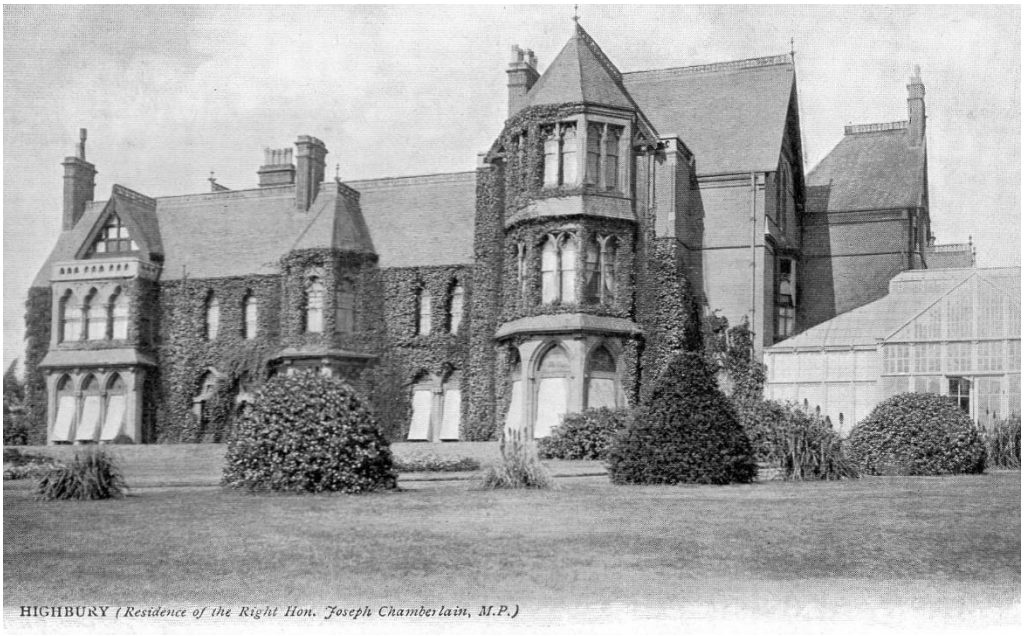
Highbury's 'Lost' Gardens

This article has been made possible through the generosity and kind permission of Phillada Ballard and is based on her 1987 publication 'Joseph Chamberlain's Gardens at Highbury, Moor Green, Birmingham 1879 – 1914.'



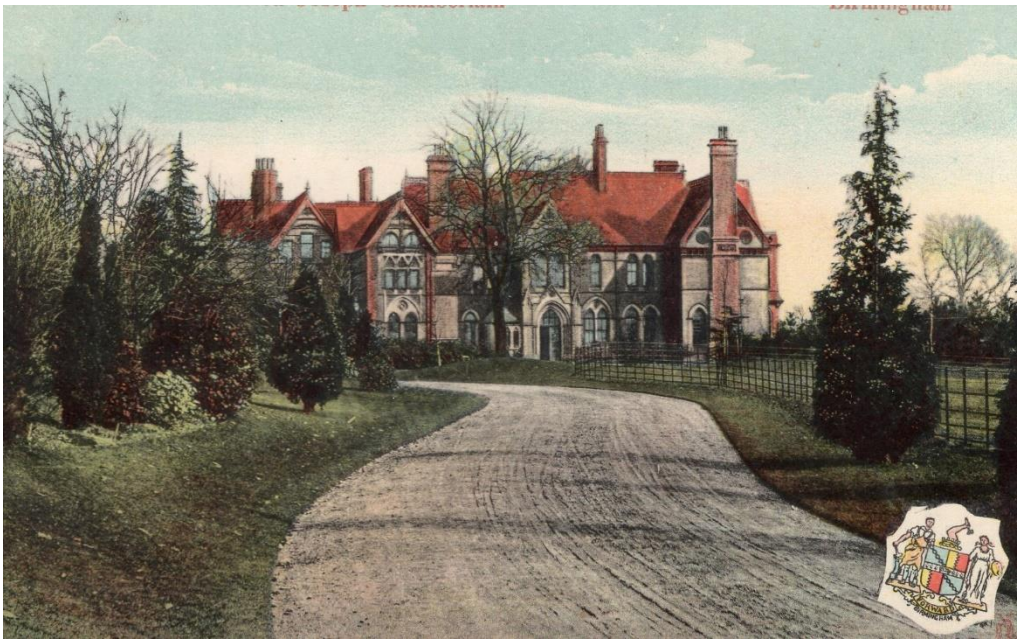
Highbury and the south facing front garden circa 1900

Highbury was the home of Joseph Chamberlain and his family from 1879 - 1914 and was named after the London suburb where he spent his childhood. It was built in 1879 in the area known as Moor Green, then in parish of Kings Norton. It became incorporated into the City of Birmingham in 1911. The area was then largely rural with a number of farms and a small number of prominent residences including those of Joseph's older brother Arthur Chamberlain, who was Chairman of Kynoch Works in Witton, North Birmingham and Sir John Holder, brewing magnate. The location chosen by Joseph Chamberlain was south facing and afforded good views of the Worcestershire countryside as far as the Lickeys at the time. The position of the house prevented it and the estate form being overlooked.

In 1879 Edward Milner, a Surrey Landscape Gardener, whose other clientele also included members of the new rich. Locally these included families such as the Kenricks and glass maker Henry Osler. Milner submitted plans for landscaping 25 acres of the grounds at Highbury including gardens and meadow land on the south facing slope. The estate was designed to be 'both ornamental and productive.' The meadow land was used for raising livestock, which included a herd of Jersey cows, pigs, poultry and later sheep. The animals supplied the household with milk, cream and meat. (1) Fruit and vegetables were also supplied by the kitchen garden, more about that later. Phillada Ballard in her publication 'Joseph Chamberlain's Gardens at Highbury', on which much of the information in this article about the gardens is based, suggests that the overall aim of the design of the grounds was to give the illusion of a sizeable 'country estate in an urban setting.' (2)

As the area purchased by Joseph Chamberlain was predominantly rural in aspect, the existing field boundaries were maintained in order to create an area of parkland, and many of the existing trees were retained to create the idea of maturity (see section on the Oak Pool/Pond later.) Extensive tree planting continued however, and included the southern boundary of the park along the railway line. This planting was intended to obscure the view, from the house, of the expanding centre of Kings Heath and the development of housing on the former Grange Estate. (3)

The approach to the house included a lengthy carriageway, entrance gates and a lodge house, which are still existence today. Rhododendron plantings, which were a particular favourite of Joseph Chamberlain's, concealed the view of the road.



The house and driveway circa 1900

The gardens evolved over a thirty-year period and included many of Joseph's own ideas. They included a front garden, kitchen garden, Elizabethan Garden, Tea Garden, Dutch and Italian Gardens and a rockery all located at the Northern and Eastern ends of the estate. There were a number of pools or ponds included within the overall design. The garden staff included head gardener Edward Cooper, who previously worked for Joseph and a large number of other outdoor staff, who maintained the gardens and hothouses.

Figure 3. View of the circuit path at Highbury, June 1899

The gardens and pools were connected by a circuit path (See photograph above.)

The 1916 OS map below shows the location of Joseph Chamberlain's Gardens within the estate and within the context of the park as a whole.

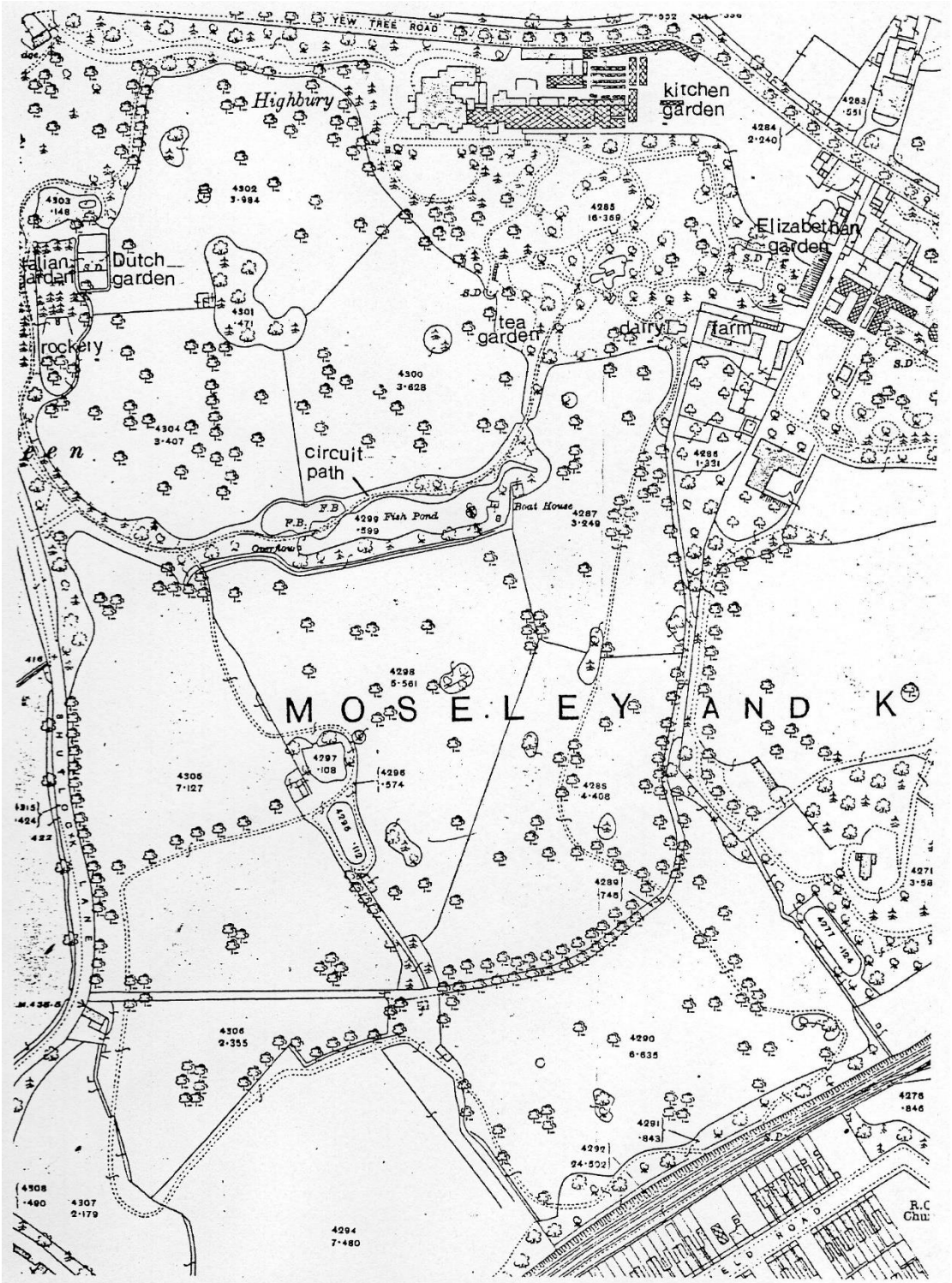


Figure 10. The layout of the grounds of Highbury in 1916, based on 25 in to 1 mile
Ordnance Survey Map 1916

The **South Facing Front Garden** included a lawned area with a semi-circular path accessed from the terrace and edged with ‘clipped shrubs of ornamental holly and box’, which are still in evidence today. The design also included two heart shaped Rhododendron beds and a number of unusual and rare tree plantings also still in evidence today. (4)

The **Conservatory and Hothouses** housed an extensive collection of exotic plants, gaining many prizes at horticultural competitions. The conservatory and hothouses were located between the house and the Kitchen Garden and have since disappeared. In 1896 however, there were 14 hothouses, and by 1903 there were 25 (12 devoted to orchids, a particular favourite of Joseph Chamberlain’s, and 13 to ferns, azaleas, rhododendrons and other plants.) The hothouses were accessed by a central corridor which, from 1899, was lit by electric light. They supplied regular cut blooms to ornament Chamberlain’s houses at Highbury and in London, as well as a regular supply of orchids for his trademark button hole.

Interior view of the Fernery at Highbury

The **Kitchen Garden** was located adjacent to the house and hidden from view by deep plantings of Rhododendrons. Fruit and vegetables were grown, which included beds of asparagus, peas, celery, salad, cumbers, apples, vines, peaches and melons. An arch or pergola of apple and pear trees was planted in the late 19th century and is still in evidence today. (5)

The ornamental gardens, included an **Elizabethan Garden** established circa 1890 and which was located at the end of the kitchen garden and close to the crucible wall. It was planted with roses laid out in an Elizabethan style, edged with Box and had a sundial in the centre as well as arbours for seats in each corner of a Yew hedge, which enclosed the garden.

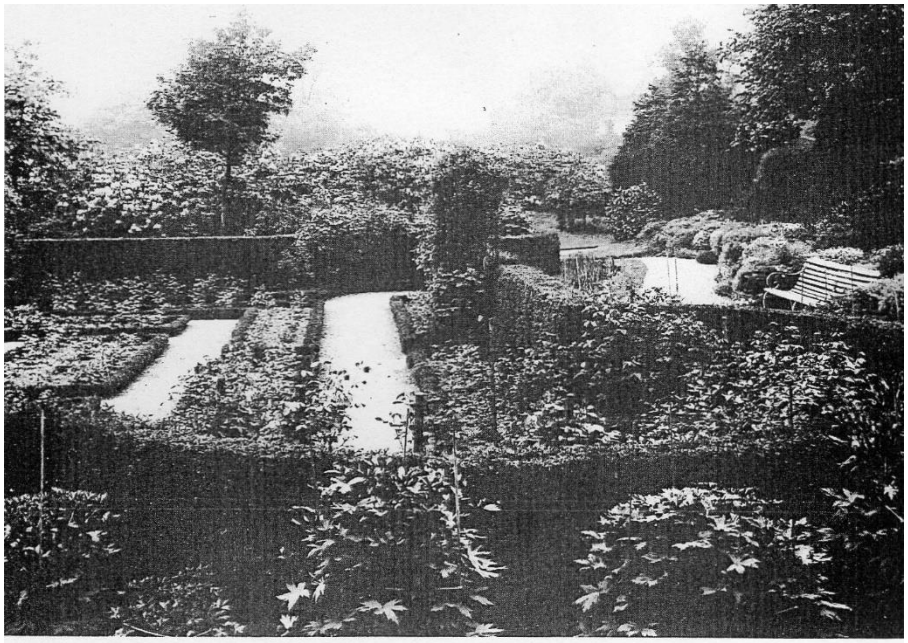


Figure 4. The 'Elizabethan' garden at Highbury, June 1899

A **Pleasure Ground,** although not part of Milner's original design, was located below the kitchen garden. It was built following the acquisition of Spring Meadow and consisted of a hardy flower garden, beds of flowering shrubs and rockeries and a large rockery descending from a lookout or viewing platform to an ornamental pond or pool. In 1904 a twenty-foot embankment was constructed using industrial crucibles at the eastern end of the pleasure ground. This was designed and put in place to obscure the view of Uffculme, home of Richard Cadbury and which Joseph Chamberlain is reported to have disliked. (6)

The Crucible Wall today- view facing away from the Pleasure Gardens and towards Uffculme

A **Tea Garden** was created in 1904 at the edge of the Pleasure Ground and Spring Meadow and towards the front of the house. The path leading to it was lined with statues opening onto a stone balustraded area with an elaborate sundial and seat leading to the tea lawn, where visitors were entertained.

The Long or Boating Lake, which we still see today, was created by diverting water from the existing Shuttock stream. The water enters at the highest point by a waterfall or cascade. The design of the lake originally included two islands, one of which was accessed by rustic bridges from the circuit path. There was also a Swiss summer house, a boathouse and a further waterfall at the outfall of the lake. Much of this remains in evidence today except for the buildings and the rustic bridges.

Towards and parallel to Moor Green Lane, at the Western end of the estate lies the **New or Italian Garden**. This was built with a pergola and an elaborate balustrade built of terracotta brick at one end, with steps leading down to a **Rock Garden** designed by Joseph Chamberlain and laid out by Messrs Pulham and Sons. The pergola was covered with climbing roses and the garden beyond was planted with perennials in small rectangular beds. The garden became known as the **Italian Garden** and had features such as cast-iron gates, stone seats, a fountain and a small pool, which was added later. Large terracotta pots and lead urns were also added later. The garden was surrounded by a Beech hedge with shaped enclosures for wooden benches.

Further on a **Dutch Garden** was established adjacent to the Italian Garden and to near the Upper Pond/Pool. It was created in a style reminiscent of 17th Century Dutch gardens and devoted entirely to bulbs. The garden was designed with geometric beds edged with terracotta and with an astrolabe on a stone plinth placed in the centre. The garden was surrounded by a holly hedge. The avenue of Redwood trees planted in 1993, as part of the arboretum project, has now replaced this garden.

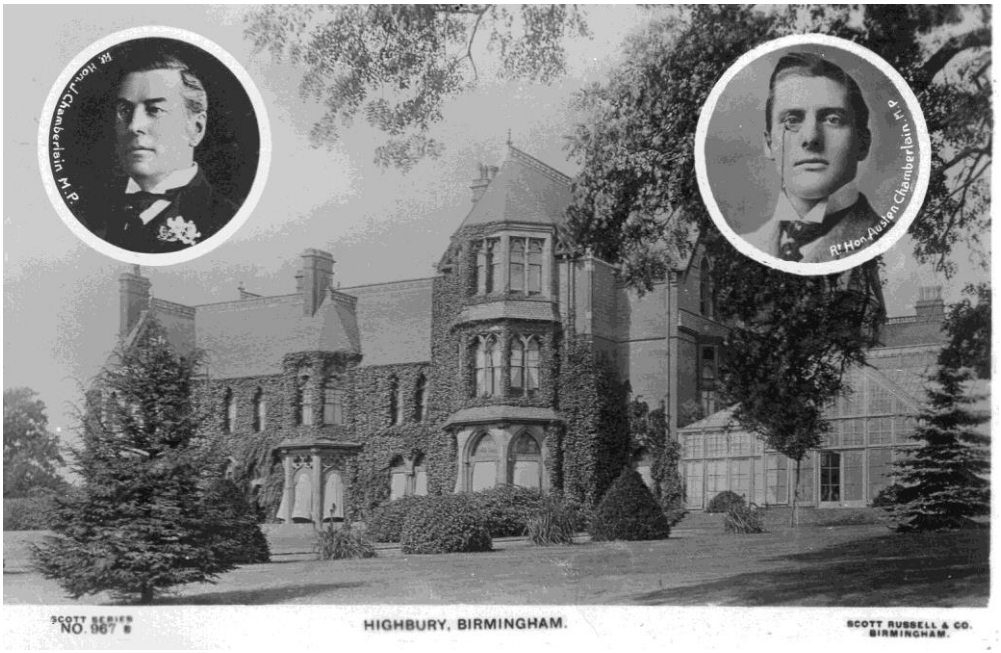
Figure 5. The 'Dutch' garden at Highbury, Spring 1903
Birmingham University Library

A circuit path led onto another pool, **Oak Tree or Upper Pool/Pond**. This had an island and was surrounded by extensive Rhododendron plantings. The remains of an original Oak Tree, from pre-Highbury days (and dating back to when the area was once rural,) are still in evidence today beside the pool. The tree, which was later surrounded by a seat, is believed to have been favourite resting place of Joseph's. The pool has sadly since become overgrown and has now become a haven for Bull

Rushes and Iris Flags. The pool once looked across meadowland towards the lodge, before the Shrubbery Garden and Lime Tree Avenue were created.

View to the lodge from the Oak Tree Pool/Pond.

The Circuit path continued on to the lodge and the driveway to the house. On the way a further two-acre garden was laid out near the lodge on what once meadowland. This was known as the **Shrubbery Garden** and was planted with a variety of Bamboos, Cherries, Azaleas, Rhododendrons and Magnolias all newly introduced from the East. Closely mown, winding grass covered paths lead visitors through the garden and rustic seats were placed within for resting and to admire the plantings. A Lime Avenue was also planted adjacent to the Shrubbery Gardens and leading up to the carriageway.



South facing aspect and the garden designed by Milner

Joseph Chamberlain died in 1914 and in 1915 Highbury ceased to be a Chamberlain family home. It then became an auxiliary military hospital for the First Southern General Hospital at the University of Birmingham. (7)

Many of the garden sculptures and other decorative items were taken to Oldam, Hants, the home of Hilda and Ida Chamberlain and to Westborne, home of Neville Chamberlain. Garden seats and surplus furniture were sold at public auction in 1915. In 1921 the trustees of Highbury leased 15 acres of its grounds to Birmingham City Parks' Department for use as a public park, with the remainder (16 acres) continuing as part of Highbury's gardens.

The grounds at Highbury are grade 2 listed on the English Heritage register of Parks and Gardens of special historical interest. They are currently in receipt of funding for restoration thanks to the work of the Chamberlain Highbury Trust.

Notes:

1. Maureen Perrie provides further reading on the Model Farm at Highbury in her article entitled 'Hobby Farming among the Birmingham Bourgeoisie: the Cadburys and the Chamberlains on their suburban estates, c. 1880 – 1914' Agricultural review, Vol. 61 no.1, 2013 pp 111 – 134. https://www.bahs.org.uk/AgHRVOL.html?Year=2013&MOD=this.

2. Phillada Ballard provides a detailed insight into Joseph Chamberlain's Gardens within the 1987 publication 'Joseph Chamberlain's Gardens at Highbury, Moor Green, Birmingham 1879 – 1914.'. She has also produced a recently revised version of Highbury Landscape History first written in 2009, which contains more on the small gardens. This can be found on the Chamberlain Highbury Trust website at https://chamberalinhighburytrust.co.uk.

3. Stan Budd writes about the history of the Grange Estate in a publication entitled 'The Grange, Kings Heath' available on www.kingsheathhistory.co.uk – Booklets and Publications tab.

4. The Chamberlain Highbury Trust has commissioned a survey of the Rhododendron stocks at Highbury *https://chamberalinhighburytrust.co.uk.*

5. The Chamberlain Highbury Trust has commissioned the preservation of the heritage fruit tree collection at Highbury under the auspices of Let's Grow Together and volunteers. *https://chamberalinhighburytrust.co.uk.*

6. The Chamberlain Highbury Trust has commissioned and the restoration of the driveway to the house, the Eastern part of the original circuit path and the refurbishment of the Viewing Platform within the original Pleasure Gardens as part of the overall restoration plan for Highbury. https://chamberalinhighburytrust.co.uk.

7. Justine Pick is the author of Highbury During the First World War published by West Midlands History.

8. All photo images are courtesy of the author's own collection except for photographs of the Circuit Path, the Dutch Garden and the Elizabethan Garden which are reproduced from the Chamberlain Family Archive with the kind permission of the Cadbury Research Library at Birmingham University.