

# Old Trafford – the evolution of a Victorian suburb

## Introduction

Think of Old Trafford and two images will no doubt form in the mind's eye: cricket and football. Indeed, Old Trafford has been home to the Lancashire County Cricket Club and Manchester United Football Club for over a hundred years now, but there is much more to Old Trafford than these monuments to fine sporting endeavours. During the nineteenth century Old Trafford quickly gained a reputation for being an exclusive suburb in which to reside and to visit for genteel leisure activities. The area became the preserve of the professional and the rich who lived in splendid villas overlooking green pastures and farmsteads. Development was very much influenced by local landowners, principally the de Trafford family, who governed the kind and extent of building which was to take place upon their land. They did this to ensure that the suburb remained salubrious and attractive to the *nouveau riche*.

As the wealth of Manchester increased, the city population began to move out into the fringe areas and gradually a wave of road building and house construction began to envelop Old Trafford, changing it from a predominantly rural area to a suburban one.

At the same time, a change was taking place in the composition of the local population. As well as playing host to those with an opulent lifestyle, the area began to attract residents with lower incomes and professional status and, as a result, a kaleidoscope of housing styles emerged, reflecting the relative wealth of the inhabitants. This picture did not remain for very long, however. By the late 1890s many wealthy Old Traffordians had left the area, preferring the leafy lanes of Cheshire, and light industry had become established within the vicinity. Heavy industry had also secured a foothold in the newly created Trafford Park industrial estate located nearby. This enterprise had developed following the sale of Trafford Hall and grounds to Trafford Park Estates Ltd. So, over a fifty year period the countenance of Old Trafford had changed radically, a process accelerated by the removal of the de Trafford family to their London address and the consequent decline in interest in a place they had dominated and influenced for so long.

As we journey through the history of Old Trafford during the mid to late 19th and early 20th centuries we shall take time to look at the physical development which gave it substance, examine the leisure pursuits which gave it the reputation as the playground of Manchester, look at the initiatives that made it the showpiece for art and industry for a worldwide audience, and meet some of the people and personalities which gave it character. As we shall see, there is much more to Old Trafford than cricket and football.

### Chapter 3 Old Trafford – a cultural paradise

During the nineteenth century Old Trafford was not only a salubrious suburb in which to live, but a place which hosted prestigious cultural and leisure activities for Manchester's rich and famous. It was also the venue for two major events which drew worldwide attention. By the 1890s amenities for the less affluent emerged, demonstrating that social change in the area also brought about cultural change.

During the early nineteenth century it became fashionable for wealthy Victorians to spend their leisure time visiting botanical gardens. At this time few private dwellings had gardens and the development of botanical gardens enabled people to pursue an interest in horticultural matters and to enjoy open spaces. It was in 1831 that the Old Trafford Botanical Gardens, located close to the de Trafford residence, were opened to the public. They were hailed as 'the metropolis of horticulture outside London' and 'a pleasant oasis outside the miles ... of brickwork and crowded streets'. This was quite an accolade. The idea to create the gardens came from the Manchester Botanical and Horticultural Society, formed in 1829. The society searched for a tract of land to cultivate and develop, though the means by which they did this was a little odd as it involved eminent scientist, John Dalton, travelling out into the suburbs to test the leaves of the trees for smoke and dust with a white handkerchief! After much deliberation Dalton chose Old Trafford as the ideal venue. The Old Trafford Botanical Gardens subsequently played an important part in middle and upper class society, attracting affluent residents from the immediate neighbourhood and those living in the built-up areas of Manchester who sought a reprieve from the rigours of city and business life.

One particularly prestigious event in the history of the gardens was the 1857 Art Treasures Exhibition. The Exhibition mirrored the Dublin Exhibition of 1853 and the Paris Exhibition of 1855 and its purpose was to provide a showcase for the fine and decorative arts from all over the world. The choice of location was an extremely important factor, given the need to exercise care over the housing of expensive and delicate paintings and objects. A smoke-free atmosphere was required and after considering such matters as the direction of the wind – to ensure that smoke did not blow in the direction of the exhibition – and transport access, the Old Trafford

Botanical Gardens were chosen as the most suitable site. A total of thirty-five acres was commandeered, seventeen acres of which was leased from de Trafford for one year. A temporary railway station was built close by so that visitors could journey to the venue with ease.

The exhibition was opened by Prince Albert on 5 May, 1857 and visited by Queen Victoria a month later. It proved to be a huge success, with over a million visitors, including many eminent guests – the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Tennyson and heads of state from other countries. One contemporary writer made the following observations about the events: 'Manchester was, for the time being at least, a centre for wealth, dress and fashion. Ladies from far and wide vied with one another in the richness and elegance of their costumes and in this way added to the general charm of the place and its surroundings.' This shows the extent to which the area was regarded as an important social and cultural haven at that time.

The exhibition was a great success. It was not only a marvellous accomplishment in its own right, but a catalyst for the future. For instance, the Art Treasures Exhibition Committee donated over £4,000 to Mr Charles Halle, a little-known musical conductor at the time. The grant enabled him to enlarge his orchestra and provide daily concerts for visitors to the exhibition. He soon became well established and, having gained public acclaim, began a series of weekly concerts at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, in January 1858. Out of these obscure beginnings came the creation of what was to become a renowned, world-famous orchestra.

The Botanical Gardens did not, however, have the monopoly of cultural activity in the area. The Pomona Gardens, situated near the confluence of the Cornbrook and Irwell Rivers, was equally popular with the well-to-do. It had been developed during the 1830s as a pleasure ground for the affluent and visitors could enjoy a pleasant stroll through the apple orchard or participate in evening sports during the Summer months. In 1842 the Manchester and Salford Regatta was established along the River Irwell, from the Regent Road bridge in Salford to Throstle's Nest in Old Trafford and this proved to be very popular. This particular venture was financially supported by Salford landowner, Lord Francis Egerton, resident of Swinton Hall, and

other wealthy individuals from the locality. A little later, in 1857, we also see the establishment of the Manchester Cricket Club, which moved from its grounds in nearby Hulme to the Warwick Road site. This, another popular leisure facility catering for the wealthy middle classes, later became the Lancashire Cricket Club.

So, it is clear that Old Trafford, during the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s was a cultural haven for the wealthy elite of Manchester. This picture began to change during the late 1860s. By this time part of Old Trafford had undergone physical and social change and this was reflected in the changing nature of local leisure amenities. The Pomona Gardens changed quite radically, following their purchase in 1868 by Mr James Reilly. He built a large 'palace', whose hall could accommodate nearly 30,000 people. His aim was to develop attractions that would cater for a wide audience. The various diversions included dancing, refreshments, sideshows given by travelling showmen and tightrope walking feats by the famous Blondin. Reilly also built an agricultural hall in which cattle and horse fairs were regularly held and he later reinstated the Regatta, which had gone into demise in the 1850s.

The Pomona Palace and grounds were also the venue for political meetings. In 1869, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli gave a speech to an audience of around 100,000 about the disestablishment of the Irish Church and in 1872 he received a deputation of Lancashire Conservatives outside the palace. Other eminent politicians who gave speeches here included Conservatives Lord Randolph Churchill and Lord Salisbury, and Liberals John Bright and the Marquis of Huntington. In June 1884 one such meeting held in the Dancing Hall drew around 18,000. Other meetings were being held simultaneously on the same day in the agricultural hall, which shows the popularity of the place and its importance as the hotbed of political debate.

By the 1880s leisure facilities had begun to diversify and incorporate a more varied programme in order to meet the cultural and even political tastes of the local – and general – population. This trend was also evident in the changing activities of the Botanical Gardens. Thirty years after the Art Treasures Exhibition the gardens hosted yet another event, the Royal Jubilee Exhibition, the aim of which was to

commemorate the Jubilee of Queen Victoria's reign. The Exhibition, opened by the Prince and Princess of Wales on 4 May 1887, sought to portray the progress made within the industry during the Victorian era. The entire grounds of the Botanical Gardens were used for the event and a massive glass, timber and iron building was constructed to house the exhibits. The displays not only showed the extent of industrial development throughout the country, but they gave local firms the opportunity to advertise their products. This revealed Manchester's pride in its economic, commercial and industrial success. Indeed, by the 1880s Manchester had expanded and diversified its industrial interests and had re-established its premier economic position. The event, attracting over four million people, was even more popular than the Art Treasures Exhibition. It was visited by the Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone, the Crown Prince of Greece, the Princes of Japan and Thailand, several Princes of India, the Duke of Cambridge, the Duke and Duchess of Teck with their daughter Princess Victoria (who later became Queen Mary, Consort of George V), and members of the acting profession, including Sarah Bernhardt.

The Royal Jubilee Exhibition differed from the 1857 Art Treasures Exhibition not only in its theme, but in another respect – the social status of its visitors. The Art Treasures Exhibition catered primarily for the wealthy elite, but the Royal Jubilee extended a welcome to members of the general public regardless of class. This had implications for the future of the Botanical Gardens, as identified by the Horticultural Society in its 1888 Annual Report: 'If the more general use of the gardens by the "masses" has led to a falling off of the "classes", in other words, the fashionable subscribers, the council have the problem presented to them of marching with the general taste of the times or catering for the exclusives.' Despite this perceived predicament, the council, in 1889, invited the 'working classes' to visit the gardens free of charge. As a result, 13,000 people attended and, having appreciated the experience, implored the council to make it an annual event. This, however, was not to happen. By the 1890s, the fashion for such leisure pursuits had begun to wane, a process sparked off by the migration of the wealthy out into the countryside and the fact that house building allowed for the development of private gardens. So, the Botanical Gardens went into a hasty decline. The Pomona Gardens suffered the same fate. The construction of the Manchester Ship Canal during the 1870s and 1880s led to the dismantling of the Pomona Palace and the closure of the grounds.

The site was subsequently occupied by warehouses for the Calico Printers Association.

Despite the demise of the Botanical and Pomona Gardens, other leisure facilities catering for the middle classes did flourish in Old Trafford during the 1880s. These included the Manchester and County Gun Club, the Old Trafford Bowling Club, and golfing at the course near to the Botanical Gardens. A number of tennis clubs were established in the area, most notably the Northern Tennis Club, opened in 1881 and located along Skerton Road, close to Seymour Grove. An expensive annual subscription meant that membership was confined to the wealthy. However, within twenty years the club's popularity had gone into decline and it moved out to Didsbury, a number of miles away.

At the same time leisure pursuits catering for the less affluent blossomed. During the 1880s, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Company came to Brook's Bar and provided entertainment in the form of mock battles, presentations of 'how the west was won' and exhibitions of North American Indian customs and dances. Old Trafford was also the venue for Barnum and Bailey's travelling circus which 'came to town' during April and May 1898. It was a huge success, described as 'the world's grandest, largest, best amusement institution' and 'the greatest show on earth'. Such accolades certainly attracted the crowds – on one particular day nearly 12,000 visitors passed through the gates. The actual location of the circus was in the grounds of the Trafford Park Industrial Estate which still retained an oasis of parkland which was used for rallies, exhibitions, agricultural shows and sporting events. Visitors could also enjoy boating trips on the lake. In fact, Trafford Park was originally planned as a garden suburb with surrounding parks and a racecourse. However, this idea was rejected in favour of building an industrial estate, but at least some kind of compromise was reached in the early days. It was a couple of decades after the opening of the estate that leisure pursuits at Trafford Park finally gave way to further industrial development.

The 1890s saw residential growth within the Park Avenue area of Old Trafford. Some of this land was retained for recreational purposes. Hullard Park, situated near the former site of Hullard Hall and gardens, was created in 1890 and Seymour Park,

located between Northumberland Road and Seymour Grove was opened in 1906. These were regarded as important areas of retreat for those living in the surrounding built up environment.

The early 1900s saw the further demise of leisure facilities for the middle classes and the rise in those for the less wealthy. By 1907 the site of the Botanical Gardens had been swallowed up by the White City Entertainments consortium and had developed into an amusement park catering for a wide range of people, as asserted by the organisers in one of their reports: 'innocent pleasures for the masses and classes has at all times been the aim of the management.' Such pleasures included a fun factory with cartoons and concavatures (mirrors), an aeroflyte, scenic and miniature railways, skating rinks in the Great Pavilion, the Brooklyn Cat Walk, Japanese Puzzle House and helter skelter. Other leisure facilities developed during the early years of the twentieth century included the public baths built in 1904 and located along Northumberland Road and the opening of the Manchester United Football Ground near to Trafford Park in 1910. The ground, bought for £60,000, was built to accommodate 100,000 spectators. The move of the club from Clayton to Old Trafford indicates that the area was yet again the preferred location for leisure pursuits for the less wealthy.

During our meanderings around the cultural and leisure facilities of the area we have glimpsed the contrast between the Old Trafford of the 1830s and that of the early 1900s and witnessed the changing type of amenities offered throughout the intervening years. As we have seen, the area, one time cultural haven to which the wealthy travelled in search of refined leisure pursuits, became the location for numerous diversions for the less affluent. By the early 1900s such amusements had increased and ousted the middle class amenities which had either closed due to lack of support or had relocated elsewhere. In the case of the Pomona Gardens, it was industrialisation which heralded its demise. Similar interests were also behind the decision to convert Trafford Park into an industrial estate rather than to develop it into a garden suburb.

It is therefore apparent that social and industrial change in Old Trafford and its environs brought about and influenced cultural change in the area and led to the

diversification of leisure pursuits for a wide ranging clientele. This natural consequence of suburban development was no doubt inevitable and began a process which was impossible to reverse.