

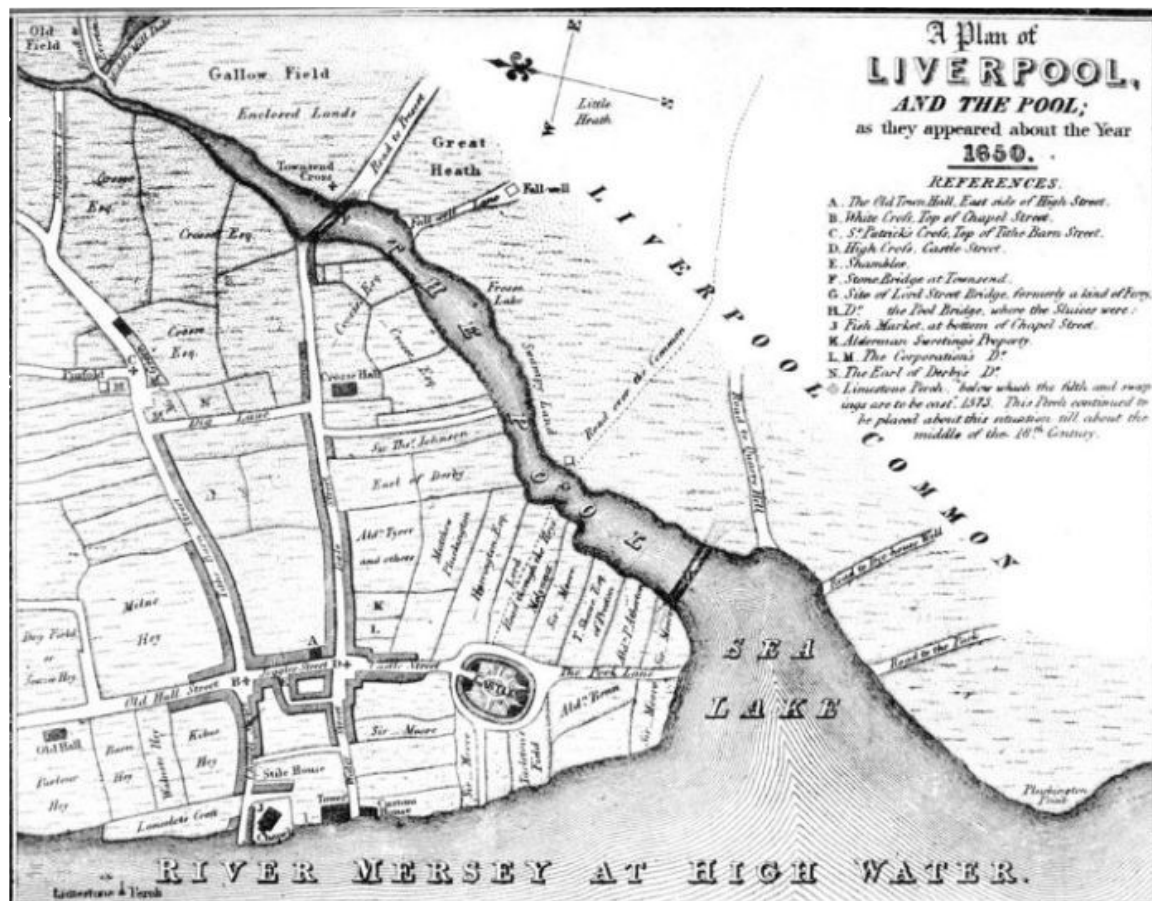
‘Before the road was the river’: the streams beneath our streets

Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Proverbs 5:16

Well, water has to go somewhere: a lesson brought home by the recent flooding in the north of England and the Scottish borders. But where does it go when a town grows and smothers fields and streams with concrete, brick and tarmac? It’s buried, pushed out of sight. Towns like Liverpool and London have grown around rivers which have later been covered in and forgotten. But beneath the city streets, waterways continue on their ancient courses in underground culverts.

As Liverpool expanded from late 18th century onwards, many such streams and brooks were buried beneath roads and buildings to be forgotten. All of these lost streams had once wended their way through meadows and marshlands down to the Mersey.

There was a stream that once rose in Parliament Fields (roughly, the area stretching across Upper Parliament Street to Princes Avenue) and ran down to the bottom of what is now Parliament Street where it powered a water-mill before it joined the river. Another stream rose somewhere in the high ground around High Park Street, ran its course down what is now Park Road, past the Ancient Chapel of Toxteth and through the present grounds of the Turner Home, before flowing through [the Dingle](#) and entering the Mersey at Knott’s Hole.



Most significantly for Liverpool's future development was the stream that emerged from the Moss Lake, the marshy area between Parliament Street and Brownlow Hill (now occupied by the streets of Liverpool's elegant Georgian quarter), that flowed into the Pool, the creek that gave Liverpool its name (now buried beneath the foundations of Liverpool One).

The Pool on a map from 1650

In the beginning there was the road. But before the road, there was the river.

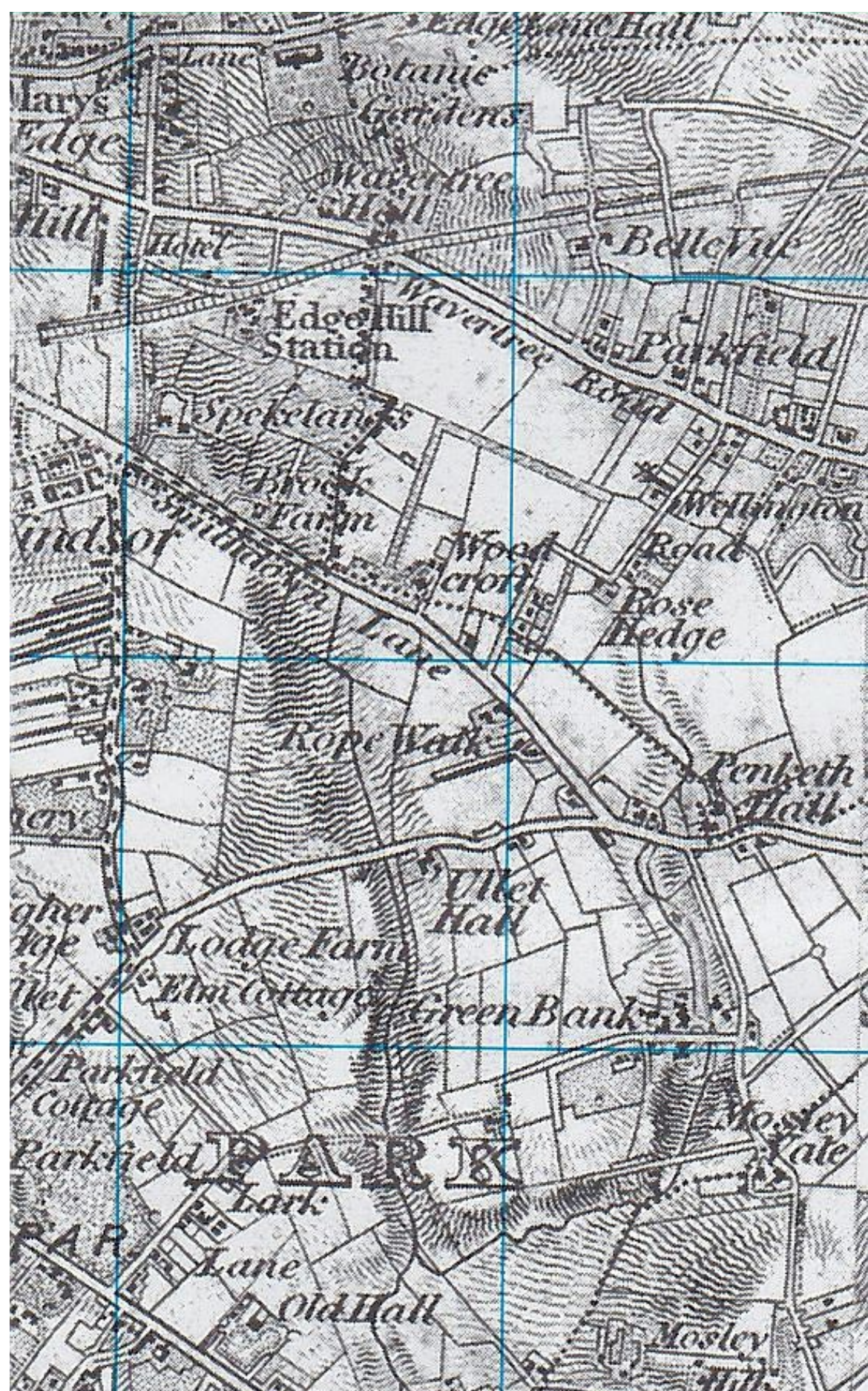
– Gillian Tisdall, *The Fields Beneath*

It's nearly half a century since I came to Liverpool, and in that time much of my daily life has been spent beating the bounds of the territory that was formerly Toxteth Park. Over the years I've internalized a dual psycho-geography: that of the streets, buildings and bustle of today, and, in my imagination, the sleeping forms of the land as it once was – fields, lanes, streams and valleys. As Gillian Tisdall remarks in *The Fields Beneath*, her wonderful study of the landforms that lie concealed beneath her own London suburb of Kentish Town, 'the town is simply disguised countryside':

Main roads, some older than history itself, still bend to avoid long-dried marshes, or veer off at an angle where the wall of a manor house once stood. Hills and valleys still remain; rivers, even though entombed in sewer pipes [...] Garden walls follow the line of old hedgerows; the very street patterns have been determined by the holdings of individual farmers and landlords. [...]

From this, it is only a short step of the imagination to envisage the onetime fields being still there, with their grass and buttercups and even the footprints of cows, merely hidden beneath modern concrete and asphalt – as if you had simply to lift up a paving stone in order to reveal it.

Every day for many years now dog-walking duties mean that I follow the course of one of the lost streams of Toxteth Park where it remains above ground. This is the Lower Brook that once originated near the Botanic Gardens on Edge Lane (an ancient road) and flowed in a southerly direction across Smithdown Road (originally Smithdown Lane, another ancient road), through fields now occupied by Toxteth Park Cemetery and Sefton Park, then down through the creek they called Otterspool, and then into the Mersey.



e Upper and Lower Brooks shown on a map from 1840

These days the Lower Brook makes its first appearance on the northern edge of Sefton Park at a grotto, built in 1870 by a French rock-work specialist. The grotto was created after French landscape architect Édouard André won a Europe-wide competition launched by Liverpool Corporation to design a grand park on land donated by Lord Sefton.



The Sefton Park Grotto

But this is not the source of the Lower Brook. That lies a couple of miles to the north – in the Botanic Gardens on the south side of Edge Lane. The stream once emerged from ponds that lay to the east of the Botanic gardens, first established on Mount Pleasant by a group of Liverpool botanists led by William Roscoe, then relocated to Wavertree in the 1830s.

The ponds are still shown on maps of the area in the 1960s, but now lie buried somewhere beneath Wavertree Technology Park (its main thoroughfares imaginatively named Innovation Boulevard and Digital Way). Yet the Lower Brook still emerges in Sefton Park, its flow varying with the rainfall (particularly strong after the recent deluges that have saturated open ground): so where does the water come from? Presumably the brook still drains the borders and grassy open spaces of Botanic Park – as well as taking run-off water from the neighbouring Technology Park.

Until the arrival of the Liverpool-Manchester railway line in 1830, the brook crossed Wavertree Road close to a house called ‘Bridge House’. In his invaluable *Memorials of Liverpool*, published in 1875, James Picton records that:

Just where the railway crosses the road stood a farm-house and orchard called Bridge House, from the bridge over the brook forming the division between the townships. About half way from Edgehill stood an old picturesque cottage, originally called the 'Pump House' but subsequently converted to a tavern called the Halfway House, with a tea garden and skittles.

Now the brook must be culverted beneath the railway tracks – and under the streets of 19th century terraced housing beyond. Before the streets, the stream appears to have followed a course now marked by Spofforth Road and Webster Road (significantly, the line of these streets once formed a section of the boundary of a Parliamentary constituency).Toxteth Park Cemetery



After following the line of Webster Road, the brook passes beneath Smithdown Road and then Toxteth Park Cemetery – opened on 9 June 1856, and where James Picton is now buried. In this place, because the ground was never levelled, you can still feel a powerful sense of

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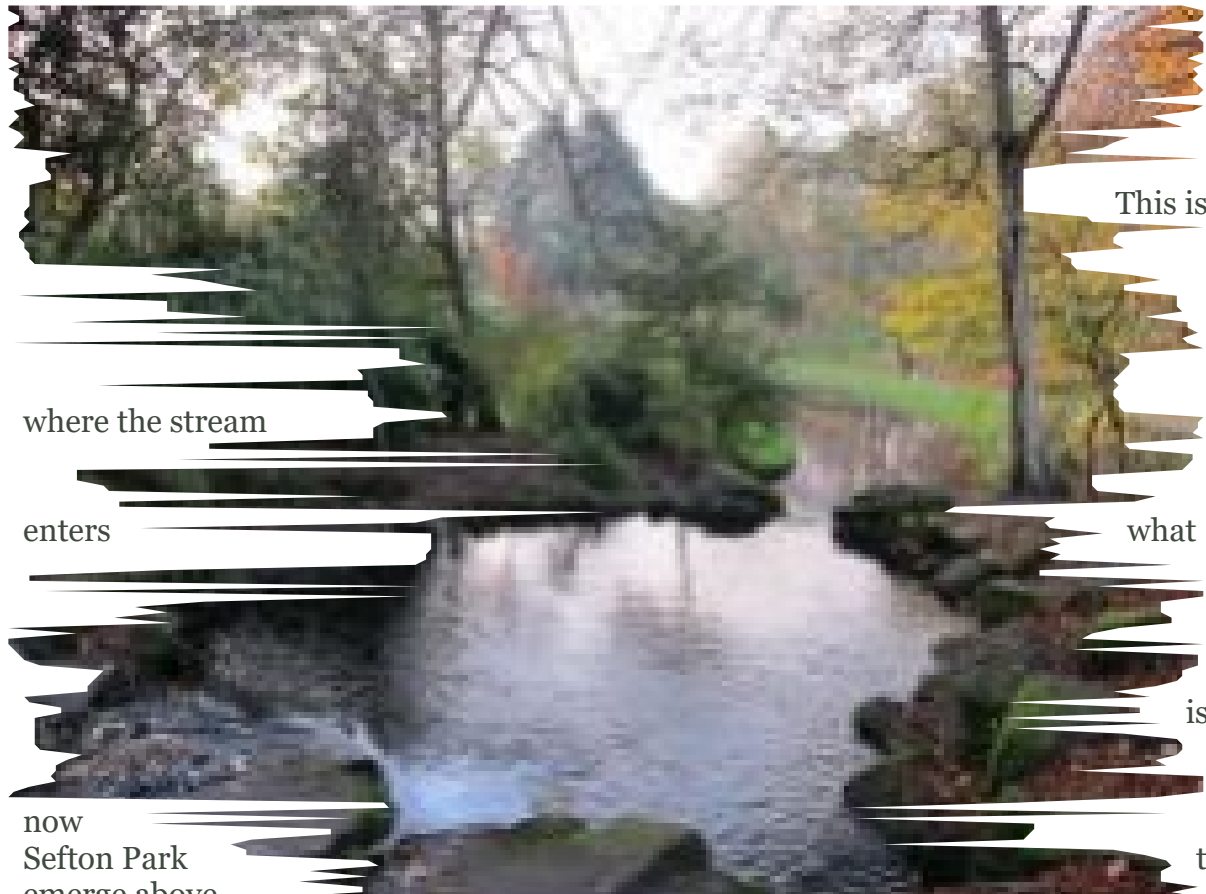


rolling fields that once characterised so much of Toxteth Park before the fields disappeared beneath endless streets of working class terraces.

Ullet Road looking towards to the dip where the Lower Brook crosses

If you're familiar with Arundel Avenue or Ullet Road you'll know that walking towards Smithdown, the route takes a sharp dip somewhere near Cheltenham Avenue: the physical manifestation of the valley shaped by the brook as it passed this way.

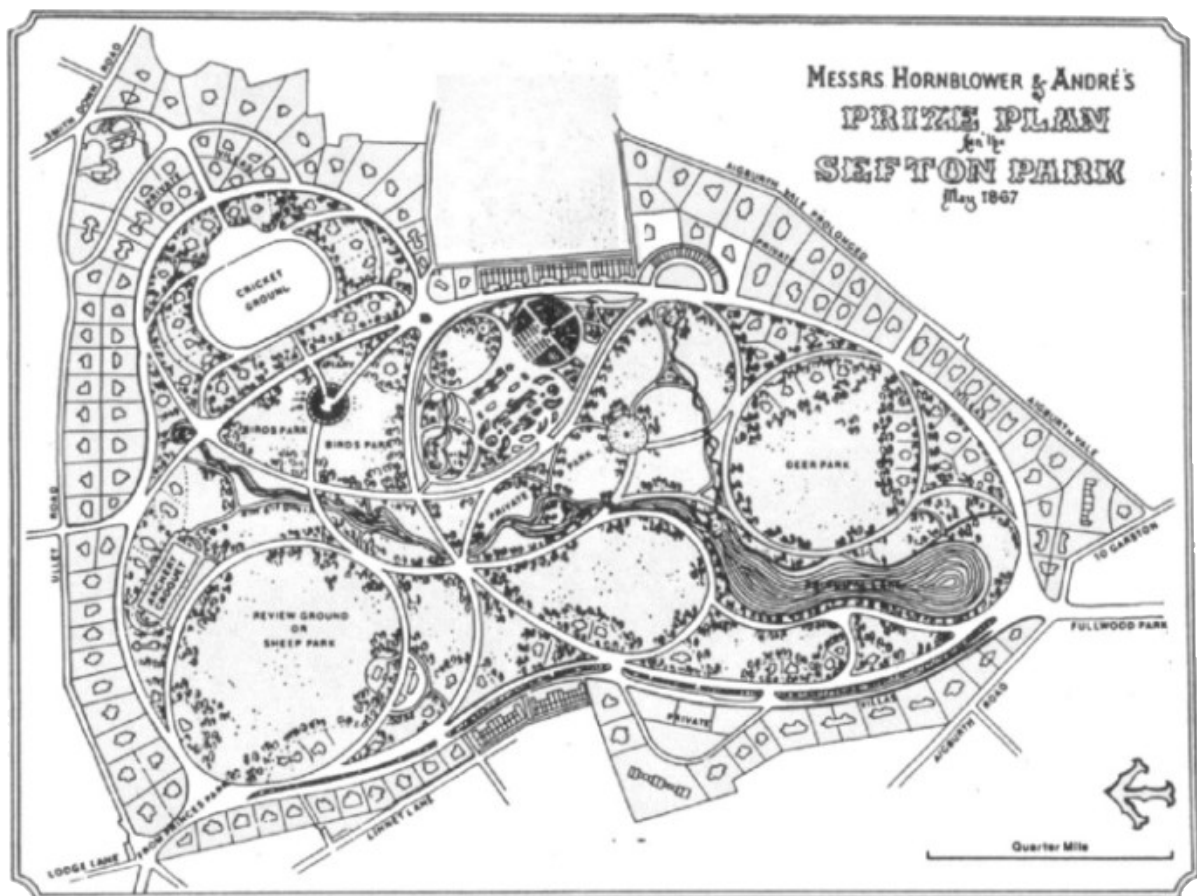
The Upper Brook just below the Grotto



now
Sefton Park
emerge above
ground at the Grotto. Now the brook flows through Sefton Park, a walk I follow almost every day, before it eventually empties into the Boating Lake where it merges with another ancient stream, the Upper Brook.







Walking along the Lower Brook there are several places where it is still possible to imagine yourself in the old, open country of Toxteth Park before the city spread its tentacles, before the Earl of Sefton began to sell off parcels of his land for urban development.

In 1769 the township of Toxteth comprised a mere 54 farms and cottages. Development came rapidly: by 1831 it had a population over 24,000, and by 1871 85,000. The City Council's purchase of the land for Sefton Park was a successful attempt to preserve what little was still left of Toxteth's rural landscape. In 1864 the council paid a quarter of a million pounds for 375 acres of undulating agricultural land on which groups of farm buildings marked the few holdings.

Sefton Park winning prize plan, 1867

The winning design for the park, by French landscape architect Édouard André with assistance from Liverpool architect Lewis Hornblower, retained the natural valleys of the two streams, along with much of the informal character of the wending watercourses, but adding features such as waterfalls, islands and lakes.

At the head of the Boating Lake the waters of the Lower Brook merge with those of the Upper Brook, a stream that originally had its source near the northern end of Wavertree Playground, known to locals as The Mystery. This was one of the first purpose-built public playgrounds in Britain, once the grounds of a stately home called The Grange which was demolished in 1895. It seemed inevitable that the estate would be sold for building houses, but an anonymous donor bought the land and presented it to the City of Liverpool. The area was levelled and an ornamental lake that probably was once the source of the brook was filled in. The culverted Upper Brook passes near to the junction of Greenbank Road and Smithdown Road where it gave its name to the Old Brook House, built in 1754. In his *History of the Royal and Ancient Park of Toxteth* (1907), Robert Griffiths offers this sketch of the old pub,



part of the Upper Brook was still visible above ground in gardens behind the new pub. From there it flowed under Smithdown Road and entered Greenbank Park where it was dammed to form the lake. Disappearing underground once more, the Upper Brook reappears at the Iron Bridge at the head of the Dell, or Fairy Glen in Sefton Park.



A stroll down the Upper Brook



Here Édouard André and Lewis Hornblower created one of the most attractive parts of the park they designed, utilising the natural forms of the stream's little valley before it meets up with the Lower Brook at the northern end of the Boating Lake.

*The farmhouse lingers, though averse to square
With the new city street it has to wear
A number in. But what about the brook
That held the house as in an elbow-crook?
I ask as one who knew the brook, its strength
And impulse, having dipped a finger length
And made it leap my knuckle, having tossed
A flower to try its currents where they crossed.
The meadow grass could be cemented down
From growing under pavements of a town;
The apple trees be sent to hearth-stone flame.
Is water wood to serve a brook the same?
How else dispose of an immortal force
No longer needed? Staunch it at its source
With cinder loads dumped down? The brook was thrown
Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone
In fetid darkness still to live and run —
And all for nothing it had ever done
Except forget to go in fear perhaps.
No one would know except for ancient maps
That such a brook ran water. But I wonder
If from its being kept forever under,
The thoughts may not have risen that so keep
This new-built city from both work and sleep.*

-Robert Frost, 'A Brook in the City'

After leaving the lake at the far end, the combined waters of the two streams were known centuries ago as the Osklesbroke. Later, when an early 17th century colony of Puritan farmers settled on land near Otterspool after the disafforestation of Toxteth Park, they named their small-holding Jordan Farm, and called the nearby stream the River Jordan, and the named stuck.

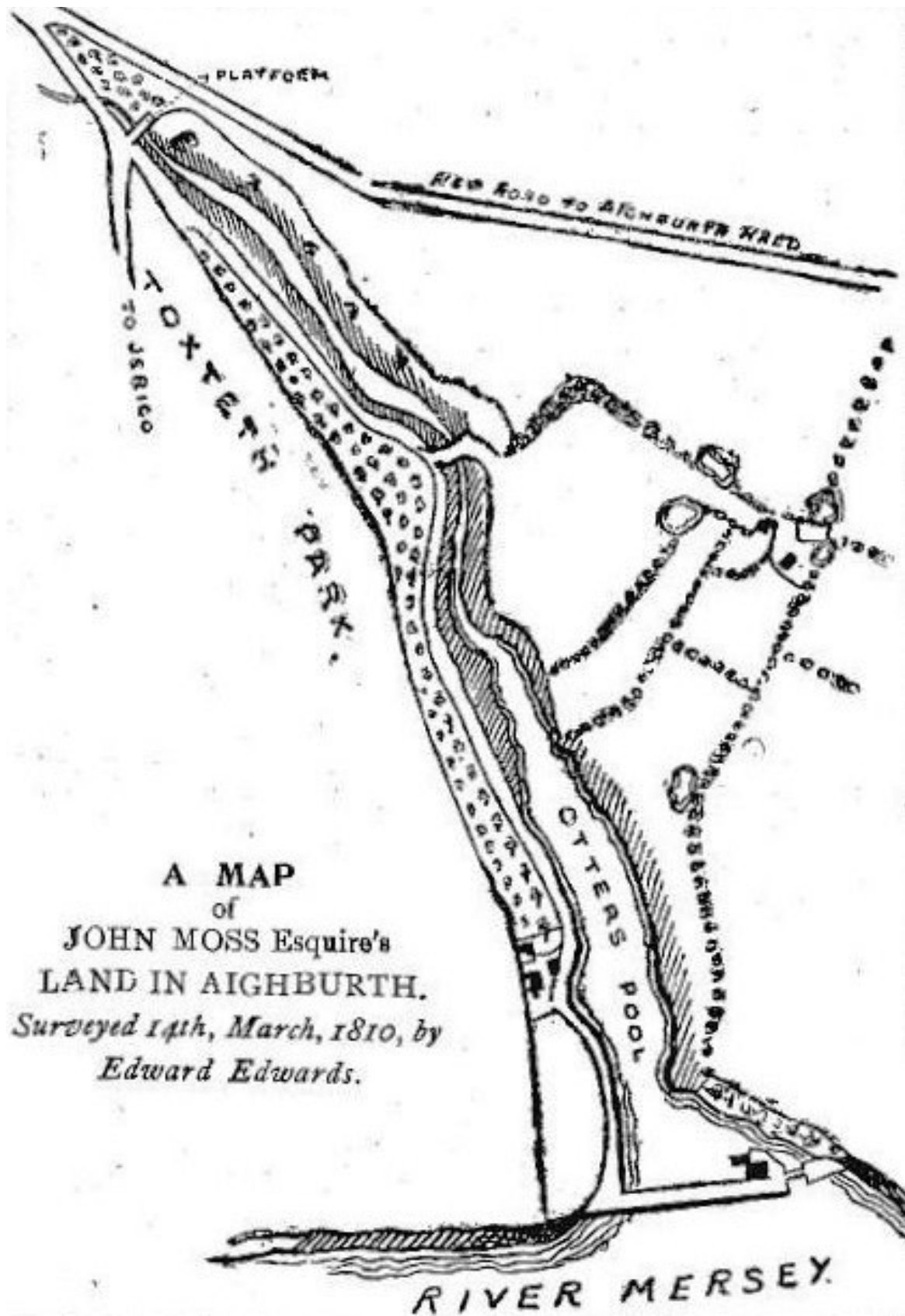
The astronomer [Jeremiah Horrocks](#) – who was the first person to demonstrate that the Moon moved around the Earth in an elliptical orbit, and predicted the transit of Venus of 1639 – was born at the Lower Lodge on the Jericho farmstead in 1619. Now regarded as the 'Father of British Astronomy', there's a memorial to him at the Pier Head in Liverpool.

These days the River Jordan has disappeared from view, flowing in a culvert under Aigburth Road, then beneath the carriage drive at the entrance of Otterspool Park and through woodland before finally flowing into the Mersey.

In his 1907 *History of the Royal and Ancient Park of Toxteth*, Robert Griffiths writes

The stream ran into the large Otter's Pool shortly after entering the Park, then on into a second Pool, probably tidal, which widened into the creek. Before the water was checked upstream, and the creation of the Upper Pool, this was a sprightly brook with cascades, known as the Osklesbrok, as it danced through the picturesque woods towards the Mersey. In 1204, the stream formed the southern boundary of King John's newly created hunting estate of Toxteth Park.

Until the mid-19th century, fishermen's nets and cottages were a common sight along the river bank at Otterspool and the Mersey fishery was known for its abundance of fish, which included salmon, codling, whiting, fluke, sole and shrimps. The last remaining river bank cottage, occupied by the Kennerley family, was located close to the end of Jericho Lane. This building became a local landmark but was demolished in 1933 and with its demise went the last relic feature of the Mersey fisheries.



Map of Otterspool in 1810

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Otterspool is derived from the Old English *otirpul*. *Otir* was the Old English for otter and the pool was named for the otters which inhabited the tidal creek where the Osklesbrok, or Jordan, joined the Mersey.

The Jordan now flows underground and out of sight in a culvert that takes it to the Mersey. But there are pot-holing types whose greatest pleasure is to squeeze themselves through confined spaces that would fill most of us with terror. In forum posts on the website of the Northwest Exploration Group it is possible to follow the steps of these underground explorers as they make their way along the culvert – from the entrance to Otterspool Park to the Mersey – in photos taken along their way.



he Jordan river culvert: photo by Georgie, Northwest Exploration Group
Another view inside the Jordan culvert: photo by Kevsy, Northwest Exploration Group

In his *History of the Royal and Ancient Park of Toxteth*, Robert Griffiths relates how, at the start of the 19th century, a massive stone dam, known locally as the ‘water lily dam’ on account of the great number of water lilies which grew in the stream at this point was built across the neck of the Jordan where it entered the Mersey:

A roadway passed along the top of this dam and through it ran a conduit ... thirty yards long, and cut through the solid rock. Near this dam, there was at one time, a boathouse, and on the other side of it, a stone landing place.



Otter

spool Mill in 1907

In 1779 a Snuff Mill had been built at Otterspool along with workmen's cottages. Then, in 1812, the snuff mill became an oil mill with direct access to the Mersey for barges loaded with cocoa nuts and other raw materials via a channel called the gut. There's a photo of it as it looked in 1907 in Griffiths' book.

Today it's difficult to visualise the lay of the land as it was because of the construction of the promenade, begun in 1929 and completed in 1932. The area behind the new sea wall – on average 180 metres from the original foreshore – was filled with material excavated during the construction of the Mersey Tunnel. Otterspool Promenade was opened on 7 July 1950.

*When it rains here, we soak
up to our ankles and down
from our hoods. You wouldn't
believe all the water teeming
in the cracks of our streets and
sliding down the sidewalks
in thin, fleeting sheets. We
could almost be swept away.*

—David K. Wheeler, 'The Chance of Rain'