

North Earlsdon Neighbourhood Association

**Safeguarding the future of Spencer Park,
Earlsdon, Coventry**

Project - DRAFT

December 2012

This is a working document that will develop and expand as the project progresses.

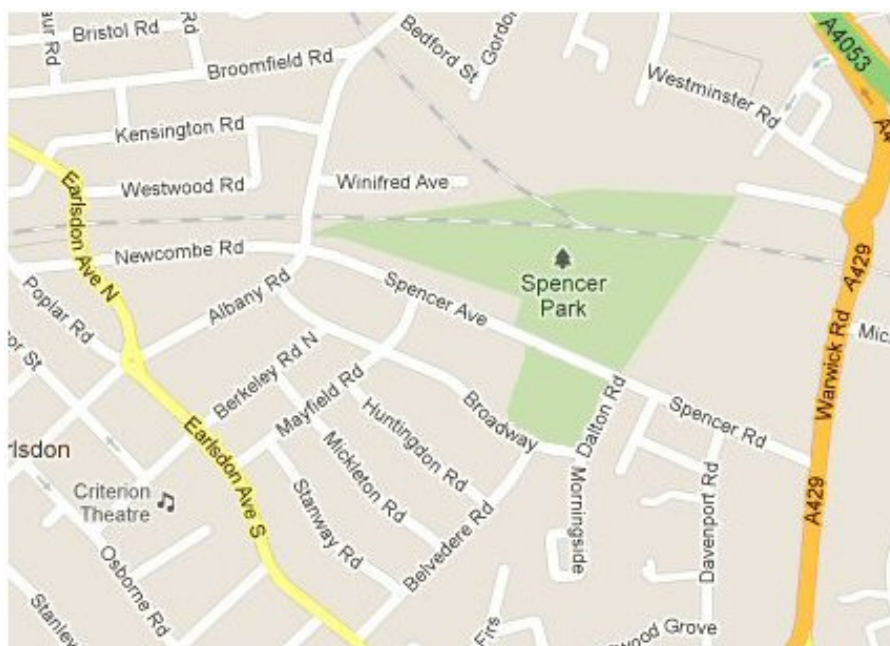
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1. The Park – background and location

Spencer Park is an Edwardian Park located in Earlsdon Coventry. Situated on a low ridge along the London and North West railway line, it has an excellent panoramic view of the City Centre.

The Park is divided into two sections, bisected by a residential road. The largest section is an open recreation ground bounded by trees and containing a football pitch and a very limited play area. The vast majority of this space is however left to mown grass. The smaller section of the park is bounded by hedging and trees and is formally laid out with paths, bowling greens and tennis courts. There are a limited number of maintained flower beds and a centre piece Edwardian Pavilion in need of refurbishment. There is a large terraced area of what, at one time, would have been grass tennis courts, which has now been left to mown grass. The park is typical of its time but has suffered from neglect. It is however very popular with both local residents and those coming from outside of the area to use its facilities on both a daily basis and for special events.



Location of Spencer Park, Earlsdon, Coventry



An arial view of Spencer Park

Current facilities comprise three tennis courts and two bowling greens, both flat and crown green (the crown green being one of only a few remaining in the city). The facilities are formally open from April to October each year. In addition to these facilities the park plays host three 'Bands in the Park' events every summer and a variety of community events, which have proven very popular.



One of the regular community events in the park

The recreation ground provides a maintained football pitch and a small play area comprising a small swing and basketball hoop.

2. Spencer Park – a brief history



The city owes a debt of gratitude to Coventry benefactor David Spencer, for the gift of land for Spencer Park which opened in 1883. He had acquired land in Earlsdon which he donated for a park long before he died in 1888. David Spencer is commemorated by a memorial which says: "This tree was planted in 1925 in memory of David Spencer (1805-1888) a generous benefactor of Coventry who presented this park to the people of Coventry City in 1852." The story goes that in the mid 19th Century the City Council was looking for an area of public land on which they could create a city park. Part of Stivichale Common was eventually identified and work began on a 4 acre site on Warwick Road, which is now known as 'Top Green'. David Spencer believed the area could be improved if the space was increased to provide a good sized recreation ground and he offered the city council 4,000 guineas to pay for it, if they would complete the project. However, the owners of the adjoining land would not sell.

Instead, another area of land was found in the form of a large meadow of just over 7 acres which belonged to the Grammar School Trustees. They had bought the land in order to build the new King Henry VIII Grammar School, but this area of meadow was surplus to their needs. The Trustees were glad to sell as the proceeds enabled them to begin their building project earlier than originally envisaged. In addition to the 7 acre meadow a further small field of 3 acres or so was also bought from Mr RA Dalton who was the owner of a large chunk of the surrounding land. This was later to become the bowling green and tennis court area. An agreement was also entered into by the Council with the city Freeman's Trustees whereby a new road was to be cut from Warwick Road to the Freeman's land at Earlsdon, this was to become Spencer Road. This was to compensate for the common rights they were losing by the regulation of Stivichale Common and would give them better access between Earlsdon and the railway station and the city. Finally, an extra wedged shaped area called Quarry Close, next to the railway line, was also bought from the John Worth estate. This would give access for Earlsdon folk from the Earlsdon Jetty (Albany Road was not built for another 15 years).

On 19 December 1882 there was an official handing over ceremony and a luncheon held in celebration, hosted by the mayor and attended by the Corporation, Mr Spencer and many other local worthies. The mayor proposed a toast to Mr David Spencer saying he was "the truest and most generous benefactor, who in his own lifetime at his own expense bestows his bounty for the benefit of his fellows".

By 1894 a "gymnasium", as it was called, consisting of swings, roundabouts, slides, see-saws and climbing frames was erected for the children on what is now the recreation ground. This was followed some years later by the bowling greens and tennis courts and the pavilion, designed by the City Engineer, was opened in August 1915.



The Pavilion and Tennis courts, circa 1920

Originally the park stretched from the railway to Dalton Road, unbroken by what is now Spencer Avenue. The section of road that runs through the park was added in the early 1900's to link the existing Spencer Road with Albany Road.



Spencer Park 1919

Spencer Park was also the site of Coventry's first Cenotaph. Close to the footpath alongside Spencer Avenue a small stone acts as a reminder of the Cenotaph unveiled on 12th October 1919. The Cenotaph was erected after the ceremony depicted in this postcard but was removed when the City's War Memorial was later unveiled in Memorial Park. At the same time an oak was planted that had been grown from an acorn gathered at Verdun in 1916. This original ceremony in 1919 was Coventry's first attempt at a memorial to its dead from the First World War. Despite being performed in very poor weather the ceremony was reportedly attended by thousands who gathered after a procession from Pool Meadow. They collected the Mayor and sword and mace bearers on the way past the Council House. The Mayor, who performed the unveiling ceremony, referred to the cenotaph, not unkindly, as 'quite home-made affair' as it was constructed of wood in the form of an obelisk surmounted by a cross painted in black and white. It had been designed, built and paid for by discharged soldiers. Clearly a larger memorial had not been planned at this stage as it was hoped that the wooden cenotaph would be replaced by an identical stone one.

Spencer Park's other claim to fame was as the subject of a painting by British war artist Dame Laura Knight. 'The Barrage Balloon' depicts members of the ATS preparing a barrage balloon in Spencer Park during the Second World War.

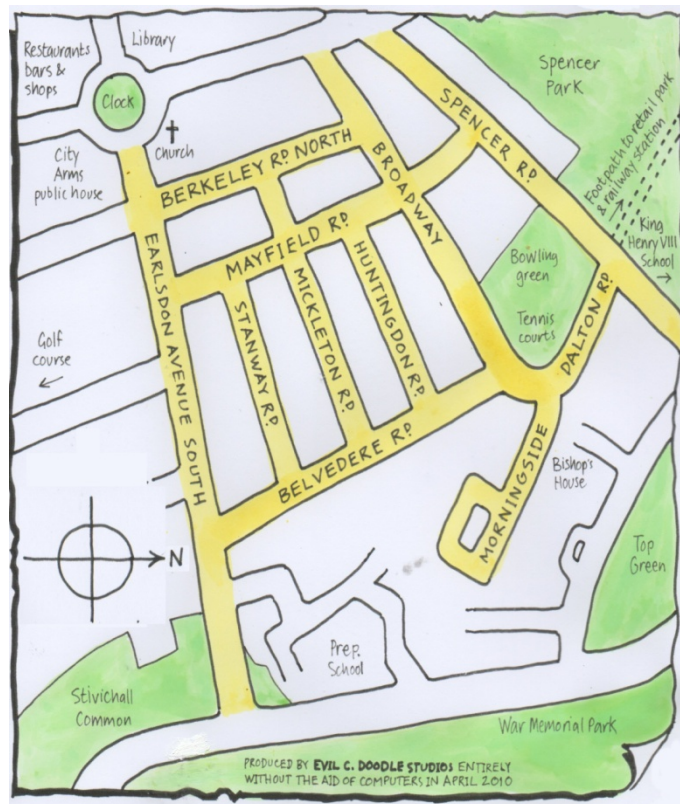


The Barrage Balloon (Coventry) by Dame Laura Knight

3. North Earlsdon Neighbourhood Association

NENA is a community association made up of interested members of the local community from the following Earlsdon Streets -

Belvedere Road
Berkeley Road North
Broadway
Dalton Road
Earlsdon Avenue South
Huntingdon Road
Mayfield Road
Mickleton Road
Morningside
Spencer Avenue
Stanway Road



Our mission is to protect and enhance our environment and promote a strong sense of community across our neighbourhood.

Membership currently stands at around 340 households out of a potential of 600. This constitutes well over half of the population of the area. The group is committed to improving the quality of life in the area by attracting external funding for community activities and area amenities. We act as a channel for communication with the City Council over development issues, we keep people informed of issues affecting our area and we help neighbours get to know each other better.

A quick survey in 2009 generated a few ideas for some of the things that people would like to see. Even at this early stage the most popular idea was the possibility of a funding bid to restore and improve Spencer Park. Other comments included the general enhancement of the local environment and especially improvements to the condition of the alleyways and pavements.

The group is also in negotiation with the Council and developers regarding the potential impact of the planned £650 million pound Friargate Development around Coventry Station. This could have implications for traffic volume and flow through our area and a rise in potential parking problems. It also has amenity implications for Spencer Park, which adjoins the development site.

The group is active in building a stronger sense of community and has held a series of social events including Cheese and Wine, picnics, community street sales and a beer tasting. We have developed a Welcome Pack which we issue to all new residents moving into the NENA area.

Finally NENA is actively making links with other groups in the Earlsdon area with a view to working closely with them on area-wide issues.

The group meets every two months to report on and move projects forward. NENA is organised around street reps in every street in the area who ensure that everyone is kept fully informed. Whilst day to day management of the group is conducted by a committee, specific projects are delegated to project groups such as the Spencer Park Group (SPG).

4. Spencer Park Group (SPG)

NENA formed a Spencer Park Group in 2009 to undertake a possible restoration project for the Park. The Group quickly established a scope for the project and made early contact with the City Council. Ideas were discussed and shared with the Friends of War Memorial Park who are undertaking a similar but much bigger project.

However it soon became evident that although a long term restoration project was desirable a more immediate problem was the day to day maintenance of the park and its visible deterioration. Flower beds were becoming overgrown and some were being grassed over. Paths were deteriorating and boundary hedges were becoming strangled by ivy. Of greatest concern was the gradual deterioration of the Pavilion, built in 1915, and the centre-piece of the Park. Attention was therefore turned to pressurising the City Council to invest more time and resource into the Park's upkeep. Over a twelve month period this led to a number of meetings with Council Officers. Matters came to a head in the spring of 2010 when local residents took matters into their own hands and began work on the Park clearing weeds and ivy from flowerbeds and hedges. After a further meeting with Council Officers residents were persuaded to stop work in the park on the understanding that a new maintenance agreement was due to be reached and the level of service would improve. From this point on (summer 2010) there was a marked improvement in Park maintenance as beds were restored (2010) and maintenance work was undertaken on the Pavilion (spring 2011). In the summer of 2011 the football pitch was also restored and reseeded.

With the introduction of an improved maintenance regime the group turned its attention to the long term restoration plan. It is proposed that the Project be taken forward through the formation of a Project Board under the title of 'Friends of Spencer Park'. This will involve a wider membership than just NENA and will be expanded to include other park users and representatives of the City Council.

5. Project Management

Through its Spencer Park Group NENA has embarked on a process of producing a restoration and development plan.

a) Project Board- Friends of Spencer Park

The process required to achieve this will involve the formation of a Project Board comprising SPG members, representatives of Coventry City Council Leisure Services and representatives of park users. The Project Board will be formally constituted with regular meeting dates. It will oversee all aspects of the Park in which local residents have an interest. The Board will be chaired by a NENA member and will comprise members of the Spencer Park Group together with invited park users. Two Council Officers will be invited to join the Board.

The scope of the Project Board will be the restoration and development of what is referred to by Coventry City Council as 'Spencer Park' and 'Spencer Recreation Ground'. As well as the park space itself they will have an interest in the boundaries of the park, its approaches and the section of Spencer Avenue/Road which dissects the park. The Board will, in consultation with residents and park users, devise a plan for the restoration, enhancement and development of the park and seek funding from one or more sources to achieve this.

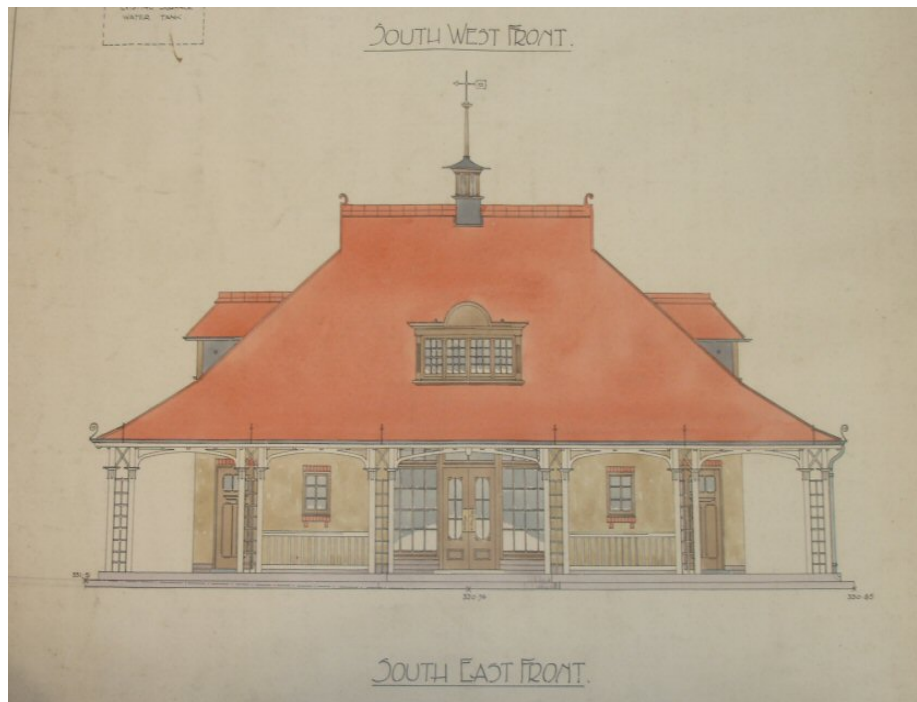
b) The Concept

Some consultation has already been undertaken and in accordance with this it is hoped to restore the section which is currently south of Spencer Ave/Rd in keeping with its original design. It is accepted that there are some features, such as the grass tennis courts, that it would not be practical to resurrect but in place of these it's hoped to add some new but complimentary features such as a new play area for very young children. It is hoped to restore the boundaries, gates, planting and seating around the park. The intention of this scheme is to create a 'quiet park' area particularly for use by older residents and pre-school children. The centre piece will be the restoration of the Edwardian pavilion which could include the provision of some community space.

In contrast the area north of Spencer Ave/Rd would be developed further to encourage greater usage and more activity. Its development would be targeted at older children and adults. The objective would be to improve safety and security of this area whilst improving facilities and access.

In support of the above the Board would look at local parking provision which is currently poor for park users. Also on the agenda is the generation of greater community involvement in the park including the possibility of community wardens. Once funding has been secured and work is underway the Group will Project Manage all aspects of the Project.

SPG will continue to meet to oversee the annual maintenance of the Park, to liaise with Park staff and Council Officers to ensure that problems are quickly identified and resolved. This group may also wish to work with the Council to form a **Volunteers Group** to supplement those tasks undertaken by Council or contract staff.



Plan of the Pavilion, 1915

c) Process

The process, in partnership with Coventry City Council, will be highly dependent on consultation with residents, other park users and potential park users. The development of a draft plan is key to any discussion.

Some work has already been undertaken. The existing group has already:

- promoted the history of the Park at public events
- undertaken a survey of Park users that can be used alongside official Council survey results
- explored options on new play equipment
- researched the Pavilion and have been liaising with conservation architects and Coventry University about potential for restoration
- initiated a debate on access and parking restrictions on Spencer Avenue, possibly funded by 'Section 106' money.
- gathered costings and established suppliers for supporting projects such as a tree labelling project across the park and the installation of nesting boxes.

This work will be continued, costed and presented as a single project plan. The group can then decide its strategy for securing funding. This may be a single large funding bid, such as the Lottery 'Parks for People' Fund, or as separately funded projects from multiple sources. Match funding will also be required and this may be achieved through some sponsorship, planned Council spending and/or Section 106 (a big opportunity is being offered by the Friargate Development).

6. Project Proposals

Consultation so far has generated many ideas and each of these will need to be considered, costed and included or rejected. Planning is still in the early stages but a series of Project Themes are being developed. These themes will be developed and expanded through further consultation:

a) Information and interpretation

- Development of a 'brand' for the park, for signage etc
- Improve signage
- Development of new interpretation boards with themes such as: history of the park, trees, birds and exercise
- Publication of a printed history of the park

b) Play and Leisure facilities

- Creation of a new maze and/or 'natural play' area for pre-school children (on abandoned hard tennis court)
- Provision of seating around children's play area
- Improved sports facilities on recreation ground
- Introduction of shelters on recreation ground for young people
- Provision of adult play/exercise equipment
- All year round tennis courts

c) Heritage

- Restoration of boundaries, fencing, gates and seating in small park
- Revival of existing flowerbeds in small park and develop new planting schemes
- Full restoration and enhancement of facilities in the pavilion and improved access to toilets

d) Wildlife and nature

- Improved planting
- Tree labelling
- Development of a sensory garden area
- Development of a wild flower area
- Organised bulb planting

e) Safety and access

- Establishment of a 'community warden scheme'
- Creation of a pedestrian crossing between the two park spaces
- Introduction of a 4 hour limit parking on road adjacent to the park to improve access
- Introduction of 'residents only parking' to other surrounding streets
- Creation of 'community space' within the pavilion
- Improvement of access via bridge, ie. resurface and improve lighting
- Improved lighting
- Planting of a low hedge boundary with Spencer Ave to improve safety
- Planting of security hedging to rear of houses adjoining recreation ground and small park