

## **Warriston Playing Fields**

*In 2015 the Society responded to a planning application from “Baseball Scotland” seeking to develop permanent playing facilities on the Warriston Playing Fields. This would have involved the construction of a hard surface “diamond” with pitcher’s mound and a 2 metre back-wall with higher fencing to be installed on the ground perimeter when games were in progress. Our assessment showed that these proposals were incompatible with the continued use of the playing fields for school sports as well as with the retention of the large chestnut tree in the centre of the ground.*

*As a result of our concerns about the baseball proposals the Society had some discussions with Council officials about their plans for future use of the playing fields. Although there is no indication that any major changes are imminent, there are clearly pressures on the budgets available for maintenance and improvement of playing fields like Warriston and the Council is therefore attracted by the idea that there may be opportunities to offset costs by sharing use of the playing fields with local sports clubs or other organisations. Council officials made clear that they would be interested to receive any proposals from members of the Society or from other local organisations for sharing use of the playing fields.*

*In these circumstances it is hard to know what the future may hold for the playing fields. The Society is aware that there is some legal protection against development of the Southern part of the playing fields but we are not clear whether a similar protection exists for the Northern part.*

*This seemed a good moment to reflect on the history of the playing fields. The following paragraphs are extracted, with grateful acknowledgment, from the fascinating research undertaken by Jeremy Norfolk in connection with the development of the Warriston Community Tennis Club. This revealed among other things that the original Warriston Tennis Club was one of the first tennis clubs in Scotland, having been founded in or before 1885 with five grass courts on the southern half of the present Warriston Playing Fields, then known as Warriston Park,*

*and a small pavilion on top of the broad bank which at that time divided the two halves of the field.*

Further back in time, the ground that now comprises Warriston Playing Fields was first laid out in something resembling its present form towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Until the bridge at Canonmills was built in the 1760s, the 'road' north from the Old Town passed through Broughton village, ran down to Canonmills, and from there followed the course of the present Warriston Road, crossing the river by ford (and stepping stones) about 100 yards upstream from the present bridge beside B&Q.

Following the building of the first bridge at Canonmills and the associated road (now Howard Place/Inverleith Row) running north from the bridge up to Ferry Road. Until this time, old maps show the land running down to the river to the south of Inverleith House and Warriston House (which stood on the top of the high ground behind Eildon Street, at the east end of the present Warriston Terrace) as open, uncultivated, rough pasture. A stream, starting roughly where the present pond in the Botanic Gardens is located, ran east towards the river, through the woodland below Warriston House, joining the river downstream of the weir beyond St Mark's Park. Between 1786 and 1804 a landscaping scheme turned the grounds into a home park for Warriston House with an ornamental pond at the base of the steep slope below the house (half way down which the present Eildon Street now lies) fed by the stream from the Botanic Gardens. This pond ran the length of the north side of the present playing field, starting roughly where the present building in the north-west corner of the field is located, running parallel to the present Eildon Street before curving gently south to end where the present east pavilion now stands. There was a small island towards its western end and in the middle it was crossed by a small bridge. A stream continued to run out of the east end of the pond, probably until the embankment was built for the railway and railway bridge in the mid-nineteenth century.

The other two sides of the triangle of ground on which the playing fields now lie were formed by a belt of trees, three or four deep. These trees ran down the east side of the new road, following the line of the present Howard Place houses, thus forming the western boundary of the park. The trees forming the eastern boundary ran parallel to the river, following the line of the present wall on the west side of Warriston Crescent. The two lines of trees came together close to the position of the present Orchard Bar to form the southern point of the triangle. A path ran through the trees all the way round the ground and around the pond, ending up back at Warriston House

The field changed little through the first half of the nineteenth century. The creation of Warriston Crescent and the building of the Warriston Crescent and Howard Place houses, which started in about 1815, had little impact. Howard Place replaced the belt of trees forming the western boundary and the wall along Warriston Crescent came to form the eastern boundary with some of the original belt of trees left inside the wall. According to one of the early plans for the northern extension of the New Town, it was originally intended that Warriston Crescent should in due course be extended northwards, crossing the Ferry Road just to the east of its present intersection with Warriston Road, and continuing on to Newhaven. Why this plan was dropped isn't clear, but it probably had something to do with the coming of the railway.

The Edinburgh Leith and Granton Branch of the railway was built in the late 1840s, with the lines from Leith and Granton coming together above the north-east corner of the field, to form Warriston Junction. The railway line and the associated bridge over the river and Warriston Road, which carried the line on towards Scotland Street Station and Waverley, involved the building of an embankment at this corner of the field, cutting the field off from the river, down to which it had previously run.

Sometime between 1856 and 1876 the pond was drained in preparation for the building of Eildon Street. Presumably, an underground course was found for the original stream (could it be that the present drainage problems in the north-east corner of the field are connected with this in some way?). Eildon Street was marked out at this time and the Victorian part was built between 1878 and 1888.

A plan dated 1878 shows both Eildon Street, noted as 'New Road to be called Eildon Street', and a street noted as 'Road to be called Warriston Terrace'. The latter is shown as running parallel to Eildon Street from the present gates into the Playing Fields from Inverleith Row, across the field and then turning south to join up with the end of Warriston Crescent. Although this road was never completed, some preparatory work appears to have been undertaken because all maps from this time on show the ground that had been marked out for the road as raised above the level of the ground to either side, probably to the height of Warriston Crescent. This broad bank now both enclosed the southern half of the field and divided it from the northern half. From about this time the history of the two parts of the field begins to diverge.

The southern part of the field began to be used, at least in part, for recreational purposes from about the middle of the century. Maps of this time show a rectangular bowling green located behind Howard Place to the North of the present Northern Bowling Club. By 1876/77, maps show the

rest of the southern half of the field, bounded by the (proposed Warriston Terrace) bank, as 'Cricket Ground'. The northern half of the field seems to have been still pastureland. From about this time, the southern half of the field is clearly differentiated on maps from the northern half and given the title 'Warriston Park'. Its use as a Cricket Ground cannot have lasted long since the Warriston Lawn Tennis Club, founded sometime before 1885, took over the central and southern part of Warriston Park from that date, where it remained for the next 25 years. An 1888 map also shows a second bowling green alongside the tennis grounds in the north-east corner of Warriston Park in front of the present no. 33 Warriston Crescent.

In about 1890, the present bowling club, the Northern Bowling Club, took over the piece of ground which it occupies to this day, south of the original bowling green. The Northern Bowling Club had been founded in 1879 and its original green (and curling pond) was on ground leased from Heriots Hospital to the north of Henderson Row. However, it was evicted in December 1889 when its initial lease came to an end. The central part of the present clubhouse on the south side of the green also dates from this time (it may in fact date back further to the club's foundation since the club's history records that the original Henderson Row pavilion was removed from its original site and re-erected at Warriston).

At about this time, around 1890, the northern part of the field also began to be used for sporting purposes and is shown on the 1893/94 Ordnance Survey map as the 'Institution Cricket Ground' - the Edinburgh Institution being the forerunner of Melville College, itself an ancestor of the present Erskine Stewart's Melville Schools. The two halves of the ground continued to be divided by the broad central bank with a boundary fence running in a straight line across the field from the present south gatepost of the Inverleith Row/Howard Place gate to the south end of the present east pavilion. A double line of trees had been planted along the bank on the Warriston Park side of the fence on either side of the Tennis Club pavilion. It is likely that the present chestnut tree in the middle of the Playing Fields is a survivor of these trees.

In 1908 the Edinburgh School Board acquired Warriston Park as a playing field for Board School children and immediately gave notice to the tennis club. In a separate transaction the previous year it had also acquired the northern half of the field and gave notice to the Institution. It appears that both transactions were subject to feu conditions intended to prevent the land being developed or used for any purpose other than recreation. It seems that Warriston may have been the first School Board playing field in Edinburgh and judging from contemporaneous reports, the use of public money for the purchases was not uncontroversial. Having acquired the ground, the School Board's first actions seems to have been to remove the

remaining trees, provoking concerns from local residents. The northern half of the field became known variously as the 'School Board Sports Ground', the 'Warriston Sports Ground', or the 'Education Committee Sports Ground', and it was on this half of the field that the Board concentrated its initial improvement efforts, with the scale of work again attracting accusations of extravagance. The level of the ground was raised to the same level as the bank dividing the two halves, probably to improve drainage, and the two present pavilions were built. A few years later similar improvements, but in this case also including the formation of tennis courts were undertaken on the southern part of the site.

The two halves of the field continued to be treated separately, at least up until 1955. The southern half of the field, which continued to be known as Warriston Park, seems to have continued to be used for a mixture of bowling and tennis with contemporary maps showing all three bowling greens and the tennis courts still in place in 1955.