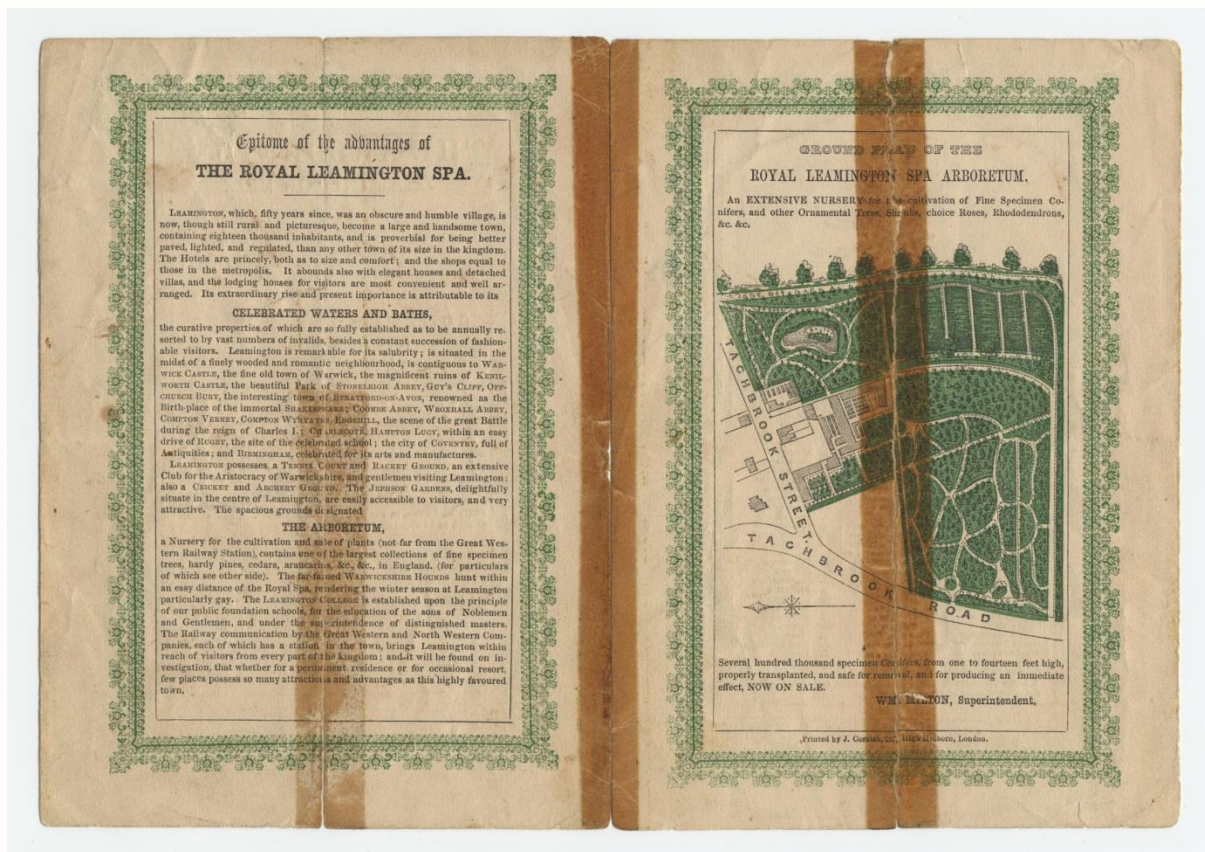


The Arboretum, Leamington Spa (CR3924 and CR4624/11)

Arboretum, n. “A place devoted to the cultivation and exhibition of rare trees; a botanical tree-garden.”¹ “Latin *arborētum* a place grown with trees, < *arbor* tree.”²

All over the county there are many beautiful gardens and parks. For example, you may know of the famous Jephson Gardens in Leamington Spa, and the charming grounds at Charlecote Park and Baddesley Clinton. However, have you heard of The Arboretum, Leamington Spa?



The ground plan of the Arboretum
Warwickshire County Record Office, CR3924

Do not worry if you haven't heard of it. Very little of the Arboretum survives today. Yet, in the mid-19th century, it covered a wide expanse of land on the edge of town. As the illustrated ground plan shows (CR 3924), the spacious arboretum was situated between Tachbrook Road, Tachbrook Street, and St

¹ Arboretum, n. definition, www.oed.com

² Ibid

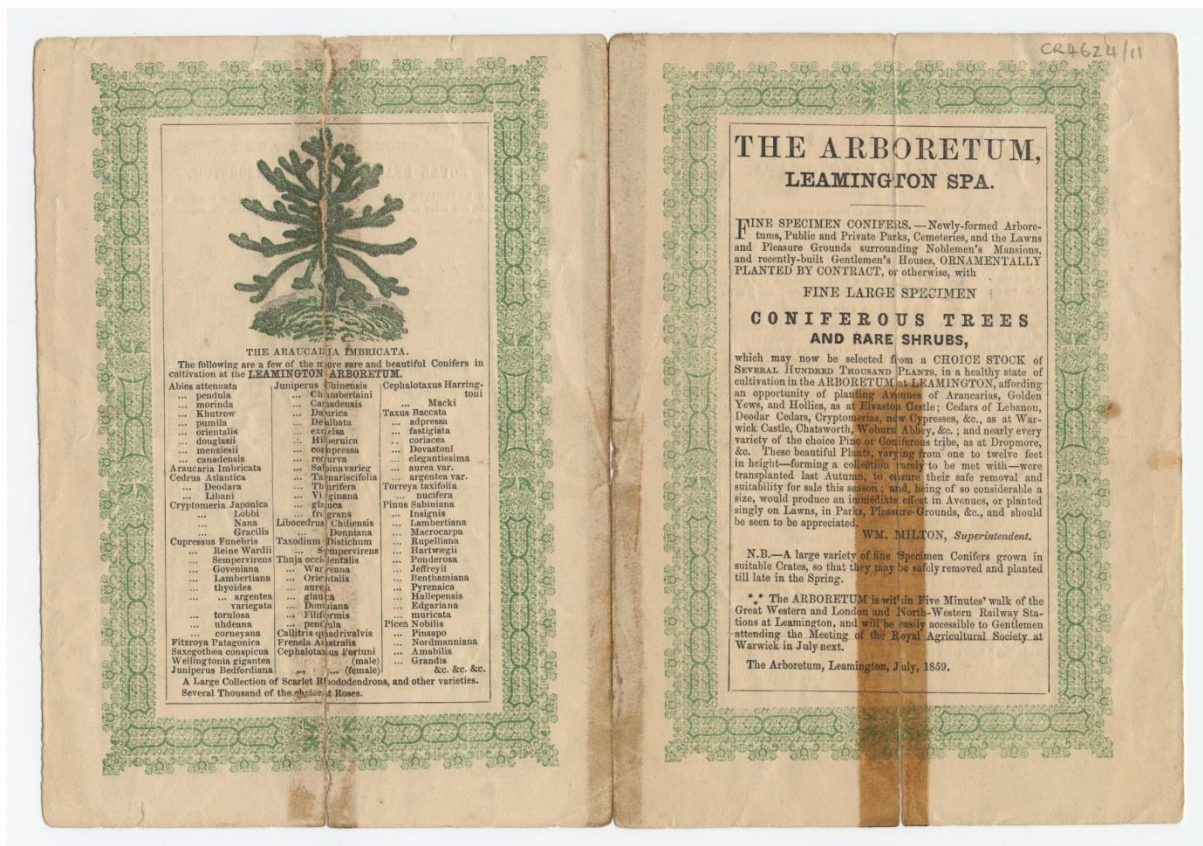
Helen's Road. The land was purchased in 1851 by Dr John Hitchman (1805-1867), who was a surgeon, a prominent member of Leamington society and a great philanthropist. He enriched the space "with thousands of flowers, shrubs and exotic trees and [opened] it free to the public"³ as an arboretum. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the eleven acres of land had another practical purpose too. It was turned into "a Nursery for the cultivation and sale of plants"⁴, which was a popular trend during the Victorian era.

Rare Trees and Plants

According to the leaflet (CR4624/11), the Arboretum contained "one of the largest collections of fine specimen trees, hardy pines, cedars, arancarius, &c., &c., in England." Indeed, the list of rare conifers on the second half of the leaflet (CR 3924) does not disappoint. Ninety-three different specimens are listed, and it is hinted that there were many more. Flowers were in abundance too, as it is noted that the Arboretum offered "A Large Collection of Scarlet Rhododendrons" and "Several Thousand of the Choicest Roses." Undoubtedly, visitors were not stuck for choice!

³ Johnston, Mark. *Street Trees in Britain: A History*. N.pag. Windgather Press, 2017.

⁴ Warwickshire County Record Office, CR4624/11



Part of the leaflet advertising the variety of the Arboretum's specimens
Warwickshire County Record Office, CR4624/11

The marketing of the Arboretum's collections is intriguing. For instance, WM. Milton, Superintendent, writes that buying specimens affords: "an opportunity of planting Avenues of Araucarias, Golden Yews, and Hollies, as at Elvaston Castle; Cedars of Lebanon, Deodar Cedars, Cryptomerias, new Cypresses, &c., as at Warwick Castle, Chatsworth, Woburn Abbey, &c."⁵ It encourages buyers to think about landscaping on a grand scale. Indeed, it implies that buyers' lawns and Leamington Spa itself could become as majestic as those historic places if the right trees were planted. According to Mark Johnston, "John Hitchman was the driving force behind much of the early street planting in Leamington Spa."⁶ Evidence suggests that this activity was not for monetary gain, but rather for sanitary improvement. In the Victorian era, sanitary improvement "embraced a wide range of urban incentives with a health agenda,

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Johnston, Mark. *Street Trees in Britain: A History*. N.pag. Windgather Press, 2017.

including street tree planting.”⁷ Hitchman was truly dedicated to improving public health, as his obituary in the *Monthly Homeopathic Review* highlights, that he ““was especially active in all matters bearing upon the sanitary improvement of towns.””⁸

The “Hydropathic Establishment”

Yet, Hitchman’s efforts did not focus solely on tree planting. He extended the land at the Arboretum and opened a “Hydropathic Establishment”⁹ (a hospital) within its grounds in 1863. This establishment, which demonstrates Hitchman’s use of Homeopathic medicine late in his career, combined “landscape gardening and arboriculture with healing.”¹⁰ The treatment involved using water “at temperatures graduated according to the nature of the disorder, aided by a properly regulated diet and regimen.”¹¹ Methods included separate “Electric and Electro-Magnetic Baths”¹² for men and women. They, along with other treatments, were said to cure all sorts of complaints. Both the Arboretum and the “Hydropathic Establishment” were advertised regularly in the local newspapers. Using the Record Office’s new online subscription to the *British Newspaper Archive* proved this fact in a matter of minutes. It was fascinating to follow the advertising over several years.

Conclusion

Sadly, Hitchman died suddenly in 1867, but the Hydropathic hospital survived until 1883. After its closure, it was bought by the Royal Midland Counties Home for Incurables, who used the property and grounds as a hospice. The institution was “taken over by the National Health Service in 1948, closing finally in 1995 when most of the land was sold for housing.”¹³ Today, only the road names (e.g. Conifer Grove, Hitchman Mews) and a few original trees hint at what used to be there in the mid-19th century. However, they are a wonderful

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Qtd in Ibid

⁹ Leamington Advertiser, Thursday 4th January 1866. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

¹⁰ Johnston, Mark. *Street Trees in Britain: A History*. Windgather Press, 2017. N.pag.

¹¹ Poster, © Jennings, A., Taylor, Robin. www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk

¹² Ibid

¹³ Taylor, Robin. www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk

reminder of Leamington's history, and of course, of an extraordinary Arboretum.