

Paddington Recreation Ground

The origins of Paddington Recreation Ground date back to 1886 and a local campaign to create a recreation ground to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887.

In common with most of Maida Vale at the time, the land had originally been intended for residential development. Pressure had arisen because of the conflicting requirements of landowner and developer. Unable to agree their respective proportions of development gain, momentum was gained to establish the area for recreation in a borough that had urgent need for it. Increasing public exposure led to embarrassment and the developer withdrew from the project.

Cricket had been played by boys on Paddington Green in 1815, to the local Vestry's annoyance (the Vestry being an administrative fore runner to a Parish Council). Maida Vale Cricket Club was formed in 1846 and Westbourne Cricket Club in 1852. Westbourne C C used a field in Harrow Road, opposite the workhouse, in 1857. There were several local teams in 1870, including the Goldbourne and Nonsuch clubs, both from Upper Westbourne Park and Greville House from Paddington Green. Groups of workers, such as the Bayswater Bakers and, by 1875, employees of Whiteley's also formed clubs.

There was considerable pressure for local facilities for the playing of sport. Throughout the 1870s, home matches were usually played by cricketers outside the parish, at Shepherd's Bush or Kensington Park. The shortage of local land prompted Richard (later Sir Richard) Melvill Beachcroft, a solicitor and the treasurer of Paddington Cricket Club, to start his campaign for the purchase of Paddington Recreation Ground.

He accepted a yearly underlease of nine acres as a site for a Grand Festival for The Aged, Poor and Children of the Parish in the hope that on its expiry, a final attempt would be made to secure the site as a playing ground for local use.

Money was raised and the Grand Festival took place on 7 July 1887. The *Daily Telegraph* reported the event and reckoned that "there was more behind this movement than just this enjoyable scene. Paddington has no playground. A township of 120,000, equal to a third of municipal town, has no open spaces for football or cricket".

There then followed the national slump in 1887. With no alleviation of evident distress and no proposals to tackle the problems it generated, Lord Randolph Churchill, a resident of 2 Connaught Place, took the initiative. The Fund for the Paddington Unemployed was formed and raised £1,800. The underlease negotiated by Mr Beachcroft also provided work for men in fencing and creating an athletics track and an area for cycling, with part of the local relief fund being used to pay for labour. The pavilion was built in 1888 and used originally for refreshments and as a grandstand.

The Prince of Wales and his wife Alexandria accepted an invitation to attend the Recreation Ground in 1890. Lord Churchill was also in attendance. Despite inclement weather, many activities, including athletics, took place. In 1890 the ground was being used by six cricket clubs.

The royal visit stimulated further benevolence from those previously reluctant to donate. Lord Churchill was able to announce a gift of £1,000 from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and within ten days the Paddington Vestry appointed a special committee and resolved to raise half of the cost of acquiring the Recreation Ground if the other half could be subscribed privately.

This spurred the parishes of St Marylebone, Hampstead and Willesden to contribute £8,000. A further £3,000 was raised from the Trustees of the Paddington Estate, the original developer of the site. In 1893 the recently formed London County Council gave £6,000 to facilitate the acquisition of a further two and a half acres. In June 1893, the Paddington Recreation Ground Act was passed to authorise the purchase by the Vestry “to provide the residents with a public recreation ground”.

In 1896 the Recreation Ground was established as a charitable trust enabling it to raise funds for any public recreational purpose. The Ground subsequently became the responsibility of Paddington Borough Council (and now Westminster City Council). The London County Council provided for other sports including the running and cycling tracks.

Melvill Beachcroft became the Deputy Chairman of the London County Council between 1896 and 1897. He became Vice President between 1897 and 1898. In 1904 he succeeded to the baronetcy and became Sir Melvill Beachcroft. He was appointed Chairman of the LCC between 1909 and 1910. He died in 1926.

In 2010, after further improvement to the Ground undertaken by the City of Westminster, with work completed to the Pavilion and the opening of the new Gym and Fitness suite, the Pavilion was named after Richard Beachcroft. At the same time, the Randolph entrance was re-named as The Randolph Churchill Gate to recognise the debt owed to these men for securing the land and developing Paddington Recreation Ground for the community.