

# Bathwick Villa

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Fig. 1: **Bathwick Villa, Bath. Watercolour, c.1890, by George Hobson (1833-1919)** - Victoria Art Gallery

Spring Gardens and Sydney Gardens were described in the *Georgian Pleasures* conference but the smaller and short-lived pleasure gardens of Bath in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries received less attention. This edition of *Bath History*, therefore, seems to provide an ideal opportunity to reprint an article on the lesser-known 'Bathwick Villa', which first appeared in *Bathwick: A Forgotten Village* in 2004,<sup>1</sup> and so bring to wider attention the story of this amusing place of entertainment, which is long since demolished and the site redeveloped. For further information it has also become possible to add to the article, colour images of the original watercolours of the Villa and its setting. These pictures are published with the permission of the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath.

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<sup>1</sup> Bathwick Local History Society, *Bathwick: A Forgotten Village* (Bath: Millstream Books, 2004), pp.43-8.

## Bathwick Villa

Bathwick Villa was a substantial Gothick-style house that stood with its outbuildings on The Ennix, later known as Villa Fields. Built in 1777 for Alderman James Ferry, the house and gardens were laid out as a pleasure resort. The building changed hands in 1782 when it then became popular as a place for public entertainment and refreshment.

Business declined in the early 1790s due mainly to competition from other resorts and transport difficulties as a result of the Georgian development in progress in Bathwick at that time. By 1799 the future of Bathwick Villa was uncertain and the nineteenth century saw a steady decline in its fortunes, culminating in its demolition in 1897 to make way for the Forester estate. Today almost nothing of the Villa remains.

### The Early Years

On 24th September 1744 Peter and James Ferry, Weavers and Silk Merchants of the Strand, London, opened a shop in Pierrepont Street, Bath (see **fig. 2**). The brothers later moved to the first house on the North Parade (Corner of Galloway's Buildings), from where they retired from business in 1770.

Alderman James Ferry was Chamberlain to the City of Bath for many years

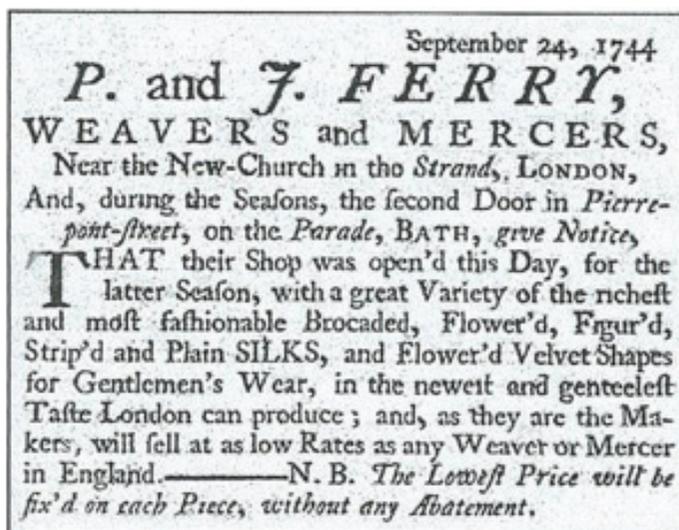


Fig. 2: Advertisement from the *Bath Journal*, 1744

but was removed from office in 1780. By 1782 he was unable to settle the balances due to the city treasury of his accounts as Chamberlain and therefore resigned as Alderman. Previous to these events in 1777, Ferry acquired the land from the Pulteney estate for the construction of a Gothick-style villa, apparently occupying it in 1779. Until then the land was open meadows.

The architect of Bathwick Villa is unknown but the watercolour of the house by George Hobson, c. 1890 (see **fig. 5**), shows a resemblance to the Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel on the Vineyards, Bath, which is thought to have been built to design by the master builder John Case in about 1765.

The Villa was situated roughly where numbers 10 to 15 Forester Road stand today, although there is nothing now visible to identify the spot. Built into its frontage were balconies with private boxes and, around the house, the many outbuildings spread out to form three sides of a square. The staircases were described as handsome, the main staircase being so wide as to accommodate six people abreast ascending or descending at one time. The ground-floor surface of the building was of tessellated marble.



**Fig. 3: Section from *A New and Recent Survey of the City of Bath*, published in 1810, clearly showing Bathwick Villa - Bath Record Office**



**Fig. 4: The Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel - Photograph by Liz Adamson**



**Fig. 5: Bathwick Villa from the Warminster Road, with highlight showing the extent of the Villa and its walled gardens. Artist unknown - Victoria Art Gallery**

The gardens were long and narrow and, with a carriage drive, extended from the house to the present Beckford Road.

An unconfirmed theory suggests that the ornamental arch, now at the entrance to Henrietta Court (the modern block of flats in Bathwick Street), was once part of the entrance to the grounds. Often referred to as Pinch's Folly, this arch is thought to have originally formed a gateway to the Villa but was removed and rebuilt on or near its present location in about 1850 by William Pinch the grandson of [the Bath architect] John Pinch senior.

In 1934 a reply to a query about the arch appeared in the *Bath Chronicle and Herald Weekly*; in the letter, William Pinch's granddaughter wrote,

This archway was designed and built by my grandfather Mr. William Pinch, architect of Rochfort House. His intention was to stop the annoyance of noise and dust caused by the coal carts using the road leading to the cottages at the side of Rochfort House.

Carved into the stonework above the arch is the Coat of Arms of Powlett and Lowther. The Arms, now weather worn and difficult to see, are set side-by-side, indicating husband and wife. In 1815 Lord Powlett married Caroline Lowther, daughter of the 1st Earl of Lonsdale. In 1864 he succeeded to the dukedom of Cleveland and inherited the Pulteney estate but died the same year.

In June 1780, Bathwick Villa was visited by the novelist and diarist Fanny Burney. In her diary and letters written while she was staying with her friends Mr. and Mrs. Thrale at No. 14 South Parade, she describes the occasion,

... the Bishop (of Peterborough) proposed a frolic that we should all go to the Spring Gardens, where he would give us tea, and thence proceed to Mr. Ferry's to see a very curious house and garden...

They crossed the river to Bathwick via the Whitehall stairs and ferry but when they arrived at Mr. Ferry's, Fanny noted the bad taste displayed at the Villa. The crowd of outbuildings and the cheap ornamentation gave the appearance of 'Unsuccessful attempts at making something of nothing...' and she added,

After parading through four or five vulgarly showy closets, not rooms, we were conducted into a very gaudy little apartment where the master of the house sat reclining on his arm, as if in contemplation....

They also saw what she described as one of the 'puerile wonders he (Mr. Ferry) evidently delighted in.' This was a strange device that caused the dining table to rise up through a trap door in the floor and a carved eagle to descend from the ceiling and take up the tablecloth revealing a rich display of confectionery.

The sights occasioned us a good merry walk home through the Bathwick Meadows, indeed we laughed all the way.

On 8th April 1782 Mr Ferry, by now an old man, put the house and gardens (heavily mortgaged) up for auction.

All that new built House and Garden, situated in Bathwick, now in the possession of Mr. Ferry - commanding many beautiful views of Bath and the country circumjacent. The Gardens consist of about an acre and a quarter. Laid out in modern taste, with serpentine gravel walks, and valuable shrubbery,

evergreens, fishponds, bridges and fruit trees in the highest perfection. The distance is only 1152 measured yards from Bath Market to the garden gate, and a further distance to the public rooms is very inconsiderable.

Mr. Marrett, a Wine Merchant of Milsom Street, and a shareholder in Sydney Gardens, purchased the property and in an effort to attract the public subsequently made improvements to both house and grounds. In April 1783 a notice in the *Bath Chronicle* announced the opening.

Bathwick Villa. The Nobility and Gentry are respectfully informed that the delightful Villa and pleasant Gardens, late the seat of James Ferry Esq. will on Tuesday 10th instant, be opened for Teas, Coffee etc.

A subscription is taken at the bar for ladies and gentlemen walking in the gardens at 2s 6d. each for the season.

Newspapers in the Coffee Room for the use of subscribers. Dinners and Suppers at short notice.

The choicest of wines may be depended upon.

As this undertaking has been attended by very great expense, the proprietor humbly requests the favour and encouragement of the public in general and friends in particular.

A coach road up to the front of the house, and a ferry over the river from Walcot.

The words BATHWICK VILLA NEAT WINES were carved prominently into the outer wall of the Villa and remained there until the house was destroyed in later years. A metal entrance ticket was produced.

Over the following five years the house and gardens proved to be a popular resort, with musical concerts, fireworks, illuminations, gymnasts and conjuring provided on a regular basis. The gardens, set out with pavilions, fountains and statues in prim classic style, were said to be a place where fashionable Bath socialites and their friends congregated for pleasure, leisure and entertainment.

There was great competition from other pleasure grounds, especially the Spring Gardens resort and by 1788 this, combined with the huge Georgian



Fig. 6: Bathwick Villa token. One of these rare tokens can be seen on display at the Museum of Bath Architecture - Bath Central Library

developments in and around Pulteney Street, badly affected business at the Villa.

On 19th August 1790, an evening of *Grand Entertainment and Vocal and Instrumental Musiks* was announced in the *Bath Journal*. This appears to have been the last big event staged and soon after the house closed to the public.

### Decline and Demolition

After closure a large part of the gardens was included in the plans for further Georgian streets such as Alva Street and extensions to Sydney Place but these never materialised and so the whole area became known as Villa Fields.

Nothing is known of the house from its closure until 21st February 1799, when at a vestry meeting in the Bathwick Parish Church attended by John Pinch, then an agent for the Pulteney Estate,

...Consideration was given to the terms of a proposal from Sir William Pulteney for the letting of the Old Villa House and gardens to the Parish of Bathwick for the better accommodation of the poor.

However, the building, by then only just over twenty years old and probably

**VILLA - GARDENS,**  
 (Ten Minutes Walk from the Pump-Room, and about  
 the same distance from the New Rooms over the Ferry  
 opposite Walcot-Parade.)

**T**HE Nobility and Gentry are respectfully in-  
 formed that this much-admired House and Gardens  
 are now opened for the reception of company.

The First PUBLIC BREAKFAST, attended with  
 French Horns, Clarionets, and Bassoon, will be on Wed-  
 nesday the 19th instant.—Tickets One Shilling and Six-  
 pence each, to be had at the Gates of the Gardens, and at  
 Marrett's, Wine-Merchant, in Milford-street, who humbly  
 solicits the patronage and encouragement of a generous pub-  
 lic, and of his friends in particular.

A Subscription is opened at the Bar for Ladies and Gen-  
 tlemen walking in the Gardens, at 2s. 6d. each for the  
 season.—The curious Chair, Table, Perspective View, &c.  
 are in proper repair for the amusement of subscribers.

Large private Partics (either for Breakfasts, Dinners or  
 Suppers) are requested to give timely notice.

\* \* \* For the Direction of Strangers, a FLAG will be dis-  
 played at the Top of the House every Public Morning.

Fig. 7: From the *Bath Journal* in 1786

already in a neglected state, next became the home of the Reverend Dr. John Trussler, DD. A theologian and prolific writer, Trussler resided at the Villa from early 1800 until his death in 1820.

In 1803 the threat of invasion by Napoleon loomed and as plans were drawn up for the defence of the country, the Villa Fields was regularly used to drill the troops of the local Bath Volunteer Corps.

As the population of Bathwick steadily increased and with the need to produce more food, some areas were let out as garden allotments with cottages attached.

By 1851 the house was being used to house the poor as described in the following article published in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* in 1852:

GUILDHALL, SEPT. 20, 1803.  
To the BATH VOLUNTEERS.

**T**HE MEMBERS of the BATH VOLUNTEER  
CORPS who have signed their Names, and have  
not taken the Oath of Allegiance, are requested to do so  
*on or before Sunday next,* when there will be  
A PUBLIC DRILL in the VILLA FIELD,  
Precisely at Eight o'Clock in the Morning.  
All persons neglecting to take the oath as above stated,  
will be excluded the advantages arising to them under  
the several Acts of Parliament respecting Volunteers.  
By order of the Committee,  
C. WOOTTEN, Secretary.

Fig. 8: From the *Bath Chronicle* in 1803

This fine old house now a little better than a ruin ... the villa is now divided and subdivided, and is inhabited by a number of poor families and the gardens are cut up into a batch of lanes and allotments...

In 1890 the old house was let out as cheap lodgings to labourers working on the construction of the Forester Estate on the Villa Fields. From then on the deterioration rapidly became dereliction and ended with the demolition of Bathwick Villa during October and November 1897. Some of the stone was re-used in the building of the present houses in Forester Road.



**Fig. 9: A cottage in Villa Fields in 1927. Once named Holly Cottage, its exact age is unknown but it was built before 1834 and is one of just a few original buildings that still survive in what later became the Forester Estate - BLHS Archives**

## About the Author

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