

# Power to the People

## A talk by Holly Grange, Exhibitions Curator at Leeds Art Gallery

Hello, I would like to tell you a story about the power of art and the power of people and how, when the two unite with shared aims, the seemingly impossible can be made possible.

This is a story about how a stretch of land in Leeds was secured for the working people of Leeds and remains to this day one of the best-loved and most visited greens-spaces in the city.

But where am I talking about? Here are a few clues...

- If you live in the North East of the city this might be a good place to walk off your Sunday lunch.
- The second clue: In the 1980s, if you lived in Leeds, you may have been lucky enough to see Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, Genesis or U2 play here
- The third clue - There is Great scenery on offer including huge parks, flower gardens, a pond and plenty of wildlife.' Including 30 species of butterflies and a community of lemurs (which I am told the collective noun for is a conspiracy of lemurs!)

The place in question is, you may have guessed it, is Roundhay Park.

One of the biggest city parks in Europe. It covers more than 700 acres (2.8 km<sup>2</sup>) of parkland, lakes, woodland and gardens which are owned by Leeds City Council. The park is one of the most popular attractions in Leeds; with nearly a million people visit each year.

But travel back in time nearly 150 years ago and the park as we know it today was merely a collection of mansions and grounds owned by the wealthy gentlemen of Leeds – industrialists and aristocrats, who preferred to keep their view of the landscape unsullied by the general public and the land around their houses distinctly private.

The year was 1871 and the particulars for over 150 acres of land had come up for sale in the neighbourhood of Roundhay- formerly the family seat of the Nicholson Family. The sale particulars extolled the virtues of the area “Roundhay is the most charming suburb of Leeds, presenting a magnificent landscape unsullied by the smoke of the town, broken by hill and dale, adorned by rich Plantations and fine Parks, and studded with Gentlemen’s Seats and Homesteads’. They stated that the land and property would be of interest, and I

quote, “not only to gentlemen seeking residencies but also to capitalists who may be desirous of profiting by its development.”

However, what they hadn't bargained for was one man having a radically different opinion of things. This man was John Barran, Mayor Leeds, who declared – “Here we have an estate which would make an ideal playground for the people of this town. Future generations will remember us with gratitude as they stroll along the pleasant walks and enjoy the ease and shade of the trees.”

With one eye fixed on these future generations, John Barran became embattled in leading a hard-fought and bruising campaign to acquire the land for a public park.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised when we hear of Barran's back-story that he was very much someone to 'plow his own furrow' and was not easily swayed or dissuaded by the opinion of others as he was very independent of mind and spirit. When Barran was just 21 he left home and sailed to Hull – boarding the new railway to Leeds to look for an opening in this bustling industrial town. Just 10 years later and he could be found running his own ready-made clothing business. Energetic and dedicated – he was described as 'like a spinning jenny, in constant motion.'

As his business expanded he moved his home to Chapel Allerton Hall and his factory to Park Row. Then in 1877 he designed a new factory and warehouse in Park Square. If you've ever visited Park Square- I am sure you would definitely have noticed it. Eye-catching, fantastical, with minarets and parapet, it looks like it's been magically transported from Moorish Spain into the middle of Leeds.

As the local Thoresby Society states – ‘This imaginative building was planned with care for his employees. Barran had a reputation for good conditions and fair pay, unlike many of the sweat-shops and wretched wages in the clothing trade elsewhere in the city.’

It would seem by all accounts that John Barran was someone who cared deeply about the working man and woman, and crucially their health and wellbeing. Perhaps then, it is unsurprising then that it was Barran that spear-headed the campaign for a city park in Roundhay that would cure the malaises of the city-folk whose lungs were increasingly being clogged by smoke and smog from the factories.

Barran and the Leeds City Council's appointed Barrister Mr Denison QC, summed up the argument thus *‘Populations of this kind (should) have some place where fresh air could be obtained, where the people could see green trees and green fields, and if they could enjoy a sight of water so much the better...because in Leeds trees absolutely refuse to grow. They had their pores choked with smoke from morning to night that they could not breathe... and in order to give the idea of the effect of smoke from the factories he might observe that in the surrounding countryside even the sheep are black.’*

The well-heeled residents of Roundhay, nicknamed at that time the 'Roundhay aristocracy' argued that the Mayor and city authority had no right to buy such land, and presented a petition to Parliament against the purchase. One of the most outspoken individuals was James Kitson, the famous locomotive engineer, bitterly opposed such a plan. Six years earlier he had purchased Roundhay Lodge. He couldn't face the idea of his work people being allowed access to his perimeter fence. Kitson feared that the opening of the park would lead to, in his words, 'unseemly behaviour'.

An amusing poster lampooning the Roundhay landowners was pasted throughout the streets of the town, which read:

"Citizens, The Commons of Leeds, assembled in their Town Hall, Decide to buy Roundhay Park. The aristocrats of Leeds petition against this purchase. Which is to win the day? A Score of private gentlemen in Leeds, and 300 Private Gentleman in the Hereditary Chamber? Or, a town with a quarter of a million inhabitants and the elected representatives of a nation of 30 million!"

A special act of parliament was required to permit the purchase of the land by the city authority as it exceeded the £50,000 limit they were allowed to spend on any single asset. With the auction looming and time being of the essence Barran and some other wealthy supporters stumped up the £139,000 to buy the land, with Barran placing himself in a hugely precarious financial position by re-mortgaging his own house in order to do so.

But purchasing the land was just the first step, Barran now had to persuade the parliament to pass the act. This was before the days of PowerPoint presentations drawn up to show the vision of landscape architects and park designers, and so Barran had to find a way to paint and picture and illustrate to the great and the good of parliament, some of whom may have never visited Leeds, the beauties of this potential park. Eventually he commissioned John Atkinson Grimshaw, a self-taught and then very famous local artist, to produce three paintings – that would serve as his visual argument to seduce and persuade.

In the 1970s – Leeds Art Gallery acquired one of the three paintings – which you can see here 'Tree Shadows on a Park Wall, Roundhay'

Here you can see the silhouette of a single figure walking along the cobbled street alongside what could be a perimeter wall separating the land from the people. Arching above the figure are large trees – their dark shadowy profiles contrasted against the almost acidic green sky- capturing during the gloaming or twilight – when the shadows seem to elongate and it's possible for the light and shadow to play tricks upon the eye.

This work was characteristic of Grimshaw's work at that time in that it was painted at dusk. These nocturnes, as they were called, was what he became most renowned for. They

were highly detailed, often combining topographical accuracy (sometimes using photography as an aid) with considerable atmosphere – which led to the famous American artist James McNeill Whistler commenting, ‘I considered myself the inventor of Nocturnes until I saw Grimmy's moonlit pictures.’

Popular support was rallied by holding large demonstrations and gathering in the lead up to the ‘Leeds Improvement Bill’ reaching the select committee. Hundreds marched through the street waving banners and singing songs accompanied by brass bands.

Over 50,000 walked to the park on Whit Monday with twice that number making the long journey the following day. Then at 3pm on the 8<sup>th</sup> June 1872 the band of the 4<sup>th</sup> West Yorkshire led the ‘Great People’s Demonstration’ through the streets, showing that the taxpayers of Leeds were definitely behind the scheme. The event was timed to perfection and the bill was passed.

Before I leave you I’d just like to introduce a special guest, our very own Leeds baird and comic Micky P Kerr, whose going to read a poem written by John Middlebrook the local Bramley poet read by ...

“Hurrah for Barran! What d’ye think abaght we Mayor nah?

Three cheers for Barran! Upwi t’cap an shaat ageaan hurrah

He’s gant is t’lad! Come what’s to think be what he’s dun to’day

Wah, it dussant matter much to me bud – somb’dy’ll hev to pay!

It’s t’grandest place- thah never saw, owd lad, a place so nice!

Thah shak’s thi head it’s true, I know, it’s a longish price;

But then it’s nowt for Leeds- they can rise it onny day

Can they? Well its reight to me, bud – sumb’dy’ll hev to pay!

Hey up for Leeds! I dunnot care hah big is t’debt at’s on!

We’ve gotten a rattlin paairk at last- all thanks to thee, Sir John

It can’t be bet all England throo – at least so judges say

An it isn't all that can't be bet! – there's a rattlin debt to pay!”

Thanks for that rousing recital Micky!

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored that close-to-home parks are crucial to communities' quality of life, particularly for those who do not have private gardens they can access. During this crisis, people have turned to their parks like never before—for fresh air, exercise, meditation, solace, and a much-needed break from the stresses and anxieties that life throws at us. Roundhay Park would have fulfilled this role for many Leeds residents this year.

In 1871 Barran understood that everyone should have access to the joy of nature, for the mental and physical health benefits, and also that access to this green space should be part of everyone's daily existence. And I hope you agree that it was worth the “rattling debt to pay.”

I hope you've enjoyed this tale of the founding of Roundhay Park and how the power of art and the people came together to create real political and social change for the people of Leeds.

Thank you for listening.

With special thanks to Steven Burt's 'An Illustrated History of Roundhay Park' (2000).