

History of St Agnes Park

By 1850, Bristol was the third most unhealthy city in England. The movement of people from country to city to find employment in the growth of the industrial revolution resulted in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. So much land had been built upon that there was little open ground for recreation and the old city centre of Bristol had spread out into hitherto green suburbs. In this setting, many individuals and groups, from both religious and secular backgrounds campaigned on behalf of the urban poor. Reverend James M. Wilson, Headmaster of Clifton College, who also ran the College Mission in St. Agnes, was one such energetic campaigner.

St Agnes Park, together with the church, the Mission Hall and the Lodge was part of Wilson's plan for improving the lives of the urban poor in St Agnes. In 1882 he organised a petition to try to get the council to buy an old orchard on the site, offering to pay for laying out a park there if the council would look after it. Wilson's plan included a lodge, a refreshment room, a retiring room for ladies, a room for men, a fountain, an ornamental pond, a bandstand, a greenhouse and a summerhouse, two drinking fountains, storage sheds and shelters. The council eventually bought the orchard in 1885 but only agreed to one of the drinking fountains, but the rest were funded by public donation.

Eventually, the council added more features and improvements, including mens' toilets, tar paving, boundary shrubs and trees, and the appointment of a park keeper. By 1898 the City Forester was spending more on flowers for St. Agnes than any other public park in his care. Even up to the mid-1980s, the park was well known for its shrubberies, rockeries, a well used playground, and a pond in the north east corner.

St Agnes Park is the site of a model of community green space renewal. By 2000, it was a virtual no-go area frequented mainly by local drug dealers. The Victorian lodge house was derelict, the playground abandoned, with overgrown shrubs and dead trees making the park seem like a dark and dangerous place. Improvements in 2000 transformed the park into a clean, bright, welcoming community green space at the heart of a multi-cultural neighbourhood, with a resident park keeper.

The continued improvement of St Agnes Park has involved further significant works in 2010 including the creation of welcoming entrances, widened paths, new garden areas and an enlarged play area. These works involved extending the park across the pedestrianised Thomas Street and into St Paul's Adventure Playground. New historically sensitive park boundaries mark the extended footprint of the park.