial genre.¹⁰ In the century that followed, a mass of visual imagery acquainted viewers with the emerging iconography of provincial urban England.¹¹ Publishers' endeavours to develop new markets for topographical imagery were aided by technological innovations that made printed imagery ever more affordable.¹² A multi-tiered market emerged, at the cheaper end of which were wood cuts and, at the most expensive end, copperplate engravings.¹³ The arrival of steel engraving in 1824 and steam-powered printing presses in the 1830s meant that publishers could increasingly combine quality with high edition numbers to produce large quantities of elaborate topographical images.¹⁴ Print sellers were established in a growing number of towns and were joined by stationers, 'pinner's up', bookshops and railway bookstalls.¹⁵ The accessibility of visual material transformed the nation's familiarity with urban topography, and audiences became well versed in interpreting the visual character of a town as an indicator of its status and quality.¹⁶ Topography, terrain and 'the view' combined to form a language of urban evaluation. As Penelope Corfield has argued, the physical form of towns was 'studied as visible proxy for other changes'.¹⁷ Therefore, it was to a town's advantage if it could be viewed and represented as a complete and balanced 'picture' and to its disadvantage if it could not. Bearing in mind the important role that topography played in defining urban reputations, it was perhaps no coincidence that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Liverpool developed the foundations of an ambitious parks system, a system that would transform the town and its visual representation over the next two centuries.

LIVERPOOL'S EARLY WALKS AND THE URBAN PROSPECT

Eighteenth-century Liverpool was defined by mercantile expansion. In opening the first enclosed wet dock in the world in 1715, the town had ensured that it was well placed to exploit trading opportunities and become the linchpin of the north of England's manufacturing and trading nexus. The employment potential offered by the town as it developed trading relationships with its counterparts in the Americas and Africa attracted rural migrants into its relatively dense town centre. From a population of approximately 6,000 in 1700, Liverpool was home to 22,000 inhabitants by 1750, quadrupling again to reach around 83,000 by the end of the century.¹⁸ This rate of population growth had a dramatic effect upon the townscape. Bordered by the River Mersey on one side, the only route for expansion was west, up a steep incline towards an area known as Mount Pleasant. Consequently, speculative building developments in Liverpool tended to be even more concentrated than in neighbouring Manchester, Preston and Salford. High demand translated into high land prices and plots were utilized intensively; Liverpool became home to the infamous cellar dwelling. Yet, throughout the century this potentially demonic image of Liverpool as a series of dark, unhealthy courts and cellars was counterbalanced by the actions of an enthusiastic oligarchy, comprising merchants, professionals and the local gentry, who sought to celebrate the town and build upon its achievements. To this end, Liverpool was the site of extensive civic and commercial construction schemes and, most importantly for the purposes of this article, public walks and gardens that improved the townscape and enabled residents and visitors alike to 'take in' the town.¹⁹

In an age of enthusiasm for viewing urban panoramas, Liverpool was fortunate in its natural topography, in that it could be viewed from both Rock Ferry and Birkenhead across the river and from elevated vantage points on the periphery of the town itself.²⁰ In addition, the compact nature of the town ensured that Liverpool could be visualized as a single entity. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the public's appetite for parks and gardens grew, officials and developers made use of Liverpool's natural topography by constructing a number of walks that promised panoramic views along with an opportunity for modest exercise. Arguably, the first substantial, man-made green space within the town was Ranelagh Gardens, a pleasure garden modelled on its London namesake and opened c. 1722.²¹ The gardens provided a prospect of the town and river from Copperas Hill, which took in the nearby rope walks, churches, large residences and the Wirral Peninsula across the water. There are no extant images taken from the gardens themselves, but E. Rooker's view taken nearby in 1770 indicates the extent of the vista visible from the gardens (see Figure 1). Notwithstanding its significance as Liverpool's earliest garden, Ranelagh was a private establishment, accessible only to those willing and able to pay an admission fee and, as such, was unlikely to have informed a broad 'popular' perception of the town.²² The earliest *public* walks, created in the vicinity of Duke Street after 1748, were more integrated into the townscape, and therefore more accessible to inhabitants and visitors alike.²³ In 1795 the chronicler of Liverpool, James Wallace, recollected one of these amenities, Ladies' Walk, as 'a pretty walk' which ran adjacent to Duke Street, 'in which were four

rows of trees, and from its elevated situation commanded the river, and all vessels passing to and from the town'.²⁴ From this side of Liverpool, the view would have been relatively clear and Ladies' Walk certainly provided a fine vista. However, the landscaping was minimal and, being located alongside a thoroughfare, it could hardly be afforded the status of 'green' space.

St. James's Walk, also known as St. James's Mount and Mount Gardens, was the second walk to be created in eighteenth-century Liverpool. Laid out in 1767, on the edge of a disused stone quarry, the site's greatest appeal was its situation, high above the centre, away from the docks and the densest residential areas. Wallace described it as 'a terrace walk ... at the south end of the town, which commands an extensive view over a great part of the river, and the adjacent country, it has convenient benches, a pretty shrubbery, and walks decently kept, for such as are disposed for that amusement'.²⁵ Notwithstanding its 'pretty' features, the walk was not designed to be an isolated refuge, divorced from the town. Rather, it was perceived as a good location from which to best 'take in' the scene of docks and warehouses. As one inhabitant noted in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Liverpool's docks were 'considered as the most magnificent spectacle in the town'.²⁶ Clearly, such commercial and industrial panoramas were sought by observers, not least because a large proportion of the new consumers of topographical imagery were themselves merchants and traders. Indeed, the view from St. James's Walk was so valued by the Corporation of Liverpool that it prompted one of the earliest attempts to actively preserve the character of the town's open spaces. In his *Liverpool Guide* of 1796, William Moss noted that 'as the Walk and the adjoining grounds belong to the Corporation, They have determined to prevent any buildings being erected in front, that may interrupt the prospect towards the river'.²⁷ This commitment to both sustaining commercial prosperity and advertising it through urban prospects reveals much about the motivations that underpinned early urban walks and gardens. In the eighteenth century, by virtue of its location and

Figure 1 E. Rooker, *View of the Harbour of Liverpool* (1770), detail. Reproduced courtesy of Liverpool Record Office.

orientation, St. James's Walk enabled the town's commercial character to be revealed rather than concealed or compensated for. Indeed, the entire thrust of writers such as Enfield and Moss was to demonstrate that civility and commerce were combined in Liverpool. Just a year earlier, in 1795, James Wallace had concluded that it was on the 'floating wings of commerce' that the inhabitants of Liverpool 'extended their intercourse with the world', 'enlightened their ideas' and achieved the 'improvement and embellishment' of their town.²⁸ This celebration of the commercial ethos of the town became the leitmotiv of much topographical imagery and many visual-centric accounts.²⁹

Although it was the highest *official* public walk in Liverpool at the end of the eighteenth century, St. James's Walk was not the only open space on the urban boundary to be used as a vantage point. Images 'taken' from Toxteth Park, adjacent to the Mount Pleasant area, testify that this site was also used for recreation. Toxteth was historically a royal deer park and, as such, was not designated for public use. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, the high ground nearest to the town had been adopted by many of Liverpool's inhabitants as an unofficial common for open-air recreation.³⁰ With the growing popularity of domestic tourism in the late eighteenth century, visitors swelled the numbers of those who sought out the views and fresh air that the location afforded, providing a ready market for printed representations of the sight they had enjoyed.

Liverpool from Toxteth Park, drawn by G. Pickering and engraved by J. Sands in 1834, is typical of the numerous images 'taken' from this rise (see Figure 2).³¹ Here, the parkland is clearly defined against the town proper, with the side elevations of Liverpool's outer buildings emphasizing the boundary of the evolving street plan and the start of the hinterland. However, the park is not presented as a rural counterbalance to the town. Rather, the foreground is illustrated accurately as a semi-industrial site, utilized for the tentering (stretching) of cloth, which, along with the distant shipping and warehouses, projects an image of commercial prosperity. Although ostensibly 'picturesque' elements are evident, for example in the cattle that fill the middle ground, they are not employed as neutral pictorial devices in the manner prescribed by microcosms and guides to the picturesque.³² Instead, they serve to reiterate the notion that urban productivity can coexist with and complement the green hinterland.³³ A similar perspective is presented in a slightly later view, taken from the same location (see Figure 3). Henry Lacey's *Liverpool, Looking North* (1846) represents the urban centre as the dominant feature of the landscape, and no attempt is made to conceal or deny its mercantile character. The view accurately represents commercial premises and residential housing, churches and civic buildings in close proximity to one another and the green periphery. The foreground has been foreshortened, shifting attention away from the onlookers and livestock that populate the park and focusing it towards Liverpool itself. In both Pickering's and Lacey's prospects, Liverpool is represented as a complete, integrated and impenetrable mesh that resists the intimate scale of human activity; it is a place to be viewed from afar and translated into a 'sight' for visual appraisal. The physical density of the townscape is sketched out before the viewer, albeit at the cost of the delineation of distinctive individual features. In this sense, this

distinctly nineteenth-century image might be understood as the culmination of a concern with the 'form of the town as a whole', the roots of which Peter Borsay identifies in the eighteenth century.³⁴

Despite the apparent abbreviation of the townscape into a dense web of engraved lines, images taken from Toxteth Park also exemplify how a town's green spaces could be presented as a complement to, rather than compensation for, urban density. The aesthetic balance that is represented as existing between the hinterland and the urban centre mirrors the harmony that was believed to exist between commerce and culture, leisure and labour.³⁵ Notwithstanding Jon Stobart's assertion that, as early as the 1770s, cultural development had 'ground to a halt' in Liverpool as a consequence of commercial myopia, the fortunes of the town's parks and other 'polite' venues continued to remain closely tied to those of its docks and exchanges.³⁶ Throughout the period examined here, the greatest enthusiasm for formal urban green space was demonstrated by Liverpool's growing and diversifying commercial elites.³⁷ At the same time, the costs of urban public walks were met by the town authority's coffers. As periods of economic growth served to increase both the size and the confidence of the mercantile population, as well as improve the town's finances, the walks benefited most when Liverpool was booming. Both public walks and private pleasure gardens substantiated the public's confidence in commercial and cultural harmony by providing an environment that complemented urbanization and revealed its scale and visual character to observers. Liverpool's early walks, and the views they afforded, enabled

Figure 2 G. Pickering and J. Sands, *Liverpool from Toxteth Park* (1834). Reproduced courtesy of Liverpool Record Office.

visual ornament to be combined with icons of commercial utility to produce a single all-encompassing scene of urban ascendancy.³⁸ When viewed from such vantage points, a town could be presented to viewers as a diversion and entertainment to be enjoyed in the same manner as the serpentine paths, exotic animals, fountains and fireworks that had, for decades, attracted wealthy patrons to gardens of zoology, botany and pleasure.³⁹

It was not only their vistas that made Liverpool's elevated parks and walks popular among visitors. As Liverpool expanded, residential streets spread south, towards St. James's Mount, Myrtle Street and Toxteth Park, bringing with them courses of domestic chimneys, smoke, smog and street lamps. The atmospheric repercussions of this urban creep added a dramatic element to the prospect. Visitors and, by proxy, print viewers could enjoy the prospect from St. James's Walk as variously tranquil, turbulent, brightly illuminated or semi-obsured. Pollutants and cloud mass could change the entire topographical context of a view by variously revealing and concealing from view Liverpool's neighbouring conurbations, the Welsh mountains, the estuary or even the Mersey. As William Moss explained: 'The interest of this engaging prospect will be considerably varied, not only by the weather, but by the direction of the wind. The easterly winds, from blowing the smoke of the town over the river, obscure the view.'⁴⁰ Evidently, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the evolving townscape of Liverpool was being framed within a familiar pictorial formula. This was not motivated by a desire to conceal trade and commerce so much as to present evidence

Figure 3 Henry Lacey, *Liverpool, Looking North*, in *Pictorial Liverpool: Its Annals, Commerce, Shipping*, 2nd edn (Liverpool, 1846). Reproduced courtesy of Liverpool Record Office.

that economic prosperity operated in harmony with good taste, health and topographical beauty. Public green space and urban commercial activity are embellished by the visual vocabulary of the picturesque, but the impact of the latter is essentially superficial. Aesthetic devices such as asymmetrical trees, mountains and atmospheric variations did not conceal the urban character of the scene. Equally, walks and gardens were presented as a component of the commercial townscape rather than distinct and isolated 'pockets' of green. Such an amalgamation of aesthetic design and urban reality is to be expected in images produced during a period when a town's prestige was intrinsically linked to its commercial and political purchase upon the surrounding region. Nevertheless, such visual descriptions and images indicate that, rather than being attempts to 'contain and neutralize' or expunge the town, Liverpool's early walks and the views they afforded reflected a pervasive belief in the compatibility of green space and commercial progress.⁴¹

A CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

Throughout the nineteenth century, Liverpool's array of buildings, cranes and shipping continued to present a lively spectacle to observers.⁴² Extensive remodelling of the waterfront, such as the construction of the Princes and Clarence Docks (opened in 1821 and 1830 respectively), provided a continually changing vista for those who 'took in' the town.⁴³ However, the exciting visual impact of urban expansion had been accompanied by less positive changes. In the fifty years between 1750 and 1800, Liverpool's population had grown almost fourfold, leaving it second only to London in size. Over the next forty years it would increase by a further 200,000 people, reaching 286,000 inhabitants by 1841, 50,000 more than its closest rival, Manchester.⁴⁴ The vast majority of this new urban society was made up of the labouring classes, who arrived with little capital and who required housing, feeding, heating and employment. The result was an increase in cheap housing erected by speculative builders as well as the subdivision of substantial town-centre properties into multiple-occupancy dwellings.⁴⁵ As population density rose, so too did the number of coal fires, and the air pollution they produced increasingly overwhelmed existing walks and gardens. Views were occluded and horticultural features were destroyed.⁴⁶ Although the quality of urban dwellings was not commonly considered to be the responsibility of town councils until the late 1840s, public green space was a different matter. By 1833 the situation had already become so dire as to lead the Select Committee on Public Walks to conclude that St. James's Walk was 'little frequented in consequence of its being surrounded by the town, and the trees being spoiled by the smoke'.⁴⁷ In the 1840s substantial residential expansion to the south of the town threatened the very survival of Liverpool's existing walks, and by 1861 St. James's Walk was condemned by a local newspaper as a 'scrap of blackened grass plot, with all the smoke of the whole line of town and docks agreeably uprising on one side, and the vapours of a charnel-house, the healthful exhalations from our dear brethren and sisters departed, steaming upwards on the other'.⁴⁸

Compounding the sense that existing green spaces were both insufficient and compromised was the wider public health agenda. From the 1830s onwards, Liverpool,

like many other towns, was plagued by a series of environmental hazards and epidemics that transformed previously nebulous fears surrounding urbanization into tangible, quantifiable threats to health, wealth and prosperity. The cholera epidemic of 1832 and the subsequent Public Health Act of 1848 prompted the Corporation of Liverpool to transform the scale and character of public park provision within the town.⁴⁹ Artists and residents alike abandoned the increasingly polluted old walks in favour of new environments, which were designed specifically to compensate for rather than complement the built-up town centre. In the absence of natural vantage points, these new parks would need to provide their own diversions and topographical features. Thus, the internal design and prospects of parks and gardens, those aspects that had always been a secondary attraction, now became a primary concern in the development of Liverpool's green spaces and the representation of the town as a whole.⁵⁰

The earliest such site in Liverpool was Princes Park (1843), developed by local industrialist and town councillor Richard Vaughan Yates on a ninety-acre plot within the historic Toxteth Deer Park.⁵¹ The Corporation declined to be involved in the scheme, which combined high-quality villas and townhouses with extensive public parkland.⁵² Consequently, the project was underwritten by private shareholders for whom the gardens were a secondary consideration, developed purely to enhance the value of the building stock. Nevertheless, the landscape design was impressive and made a considerable impact upon visitors and artists.⁵³ Joseph Paxton, the chosen architect of the scheme, had been responsible for remodelling the Duke of Devonshire's private gardens at Chatsworth House and took his influences from the scale and diversity of country estates rather than the modest linear form of traditional urban walks. In the decades that followed, the influence of the country-park model endured in the manner in which Princes Park was represented in prints and photographs. As late as the 1920s, some souvenir prints and postcards still presented the site in the mode of a country seat, with a row of townhouses known as 'Regent Terrace' taking the role of the house, situated amid a conventional Repton-inspired greensward and lake.⁵⁴

Paxton's scheme divided the park into two areas, both of which presented a dramatic contrast to the urban vista. The private residents' garden, situated on the larger of the lake's two islands, contained flower beds and walks edged by shrubs and trees that grew to obscure not only the surrounding district but also the wider parkland. The privacy afforded by the scheme was much prized by residents and represented a significant departure from the visual openness of garden squares. Furthermore, by combining exclusivity with relative spaciousness, the island garden offered a striking contrast to the tiny courtyards that constituted townhouse gardens. Notwithstanding the importance of the residents' garden to Paxton's design, the vast majority of the park was given over to a more naturalistic scheme that combined open parkland with coppices of trees and shrubs planted to emulate the native countryside. The informality of the design led to it being promoted later as 'one of the most natural parks in the North of England ... a typical English landscape'.⁵⁵ The most substantial element of the scheme was a naturalistic lake that formed a focal point in the view from the townhouses, as well as providing a boating facility for visitors. The result was a cultivated realm that was both aesthetically ambitious and extensive enough to enable striking vistas and views within

its own confines. These views incorporated many of the attributes applauded by devotees of the picturesque British landscape but also included a number of foreign-inspired features, the likes of which would come to define public parks in the popular imagination. For John Robertson, the architect attributed with the design of the Princes Park's buildings, inspiration was drawn from Switzerland and the Far East.⁵⁶ A boathouse in the style of an alpine chalet was erected alongside the lake, while nearby an oriental bridge, incorporating an exotic pagoda-style shelter, provided a decorative gateway to the private gardens.⁵⁷ Thanks in part to their visual novelty and decorative appeal, these striking features were exploited to great effect in topographical prints, and they soon superseded the warehouses and cranes of the waterfront as focal points for park visitors.⁵⁸

The novelty of the new landscape at Princes Park was thrown into sharp relief by its complete disjunction from the town proper. The boathouse, bridge, lake and paths made little reference to the wider streetscapes of Liverpool. Furthermore, although the properties that surrounded the park were certainly visible from many locations within the site, these too were far removed in their style and function from the perfunctory terraces and dockyards that characterized the centre. As J.A. Picton explained in his 1875 guidebook to the town: 'overlooking the expanse of the Park, everything appears "*couleur de rose*." The cosy comfort of an English home shines out clearly in the burnished plate-glass windows ... Alas! That there should be such a reverse to the picture.'⁵⁹ An elaborate image, produced in 1849, demonstrates the extent to which the nearby townscape was excluded from this rosy spectacle (see Figure 4).

Produced to commemorate a 'Philanthropic Festival' held in 1849, J.R. Isaac's elaborate hand-coloured lithograph presents Princes Park within the well-rehearsed conventions of the bird's-eye prospect. In place of the natural acclivity, the viewer accompanies local residents on the rooftop of a neighbouring villa, while the landscape falls away to reveal an expanse of open land bordered by the grand façade of Regent Terrace.⁶⁰ Aesthetically, the composition of the view conforms to the same principles as the Buck brothers' prospects and Lacey's engraving, with the conventional figure in the foreground surveying the scene, as well as picturesque motifs embellishing the middle ground. However, in contrast to earlier prospects, it is now the park itself that provides the central subject. The exaggerated extent of the park, along with the decorative devices of billowing flags, an ascending balloon and a swarming crowd of pleasure seekers, ensure that the park is presented to viewers as a location of significance and interest in its own right. Isaac's treatment is almost delusive in the way in which it severs the park from the wider townscape, and the suggestion of a few distant chimneys serves only to reiterate this detachment. Although ostensibly an urban prospect, Isaac's view demonstrates how parks themselves had become the focus, as well as the vantage point, for such views.

An interval of only three years separated the publication of the images shown in figures 3 and 4, a period surely too short to account for so significant a shift in perspective. The discrepancy may perhaps be put down to the aesthetic preferences of the respective artists. However, there is another, more convincing explanation. If, by 1843, there was sufficient demand among Liverpool's mercantile classes to warrant the

Figure 4 J. Isaac, *View of Princes Park on 8, 9, 10 August 1849* (1849). Reproduced courtesy of Liverpool Record Office.

construction of Princes Park and its surrounding villas and terraces, then clearly the town centre, its docks and even its squares had already lost their attraction for the town's wealthier inhabitants. If this is so, then even at the moment of its publication *Liverpool, Looking North* reflected outmoded attitudes towards the town centre. The persistence of this obsolete perspective suggests a powerful aesthetic inertia, which, rather than discrediting growing disenchantment with the urban scene, inadvertently accentuated the widening chasm between the urban picturesque and urban reality.

This process of aesthetic misdirection is apparent in the vast majority of park imagery produced from the 1850s onwards. One such image is Rock and Company's souvenir print of the lake in Princes Park, published in the 1860s (see Figure 5). Here, the view is taken looking east. The only building evident beyond the perimeter of the park is St. Paul's church (1846–8), which emerges from behind an apparently mature coppice of trees. The framing of the spire is more indicative of the idyllic pastoral idiom than the urban vistas previously enjoyed from the town's walks. The rejection of the wider commercial identity of Liverpool is again evident in the activities of the characters that populate the scene. In contrast to the labouring classes who recur in the works of Pickering, Sands and Lacey, here the town's wealthier inhabitants are depicted engaged in the wholly bourgeois pursuits of boating, promenading and feeding the swans. The clear contrast between views taken from Liverpool's early walks and those taken within Princes Park could perhaps be accounted for by the vantage point selected by the artist or the relatively even topography of the later site. However, as Isaac's view

illustrates, even a traditional bird's-eye vantage point could enforce an alternative image of Liverpool when applied to the new park's landscape. Through images such as these, artists endowed the newly developed suburbs of Liverpool with the qualities of civility, elegance and good taste whilst simultaneously divorcing them from the developing commercial regions.⁶¹ Rather than amalgamating the iconographies of commerce and recreation, Princes Park and the large municipal parks that followed presented an alternative Liverpool to visitors, one that divided 'landscape' from 'townscape'. In images of Princes Park, the 'landscape' in question was limited to the confines of the park perimeters. The 'scene' of the town was no longer the central attraction of Liverpool's public walks but, by contrast, had become a sight to be denied and camouflaged.

NEW PROSPECTS

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Liverpool had become notorious for its pollution, overcrowding and perceived social evils. Cholera, economic fluctuations and

Figure 5 Rock and Company, *The Lake, Princes Park, Liverpool* (1864). Reproduced courtesy of Liverpool Record Office.

high levels of deprivation emerged against a backdrop of unregulated urban sprawl, a backdrop that increasingly threatened to upstage the town's mercantile achievements. Although action was slow, by the late 1860s the Corporation had resolved to create the 'belt' of parks extending along the boundary of Liverpool that they had originally proposed over a decade earlier.⁶² These were not to be small walks or private squares, and although residential building was to take place around the periphery of each park, there was to be no repeat of the exclusive residents' garden seen in Princes Park.⁶³ The intention was to combat rather than complement the consequences of urbanization and realize a consistent level of public park provision across Liverpool. The Corporation proposed three substantial municipal parks: Newsham Park (opened in 1868) to the east, Stanley Park (1870) to the north and Sefton Park (1872) located to the south of the town in the vicinity of Princes Park.

The ambitions of the Corporation were realized to a varying extent and through different means in each location. Although all three parks combined enough open grassland for recreation with a series of decorative features such as fountains, lakes and walks, the relative importance of these features differed between sites. The first of the parks to be officially opened to the public was Newsham Park, situated between Prescott Road to the south and Anfield and Breckfield to the north. The chosen architect was Edward Kemp, one of Joseph Paxton's protégés from the Chatsworth estate and superintendent of the newly completed Birkenhead Park across the River Mersey. The influence of his mentor is evident in the scheme Kemp proposed, and even in the diluted form that was eventually realized.⁶⁴ As with Princes Park before it, the grounds comprised part of a former country estate. Kemp used the existing topography and natural features to create an undulating 'pasture' embellished by a naturalistic lake and planting that broadly suggested British woodland. The similarity between the Newsham and Princes developments was not merely superficial; it was also ideological. The choice of an architect whose training took place in a large country estate ensured a certain conceptual and aesthetic ambition.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the intention to construct an entire residential scheme, which would effectively encase the park and isolate it from the wider townscape, may be understood as evidence of an ongoing anxiety surrounding urbanization and its physical and visual impact. However, unlike Paxton's experience with Princes Park, at Newsham Park Kemp's vision was thwarted by a number of economic and environmental challenges that curbed the ambitions of both the Corporation and the building speculators.

As early as 1861 a section of the Newsham land had been annexed by the Bootle branch railway line, and by 1866 the busy line had brought the noise and pollution of the town alongside the park. Such a conspicuously industrial neighbour would have compromised the perceived 'healthfulness' of the site before work began. The challenge facing Kemp was then exacerbated by an economic slump and consequent fall in the value of residential plots around the park. The Corporation was forced to reduce its budget in accordance with falling land values, a decision which had a detrimental impact upon both the horticultural and architectural standard of the scheme.⁶⁶ Rather than grand boulevards with impressive picturesque prospects, Newsham Park was realized in a more modest arrangement of paths, shrubs and densely built red-brick

houses. Yet, it is perhaps the failure to create a grand scheme at Newsham that provides the clearest evidence of the growing importance of creating parks as a compensation for, rather than a celebration of, urbanization. When a park was commercially unsuccessful and therefore aesthetically compromised, as was the case with Newsham, it quickly became blighted by the associations of the wider townscape. In such instances, a green space was still valued as a serviceable place for recreation, but its role as an icon of the town's cultural, social and even moral aspirations might be surrendered altogether. The more elaborate and fantastic the final park, the more transformative and worthwhile it was perceived to be. Consequently, Newsham Park never enjoyed the prestige of the other major parks in the town; significantly, there are far fewer early representations of Newsham Park than there are of its grand neighbours Princes and Sefton. Yet, a park did not have to be located in a prestigious area to receive the accolade of providing transformative vistas. It is Stanley Park, opened in 1870 in the Anfield area of town, which most clearly demonstrates the changing role of prospects in relation to urban green space.

Edward Kemp was again chosen to be architect of Stanley Park, and this time the grandest elements of his design were realized. Arguably the most striking feature of Kemp's original design was the grand terrace, which ran along the upper perimeter of the plot and afforded visitors expansive views across the park to the countryside beyond. As with St. James's Walk nearly a century before, it was the region's natural topography that enabled a prospect of the surrounding area to be 'appropriated' into Stanley Park. However, unlike earlier urban panoramas, at Stanley Park it was the view out of the town towards the countryside that attracted visitors. As the local newspaper *The Porcupine* enthused in the year of the park's opening: 'The view here is magnificent; and we can hardly say where the park ends, as it appears to be part of the open country, vast in size, rich in wooded embellishments, and picturesque to a high degree.'⁶⁷ The illusion of an endless park was compounded by the presence of Anfield Cemetery on its eastern edge, which, albeit a man-made landscape, preserved the prospect from residential development. Suppressing the physical reality of the town in this way produced a more appealing view, and therefore a more profitable one for the publishers and artists who reproduced it. However, by seeing Liverpool presented in this manner, the wider reading and viewing public might also be persuaded to believe that environmental, social and economic conditions in Liverpool were less terrible than was sometimes reported.

As soon as Stanley Park opened, the view was quickly recognized as the site's greatest advantage. The opening ceremony took place on the top terrace, where a row of substantial sandstone shelters enabled patrons to enjoy the view in all weather conditions. As a consequence, the images and accounts that recorded the event consistently cited the rural prospect as the most striking element of Kemp's scheme. As part of its report, the *Illustrated London News* (ILN) incorporated an elaborate wood engraving of the vista, which depicted the park landscape as well as the distant estuary, fields and woodland (see Figure 6). The foreground is populated by the ceremony attendees and the general impression is the antithesis of the extant image of late-nineteenth-century Liverpool as a 'problem city', the site of social deprivation, disease,

sprawling dockyards and philistinism.⁶⁸ The scene excludes the docks and warehouses which edged the river below and the residential housing that stood nearby. The emphasis upon the rural qualities of the vista was reiterated in the account that accompanied the *ILN*'s engraving:

The ground taken for this new park is very high, commanding a panorama of South Lancashire and Cheshire, with the sea-coast; the distant mountains of North Wales, as far as Snowdon, on the one hand; the mountains of Westmorland and Cumberland on the other; some of the North Yorkshire Hills, Blackstone Edge, and the Peak of Derbyshire.⁶⁹

Notwithstanding this praise, the *ILN*'s acclaim for the site was not unreserved, and the reporter added the significant caveat that 'these last are commonly obscured by the smoke of the factory districts'.⁷⁰ The enduring blight of smoke pollution did not curb the demand for taking in the vista from Stanley Park and, by the early twentieth century, the council had installed special facilities to reflect the popularity of the pursuit.⁷¹ As one guidebook advised visitors: 'at the eastern side are seen two iron scroll telescope stands, the top of which are engraved with the names of the various points of interest to be seen from this vantage ground'.⁷²

The allusion to a landscape beyond the perimeter of the town was a central feature of all three parks in the Liverpool scheme, even when the landscape alluded to was illusory and fantastic rather than appropriated from the rural hinterland. At Sefton Park, the most comprehensively landscaped of the three sites, an alternative to the urban realm was created by the employment of elaborate man-made caves, waterfalls and a dell (see Figure 7). This latter feature was reminiscent of numerous chines on the Isle of Wight which the fashionable ranks of Victorian society visited with enthusiasm

Figure 6 'Opening Ceremony at Stanley Park', *Illustrated London News*, 28 May 1870.

during sojourns to Shanklin and Ventnor.⁷³ At Sefton Park residents could enjoy a similar 'holiday' from the town without leaving the suburbs or risking a voyage across the Solent. The sheltered position of the dell enabled exotic palms to thrive among native species, belying the proximity of the town with all its industry and pollution. Clearly, the impact of this alternative exotic image of Liverpool extended beyond the parks' contribution to the physical improvement of the town and the health benefits it afforded. The vistas provided by the new generation of parks created between the 1840s and 1870s tempered Liverpool's commercial identity with opportunities to consider and critique the cultural and environmental character of the town as a whole and its role within the wider nation. Whereas the views from St. James's Walk and Toxteth Park had encouraged inhabitants and visitors to concentrate upon Liverpool's commercial heartland, and to take pride and encouragement from its energy and achievements, by the late nineteenth century the values of urban expansion and capitalism were increasingly qualified. Although the radical arguments presented by figures such as Friedrich Engels remained unusual in their vehemence, intensifying calls for improvements to housing and public sanitation suggest that some residents and onlookers were beginning to challenge the presumed correlation between a town's size and urban prestige.⁷⁴

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, walks, pleasure gardens and the views they afforded provided a lens through which residents, visitors and artists could view and articulate the changing shape of British provincial towns. As Liverpool demonstrates, from attempts to celebrate a town's commercial heritage in early printed

Figure 7 *View in Small Valley, Sefton Park, Liverpool*, postcard (c. 1910). Private collection, reproduced by permission of Nigel Sharp.

prospects, to late-nineteenth-century souvenirs that promoted parks as grand, exclusive landscapes divorced from the town, visual representations of parks both reflected and informed wider attitudes to public green space and urbanization in general. The denouement in the later decades of the nineteenth century was the by now familiar demonization of the urban environment as anathema to health, good taste and polite society. However, the journey from urban celebration to condemnation was more protracted and complex than has hitherto been acknowledged. Across Britain, visitors and residents alike participated in an ongoing negotiation with the urban realm, the aim of which was to balance visual and physical escapism with the realities and requirements of economic expansion. Notwithstanding its lofty and admirable objective, this negotiation was never fully resolved and urban green space remained contested territory throughout the following century. Indeed, ambivalence has perhaps been the only constant in our relationship with urban green space.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the support of the ESRC and English Heritage, both of which funded the research upon which this article is based.

NOTES

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6. Sara Cedar Miller, *Central Park, an American Masterpiece* (New York, 2003), pp. 70–97.
7. The main evidence base is taken from Liverpool Record Office (LRO). Many items in their collection can now be viewed online at www.portcities.org.uk (accessed 28 August 2011). Additional sources include: the Special Collections of the University of Liverpool Library;

Liverpool City Council (LCC); and the John Johnson Collection at the Bodleian Library. I am indebted to officers of Liverpool City Council's Parks and Environment Department, who allowed me to use their private collections.

8. The exact date at which Liverpool's first walks were established is the subject of much dispute. While acknowledging the importance of earlier gardens and walks, this article regards St. James's Walk (1767) as the city's first public walk, as its creation was the first effort on the part of the town's authorities to *create* green space explicitly for public benefit.
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 58. For examples of images produced, see 'Boathouse, Princes Park' (1925), postcard, LRO,

- psp; 'A View of the Lake and Ornamental Bridge in Princes Park' (1890), LRO, psp; 'Lake, Princes Park', note card (c. 1900), LRO, psp; 'Princes Boathouse' (c. 1975), photograph, LCC.
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 60. The villa is identified on the accompanying key as that belonging to a Mr Martineaus, LRO, Binns Collection C.111a.
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 62. *Builder*, 9 November 1850, p. 532.
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