

# Tom William Thornton and Kelsey Park

Tom William Thornton



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During his lifetime, Tom William Thornton saw Beckenham grow from a rather straggling but picturesque village to one of the most important towns in Kent. He loved, and was devoted to, Beckenham. In recognition of all he had done for the town, he was honoured with a public dinner in June 1913, and honoured again in December 1926 with a public reception, when he received presentations of appreciation for a lifetime of work in and for Beckenham, with contributions coming from every section of local life, and all classes of residents being represented.

Throughout his long life any project started for the benefit of the town or the well being of its people he was always deeply involved with furthering its cause, and it was his help on many occasions which brought success. His advice was sought at all times, and his abilities of organisation, his management skills, and his knowledge of the essentials needed for success, were regarded so highly that his personal connection with any big cause was regarded as vital for achievement.

TW (as he was referred to by many friends and colleagues) organised many of the great public festivities including two Coronation celebrations – that of King Edward VII and King George V, and the records of such events stand out as a credit to the town and a tribute to his organising genius. He was connected with innumerable organisations in Beckenham, and it is impossible to ascertain the

benefits the town achieved through his efforts. He used his abilities, gave his time unstintingly and freely, to support and endorse the success of so many issues for the benefit of Beckenham. TW was involved in many charitable works undertaking the raising of funds for good causes; he was a prominent member of the Freemasons fraternity; his involvement with the Beckenham Cricket Club's famous tennis week took it from small beginnings to almost Wimbledon standard; he held the position of secretary and manager of the Beckenham Public Hall Company from 1898 for many years; he was one of the founders and first president of the Beckenham Chamber of Commerce, a position which he retained to his death. He provided Beckenham with its first railway time-table, founding the "Beckenham Pocket Train Time Book" in 1879 and giving the train times in vertical columns.

Although not a worshipper at St. George's, TW had a great love for the Parish Church, helping to replace the old decayed yew tree avenue with new young plants, and when the old 13th century Lych Gate was in danger of being lost unless effectively repaired, he obtained permission to have it restored at his own expense as a memorial to his two sons who were lost during the first world war. A small plate of commemoration is placed in an inconspicuous position on the beams under the roof. It is he who is responsible for the wonderful spread of crocuses and spring flowers seen blooming in the churchyard every year. One of TW's most successful associations was with the Beckenham Horticultural Society, with which he was involved until his death, seeing it rise to prominence throughout the country. He was a Fellow of the Institute of Journalists, and held official positions in many trade societies with which he was connected.

## Kelsey Park

His own personality and the influence of his newspaper, *The Beckenham Journal*, of which he was proprietor and editor, was used for the promotion of recreation grounds and open spaces in Beckenham, the first of which was opened in 1891 –

the Croydon Road Recreation Ground. He also played a very great part in the acquisition of Kelsey Park. When Kelsey Park was being cut up for residential development, he secured an option on a considerable portion and then had photographs taken and lantern slides made and gave several public addresses, which were received with great enthusiasm. Hundreds of letters poured into *The Beckenham Journal* and also to the Councillors, meetings were held advocating the purchase for the public, and finally approval of the Council was given, and on 31st May 1913 Kelsey Park was opened to the public for ever.

## The Acquisition and Council Decision

The suggested acquisition of the Park first came to public notice in a leading article published by *The Beckenham Journal*, in which it was advocated that the available portion of Kelsey Manor Estate should be purchased as Beckenham's commemoration of the reign of King Edward VII. The article pointed out that the valley of the Beck, with its beautiful lake and wooded banks would give Beckenham a valuable asset for its own people and for generations to come.



Thatched shelter near the waterfall

Initially the land to be offered was the part below the waterfall, the large lake and the land on the east (Wickham Road) side of the lake. But as significant importance was given to retaining the spacious lawns with magnificent specimen trees, an extended plan was put forward. This side of the lake had already been marked out by the Estate Company developing the land to show 35 building plots, and the houses, had they been built,





View over lake

would have commanded fine views of the lake. These were obviously very desirable and valuable plots, and it was appreciated that the owners of the land consented to add this desirable piece of ground to the scheme. At the time it was considered that the building plots would have represented around £200 each in value.

Finally in December 1911, and after much negotiation, the Council decided to recommend the purchase of the Park. Mr George Sutton, Chairman of Council, moved the adoption of the report recommending the purchase of the Park, particularly noting the campaign supporting the acquisition which had been run by TW in the local press and at public meetings, and also the private intimations given to Councillors in favour of purchase.

Following many discussions, proposals and consultations, the Council made a formal offer to the owners of £5,000, which was accepted. The portion of Kelsey Park involved comprised a total area of approximately 18½ acres, of which 5¾ acres was represented by the lake, 6½ acres on the west (the Mansion) side, and 6¼ acres of land on the east side. Mr Sutton concluded by congratulating the Council and the inhabitants of Beckenham on the prospect of acquiring the exceedingly beautiful portion of the Kelsey Park estate for the use of the public in perpetuity. The Council then decided to apply for sanction to the necessary loan, and this decision was received with great pleasure.

It was some five months later a further announcement was made in *The Beckenham Journal*, detailing the successful outcome of the public enquiry into the application of the Beckenham Council for the sanction of the Local Government Board to the borrowing of the necessary money for buying and laying out of the portion of the Kelsey Park Estate as a public Park for Beckenham. Held in May 1912 it was reported that "when the Local Government Board's Inspector arrived there was quite an array of local gentlemen to support the acquisition of the Park. But their services in

*eloquent argument and persuasion were not required, as there was not a single opponent of the scheme present, and ..... there was nothing intricate to occupy the attention of the Inspector."* It was only a few weeks afterwards that official sanction was received.

The amount of the proposed loan was £8,800, being £5,100 for the purchase and law costs and a further £3,700 for the Lodge, fencing and paths, and the term applied for the loan in respect of the land was 60 years, and 30 years for the works. It was recognised that in purchasing this portion of the Kelsey Park Estate the Council would be acquiring a recreation ground already laid out, and that the expenditure of £3,700 would be entirely for erecting fencing, laying out of paths and included purchase of the entrance Lodge. The Inspector was favourably impressed with the prospects of Kelsey Park as a public ground, and having visited the Estate he said it offered a unique opportunity of acquiring one of the most beautiful open spaces round London containing woodland, lake, lawns and shrubbery for the benefit of the public. It was only a few weeks after this that official sanction was received. During the summer months the public were permitted to enter the Park on Sunday evenings, and it was clear that this would be a popular spot, and that when finally opened it would be a favourite choice to visit on any day. It was also noted that the lake would be particularly welcome to Beckenham residents, as there was no public water in the district which could be used for skating!

#### The Opening of Kelsey Park to the Public

Saturday, 31st May 1913 was awaited with eagerness and anticipation by many, and the weather caused a deal of speculation to the Park Superintendent, Mr W.H. Jenkins, and his staff, who had taken a walk around in the early morning. After an absence of rain for many days, which had begun to tell on the newly planted trees and shrubs, a heavy shower had fallen on Friday, and all was now revealed in fresh, superb order, a tribute to all their hard work and care.

The public were admitted to the Park at 11am by the Manor Way entrance, and were entertained by the Band of H.M. Royal Irish Guards who played a selection of music while the people were assembling for the opening ceremony, and continued to play at intervals during the afternoon. The opening ceremony took place on a spacious platform, richly carpeted in red felt, which was built on the lawn and covered with a marquee roof.

A large gathering of local dignitaries and public figures had received personal invitations and were directed to their seats on the platform to await the arrival of the official party. At the main entrance, just before mid-day, the official party arrived and processed around the Park,



The opening ceremony

proceeding up the main walk, past the cascade, through the winding paths to the thatched shelter, with some walking down the slope to inspect the waterfall. They then continued around the east side of the lake, going over the bridge which spans the brook where the Beck enters the lake, and eventually took their places on the platform.

Mr George Sutton, J.P., Chairman of the Beckenham Urban District Council, made an introductory speech of welcome and introduced The Right Hon. John Burns, J.P., President of the Local Government Board, whom he then invited to declare open Kelsey Park for ever for the enjoyment of the Public.

Mr Burns said he was delighted to be there and was anxious to identify himself officially with the extraordinary good sense, courage and perseverance that the Beckenham Urban District Council had displayed in acquiring the beautiful park, and wisely ordering the future development of their rapidly growing district. He also said he was sure they had got the best, if not one of the very best, of the Parks to be found in Greater London. In his lengthy opening address he questioned whether the viability of these Parks which cost so much money justified the expenditure from the rates, the cost of maintenance, and the trouble to the Councils in looking after them. However, he was in full support of purchasing more and more parks and open spaces in large towns and cities, citing the beneficial qualities to be obtained from the use of these parks - recreation, exercise, good clean air, and opportunities for open air nature lessons for local school children.

Mrs Sutton was then escorted to a spot immediately in front of the platform where she performed the ceremony of planting a commemorative oak sapling, using a solid silver, ebony handled spade.



She said: "May this oak tree which I have planted grow into a great and stately tree, giving shelter for many generations to a free and happy people."

The formal proceedings concluded with a vote of thanks to Mr Burns from the Rev. Canon Arnott, which was seconded by Mr H.W. Forster M.P., both of whom commended the perception and courage of the Council who had the foresight to purchase Kelsey Park. Mr Forster finished by saying: "... hoped the Park would exist for centuries to be a lasting memorial of the public spirit of the whole district and of the wisdom of those to whom the people of the district entrusted its guidance."

The opening ceremony in Kelsey Park was followed by a luncheon in the Public Hall for around 150 dignitaries and guests. Instrumental music was performed by Mr George Bradbury and his orchestra during the reception and luncheon, and the Public Hall was tastefully decorated throughout with flowers, plants and ferns.

There was complete coverage of the whole day's events, including many illustrative photographs, printed in *The Beckenham Journal* on the same date, together with a four page supplement - Kelsey Park Souvenir Edition - issued to commemorate the opening of the Park to the public. All this would have been typeset, printed and the newspapers were out on the streets and in the shops by late afternoon or early evening on the same day - Saturday 31st May.

Throughout all this coverage in *The Beckenham Journal*, the name of T.W. Thornton is mentioned but twice - amongst those who were invited as guests to attend the proceedings. It is a testament to his modesty, demonstrating his unwillingness to accept any acknowledgement for the amount of time and effort he had put into bringing to public notice the possibility of purchasing part of the Kelsey Park Estate for the public for ever. His reward was the success of the outcome, and to have the

pleasure of being able to walk there, and enjoy for the rest of his life the charms of beautiful park surroundings with flowers, trees, shrubs, wide green lawns, lakes and waterfalls. However, it may be no coincidence that just twenty-five days later a dinner was given in his honour -



This was held in The Public Hall, attended by many dignitaries and local worthies. It was a lavish dinner of eight courses, accompanied throughout by a music Quartette, with a great number of toasts and speeches.

A worthy acknowledgment for a mission accomplished.

On the 31st May 2000, TW was once again honoured, when a plaque in his memory was unveiled by the Mayor of Bromley in Kelsey Park, acknowledging the tireless efforts TW had made to secure this beautiful Park to be enjoyed by today's residents, families, friends and everyone else who derives so much pleasure from visiting. The plaque is situated near the main entrance gates, and in recent times has been elevated from grass level to a position on a fine granite pedestal. The 2000 event was organised by the Friends of Kelsey Park and attended by two of TW's relatives - his daughter-in-law, Mrs Millicent Vigar, and his granddaughter, Mrs Valerie Sheldon (see photo top right).

There is yet another commemorative plaque at Thornton's Corner in the High Street which remembers the part TW played in the first British airmail dispatch. He was very involved with the planning



for a balloon flight which took off from the Croydon Road Recreation Ground sailing across Kent dropping bags of mail to commemorate the coronation on King Edward VII. This plaque was unveiled in November 2004, and TW's granddaughter and great-grandson were in attendance.

Tom William Thornton had an abiding and intense love of gardens which was shown throughout his life, during which he had created three delightful garden retreats in various parts of Beckenham. It may be assumed that he was consulted on many aspects of the floral content of Kelsey Park, and how proud and delighted he would be to see it today in its colourful and blossoming spring majesty.

**Valerie Sheldon**

**Postscript:** Tom William Thornton was my grandfather whom, regretfully, I never knew. He died long before my father, Victor, met my mother, and my grandmother, Clara, TW's wife, died just twenty-eight days after my parents' marriage in 1935. But the more I read about TW while I am researching his life, and that of our family, the more I realise what an extraordinary man he was, being held in the highest esteem and respect of many local people, and contributing so much to the welfare of Beckenham during his lifetime. I am immensely proud to be descended from such a well-loved, modest gentleman who devoted his life to the good of others.

If anyone reading this article should know of, or have access to, any records, articles, anecdotes, pictures or any other material of interest that relates to the Thornton family I would be extremely grateful to be advised.

(I can be contacted via the Friends at [membership@fokp.org](mailto:membership@fokp.org)).

