

## Recreational Space in a Resort Town: Park versus Beach in Nineteenth-Century Swansea\*

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On Friday 4 October 1878, *The Western Mail* carried a report of the opening of a new park in Swansea:

The public opening of Knapllwyd Park, in future to be called the Ladies' Park in honour of Mrs Llewelyn of Penllergare, took place on Thursday under the most auspicious circumstances. In accordance with a notice issued by the mayor (Mr W. Thomas), nearly the whole of the business establishments in the town were closed, and the inhabitants turned out in thousands to witness the formal handing over of the park to the corporation of Swansea. Interested as the mayor is in the question of recreation for the people, he must have been delighted with the success which attended Thursday's proceedings, and the hearty manner in which he was supported by people of all classes, from the lord-lieutenant of the county to the poorest in the town.<sup>1</sup>

This new park was situated some two miles from the coast, in a location close to Swansea's largest industrial suburb, Morriston. For a town which, almost a century earlier, had put its efforts into the creation of public walks and promenades on the 'Burrows', an area of corporation-owned land adjacent to the sea, this new inland recreational development seemed to mark a significant shift in focus. Its promoters were influenced by the movement for urban parks in Victorian Britain, which saw growing emphasis placed on the provision of open spaces where working-class town dwellers could indulge in 'rational' and respectable forms of recreation.<sup>2</sup> In Swansea, this meant a re-focusing of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Western Mail*, 4 October 1878.

<sup>2</sup> Hazel Conway, *People's Parks. The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 29-38.

attention towards the satellite villages which had grown up around the town's outlying colliery and smelting areas, distant from the coast. In the eyes of a few local benefactors, the distance of these districts from the seaside, coupled with their rapid population increase,<sup>3</sup> made them the areas of greatest recreational need in the town.

The aim of this paper is to examine the shifting debate over park provision in nineteenth-century Swansea. The town's coastal location and its role as a bathing resort, it will be suggested, had a direct influence on the debate over the development and location of public parks. The existence of a 'natural' recreational space in the form of a beach meant that park promoters in Swansea had to overcome the charge that open spaces were less urgently needed than in larger, inland towns and cities without such advantages of nature. But it will also be shown that the attempt to re-focus recreational activity in Swansea around inland parks rather than the town's coastal sands was ultimately temporary and unsuccessful. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, developments in Swansea's transport infrastructure, new demands for open space for the staging of outdoor events in prestige urban locations, and the need to develop a bolder civic identity in response to the growth of Cardiff meant that the foreshore gained renewed importance.

The need for towns and cities in Britain to provide some open spaces where exercise could be taken, fresh air breathed, and recreation enjoyed by the inhabitants was gradually being acknowledged in the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The Select Committee on Public Walks, reporting in 1833, concluded that space for recreation was lacking in the larger manufacturing districts, but its recommendation that sites be identified and developed as open space for the use of the working population was aimed specifically at London and the larger manufacturing towns.<sup>5</sup> These largest of urban centres were least easy to escape by working-class inhabitants seeking release from the built-up, often polluted, environments of their everyday experience.<sup>6</sup> The witnesses called to give evidence to the Select Committee in 1833 thus came from the cotton manufacturing towns of Manchester and Bury in Lancashire, from the woollen textile centres of Leeds and Bradford, and from the metal manufacturing centres of Birmingham and Sheffield.

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<sup>3</sup> Morrision's population grew from about 3,000 in 1831 to 7,302 in 1851 and to 20,000 by 1891. See Ieuan G. Jones, 'The City and its Villages', in *The City of Swansea. Challenges and Change*, ed. by Ralph A. Griffiths (Stroud: Sutton, 1990), p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Reed, 'The Transformation of Urban Space, 1700-1840', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, vol. 2: 1540-1840*, ed. by Peter Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 636.

<sup>5</sup> PP 1833 (448), Select Committee on Public Walks. Report, Minutes of Evidence.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Thorsheim, 'Green Space and Class in Imperial London', in *The Nature of Cities*, ed. by Andrew C. Isenberg (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006), p. 25.

But it was not just in the largest metropolises and industrial conurbations that recreational space was at a premium. Park provision was also part of a wider story of the disappearance of common and waste land in urban communities in the face of increasing congestion and population density. Beach areas, along with open commons and heath, were traditionally places of public gathering, both for formal events such as the outdoor lecture to some 3,000 colliers which took place on the sea-beach at Tynemouth during the week of the British Association for the Advancement Science's visit to Newcastle in 1838,<sup>7</sup> and for informal patterns of recreation by working-class inhabitants of industrial towns seeking to escape the drudgery of work and domestic routine.<sup>8</sup> The enclosure and regulation of commons was partly a conscious strategy on the part of urban elites to exert more control over the urban environment by removing spaces where unregulated or unrespectable pursuits could be held. Such was the case at Mousehold Heath near Norwich, where residents opposed the attempt to convert the heath into a public park in the 1850s.<sup>9</sup> By regulating the layout of 'natural' space in their towns, the urban elites could extend their influence, creating outdoor 'museums' where plants and shrubs were the exhibits, positioned to inspire, educate, and improve the visiting working classes.<sup>10</sup> Not until the latter decades of the nineteenth century did park designers begin to place more emphasis on providing spaces for the playing of games and sports.<sup>11</sup> Growing interest in these themes among urban historians has led to a number of studies of the timing and motivation behind initiatives for the 'greening' of individual towns. In Nottingham, for example, the establishment of an arboretum in 1852 was part of an agenda of civic aggrandisement through which urban leaders attempted to assert their town's claim as a regional capital of the east Midlands.<sup>12</sup> In Glasgow, it was the cholera crisis of the late 1840s which galvanized the municipal authorities into actively promoting healthy spaces in the city.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An account of this is quoted in O. J. R. Howarth, *The British Association for the Advancement of Science: a Retrospect, 1831-1931* (London: BAAS, 1931), pp. 101-2.

<sup>8</sup> See John K. Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays in Victorian England', *Economic History Review*, n.s. 34 (1981), 249-65.

<sup>9</sup> See Neil MacMaster, 'The Battle for Mousehold Heath, 1857-1884: "Popular Politics" and the Victorian Public Park', *Past and Present*, 127 (May, 1990), 117-154.

<sup>10</sup> Hilary A. Taylor, 'Urban Public Parks, 1840-1900: Design and Meaning', *Garden History*, 23 (1995), p. 206.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Catharina Nolin, 'Stockholm's Urban Parks: Meeting Places and Social Contexts from 1860-1930', in *The European City and Green Space. London, Stockholm, Helsinki and St Petersburg, 1850-2000*, ed. by Peter Clark (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> See Paul Elliott, Stephen Daniels and Charles Watkins, 'The Nottingham Arboretum (1852): Natural History, Leisure and Public Culture in a Victorian Regional Centre', *Urban History*, 35 (2008), pp. 48-49.

<sup>13</sup> Irene Maver, 'Glasgow's Public Parks and the Community, 1850-1914: A Case Study in Scottish Civic Interventionism', *Urban History*, 25 (1998), p. 326.

Seaside and resort towns, in contrast, have attracted relatively little attention from historians of parks, despite the fact that ornamental gardens and walkways were an integral feature of the development of many resorts from the eighteenth century onwards. In Southampton, spa gardens were laid out in the second half of the eighteenth century as the town developed as a bathing resort and watering place, but these had all but fallen into disuse by the second decade of the nineteenth century as the town's resort attractions were eclipsed by other rising tourist centres on the English south coast.<sup>14</sup> In the north Wales town of Bangor in the late 1840s and early 1850s, plans were afoot to build a large hotel and pleasure gardens on land between the railway and the Menai Strait, thus capitalizing on the opening of the Chester and Holyhead railway which, it was hoped, might 'make Bangor the Brighton of Lancashire and Yorkshire'.<sup>15</sup> In the English south coast resorts of Brighton, Bournemouth and Margate, the provision of seafront lawns, planting, and walkways helped tame the margins of the seaside, providing space for respectable promenading and shaded areas from which to admire coastal views.<sup>16</sup>

Studies of seaside resorts outside the UK, however, have suggested the need for more research on patterns of recreational provision in coastal and resort centres and revealed that, although resort towns may, as a general rule, have been less polluted and less populated than the big industrial cities, they still experienced the pressures of an expanding population and competing uses of space, leading to the deterioration or building-over of sands.<sup>17</sup> By the early decades of the nineteenth century, it was already evident that the British seaside was becoming highly-contested geographical space. In populated coastal areas, the beach, or foreshore, had competing uses. For coastal towns close to industrializing interiors, there was enormous commercial potential in the allocation of prime seaside space for the development of port facilities.<sup>18</sup> Beach-side land also came under the close scrutiny of nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban planners, working to provide for the housing, transport, and retail facilities for urban dwellers in coastal communities.<sup>19</sup> In Swansea, recreational use of the beach had to be negotiated with these

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<sup>14</sup> E. M. Sandell, 'Georgian Southampton: A Watering-Place and Spa', in *Collected Essays on Southampton*, ed. by J. B. Morgan and Philip Peberdy (Southampton: County Borough Entertainments Committee, 1958), pp. 80, 86-87.

<sup>15</sup> M. L. Clarke, 'Britannia Park', *Transactions of the Caernarvonshire Historical Society*, 19 (1958), 54-60.

<sup>16</sup> Fred Gray, *Designing the Seaside. Architecture, Society and Nature* (London: Reaktion, 2006), pp. 131-34.

<sup>17</sup> See Maoz Azaryahu and Arnon Golan, 'Contested Beachscapes: Planning and Debating Tel Aviv's Seashore in the 1930s', *Urban History*, 34 (2007), 278-95.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon Jackson, 'Ports, 1700-1840', in Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain 1540-1840*, pp. 705-31.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, John K. Walton, 'Planning and Seaside Tourism: San Sebastian, 1863-1936', *Planning Perspectives*, 17 (2002), 1-20

alternative uses over successive decades in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, making it an appropriate case study in which to examine attitudes towards open-air leisure spaces, both natural and artificially created, in a coastal setting.

Located on the Welsh side of the Bristol Channel, Swansea was one of a number of coastal towns in the south-west of England and south Wales which emerged in the 1789-1815 period as recognizable resort regions.<sup>20</sup> A visitor to the town in the 1790s noted the effect that the new fashion for sea-bathing was having on Swansea:

Since the custom of sea-bathing has been so prevalent, this town has had a very considerable share of resort from the most distinguished persons of fashion in the kingdom; it is found a most convenient trip for the inhabitants of Bristol, Bath and the counties adjoining the Severn Sea.<sup>21</sup>

Like seaside towns elsewhere in the south west, such as Torquay, Torbay, Sidmouth, Lynton, and Lynmouth, Swansea was responding to a new market for sea-bathing among the social elite, whose travel habits had been curtailed by the Napoleonic Wars, and whose appetite for places of resort closer to home stimulated a growth in domestic travel. In this climate, the layout and equipping of seaside space for visiting bathers became a priority for the town's leaders. By the late 1780s, a corporation committee was working to supply Swansea with bathing facilities to the same standard as those in the established resorts of the English south coast. A representative of the corporation was dispatched to Weymouth to see the latest bathing 'machines' in operation, and to 'procure from hence an exact model of one of the best machines made by measure'.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, Swansea's major landowner, the Duke of Beaufort, created a public walk on the 'Burrows', an area of recently enclosed corporation land lying between the town and the sea.

In the decades of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the recreational potential of the 'Burrows', both during and outside the summer bathing season, was being realized. A committee was appointed to look to the improvement of roads and avenues in the vicinity, and in April 1790 it reported that 'the Ropewalk and the avenues leading to it may be made a public way of great utility'.<sup>23</sup> The use of parts of the area for the playing of

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Borsay, 'Health and Leisure Resorts, 1700-1870', in Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain 1540-1840*, p. 778.

<sup>21</sup> James Baker, *A Picturesque Guide to the Local Beauties of Wales; interspersed with the most interesting objects of antiquity in that Principality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London, 1791), pp. 126-27.

<sup>22</sup> West Glamorgan Archives Service (WGAS), B/S Corp B8, Hall Day Minute Book, 26 October 1789.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 April 1790.

games and sports was formally sanctioned in 1786 when Charles Collins, a local surgeon, was granted permission on behalf of 'several gentlemen' of the town who 'hath applied for leave to level a part of the open burrows for playing cricket'.<sup>24</sup> In 1810, local industrialist Sir John Morris developed the walks and gardens on the Burrows for use by the respectable inhabitants of the town and by fashionable visitors.<sup>25</sup> The determination to preserve the area as a high-quality recreational space for the elites was further underlined in 1816, when gates and walls were erected to keep out unwanted and undesirable members of the public.<sup>26</sup>

But wealthy locals and visiting bathers did not have this area of the Swansea sands all to themselves. The Burrows also proved popular with working-class residents, not only from the town itself but from elsewhere in industrial south Wales. It was noted in the mid-1840s that:

Numbers of persons from the interior, including many of the men engaged in the iron works at Merthyr Tydfil, with their wives and families, come annually to bathe in the sea at Swansea, the sandy coast being favourable for the purpose, and many in the town avail themselves of the opportunities thus afforded.<sup>27</sup>

So popular was the beach by the mid-1820s that supervision of bathing activities was required, and, in 1824, the corporation had to direct two constables to make daily visitations during the bathing season to prevent 'indecent exhibitions'.<sup>28</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century, the area was also the venue for the annual Burrows Fair, an event which gave the local police concern over public order and drink-related offences.<sup>29</sup>

Concurrent with this phase of resort planning and recreational development from the 1780s onwards was Swansea's emergence as a major copper smelting centre. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, there were some eight smelting works and dozens of collieries operating in its immediate vicinity and a lively coastal shipping trade with Cornwall, its major supplier of copper ore.<sup>30</sup> All of this commercial activity put pressure on the harbour. The total

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<sup>24</sup> WGAS, B/S Corp, B7, 19 July 1786.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 March 1810.

<sup>26</sup> John A. Owen, *Swansea's Earliest Open Spaces. A Study of Swansea's Parks and their Promoters in the Nineteenth Century* (Swansea: Swansea City Council, 1995), p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Henry T. De la Beche, *Report on the Sanatory Condition of Swansea* (London: HMSO, 1845), p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> WGAS, B/S Corp B9, 30 August 1824.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine A. Phillips, 'The Swansea Burrows, 1760-1900' (unpublished Diploma in Local History dissertation, University of Wales, Swansea, 1997), pp. 58-60.

<sup>30</sup> Trevor Boynes, 'Industrialisation', in Griffiths (ed.), *The City of Swansea. Challenges and Change*, pp. 39-44.

number of vessels entering it each year had increased from 2,295 at the end of the Napoleonic Wars to 3,699 by 1835. The tonnage of vessels had risen by an even larger margin: from 153,943 to 237,418 during the same period.<sup>31</sup> Despite the modernization of harbour management and some improvement work under the harbour acts of 1791, 1796 and 1804, Swansea still had a basic tidal harbour where vessels were liable to experience considerable delays at low tide,<sup>32</sup> and by the 1840s, when further increases in trade looked likely with the prospect of the South Wales Railway being extended to Swansea, the need for action over dock development had become critical. In 1847, a private dock company was formed with powers to build on a designated site to the south of the town. The area earmarked for development was the town Burrows. The sensitivities of the situation were clear, but such was the fear in Swansea, by the late 1840s, of the commercial headway being made at Cardiff and Newport, where docks had recently been constructed, that the influential townsmen of the day spoke out vigorously in support of the scheme. Reverend Calvert Richard Jones told a town meeting in October 1846 that, 'It is a sin and a shame that our beautiful port, so favoured in position by Providence, should remain stationary while others all around are advancing.'<sup>33</sup> The editors of Swansea's weekly newspaper, *The Cambrian*, also placed themselves squarely behind the new dock: 'It is with infinite gratification we announce to our readers, that the Docks will now certainly be constructed on the Burrows, west of the River Tawe.'<sup>34</sup>

There was a palpable sense, even before construction work began, that the initiative marked a shift in direction and a new beginning for the town: 'In place of the old woods which formerly fringed this bay – beautiful perhaps but unproductive – a far nobler and more inspiring sight will be presented in the shape of a forest of masts.'<sup>35</sup> There was little room for nostalgia as Swansea's foreshore began to undergo this transformation. At the ceremony to mark the opening of the South Dock in 1859, one speaker disparagingly harked back to the space that the docks had replaced as 'an enclosure with iron railings of a piece of grass and a few gravel walks, and which was then known as the Burrows Square'.<sup>36</sup> Many of Swansea's most influential citizens, it seemed, were willing to endorse the building-over of Swansea's traditional area of recreational land for the sake of future commercial prosperity. Some historians of Swansea have correspondingly interpreted this period as one of transition from its past as a seaside resort towards a future as a commercial

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<sup>31</sup> William H. Jones, *History of the Port of Swansea* (Carmarthen: Spurrell, 1922), p. 363.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132-35.

<sup>33</sup> *The Cambrian*, 30 October 1846.

<sup>34</sup> *The Cambrian*, 23 October 1846.

<sup>35</sup> Reverend Calvert Richard Jones, quoted in *The Cambrian*, 30 October 1846.

<sup>36</sup> *The Cambrian*, 23 September 1859.

port and industrial town.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Southampton and Tynemouth were two other early fashionable bathing destinations where, by the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, 'resort functions were fading in relative importance alongside the development of heavy industry and docks'.<sup>38</sup>

But some recent research on Swansea suggests that the extent to which dock building extinguished bathing and other recreational uses of the seaside may have been over-stated.<sup>39</sup> The simple model of resort decline in the face of commercial dock development does not allow for the possibility that sea-bathers and other users of the beach were capable of adapting to the commercial encroachments on their patch, or for the determination of town leaders to compensate for loss of seaside space with the development of alternative recreational facilities. In Swansea, both of these processes of adjustment occurred in the decades after the opening of the South Dock, suggesting the need for a re-evaluation of the relation between dock building and outdoor leisure. As other studies have shown, nineteenth-century dock expansion was not necessarily incompatible with the development of coastal leisure space. Belfast's pleasure garden at Dargan's Island (later Queen's Island) was formed from material excavated for new docks on the River Lagan and was landscaped by harbour commissioners in 1843.<sup>40</sup> In Swansea, more modest measures were put in place via the Dock Act of 1847, to compensate for the impact of the planned construction work on traditional sea-bathing areas. Section 27 of the Act obliged the Swansea Dock Company to 'make, construct and maintain a swingbridge or drawbridge with proper avenues and approaches thereto, over or across the entrance of the half-tide basin from the said Harbour'. Section 28 enacted that 'the said Company shall also make and construct [...] good, easy and sufficient access to and from the said Bathing Machines'.<sup>41</sup>

In practice, these legislative clauses were of little value in preserving pre-existing seafront recreational space when the new docks began to take shape. But instead, as the Burrows walks disappeared from view, interest began to focus on 'the foreshore question' as a matter of public debate in the town. In the

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Ronald Rees, *King Copper. South Wales and the Copper Trade, 1584-1895* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 19; David Boorman, *The Brighton of Wales. Swansea as a Fashionable Seaside Resort, c.1780-1830* (Swansea: Swansea Little Theatre Company Ltd, 1986), p. 95.

<sup>38</sup> John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort. A Social History, 1750-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983), p. 47.

<sup>39</sup> Louise Miskell, *Intelligent Town. An Urban History of Swansea, 1780-1855* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 187-88; Peter Borsay, Louise Miskell and Owen Roberts, 'Ports and Resorts Project: Bibliography of Welsh Seaside Resorts' <<http://www.aber.ac.uk/history/research/resorts.html>> [accessed 30 September 2009].

<sup>40</sup> Robert Scott, *A Breath of Fresh Air. The Story of Belfast's Parks* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 2000), pp. 4-5.

<sup>41</sup> WGAS, D/DZ413/13, 'Report of the Town Clerk on alleged encroachments on the Foreshore to the Council of the Borough of Swansea'.



early 1860s, local antiquarian and civic dignitary, George Grant Francis,<sup>42</sup> wrote a series of letters to *The Cambrian* newspaper entitled ‘What does Swansea Now Want?’, in which he urged town councillors to make up for losses of prime seafront recreational space by setting aside a site in the town as a leisure area for future generations:

The ‘Walk on the Pier’ is practically gone – ‘The Sands’ are covered with shingles – the ‘Lover’s Walk’ is closed at both ends to the young and to those who loved its shady quiet – ‘The Promenade’ and the Burrows Walk are for ever removed. [...] Commerce is every day reducing our pleasure areas, while our active population is ever more rapidly swallowing up our green lanes and open grounds [...] Swansea got no share of the Public Grant of £60,000 made by Parliament for providing Recreation Grounds for growing towns. [...] That opportunity, golden as it was, was allowed to slip away. Let us beware we lose not another chance (though in a different way) by supineness now.<sup>43</sup>

There were two very interesting things happening here. One was that Grant Francis was quite deliberately merging the debate over the foreshore with the very current issue of open spaces in nineteenth-century towns and ensuring that the question of leisure provision in Swansea was not just about catering for affluent tourists, but a matter of central importance to the health and well-being of the populace as a whole. Secondly, he was articulating the view that town leaders had a responsibility to replace the natural open spaces that had been lost with artificially created parks, and that this would restore some kind of spatial balance in the town which the extensive dock-building of recent decades had upset. His motivations for this were several. The passing of new legislation, including the Recreation Grounds Act of 1859 and the Public Improvements Act of 1860, presented wealthy benefactors and local authorities with the opportunity to develop land for recreational purposes.<sup>44</sup> Also significant in the Swansea context may have been the re-emergence of the copper smoke debate in the 1860s, when local industrialists were considering the implementation of a newly-invented German process for the reduction of sulphur in the emissions from their smelting works.<sup>45</sup> It must have seemed to Grant Francis an opportune moment to make a broader case for the pursuit of fresh air and open spaces.

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<sup>42</sup> A brief biographical note on George Grant Francis can be found in William A. Beanland, *The History of the Royal Institution of South Wales, Swansea* (Swansea: Royal Institution of South Wales, 1935), p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> George Grant Francis, ‘What does Swansea now want?’ Letter to *The Cambrian*, 28 November 1862.

<sup>44</sup> For a summary of the legislation see Conway, *People’s Parks*, pp. 224–27.

<sup>45</sup> Ronald Rees, ‘The South Wales Copper Smoke Dispute, 1833–1895’, *Welsh History Review*, 10 (1981), p. 491.

As Grant Francis suggested, Swansea's urban leaders had not been very active, in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, in the provision of parks. The historian of local government in the town identified public parks, along with free libraries, as 'the Cinderella of Swansea's municipal services'.<sup>46</sup> Although there was a small outlay on the lands around the Cwmdonkin and Brynmill reservoirs, to the west of the town centre in the 1850s, to enable public access, these efforts were widely acknowledged to be of minimal value to the bulk of the town's inhabitants who resided in the outlying industrial suburbs further north and east. Tom Ridd's explanation for the tardiness of town councillors in Swansea in providing open green spaces in the mid-nineteenth century was linked closely with the fact that Swansea was by the sea. Its inhabitants had access to 'a natural open space or urban lung – the sands',<sup>47</sup> and therefore there was no need to artificially create recreational areas as in other, less favourably located towns. This argument was not uniquely applied in coastal communities in Wales by opponents of park schemes. In the hillier, inland regions too, contemporaries wondered whether the inhabitants really needed parks. Henry Richard, MP, speaking at the opening of Aberdare Park in 1869, observed that, 'you have these fine hills around you, and there may be the less necessity for a park at Aberdare, than in many large towns'.<sup>48</sup> It was certainly an argument taken up in Swansea by the voices of economy on the town council who suggested that, with the existing spaces in Cwmdonkin and Brynmill, as well as the sands, Swansea's residents were amply provided for.<sup>49</sup>

For the historian, these pieces of evidence appear rather contradictory: Swansea's seaside was being invoked by both the champions and the opponents of the open spaces movement to support their particular arguments with regard to parks being on the one hand, essential, and on the other, surplus to requirements. To understand how this was possible, it is necessary to examine in a little more detail the fate of seaside recreation in the town after the advent of dock development in the 1840s. Although dock building had swallowed up recreational space on the Burrows, other parts of Swansea's bay remained free of commercial encroachments. Guidebook writers frequently noted the expanse of the bay as one of Swansea's principal assets, and placed increasing emphasis on the five-mile stretch which extended westward from the town and docks, towards Oystermouth and Mumbles.<sup>50</sup> Gradually, these

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<sup>46</sup> Tom Ridd, 'Swansea's Parks and Public Libraries', *Glamorgan Historian*, 6 (Cowbridge: D. Brown, 1969), p. 107.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *The Western Mail*, 30 July 1869.

<sup>49</sup> See the arguments put forward by Swansea's town clerk, discussed in Ridd, 'Swansea's Parks and Public Libraries', p. 109.

<sup>50</sup> See for example, *The Land We Live In: A Pictorial and Literary Sketch Book of the British Empire, Part XXXIX: South Wales and its Mineral Wealth* (London: William Tyler, 1951), p. 339; William W. Moore, *The 'Borough' Pocket Guide to Swansea* (Cheltenham: Edward J. Burrow, 1909), p. 14.

areas of beach, west of the town centre, were developed for visitors, first around the 'slip' and later at Mumbles. These new seafront spaces were frequented by a new breed of seaside day-tripper from the surrounding industrial communities who began flocking to Swansea's sands in significant numbers thanks to the arrival, in 1850, of the South Wales Railway.<sup>51</sup>

George Grant Francis took an active part in the promotion of the western end of the bay as a new focus for recreational and visitor facilities. In 1879, he assisted local civil servant Leopold Charles Martin in the publication of a new guidebook, *Swansea and Gower with the Mumbles and Adjacent Bays*. The guidebook, as its title suggested, aimed to extend the geography of the resort of Swansea along the coastline to the west of the town, and to make the point that Swansea Bay was expansive enough to accommodate both commercial docks and visitors to the sands. Readers were encouraged to head west of the town, away from the docks, and to enjoy the 'charming' walk to Oystermouth and Mumbles, the 'extensive sea views' from Sketty and the 'well laid out public park and recreation ground at Brynmill'.<sup>52</sup> The timing of the publication of this guidebook was significant. Work commenced on the construction of a new dock facility, the Prince of Wales Dock, as the guidebook was in production. An additional page detailing its progress was inserted just before the book went to press. As long as the docks continued to expand, the issue of land use on Swansea's seafront remained high on the public agenda. Grant Francis wrote to the town clerk on 'the Fore Shore question', calling it 'not only the question of the day to the inhabitants of Swansea, but [one which] will assuredly affect its welfare in all time coming'.<sup>53</sup>

It was clear that, despite the expansion of the docks, Grant Francis still saw the bay as the main focus for leisure and recreation in Swansea. But by the 1870s he was not a lone voice championing the provision of recreational space in the town. William Thomas, an industrialist with interests in Mynyddbach colliery and Landore Tinplate and Steel Company, also became vocal on the issue of open spaces in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Thomas was an active public figure in Swansea, becoming a town councillor in 1871 and mayor in 1877.<sup>54</sup> He was also a native of Morriston, one of a number of rapidly-developing communities located outside the old town and franchise of Swansea, where the bulk of the town's copper-smelting and coal-mining

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<sup>51</sup> John Lewis, *The Swansea Guide, 1851* (Swansea: William Mathias Brewster, 1851), p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> Leopold C. Martin, *Swansea and Gower with the Mumbles and Adjacent Bays, a guide and hand book for visitors and tourists* (Swansea: Pearse and Brown, 1879), p. 31.

<sup>53</sup> WGAS, RISW, GGF 22/118. Letter from George Grant Francis to J. Thomas, Town Clerk, 11 February 1879.

<sup>54</sup> For biographical information on William Thomas, see Albert C. Wright, 'The Life and Times of Mr William Thomas JP of Lan, pioneer-champion of open spaces', in *Wright's Swansea and Mumbles Guide* (Swansea: A. C. Wright, 1906), pp. 40-41.

interests were located and where the core of her industrial workforce resided. By 1851, Morryston had a population of over 7,000,<sup>55</sup> and from his vantage point there, Thomas's view of recreational provision in Swansea was rather different from that of Grant Francis. Viewed from Morryston, and from the other industrial suburbs of Landore, Plasmarl and Pentrechwyth, Grant Francis's favoured haunts of Oystermouth and Mumbles were remote and inaccessible. Open spaces were needed closer to the homes of the working-class residents of Swansea's industrial periphery.

In 1875, William Thomas launched an essay competition, inviting entrants to submit a treatise on 'The desirability and advantages of recreation grounds for Swansea'. Entrants had not only to make the case for parks, but also to identify key sites in the town which might be usefully developed as recreation grounds. The emphasis of the successful submissions, bound and published in a slim volume in 1875, was that the westerly development of the seafront did not meet the needs of the residents of the industrial suburbs. J. Roberts's second-prize essay noted, 'Swansea has already become a large town, but saving her beautiful beach and her two parks (some miles away from the very class that stand in most need of them) she is literally bereft of a healthy circulation of pure air so essential to life.'<sup>56</sup> Looking forward, he predicted, 'The suburban inhabitants comprise chiefly the working section of the people, so that the present suburbs will become, no doubt, in time the heart of Swansea.'<sup>57</sup> Thomas himself argued that:

Some of our public men boast of what they call our 'noble sands' as the people's inheritance, as all sufficient for health and recreation. In answer to this I would state that our sands are covered by the tide twice a day, thus rendering their use for recreation purposes only partial at the best.<sup>58</sup>

William Thomas had some success in winning over influential supporters to his cause, even before the publication of the prize essays. In 1874, John Dillwyn Llewelyn, owner of the extensive Penllergare estate, north of Swansea, donated forty-two acres of farm land at Cnap Llwyd, situated on an elevated site some two miles from the town centre, for development as a public park.<sup>59</sup> The gift fitted William Thomas's criteria perfectly. It was within easy reach of the industrial populations of Morryston and Landore and, with Llewelyn also footing the bill for the cost of converting the land into a park,

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<sup>55</sup> Jones, 'The City and its Villages', p. 82.

<sup>56</sup> *Prize Essays on the Desirability and Advantages of Recreation Grounds for Swansea* (Swansea: Cambrian Book Publishing Company, 1875), p. 55.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>58</sup> *The Cambrian*, 6 April 1883, quoted in Owen, *Swansea's Earliest Open Spaces*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Skinner, 'Parc Llewelyn: John Dillwyn Llewelyn's People's Park', *Gower*, 57 (2006), 59-69.

even the voices of economy in the town could not oppose the scheme.<sup>60</sup> When the park officially opened in 1878, it was the occasion of much public celebration in the town and the initiative won praise from neighbouring urban communities. The Cardiff newspaper, *The Western Mail*, despite reporting sceptically on the need for parks in its own vicinity,<sup>61</sup> voiced its approval of the initiative in Swansea:

It is not often that such a display is seen in Swansea; it will probably be many years before a similar sight is witnessed. Every hillock was crowded and the testimony of all was that the magnificent gift of Mr Llewelyn had been acknowledged in the most fitting and munificent manner by the worthy mayor [...] The carriages of the chief inhabitants of the town lined the grand walks of the park which is destined to be of so much advantage to the crowded and hardworking inhabitants of Landore, Morriston and the surrounding district.<sup>62</sup>

Despite its success, the ‘Peoples’ Park’, as it became known, did not permanently divert the recreational focus inland. Almost as soon as the new park had opened, the focus of the efforts of Swansea’s park promoters switched southwards, back towards the bay and, in particular, to the task of securing a parcel of land on the St Helen’s estate, close to Brynmill, which was about to undergo development as an area of residential housing. Two factors (apart from the fact that an inland park had now been provided) were paramount in causing this re-direction of effort towards the establishment of a park on this sea-side site. The first was the establishment of a tramway system in the town, and the second was the visit of the Glamorgan Agricultural Society to Swansea for the occasion of its annual show in 1878.

The development, from the 1870s, of a tramway network in Swansea gave the residents of the industrial suburbs a cheap and easy means of movement to and from the town centre. The town’s tramway promoters, meanwhile, in common with their counterparts in other towns and cities,<sup>63</sup> were keenly aware of the potential passenger demand by recreational users. Crucially, they planned the town’s new public transport network with due respect for the existing Oystermouth tramroad, which had been conveying passengers along the bay to Mumbles in a horse-drawn carriage on rails, since the first decade of the nineteenth century. The prospectus for the new company stated, ‘It is

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<sup>60</sup> ‘The Editor’s Proem’, in *Prize Essays*, p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> See for example *The Western Mail*, 27 June 1874.

<sup>62</sup> *The Western Mail*, 4 October 1878.

<sup>63</sup> See for example the role of the Belfast Tramways Corporation in developing parks and playgrounds, in Scott, *A Breath of Fresh Air*, pp. 81-96.

proposed to ask for powers by agreement to acquire the Oystermouth Tramway, and by connecting the proposed new Tramways therewith, through communication will be afforded between Swansea, the Mumbles and Morriston.<sup>64</sup> These plans negated some of the concerns expressed in earlier decades about the remoteness of the town's industrial population from the bay. As the *Western Mail* observed in July 1878, in an article supporting the development of St Helen's field as a park,

The question of distance between the field and the upper part of the town is now disposed of, being solved by the tramway, which runs between the two points (or will do so in a very short time) every half-hour in the day. There will then be a Park Llewelyn for the Morriston and Landore end, and the St Helen's field for the western extremity, with the tramcars continually running between the two for the convenience of all at both extremities.<sup>65</sup>

Voices from within Swansea concurred. 'A Man-about-Town' writing in the *Swansea Weekly Mail* acknowledged

the complete change wrought in the aspect of affairs by the introduction of the tramway system into the borough. Space is annihilated, and many objections which recently existed are now entirely swept away by the rapidity and cheapness with which people can travel from one end of the borough to the other.<sup>66</sup>

The event which really served to demonstrate this accessibility, as well as the attractiveness and spaciousness of St Helen's field as an area for public recreation, was the visit to Swansea in July 1878 of the Glamorgan Agricultural Society. Annual shows by national and local associations devoted to the promotion of agricultural improvement were an established feature of the summer calendar in Britain by the 1870s. They were usually held in, or as close as possible to, populous towns in order to secure large attendances, but with cattle shows and implement trials an intrinsic part of proceedings a spacious outdoor venue was essential to the successful staging of a show.<sup>67</sup> Swansea's corporation consented to the use of St Helen's field by the

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<sup>64</sup> *Statement in support of the system of street improvements and tramways for Swansea, proposed by the Swansea Tramways and Improvements Company Ltd.* (Swansea: Swansea Tramways and Improvements Company, 1874), p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> *The Western Mail*, 15 July 1878.

<sup>66</sup> Article reproduced in *The Western Mail*, 12 August 1878.

<sup>67</sup> Nicholas Goddard, *Harvests of Change. The Royal Agricultural Society of England, 1838-1988* (London: Quiller Press, 1988), p. 38.

Glamorgan Agricultural Society for its 1878 show, and the event set an important precedent. 'A Man-about-Town' explained,

Those who saw the very excellent arrangements made for the show, the roomy field, the broad expanse of sea and sky, the sunshine, the happy crowds roaming about over the greensward, with ample room to knock about without inconvenience or discomfort, must have been convinced that to have such a sanitary acquisition lost to the town forever would be to perpetuate an evil where a great public good presents itself.<sup>68</sup>

The staging of the agricultural show on St Helen's field, he argued, also indirectly highlighted the problem of relying solely on the beach as the town's recreational area: 'where would the agricultural show have taken place if the sea and the sands had been the only available spots?'<sup>69</sup>

The agricultural show helped the town's leading park advocates, including William Thomas of Lan and George Grant Francis, to overcome the claims that the western end of Swansea was 'amply provided with open spaces'.<sup>70</sup> But the support which gathered behind the idea of a park at St Helen's after the week-long cattle show did not produce instant results. It took another decade for the land to be acquired and the new Victoria Park was eventually opened in 1887.<sup>71</sup> This rate of progress was not unusually slow. It was in the same year that the town council in Cardiff entered formal negotiations with the Marquis of Bute over the securing of Cathays Park for the public.<sup>72</sup> There, the staging of the Royal Agricultural Society of England's annual show on the Cathays site in 1871 was also influential,<sup>73</sup> but debates were even more protracted because of the high cost and extent of the land, which one commentator has described as 'the largest central parkland of any British city'.<sup>74</sup> It took until the end of the century for the fifty-nine acres to be acquired for £158,000.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Swansea Weekly Mail*, reproduced in *The Western Mail*, 10 August 1878.

<sup>69</sup> *The Western Mail*, 12 August 1878.

<sup>70</sup> Alderman Jenkins speaking at a town council meeting, quoted in *The Western Mail*, 15 July 1878.

<sup>71</sup> Owen, *Swansea's Earliest Open Spaces*, pp. 50-59.

<sup>72</sup> W. Nelmes, 'A Brief History of Cardiff Parks', *Reports and Transactions of the Cardiff Naturalists' Society*, 87 (1957-58), 8-9.

<sup>73</sup> The use of the land at Cathays for the show was permitted by the Marquis of Bute. See *Records of the County Borough of Cardiff*, vol. 5, ed. by John H. Matthews (Cardiff: Cardiff Corporation 1903), p. 472.

<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Whittle, *The Historic Gardens of Wales. An Introduction to Parks and Gardens in the History of Wales* (London: HMSO, 1992), p. 78.

<sup>75</sup> Nelmes, 'A Brief History of Cardiff Parks', p. 9.

The close correlation in the timing of park developments in Cardiff and Swansea was just one facet of the growing rivalry between the two towns by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In particular, Cardiff's demographic advance to the position of most populous town in Wales by 1871, and its elevation to city status in 1905, came as a body blow to Swansea which had, since the 1840s, seen itself as Wales's principal town.<sup>76</sup> The keen sense of civic rivalry between the two urban centres had a visible impact on contemporary thinking about parks and about the use and appearance of the seafront in Swansea. Developments began in Cardiff, in the decade before the First World War, to transform Cathays into a new civic quarter with key municipal buildings positioned around a series of public gardens. The lavish new city hall, museum and county offices framed the Alexandra Garden, the Gorsedd Garden and the Friary Garden, and signalled Cardiff's new city status. In doing so, the bar of urban aggrandisement was set for other aspirant Welsh 'cities in waiting'.

Swansea had nothing to rival this grand new civic precinct, but the town's planners and architects saw opportunities to compete by using the bay as the backdrop for a similarly conceived civic quarter in Swansea. A plan for how this might be achieved was published by the civil engineer W. St. John Hancock, who drew up proposals for a distinct 'civic centre' of public offices in Swansea, at the seafront-end of a grand avenue, linking the town with the beach. The plans were published in a series of articles in the *Cambria Daily Leader* setting out this scheme for 'A Greater Swansea' in which Hancock mapped out what he called his 'Vision of a beautiful city', the 'town of the future'. The rhetoric was clearly influenced by the architectural ideas of the day, with pioneering town planners such as Sir Patrick Geddes and Ebenezer Howard advocating the harmonization of the natural and urban environments and the creation of garden suburbs and garden cities,<sup>77</sup> and architects and engineers in other coastal and riverside towns in Britain putting forward schemes for the beautification and enhancement of urban waterfronts.<sup>78</sup>

The role of the seafront was key in Hancock's vision. He proposed the removal of the gaol and gasworks which he saw as a blight on the foreshore area. 'A jail on a central sea-front of such a town', he claimed, 'could only

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<sup>76</sup> See Louise Miskell, 'The Making of a New "Welsh Metropolis": Science, Leisure and Industry in Early-Nineteenth-Century Swansea', *History*, 88 (2003), 32-52.

<sup>77</sup> For Geddes' ideas, see Helen Meller, *Patrick Geddes, Social Evolutionist and City Planner* (London: Routledge, 1990). For Howard, see P. Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 87-108.

<sup>78</sup> See for example, Bob Harris, "'City of the Future": James Thomson's Vision of the City Beautiful', in *Victorian Dundee. Image and Realities*, ed. by Louise Miskell, Christopher A. Whatley and Bob Harris (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999), pp. 169-83.



have been thought of in the early Victorian and pre-Victorian period.<sup>79</sup> These improvements would allow the town to draw in more visitors during the summer season. And with this aim in mind the centre point of his plan was the construction of 'A Great Central Avenue' linking the seafront with the residential quarter of the town at St James's Church:

The plan herewith involves a wooded avenue 2,200 feet long and 100 feet wide, leading to an esplanade and pier 150 feet wide [...] Let the reader give his imagination scope and place himself on the beach 200 yards east of the Slip, looking directly over St James's Church, he will then see with his mind's eye what a magnificent vista such an avenue would give of palatial town residences, backed by a wooded hill district of literally splendid dimensions and attractiveness. He would see in the near foreground the charming Victoria Park, at the entrance to which would be a circus forming the civic centre of Swansea, where would be assembled public offices and all the panoply worthy of such a city.<sup>80</sup>

In common with many similar schemes of this period, Hancock's plan remained unrealized, but his attempt to maximize the natural capital of the foreshore by locating major urban buildings along its fringes illustrated how, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the sea-front was once again being viewed as Swansea's greatest natural asset. Over the previous half-century, the growth of docks to serve the needs of commercial shipping had been accommodated, but the recreational and aesthetic value of the bay had not been superseded. In fact, prompted by George Grant Francis, Swansea citizens began, from the 1860s onwards, to widen their perception of the town's seaside recreational strip to encompass the western coastline to Mumbles and Gower. This re-definition of the 'Greater Resort' of Swansea can be seen as part of what one historian has referred to as the town's 'civic renaissance' at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>81</sup> This was, at least in part, a response to the rise of Cardiff and, by implication, Swansea's relegation to 'second town' status.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> W. St. John Hancock, 'Town of the Future', article 11, *A Greater Swansea* (Swansea: Cambria Daily Leader, 1912).

<sup>80</sup> Hancock, 'A Vision of a Beautiful City', in *A Greater Swansea*.

<sup>81</sup> Neil Evans, "'A Nation in a Nutshell': the Swansea Disestablishment Demonstration of 1912 and the Political Culture of Edwardian Wales", in *From Medieval to Modern Wales. Historical Essays in Honour of Kenneth O. Morgan and Ralph A. Griffiths*, ed. by R. Rees Davies and Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 214.

<sup>82</sup> This was acknowledged in Moore, *Borough Pocket Guide to Swansea*, p.13.

What the evidence presented in this study suggests is that rather than snuffing out seaside leisure activity in Swansea, dock building propelled the issue of recreation into the centre of public debate in the town. It was the geography of Swansea's demographic development, and particularly the rapid growth of populations in outlying industrial suburbs to the north and east of the town which, perhaps more than the construction of the docks, changed the relationship of the town with its seafront. For large sections of the working population resident on the northern fringes of the town in the 1860s and 1870s, the sands were a distant prospect. The need to create recreational areas closer to hand for these people led Swansea's park pioneers to down-play the value of the bay as a public open space in favour of securing green spaces closer to the inland industrial suburbs. But in the longer term, this attempt to divert planning and resources inland and to re-position the town's hub away from its coastline was short-lived. The size of the bay and the appropriation by visiting sea-bathers, via a newly-developed tram network, of the coastal strip west of the town centre, towards Mumbles and Gower, meant seaside recreation was possible even though dock building continued. By the early twentieth century, planners and civic visionaries were once again focusing on the bay and its attractions as the town's main asset.

One of the aims of this paper has been to show that there is some value in viewing the phenomenon of contested seaside space as part of the wider debate on urban open spaces in the nineteenth century. The evidence from Swansea shows that, by the middle of the century, urban leaders were considering and debating the role of the 'sands' in the wider context of the provision of recreation grounds for the working classes. This issue meant that the relationship between the town and the seaside was being re-examined and re-considered throughout the second half of the nineteenth century as the population increased numerically and spread geographically to inland suburbs. The problem that faced urban leaders in the 1870s and 1880s, as well as the town planners of the next generation, was how best to capitalize on the natural advantages of a seafront situation. Swansea's unusual blend of industry, maritime commerce, and leisure may mean that this case study is atypical, and not easily compared with the experience of other European coastal communities, but the foregoing examination of its docks, parks and beaches may point to the potential value of bringing histories of these usually separately considered phenomena into closer communication.