

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



CHARLES McKIMM (1848-1907)

First General Superintendant of Parks for the City of Belfast

Charles McKimm was born in Donaghadee in 1848, the third son of Charles and Isabella (Jephson). He served his apprenticeship on the estate of Lord Farnham (Maxwell family) outside Cavan Town. The estate, settled in the 17th century, covered over a thousand acres of woodlands, lakes, parkland, and formal and walled gardens with orangery, peach and vine houses.

McKimm came to the Royal Botanic Garden in Belfast in 1874, working with and then succeeding, in 1878 as Head Gardener, the Curator, Forsythe Johnston, who resigned in 1877. Belfast Botanic and Horticultural Society had founded the gardens in 1828. Until the end of the century, the gardens were open only to the shareholders. The system of management by shareholders meant that funding was meagre over the following decades, necessitating the staging of a variety of events - the forerunners of today's concerts, Food Fests and Enchanted Evenings.

The McKimms lived in an early Victorian house where six sons were born. The house was demolished in the 1920 to allow the building of the Ulster Museum extension.

McKimm's enthusiasm caused many improvements to be made and the gardens were transformed. These improvements included new nursery houses, wider paths, large fountain, Palm House extensively repaired with gas lighting installed, erection of Venetian Gothic Style Gate Lodge, Clock tower addition to Gate Lodge, Exhibition Hall built, erection of a tower or Gazebo with winding staircase to give views of the Black Mountain

In 1877 McKimm presented his plans for a Fernery on the site of the Orchid House. The design was such that the plants grew in a sunken glen with a galleried walkway around the inside perimeter, giving a wonderful view over the ravine jungle planted with cycads, ferns, palms, bamboo and tree ferns. Grottoes, pools and cascades operated by a chain pulley further enhanced the surroundings. The Tropical Ravine was opened in the summer of 1889 with its first visitors being the Marquis and Marchioness of Dufferin.

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The completion of the Tropical Ravine gave the Gardens a feature unique in the British Isles and is judged as McKimms finest achievement.

Belfast Corporation purchased the Botanic Garden and renamed it the Belfast Botanical Gardens Park, opening it to the public free of charge in 1895.

In November 1903 McKimm was appointed to a newly created post of General Superintendent of Parks for the City of Belfast. Facilities in public parks were improved and street tree planting commenced. He supervised the layout and landscaping of Victoria Park in Sydenham, which opened in 1906.

Plans were prepared for the area around the City Hall then under construction and the grounds were laid out to his design. On the occasion of the opening ceremony in 1905 he was responsible for the interior floral decoration.

McKimm died at home on 30 December 1907. In his lifetime he gained the respect of all who knew him - from the members of the aristocracy to the children who visited "his gardens" uninvited.

Patrick Devlin