

**Science, Liberality and Good Taste:
The Manchester Subscription Botanic Garden and its Founders**



Source: Chetham's Library Manchester n.d. [1831]

Abstract

The Enlightenment and the rise of science, especially botany, inspired the founders of the subscription botanic gardens. Though botany was the lowest ranking of the sciences - regarded merely as cataloguing - it was an accessible pursuit for many members of society across all classes.ⁱ The contemplation of the plants revealed the wonderful works of Nature given to man by the Creator, an expression of the relationship between science and the religious beliefs of the day. Many of the original founders of the subscription botanic gardens were nonconformists who saw moral improvement as attendant on horticultural pursuits, and their promotion as a means to overcome the vices of the working class in the growing industrial cities. In Manchester nonconformists were one of the groups that also founded, amongst other institutions, the Portico Library, the Mechanics Institute and the Statistical Society.ⁱⁱ Several of the men who founded the Manchester Mechanics Institute in 1824 went on to help found the Manchester Botanical and Horticultural Society, and the resulting Botanic Garden, in 1827. Like the Mechanics

Institute where artisans could study the sciences of mechanics and chemistry, at the Botanic Garden artisans would be able to study the sciences of botany and horticulture.

This paper will show that though the founders of the Manchester Mechanics Institute expressly opened its doors to the artisan classes, at the Manchester Botanic Garden a similar promise were not honoured. Though their original proposal subscribed to the belief that the Garden would be open to all, in reality the cost of subscription meant that members were drawn from Manchester's wealthy elite. I have shown that this also held true in the other cities studied in my dissertation: Liverpool, Glasgow, Hull, Birmingham and Sheffield.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Movement for Subscription Botanic Gardens

The Liverpool subscription botanic garden was opened in 1803 on a plot of five acres near the city centre.^{iv} The Garden had been proposed by Liverpool polymath and passionate botanist William Roscoe in 1790. The use of subscriptions to finance prestigious public ventures was an accepted method by the nineteenth century; in this way an array of influential artistic and scientific institutions brought fame to the town and honour to the enlightened citizens who sponsored them. Liverpool was a wealthy port with extensive overseas connections, verified in the introduction to *A Catalogue of Plants in the Botanic Garden at Liverpool* published in 1808 which acknowledged that 'communication is direct and frequent to the remotest parts of the earth. And the Merchants and Masters of vessels are entitled to the thanks of the Proprietors, for their valuable presents of plants and seeds to the Botanic Garden.'^v Two other port cities also established botanic gardens, Hull in 1811 and Glasgow in 1817; both acknowledged the importance of donations of plant material from local merchants and overseas connections. Among the founders of all three gardens were wealthy men who were keenly interested in botany and who were members of nonconformist groups.

In Liverpool William Roscoe, born in 1753, was a Unitarian who in his early life had been encouraged in his botanical studies by John Aitkin from the Warrington Academy, a nonconformist college which, between 1757 and 1786, was regarded as 'one of Europe's

principal seats of learning.’^{vi} Roscoe was introduced to many of the foremost naturalists of the region and he began corresponding with leading figures in the world of botany at both home and abroad.^{vii} In Hull a botanic garden was proposed by a dedicated botanist and Unitarian, Dr. John Alderson, supported by Mr. Spencer, an entomologist and Peter William Watson, a merchant, botanist and the author of *Dendrology Britannia*, published in 1825.^{viii} Like Roscoe they were prominent in local affairs. In Glasgow, the first proposer was Thomas Hopkirk, a member of a wealthy Glasgow mercantile family. He was another passionate botanist, with his own private botanic garden at Dalbeath, and had published *Fl. Glottiana, etc.* (Glasgow, 1813) and *Fl. Anomoia, etc.* (Glasgow, 1817). It is surprising that Manchester seems not to have considered establishing such a garden. The connections between Manchester and Liverpool were strong and Manchester sought to establish other similar cultural institutions to those in Liverpool.^{ix} In addition Roscoe was well known and respected in Manchester having been made an honorary member of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society in 1784.^x Perhaps there was talk of a botanic garden but trade was problematical in Manchester at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The importance of the nonconformist influence was reflected in the founding principles of both the subscription botanic gardens and the mechanics institutes. By the eighteenth century the doctrine of Providentialism, that is the unity of Providence with utility, was widespread and resulted in a common ground for science, politics and theology.^{xi} Evangelicals challenged this accepted view of cosmic influence, seeing the world as alienated from the Divine and prey to depravity.^{xii} The doctrine of Atonement however allowed Man to escape from his alienation by pursuing moral activities. The adoption of these beliefs by the middle class contributed to a growing belief in public decorum and personal rectitude. When applied to their public and social activities moral improvement, especially of the working classes, could be achieved though the provision of ‘useful knowledge’ to counter moral corruption. In Manchester, the educational opportunities provided at the Mechanics Institute would also counter radicalism amongst the working population, lately seen at the events leading up to the infamous ‘Peterloo Massacre’ in 1819. The founding members of the subscription botanic gardens also saw the provision

of a Garden as a place for moral improvement and this is made clear in their proposal documents. On the opening of the Liverpool Garden, Roscoe outlined his reasons for its foundation. He stressed the relationship between science and religion and explained how the study of botany had a role in everyday life for, he argued, though botany was considered ‘a trifling employment’ by some, how could anyone imagine that ‘the works of God are unworthy the attention of man?’^{xiii} This, he argued, gave the study of botany both dignity and importance as opposed to many other pastimes.

When the Manchester Botanical and Horticultural Society published the proposal for a botanic garden in 1827, the connection was made specific.^{xiv} An appeal was made on moral grounds, claiming that the Garden would provide ‘rational recreation’ in the pursuit of botany. The Council proposed to employ apprentices and to offer them a proper training so that they could then fill the position of gardener with credit both to themselves and their employers.^{xv} The Society’s scheme would lessen poverty and improve the character of the employee by protecting him from dissipated habits. This reinforces their view that gardening and botany were improving sciences.^{xvi} They were also seen as suitable pursuits for women - Linnaean sexual classification was expressed in terms of marriage, thus allowing husbands and fathers to approve of its study by their wives and daughters.^{xvii} The decision to allow women to become subscribers in their own right was unusual for the period and certainly working women could not enrol as students at the Mechanics Institutes. Women from Manchester’s elite middle class did join the Society in their own right, being 3% of the membership by 1833, and the overall movement also encouraged women to become members. The proposals also make clear that the founders of the subscription botanic garden societies shared a set of common aim, those established by Roscoe in 1803. The last two in the list below were not made specific in the proposals but none of the gardens made references to the antique world as was found in the aristocratic landscape gardens.^{xviii} I conclude that this was because these new gardens reflected the beliefs of the upper middle class in the emerging industrial cities - the new men who were coming to hold political power and influence.

Aims of the Movement

Study of plants related to God and seen as a moral bastion against vice

Pleasure allowed within the context of scientific study

Women were encouraged to join - botany a suitable science for them

No reference to the antique world
in the philosophical underpinning of the Gardens

The Gardens reflected the beliefs of men embracing the new industrial age

In Manchester we see these same men establishing both the Mechanics Institute and the Botanic Garden. Both institutions claimed to provide a technical education to the working man and improve his job prospects. The Mechanics Institute could be used to train operatives in the technical complexities of new industries. The Botanic Garden could train working gardeners in the latest horticultural techniques: the Manchester Society appointed apprentices soon after the Garden opened in 1831. The analysis of the founding Committee of the Mechanics Institute shows some of the same men were members of both organisations.

Mechanics Institute Committee 1827 (Founder Member of Botanical Society *)

Benjamin Heywood, Banker*

(Also R.A. Heywood, Thomas Heywood*)

R.H.Greg, Manufacturere and M.P.*

Richard Roberts, Millwright and Engineer,

David Bellhouse, Jn., Builder

William Henry, Chemist*

(Also William Charles Henry, son, Chemist*)

William Fairbairn, Engineer*

Peter Ewart, Millwright and Engineer*

John Dalton, Mathematician

The Heywood, the Greg and Henry families were nonconformists. In Manchester the nonconformists were a rising section of the upper middle classes, wealthy manufacturers, bankers and merchants who were entering the government of the town as Liberal politicians. They were challenging the Tory establishment and, though these two groups have been shown to be mutually antagonistic in town affairs, on civic enterprises that would improve conditions in the town they co-operated fully; the Mechanics Institute and the Botanic Garden were two such institutions.^{xix}

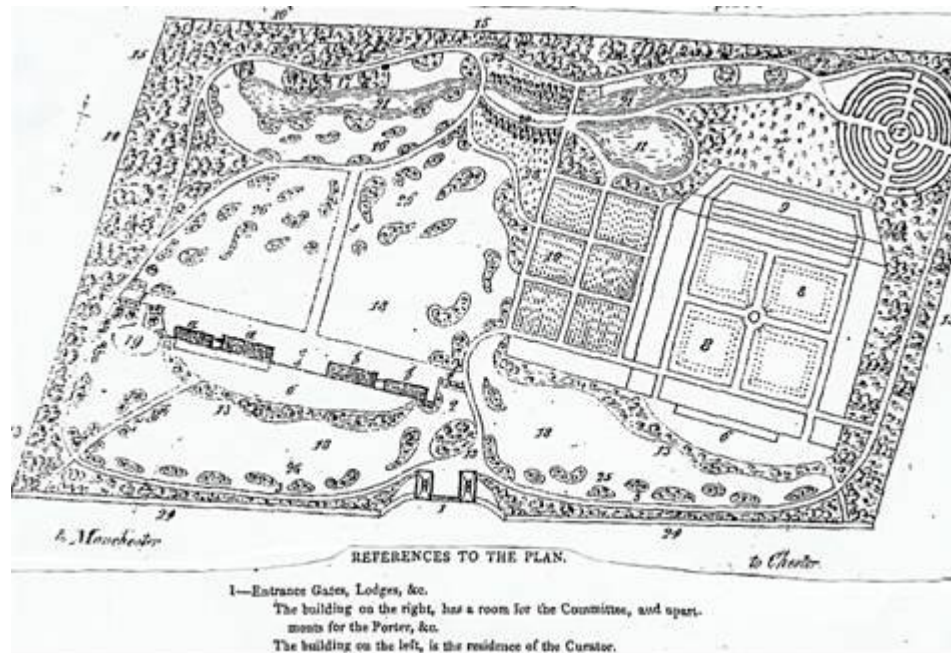
The newly wealthy upper middle classes were dominated by two ideals. One, they were scientific, rational and morally correct and two, they were also socially exclusive. Douglas Reid in 'Playing and Praying' argues that the restricted-access Botanical Gardens exemplified these traits.^{xx} Though the Manchester Mechanics Institute was a paternalistic organisation it did offer education to the artisan classes - albeit one they deemed he needed rather than one he might have chosen. These tensions led to later problems beyond the scope of this paper. Though a proposal, as in Manchester, might have lauded the "noble cottager" and the artisan botanist, the unwritten message was clear.^{xxi} At the Manchester Botanic Garden the concept of 'Good Taste' excluded the working classes almost totally whatever the original proposal may have claimed. For example at Vauxhall Garden, a public garden in North Manchester which staged spectacular events, entrance was open to all who could afford it and newspaper advertisements claimed that there were men patrolling with dogs and guns to keep out intruders who could not. This was a garden that did not constitute 'Good Taste'.

The Manchester Botanical Society (and its Garden) was to be a private club for the exclusive use of the upper middle class. The initial subscription and the annual charges were set at a level to ensure this and aspiring members could be blackballed. From the very beginning of the movement, the high walls surrounding these gardens were symbolic of a social retreat from the horrors of the industrial cities: a *hortus conclusus* for the new age.^{xxii} Other indicators in Manchester included the building of a new road, Stretford New Road, which led directly to the Garden from the town centre, avoiding the former route through Hulme, a crowded unhealthy working class district. In Manchester the working classes were allowed into the Garden during Whit-week, the town's annual holidays, to see the horticultural exhibitions. Most subscription botanic gardens were closed on Sundays and the 'Sunday Question' was to become a national topic later in the century.^{xxiii} (Only Birmingham Botanic Garden, opened in 1832, admitted the public on Sunday afternoons from the beginning, to the vociferous objections of its wealthy neighbours in the exclusive suburb of Edgbaston.)

The Manchester proposal recognised that science would not of itself be sufficient attraction and so appealed to those with no inclination to study botany. The Garden was:

... an inviting scene of public recreation [for] those who are little interested in the cultivation of Botany ... [they] may be induced to frequent the Botanic garden, for the beauty of the objects, the pleasures of society, and the animated gaiety of the scene.^{xxiv}

This secondary purpose came to dominate the subscription botanic garden movement. By 1814 the Liverpool Botanic Garden was in financial difficulties as the scientific attractions failed to draw enough members.^{xxv} By 1831 when Manchester opened, Liverpool was moving to a larger site so it could expand the attractions of a pleasure garden.



Plan of the Manchester Botanic Garden 1831, *The Horticultural Register* 1 September 1831

This was a site of sixteen acres specifically designed to be partly a pleasure ground.

By 1848 the Manchester members voted for the scientific beds and horticultural garden to be dismantled (No's 8,9,10 on the plan) and the entire Garden devoted to the entertainment of members. The exclusivity of the gardens was to be the eventual downfall of the Manchester Botanical and Horticultural Society. Though the public were allowed in during the factory holidays at Whitsuntide - the money generated could not cover the losses incurred by maintaining such an expensive garden. In 1857, when the Society came near to bankruptcy, at a special general meeting Sir John Potter, M.P. expressed the hope that the citizens of Manchester would agree to the Garden becoming a public park for Hulme rather than an 'aristocratic garden'.^{xxvi} This perception of exclusivity clung on and it is ironic that in 1898, when the Society's garden was no longer advantageously situated and was under such enormous financial pressures that it had been leased out for public attractions, a member of the Council could still assert that: 'general use of the gardens by the "masses" has led to the falling off of the "classes"'.^{xxvii}

This was not a new problem. The Liverpool Botanic Garden suffered a financial crisis in 1845 and was taken over by the local authority. J. A. Picton, a Liverpool antiquary and

architect, looking back in 1873 to the early history of the Liverpool Garden, gave the exclusive rules of the Liverpool Society as a reason for the Garden's failure at this time. He claimed that the 'inherent vice of exclusiveness' was discordant with the spirit of the age.^{xxviii} This was a time when the movement to establish public was gaining momentum.^{xxix} In 1846 Philips Park and Queens Park were opened in Manchester and Peel Park opened in Salford and a half-day holiday was granted to the working classes. The proponents of all these schemes were the very men who had previously founded the Mechanics Institute and the Manchester Botanical Garden. The wealthy middle class still held to the nonconformist belief that to found civic institutions that improved the working class facilities of their town - rational recreation as it was known - was a moral duty and still acted as a bastion against vice.

Conclusion

The movement for Subscription Botanic Gardens combined many cultural strands both at the time of their foundation at the beginning of the nineteenth century.^{xxx} This article has demonstrated that the founders of both the Manchester Mechanics Institute and the Manchester Botanic Garden came from the wealthy residents of the town who formed its cultural and political elite. At the Mechanics Institute their paternalistic attitudes manifested themselves in the control of both students and studies and eventually led to a decline in membership in the 1830s, resulting in the introduction of social activities including concerts and excursions. In 1834 Richard Cobden, William Langston and James Heywood founded the Manchester Athenaeum. This too was aimed at educating the working classes but there was a significant difference from the Mechanics Institute. In his speech at The Athenaeum in 1844 Richard Cobden described the Institution as 'a society for self culture'.^{xxxi} He went on to say that the building was 'a donation ... from the employers of this town to the employed; but from the first origin of the Athenaeum, in the nature of its rules and objects, it has been wholly in the hands of its members.' Paternalism had been reined in with the founders liberally financing the building.

The Manchester Botanic Garden, though claiming it would be open to all, was socially exclusive, the Garden for the wealthy elite of the town. Yet when the movement for

public parks began in the 1840s, the Garden's proprietors were amongst those who subscribed to buy the land so that the working classes could have access to open spaces. Competitions were held for their design and it was made clear that the parks were not for a private minority but for the general public. The parks were not just pleasure grounds for healthy walks but also contained areas devoted to recreational activities. Like the mechanics institutes and the subscription botanic gardens, the Athenaeum and the public parks became civic ornaments. Though the elite citizens of Manchester contributed to the improvement in the lives of the working classes, social separation continued: physically demonstrated by the move of the middle classes to the suburbs and beyond. The history of the Manchester Botanic Garden arguably can be held up as a paradigm of the social divisions within the industrial cities in the nineteenth century.

Endnotes

ⁱ See Richard Morris, *The Botanist's Manual A Catalogue of Hardy, Exotic and Indigenous Plants* (London, 1824). Due to the increasing taste for Botany, the book was intended for those who cultivated their own gardens and pleasure grounds. At the other end of the scale working men had their own florist societies. See Ruth Duthie, *Florists' Flowers and Societies* (Princes Risborough, 1988)

ⁱⁱ See Ann Brooks and Bryan Haworth, *Boomtown Manchester 1800-1850 The Portico Connection* (Manchester, 1993)

ⁱⁱⁱ See: Ann Brooks, 'A Veritable Eden' *The Manchester Botanic Garden and the Movement for Subscription Botanic Gardens 1827 - 1909*, Ph.D. Thesis, department of History, Manchester University, 2007

^{iv} In 1788 William Curtis, a former curator of the Chelsea Physic garden, proposed to open his own garden in Lambeth as The London Subscription Garden and invited subscribers. I have contended that this was the possible model for the later subscription botanic gardens in the provinces.

^v (John Shepherd, Curator), *A Catalogue of Plants in the Botanic Garden at Liverpool*, (Liverpool, 1808)

^{vi} H. McLachlan, *Warrington Academy* (Manchester, 1943)

^{vii} See: Roscoe Letters (920ROS), nos. 181, 572 and 185 to Joseph Banks, Liverpool Archives, Liverpool Record Office and Local Studies, Liverpool City Library, Liverpool Cultural Services, Liverpool

^{viii} John Greenwood, *Greenwood's Picture of Hull*, (Hull, 1835), pp. 147-148

^{ix} The Portico Library, Manchester, was in part a response to the establishment in Liverpool of a second subscription library.

^x George Bew to William Roscoe offering Honorary membership, Letter 2624, Roscoe Letters (920ROS). Liverpool Archives. Document 2625 is the original certificate.

^{xi} See: C.C. Gillespie, *Genesis and Geology. A study in the relations of scientific thought, natural theology and social opinion in Great Britain, 1790-1850* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951)

^{xii} See: Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The influence of Evangelicalism on social and economic thought 1795-1865* (Oxford, 1988), pp. ix-x. Hilton argues that the adoption of evangelical ideology by the middle class contributed more than 'classical economics or utilitarianism' to the development of public morality and the encouragement of public decorum and financial rectitude. The classic texts of the

movement were William Wilberforce's *Practical View of Christianity* and Malthus's *An Essay on the Principles of Population*.

^{xiii} William Roscoe, *An Address delivered before the proprietors of the Botanic Garden in Liverpool previous to the opening of the Garden, May 3, 1802, to which are added the Laws of the Institution* (Liverpool, 1802), BBHS 1520/13/2. Archives, Birmingham Central Library, Birmingham

^{xiv} See: *An Address to the Inhabitants of Manchester and the Neighbourhood on the formation of a Botanical and Horticultural Garden* (Manchester, 1827), p. 2, EGR 4/2/10/20/1, Dunham Massey Archive, John Rylands Library, Manchester

^{xv} *An Address*, EGR 4/2/10/20/1. The education of gardeners was a preoccupation of the period as the art of gardening was becoming increasingly scientific.

^{xvi} Due to financial difficulties the scheme foundered by the early 1840s.

^{xvii} See: Amy King, *Bloom The Botanical Venacular in the English Novel* (Oxford, 2003)

^{xviii} The one exception was the entrance gates built in the Neo-classical Ionic style. See: Clare Hartwell, 'Manchester and the Golden Age of Pericles. Richard Lane, Architect', *Making Manchester*, (Hartwell and Wyke (eds.) (Manchester, 2007)

^{xix} See: Brooks and Howarth, *Boomtown*, The Middle Class Debate, pp. 112-114; Alan Kidd, *Manchester* (Keele, 1993)

^{xx} See: Douglas Reid, 'Playing and Praying', *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Prof. Peter Clarke (ed.)*, Vol. III, pp. 778-779

^{xxi} Working class naturalists were studying the local flora. See: James Cash, *Where There's a Will, There's a Way! or, Science in the cottage. An Account of the labours of naturalists in humble life* (London, 1883)

^{xxii} The medieval term *hortus conclusus* (literally, enclosed garden) came to have religious symbolism. See: John Prest, *The Garden of Eden: the botanic garden and the recreation of Paradise* (New Haven and London, 1981); Rob Aben and Saskia de Wit, *The enclosed garden* (Rotterdam, 2001)

^{xxiii} Evidence to the Select Committee on Drunkenness in 1834 described Liverpool's public houses as open whilst the public walks ... and botanic gardens were closed; therefore 'innocent amusements' could not replace 'debasement pleasures'. Quoted in Hazel Conway, *Public Parks* (Princes Risborough, 1996), p.7.

^{xxiv} *An Address*, EGR 4/2/10/20/1.

^{xxv} A letter to the *Liverpool Mercury*, 6 May, 1814 asked for support for 'that neglected institution' and describing it as a place for a 'select promenade'.

^{xxvi} One of the attractions offered by all the subscription botanic gardens was that the local aristocracy were their patrons and supported the gardens by donating plant material and took part in the Societies events.

^{xxvii} 'Manchester Royal Botanical Gardens', *Manchester Faces and Places*, Vol. 1 (Manchester, 1899), MBH 7/3/21, MBH Archive, John Rylands Library, Manchester

^{xxviii} James Allanson Picton, *Memorials of Liverpool historical and topographical*, 2 Vols. (London, 1873), Vol.2, p. 258.

^{xxix} See Conway, *Public Parks*. Birkenhead Park was opened in 1847.

^{xxx} Though some of the gardens still exist they are in the control of the local authority. The exception is Birmingham where the original Society shares responsibility with local authorities.

^{xxxi} Richard Cobden M.P., Address at the Manchester Athenaeum, 23 October, 1844. See *Athenaeum Addresses, 1843-8* (Reprinted from *The Manchester City News* (Manchester, 1875)