

# OUTLINE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

## PROPOSED SITES FOR A NEW SCHOOL NEAR BIRKENHEAD PARK

### **Introduction**

Birkenhead Park was designated Grade I, by English Heritage, in 1995. The Park was created largely by Joseph Paxton and it is, arguably, his finest piece of landscape design. Opened in 1847, it was the first publicly-funded public park and it is widely recognised as a model which inspired the design of public parks for many decades thereafter. Most remarkably, it was Birkenhead Park which influenced Frederick Olmsted, when he created Central Park, completed in 1873 in the heart of New York. Above all, what Olmsted admired was the fact that Birkenhead Park was a, 'magnificent pleasure ground ... entirely, unreservedly and forever the people's own'.

In recognition of its importance, in 2008, a ten-year project to restore and develop the fabric of Birkenhead Park reached its conclusion. This included repairing and reinstating railings and gates, desilting and rebuilding all three of the lakes, renewing the paths and planting, re-opening the views and restoring the major ornamental structures on the site - the iconic Swiss Bridge, Roman Boathouse and the lodges which announce the six major entrances to the Park, including the impressive Grand Entrance Lodge. The work was undertaken for Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council (WMBC) by a design team led by Hilary Taylor Landscape Associates Ltd. (HTLA Ltd.), a practice with a national reputation for its work on the conservation and renewal of historic parks and gardens. The project was made possible by the award of grant-aid from numerous bodies, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, the Wirral Waterfront SRB, English Heritage and the Wolfson Foundation. The WMBC itself also made a considerable investment in the Park, in terms of capital funding and the time of expert staff. Perhaps most important of all, was WMBC's commitment to managing the Park, now and in the future, in a way which ensures that it lives up to Olmsted's description and serves as many people – local, national and international audiences – in as many ways as possible.

Birkenhead Park may be internationally significant – it attracts visitors from many parts of the world – but its key function is to benefit people who live in the neighbourhood. Therefore, WMBC has been actively engaged in pursuing links between the local community and the Park. This has meant that the Park, and its new, glass and steel, Visitor Centre, have provided opportunities and facilities for a vast range of individuals and interest groups, including families, local children, teenagers, retired people, sports men and women, those who want to enjoy simple exercise, to expand their education, or those who simply wish to celebrate their lives and their natural environment. Thus, the rejuvenated Birkenhead Park is fulfilling a vital role at the heart of what is recognised as a deprived area, and is instilling a growing sense of ownership and pride.

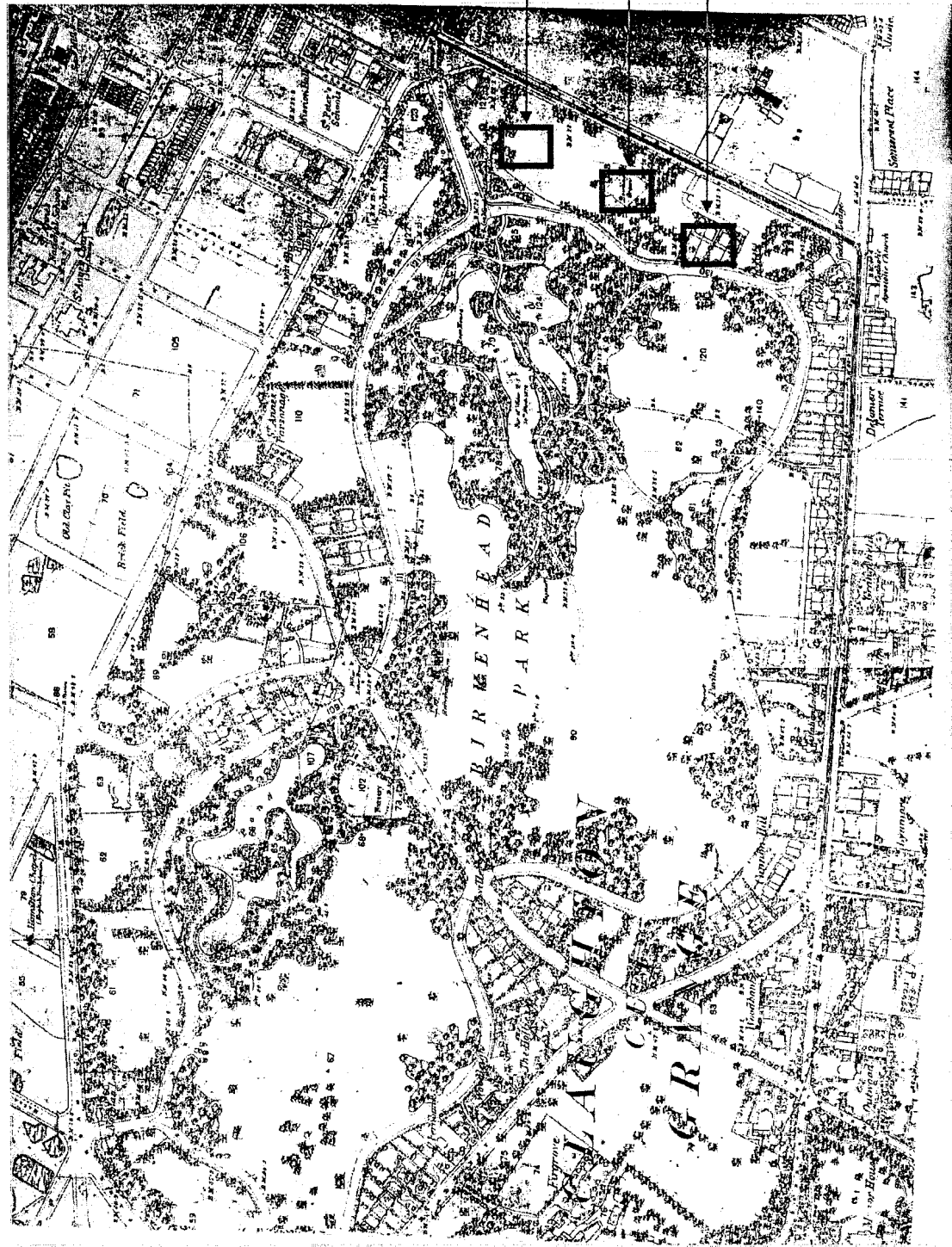
In summer, 2009, as part of its ongoing responsibilities for planning the future educational requirements of its children and young people, WMBC developed options for building a new school (amalgamating two old schools), serving a catchment area adjacent to the north and east of the Park.

The aim is to establish a new school that will develop close links with Birkenhead Park, thus reinforcing the relationship between the Park and its neighbourhood and helping to ensure that, in the future, the families of Birkenhead will feel attached to, and protective of, their remarkable Park.

Numerous options were considered by officers from WMBC for the location of a new school. Three were selected for further consideration. At this point, Hilary Taylor (of HTLA Ltd.) was asked to review the options that were being put forward, in order to offer advice about the advantages and disadvantages of the three possible sites for the new school, insofar as they would relate to, and have an impact upon, the historic fabric and function of Birkenhead Park itself.

Accordingly, on 18<sup>th</sup> August, Hilary Taylor visited the Park, and was able to consider the potential sites and discuss options with Bryan Gilbert, WMBC's Principal Architect, and Adam King, Birkenhead Park Manager, as well as other members of the team.

Illustration 2, highlighting areas associated with proposed locations for new primary school, Options 1, 2 and 3.



## ***Birkenhead Park – history and character***

This Park has a unique and fascinating history. By 1845, it was envisaged that Birkenhead would be a 'City of the Future'. In order to create an environment that provided for every need, the new city was to have opportunities for work, comfortable accommodation, education, worship, good health and exercise: the docks, decent housing, schools, hospital and the public park fulfilled these ambitions.

The Park was to be large and beautiful. Some 90 hectares were laid out and ornamented by Joseph Paxton, the Head Gardener to none other than the Duke of Devonshire, one of the most important landed families of the day. The Park originally comprised two units, the larger, Lower, Park and the Upper Park, the two being divided from one another by the Ashville Road. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Boothby Ground was added, fitting neatly into the triangle of land that separated the Lower from the Upper Park.

From the outset, it was envisaged that some of the capital required to lay out the new Park would be provided by selling off land on the periphery for housing, and applying the ground rents to the long-term maintenance of the site. The first auction of such land was held in 1846 and sales continued over the following decades. The requirement was that all the new villas would be built from brick or stone and, though there were to be no gates providing open access between the gardens of the houses and the Park, there were to be open railings, thus allowing an immediate interchange of view between private plot and public park.

Around the Park, separating the development plots from the ornamental landscape, Paxton designed a sinuous carriage drive. This remains one of the most significant features of the Park, providing for the circulation of vehicles and preventing conflict between traffic and pedestrians in the Park proper. This Park Drive also ensures that, for 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences, the majority of Birkenhead Park is readily accessible to all.

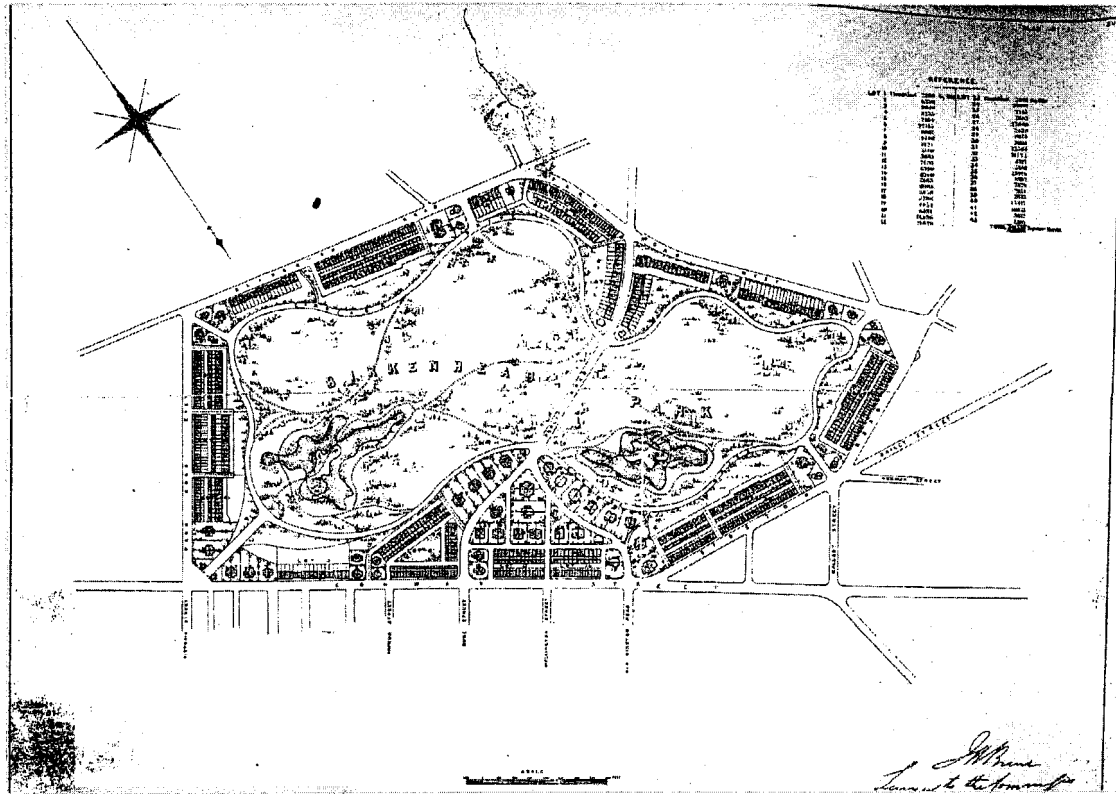
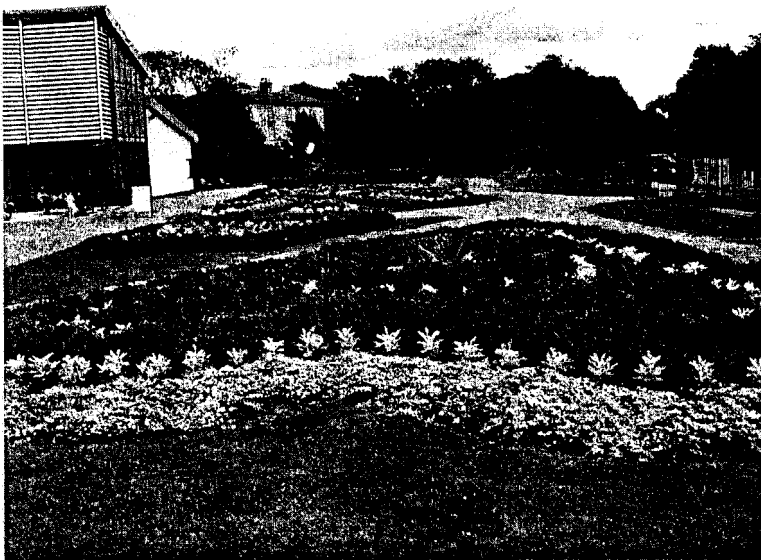


Illustration 3, showing the plan prepared in 1846, to accompany an invitation to purchase plots of land on which to build houses, on the periphery of the Park.

Throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Park continued to function as the heart of the community. Nevertheless, from the 1980s, investment was restricted and, by the 1990s, Birkenhead Park was beginning to show the impact of decades of reduced investment of funds and skill. The Park was still enjoyed by many people, but there were neither acceptable toilets nor any location to buy refreshments; the Swiss Bridge and Roman Boathouse were neglected and almost derelict; the Grand Entrance Lodge was run down; the trees and vegetation were overgrown and the lakes were damaged and unpleasant. In 1999, Hilary Taylor produced the *Restoration and Management Plan*, which provided the foundation for the successful application to the HLF's Urban Parks Programme, and the subsequent schedule of restoration.

As already noted, one of the most important outcomes of the renewal project was the creation of the new Visitor Centre, providing toilets, refreshments, and new opportunities for leisure and education.



*Illustration 4, the Visitor Centre in 2009*

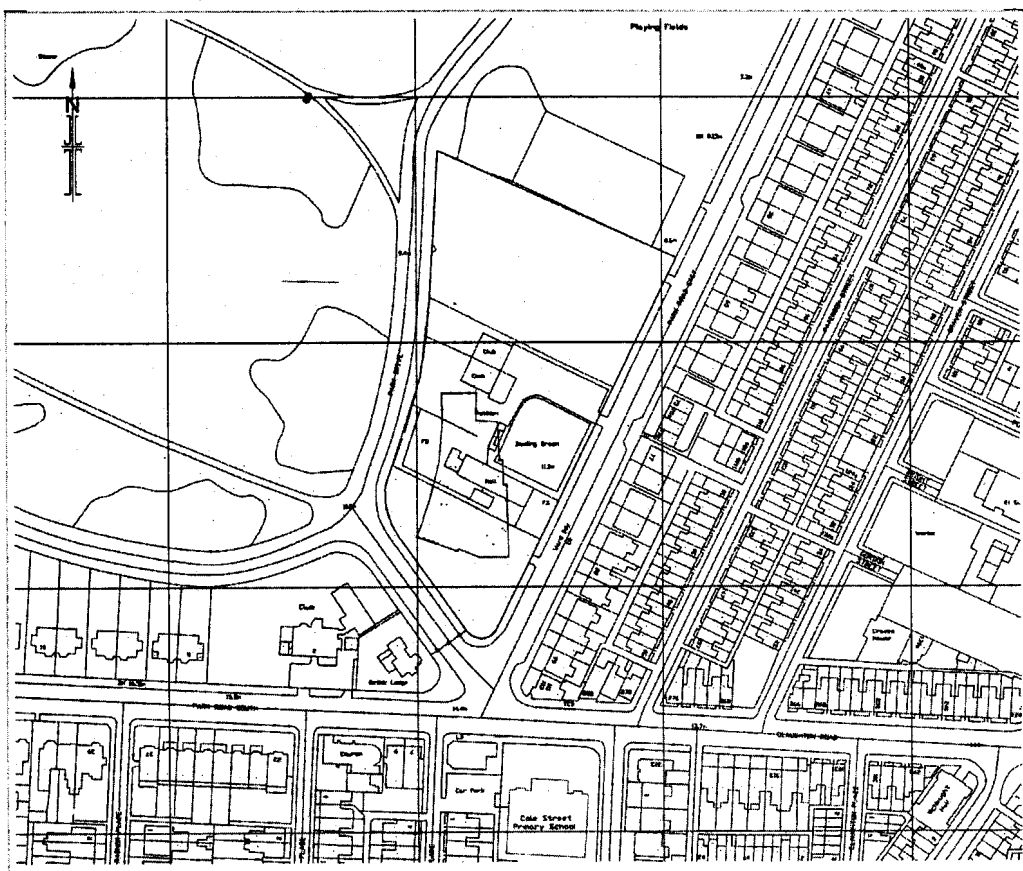
This building is located on what was 'Plot 6', on the periphery of the Park; just one of several plots which – despite years of advertising and promotion – had never been purchased for private development and, before 2000, remained open and integrated with the Park. It proved possible to argue for the building of this new Centre, in this spot, because of the historical role of those plots of land that lie outwith the carriage drive. Thus, in 1977, when the Park was designated a Conservation Area, the principal planning objectives were summed up as, 'preserving uninterrupted, tree-lined, open vistas within the 'inner park' as delineated by the route of the Park Drive'. The justification for this was recorded in Policy CH6 (Conservation and Heritage 6).

'The character and appearance of the Area principally derives from its wide and varied collection of period buildings and structures set within and around a mature parkland setting, unified by common features of design such as gate piers, boundary railings and substantial landscaping. Policy CH6, therefore, provides for these features to be retained and restricts new uses which would by their nature or design prejudice the landscaped appearance of the area or detract from the primarily domestic character of period buildings. Policy CH6 also restricts new development falling within the area of open land bounded by Park Drive in order to preserve the open landscaped setting of the central parkland area.'

It is quite clear, then, that the whole area of Birkenhead Park, and all the land which surrounds it, is protected under planning legislation which is framed by the Grade I registration of the historic landscape, the collection of listed buildings, and the boundary of the Conservation Area. There is a presumption against any new building at all within the landscape enclosed by the Park Drive; this also

means that any of those plots – once intended for private residences – on the periphery of the Park are only available for new building under exceptional circumstances and only if the benefit they impart to the Park and its community significantly outweighs the potential for damage to this remarkable heritage asset.

It is in this context that the three Options for the potential location of a new primary school have been considered.



*Illustration 5, Option 1.*

This proposal locates the footprint of the new school on the eastern, outer edge of the Lower Park. It lies adjacent to the corner where Park Road East meets Park Road South, and is close to the Park entrance which is overlooked by the Grade II Gothic Lodge, gate piers and railings.





*Illustration 6, Grade II Gothic Lodge.*

At present, this area is in very poor, run-down condition. It includes a plot of undeveloped land, at the corner, opposite to the Gothic Lodge.



*Illustration 7, plot of undeveloped land.*

To the north of the open land, there is a building of temporary construction, in neglected condition, a meeting place for the local Sea Cadets.



*Illustration 8 & 9, Sea Cadets' building.*

The latter is adjacent to a substantial building owned by the very first branch of the Royal British Legion, established on the periphery of Birkenhead Park, in 1921. This building comprises a pair of semi-detached houses, unlisted and in very poor condition, but shown as being present by the date of the first edition OS plan of the Park and its immediate surroundings, published in 1875 (see Illustration No.1). Half of this building is let to the Royal Naval Association and a well-maintained bowling green is located nearby.

A new school in this area would require a building which extended across the empty plot of land and over the footprint of the decaying huts used by the Sea

Cadets. The playing fields could reasonably extend to the north, on the assumption that the Victorian semi-detached residences, now the RBL building, could be properly restored and integrated into the site.

Threats	Opportunities	Outcomes
A new building in this location could intrude on the setting of the Grade I registered Park and the Grade II listed Gothic Lodge.	A sympathetically-designed structure, responsive to the local materials specified by Paxton and employed in the semi-detached RBL building, with an open exchange of views between school and Park, could very significantly improve the setting of the Park and the Gothic Lodge.	Palette of scale, materials, character and setting must be established, to secure a satisfactory relationship with the Park and the Gothic Lodge.
The Sea Cadets could lose the building where they hold regular meetings.	The Sea Cadets' accommodation is a temporary structure, in poor and deteriorating condition. Its removal would very considerably improve the setting of the Park and the Gothic Lodge. In turn, the Sea Cadets would also benefit from the exchange of the deteriorating building for another, which could offer more permanent and sustainable accommodation.	The Sea Cadets must be assisted in finding an alternative, sustainable and convenient location to use as their base.
A new building could intrude on the character and setting of what was once a semi-detached, Victorian residence (now the RBL building).	The Victorian residence could be restored and integrated into the proposals for the new school (note access issues).	The character and footprint of the new school must be sympathetically related to the design and layout of the historic residence. The Victorian building should be restored and adapted for appropriate use (associated with the School, if possible).
The mature and historic trees – associated with the Victorian building and/or part of Paxton's plan – could be compromised by the new developments.	The protection and conservation of mature and historic trees, both during any construction period and in the future, would be essential. Their role in providing a setting for the new buildings and enhancing the school environment would be invaluable.	All historic and mature trees should be surveyed on a regular basis and a plan, identifying opportunities for successive planting to secure the long-term tree cover, would be a requirement.

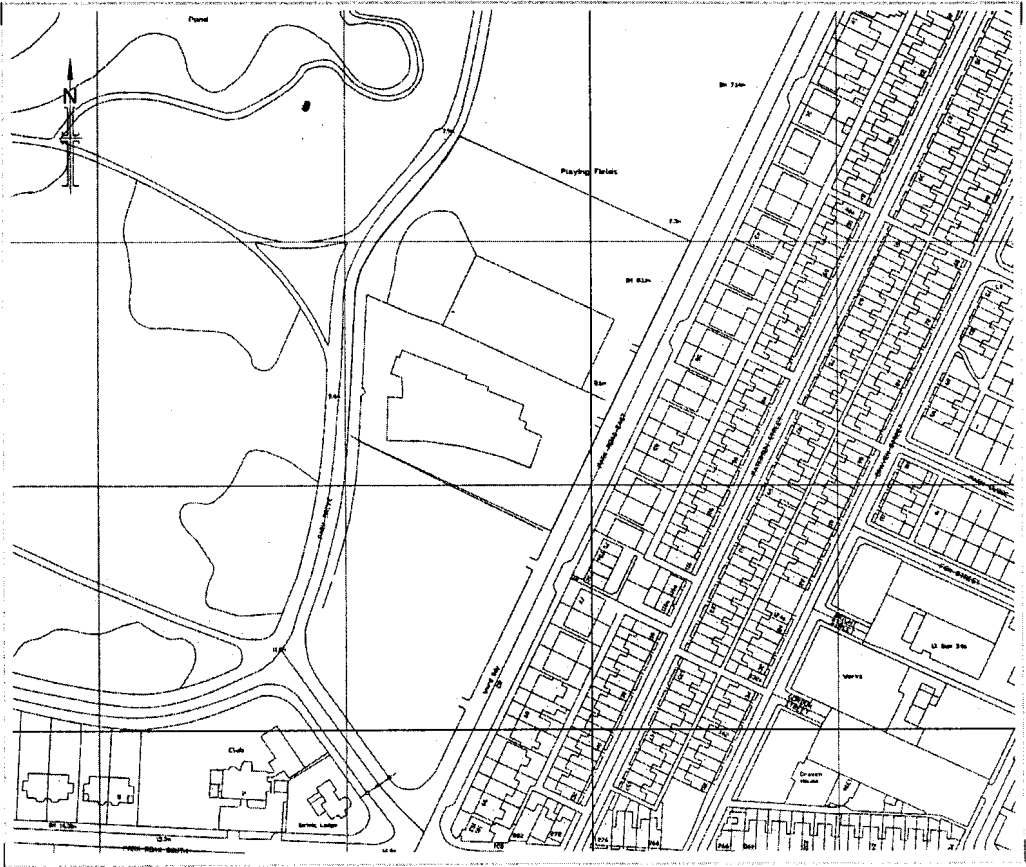
Threats	Opportunities	Outcomes
<p>The Royal British Legion and the Royal Naval Association could lose their accommodation (though there would be no need to demolish the RBL building with this Option, it would probably be difficult to integrate RBL and RNA uses with the school, in the space available).</p>	<p>The RBL is currently having difficulty retaining members and enlarging the Club. Despite the historic significance of this branch of the RBL, a new location, which incorporated opportunities for improved bar and social facilities, would be likely to bring benefits and attract new members, putting the Branch back on a firm footing.</p>	<p>If it were agreed that the RBL and RNA could not reasonably continue using their building, they would have to be offered opportunities to relocate to another, smaller, sustainable site. This would enable the RBL building to be fully restored and refurbished.</p>
<p>A primary school, located on the outer periphery of the Park, could compromise the largely peaceful, residential character of the Park.</p>	<p>Being located close to Birkenhead Park could bring considerable benefits to local children, who could learn and enjoy much about the natural and historical environment offered here.</p>	<p>There is already a precedent for locating a school adjacent to the Park: Park High School, recently refurbished and extended, is situated on the southern periphery of the Lower Park. The design and management of the new school will be carefully calculated to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with the Park. A close working relationship between the school's Head Teacher, the Park Manager and local residents will be essential.</p>
<p>Parking, delivering and collecting children could impose unacceptable pressure on the Park itself or on Park Road East and South.</p>	<p>Park Road East is wide and can accommodate parking.</p>	<p>Bringing vehicles into the Park, to deliver and collect children, must be discouraged by the Park Manager and Head Teacher. Opportunities for school staff parking must be accommodated in the footprint of the new school.</p>

Threats	Opportunities	Outcomes
The natural biodiversity of the open plot of land, on the corner opposite the Gothic Lodge, and of the stretch of land to the north of the potential footprint of the school (to be employed as playing fields for the school), could be threatened by a new building and new uses.	In the short term, the ecology of this area would be compromised by a new building and associated development. It must be recorded, however, that the area has been used, in the recent past, as a dumping ground for some rubbish, and features ruderal and scrubby vegetation, which appears to be of limited ecological interest.	The plot would be subject to a Phase 1 ecological survey, to inform any plans for future development. The school children could be encouraged to foster, study and monitor the biodiversity of the very large park, which would be adjacent to the school.

## Conclusion

All of these Options have the benefit of creating a situation where primary school children could learn to value, use and respect their magnificent Park.

This Option brings particular benefit to the fabric of an area of the Park which is currently revealing evidence of lack of investment, neglect and decay. It is important to add, however, that the Victorian semi-detached residences, now the RBL building, should not be damaged or unsympathetically altered and that the mature and historic tree cover must be protected and secured for the future.



*Illustration 10, Option 2*

This proposal again locates the new school on the eastern, outer edge of the Lower Park, on a plot that lies just to the north of Option 1. An analysis of the 1875, first edition, OS plan demonstrates that this plot of land had been built on by that date (see Illustration No.1). A pair of semi-detached houses had been constructed – in footprint, identical to the surviving building immediately to the south, which is now used by the RBL. Today, this plot reveals, in the relatively level topography and the occasional mature, ornamental tree, its earlier, private, domestic function. It is also relevant to note that the gate piers – provided to give access to the two pairs of Victorian, semi-detached residences – are still extant.



*Illustration 11, plot once accommodated Victorian, semi-detached housing.*

Just to the north of the proposed footprint of the school building, there is another stretch of land that is also level – thus revealing the original conception of building land lying outwith the carriage drive boundary. This plot was never built upon, however, and what is manifest, in its cover of strikingly coarse and scrubby vegetation, is an earlier life as a location for Boys' Brigade drill training and a more recent existence as the site for the temporary deposit of silt from the Lower Lake.





*Illustration 12, plot which reveals impact of compaction from drill training and subsequent deposit of arisings from the Lake.*

A new school, with an associated playing field, would not be an inappropriate purpose for this area of the Park, assuming that the design was responsive to the RBL building to the south and that proper protections were provided for mature trees in the area.

Threats	Opportunities	Outcomes
A new building in this location could intrude on, the setting of the Grade I registered Park.	A sympathetically-designed structure, responsive to the local materials specified by Paxton and employed in the semi-detached RBL building, with an open exchange of views between school and Park, could very significantly improve the setting of the Park. The extant historic gate piers and the restored railings should be absorbed as key features of the new layout.	The palette of scale, materials, character and setting must be established, to secure a satisfactory relationship with the Park.
A new building could intrude on the character and setting of what was once a semi-detached, Victorian residence (now the RBL building), to the south of this plot.	A sympathetically-designed structure, translating the design recommendations of Paxton into a modern, sustainable, vocabulary, could help to blend the RBL building into its context more happily than at present, replacing the Victorian semi-detached property that once stood in this spot.	The character and footprint of the new school must be sympathetically related to the design and layout of the adjacent historic residence (RBL building).
The development in this location could have a very damaging effect on the mature and historic trees on the site, which reflect Paxton's design and provide a record of changing uses.	The proper protection and future care of the historic and mature trees on the site must be written into any plan for construction and future maintenance. Children could be involved, at an appropriate level, in monitoring and learning about these trees, and would thus come to understand more about the wider Park and the natural environment.	Proper protection, future conservation and a long-term plan for successional planting, would bring benefit both to the children and to the Park itself.

Threats	Opportunities	Outcomes
A primary school, located on the outer periphery of the Park, could compromise the largely peaceful, residential character of the Park.	Being located close to Birkenhead Park could bring considerable benefits to local children, who could learn and enjoy much about the natural and historical environment offered here.	There is already a precedent for locating a school adjacent to the Park: Park High School, recently refurbished and extended, is situated on the southern periphery of the Lower Park. The design and management of the new school will be carefully calculated to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with the Park. A close working relationship between the school's Head Teacher, the Park Manager and local residents will be essential.
Parking, delivering and collecting children could impose unacceptable pressure on the Park itself or on Park Road East and South.	Park Road East is wide and can accommodate parking.	Bringing vehicles into the Park, to deliver and collect children, must be discouraged by the Park Manager and Head Teacher. Opportunities for school staff parking must be accommodated in the footprint of the new school.
The natural biodiversity of the open plot of land – the potential location for the new school and associated playing field – could be threatened by a new building and new uses.	In the short term, the ecology of this area would be compromised by a new building. It certainly seems that the site of the former semi-detached house does display an interesting diversity; the part of the plot north of this site, however, has suffered from heavy compaction (former drill area) and it has been enriched by the temporary deposition of arisings from the desilting of the Lake. This background explains its current, coarse, vegetation, with relatively little variation.	The whole plot would be subject to a Phase I ecological survey, to inform any plans for future development. Wherever possible, existing biodiversity will be protected and promoted. The school children could be encouraged to foster, study and monitor the biodiversity of the very large Park, which would be adjacent to the school.

## **Conclusion**

All of these Options have the benefit of creating a situation where primary school children could learn to value, use and respect their magnificent Park.

This Option could bring the benefit of providing an improved setting for the Victorian semi-detached residences (now the RBL building, just to the south of the proposed footprint of the new school), replacing the second pair of semi-detached residences that was on this site by 1875, but has now gone.

This Option would allow children to benefit not only from a playing field laid out within the curtilage of the plot, but also to have direct access to the public playing fields that are already in the Park, immediately to the north (adjacent to the Grand Lodge, already within the ownership of WMBC's Education department).

This option locates the proposed school in the playing fields that lie to the south of the Grade II\* Grand Lodge. The playing fields could be used by the school, as required, in the day time, and made available to the public at other times.

At present, this whole area is dedicated to playing fields that are fairly regularly used, but which belong not to the Park (in management terms), but to the Education Department of WMBC. The location of the school itself would be framed, to the north and the north-west, by the topographical mounding and the planting associated with Paxton's plan (and renewed as part of the recent project), which is still so striking a feature of the site



*Illustration 14, view of location for Option 3.*

The most important issue, in relation to this Option, is the impact on the Grand Lodge. Despite the fact that this is no longer the principal entrance to the Park, it remains the most important Lodge and one of the most distinctive heritage assets of the Park. The Grand Lodge was depicted as early as the 1847, when it was the central feature in an illustration of the grand opening.



*Illustration 15, the Grand Opening, 1847*

The language of Grand Lodge is robustly Classical and on a grandiose scale; it is intended to have an heraldic function. It is hard to envisage a design for a

primary school building which could be responsive to this setting. If the school were embraced beneath a gently-rising, grassy mound, with the building itself being visible only from the south and south-west, one might be able to argue that this would not compromise the setting of the Grand Lodge, and would be a model of 'green sustainability'. Assuming, however, that any building in this location would be subject to close scrutiny, when submitted for Planning and Listed Building Consents, any Impact Assessment must identify that this location raises significant problems.

It would have to be assumed that there would be no opportunities to build a self-contained car park or any other facility, in this area of the Park. The inevitable – and unacceptable – consequence is likely to be that traffic and parking in the Park would become very much worse than it is today.

Threats	Opportunities	Outcomes
<p>A new building in this location could intrude on, the setting of the Grade I registered Park and the Grade II* listed Grand Entrance Lodge.</p>	<p>The only defensible option for the design for a school in or near the proposed location, would probably be something which was blended into its landscape setting. This would need to be something which was carefully related to the extant tree-covered mounds that distinguish this corner; thus, a new building might effectively 'disappear' when viewed from the north and north-west.</p>	<p>This Option would appear to be the most difficult to develop and defend.</p>
<p>The development in this location could have a very damaging effect on the mature and historic trees on the site, which reflect Paxton's design and provide a record of changing uses.</p>	<p>The proper protection and future care of the historic and mature trees on the site, and on those more recently planted, must be written into any plan for construction and future maintenance. Children could be involved, at an appropriate level, in monitoring and learning about these trees, and would thus come to understand more about the wider Park and the natural environment.</p>	<p>Proper protection, future conservation and a long-term plan for successional planting, would bring benefit both to the children and to the Park itself.</p>
<p>A primary school, located on the outer periphery of the Park, could compromise the largely peaceful, residential character of the Park.</p>	<p>Being located close to Birkenhead Park could bring considerable benefits to local children, who could learn and enjoy much about the natural and historical environment offered here.</p>	<p>There is already a precedent for locating a school adjacent to the Park: Park High School, recently refurbished and extended, is situated on the southern periphery of the Lower Park. It must be added, however, that the current Park High School, though it is situated close to the Grade II Italianate Lodge, does not compromise the setting of this Lodge to the extent that Option 3 might compromise the Grade II* Grand Entrance Lodge.</p>



Threats	Opportunities	Outcomes
<p>Parking, delivering and collecting children could impose unacceptable pressure on the Park itself or on Park Road East and North. It would seem inevitable that building a school in this location would significantly increase the pressure of traffic and parking in the Park itself. It seems unlikely that opportunities for staff parking could be accommodated in the footprint of this new school.</p>	<p>Much of Park Road East is wide and can accommodate parking. Close to the Grand Entrance Lodge, however, there is a very busy junction, which would prohibit both parking and temporary dropping-off, close to the school.</p>	<p>Bringing vehicles into the Park, to deliver and collect children, must be discouraged by the Park Manager and Head Teacher.</p>
<p>The natural biodiversity of this plot of land – the potential location for the new school and associated playing field – could be threatened by a new building and new uses.</p>	<p>Assuming that the extant historic and mature trees were embraced within the setting of the new school, the damage would be minimal. At present, most of this area is dedicated to sports fields. Bringing a school into this location could create opportunities to enhance, and promote, greater biodiversity.</p>	<p>The whole plot would be subject to a Phase I ecological survey, to inform any plans for future development. Wherever possible, existing biodiversity would be protected and promoted. The school children could be encouraged to foster, study and monitor the biodiversity of the very large Park, which would be adjacent to the school.</p>

### Conclusion

All of these Options have the benefit of creating a situation where primary school children could learn to value, use and respect their magnificent Park. It should be added, however, that this Option would be successful, in design terms, only insofar as it could be 'hidden' from the Grand Lodge and the immediate setting. Therefore, this would limit the opportunities for children to be fully immersed in, and engaged with, the Park itself.

Perhaps the most difficult problem, here, would be the requirements for parking, dropping-off, emergency access etc. The impact of traffic on the immediate setting of the Grand Lodge could be unacceptable.