

THE ROYAL VICTORIA PARK

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The main events surrounding the formation of the park and its subsequent history are well documented in a number of sources.¹ Nevertheless there are key issues arising from its context within the public park movement which began in earnest after the publication of the findings of the *Select Committee on Public Walks* in 1833; these include a consideration of the stylistic diversity of the park, and the various features which reflect attitude and social change in Victorian Britain.

In the late eighteenth century the area we now associate with the park west of Marlborough Buildings was referred to as the Bath Common or Common Fields, and the Freemen² of the city had a right to a share in the income from leasing the land. However the Corporation were described as 'trustees' of the estate, and therefore any decision about the Common's future had to be by mutual agreement. For many years the Freemen had attempted to build on the Common and thereby increase their income, but the Corporation had opposed these developments, declaring that 'they had not the power...to let out the land on building leases'. In 1827 the Council Minutes report that yet another application had been made to build villas and cottages on the Common; plans had been prepared for a proposed development on the Lower and Upper Common by G.P. Manners, city architect from 1823–1862. This was rejected by the Corporation to prevent 'encroachments on a spot, which had, from time immemorial, been open for the use of the inhabitants and visitors of the city'. The same meeting recalled the decisive words of Sir Nicholas Hyde, Recorder of Bath in the year 1619, 'that the Common Fields were for the use and enjoyment of the free burgesses inhabiting the city, and should remain so for ever'. This finally brought an end to building speculation on the Commons.³

In the autumn of 1829 two prominent citizens of Bath, J. Davies and T.B. Coward, invited a group of individuals, mainly from the local business community, to a meeting to consider a plan for 'the general welfare of the city', which included the formation of 'Ornamental plantations, Walks, and Rides'.⁴ According to some sources preliminary

meetings had apparently already taken place in May that year.⁵ This beginning demonstrates that the idea for a park in Bath came well before the national movement for public parks which was most active during and after the 1840s.⁶ Arguably what was uppermost in the minds of the principal tradespeople of Bath was to provide an additional attraction for visitors and a further incentive for people to live in the city. Some evidence exists that Bath was ceasing to attract visitors as it had in the eighteenth century, and that trade was suffering. The *Morning Herald* in the 1830s claimed that as many as one third of the houses in Bath were uninhabited and many shops were to let.⁷

The case for public walks in the country as a whole had already been made by J.C. Loudon, architect, author and publisher, who reported in the *Gardener's Magazine* in 1830 that Continental towns were superior to ours in providing fine promenades; he cited the particular case of Paris where the public gardens 'are numerous, and they are all of them more conspicuously, and perhaps more truly, scenes of enjoyment than the public gardens of England'.⁸ Elsewhere he pointed out that such gardens had long been common on the Continent.⁹ The Bath Corporation echoed his sentiments exactly in an address to 'all those who are interested in the prosperity of the City of Bath': 'On the Continent, there are few places of any eminence but what possess them'.¹⁰

At this time the city had no free public gardens. Sydney Gardens, opened in 1795, were run as a commercial venture on the lines of the eighteenth century 'pleasure grounds' and their rival Grosvenor Gardens had long since closed.¹¹ The parks we now enjoy in Bath had not yet been developed. Hedgemoor Park was laid out in 1889 following a series of landslips from 1875 which had made the ground unsuitable for rebuilding, Henrietta Park was transferred to the city on Jubilee Day 1897, and Alexandra Park opened as a memorial of the coronation in 1902. The limited extent of the Gravel Walk (Fig. 1) between Queen Square and Royal Crescent was one of the few garden attractions referred to in P. Egan's *Walks through Bath* in 1819. This promenade was continuous with a path which crossed the Crescent Fields and emerged at the bottom of Marlborough Buildings. The illustration of Royal Crescent published in Warner's *History of Bath* (1801) shows walkers setting off along this path which still exists in the same position today. It is the 'Royal Avenue' running parallel to this which was to be created as the grand entrance to the Victoria Park's rides and walks.

The meeting in 1829, which began only with a consideration of Crescent Fields, soon expressed a need for a larger space, and consequently a

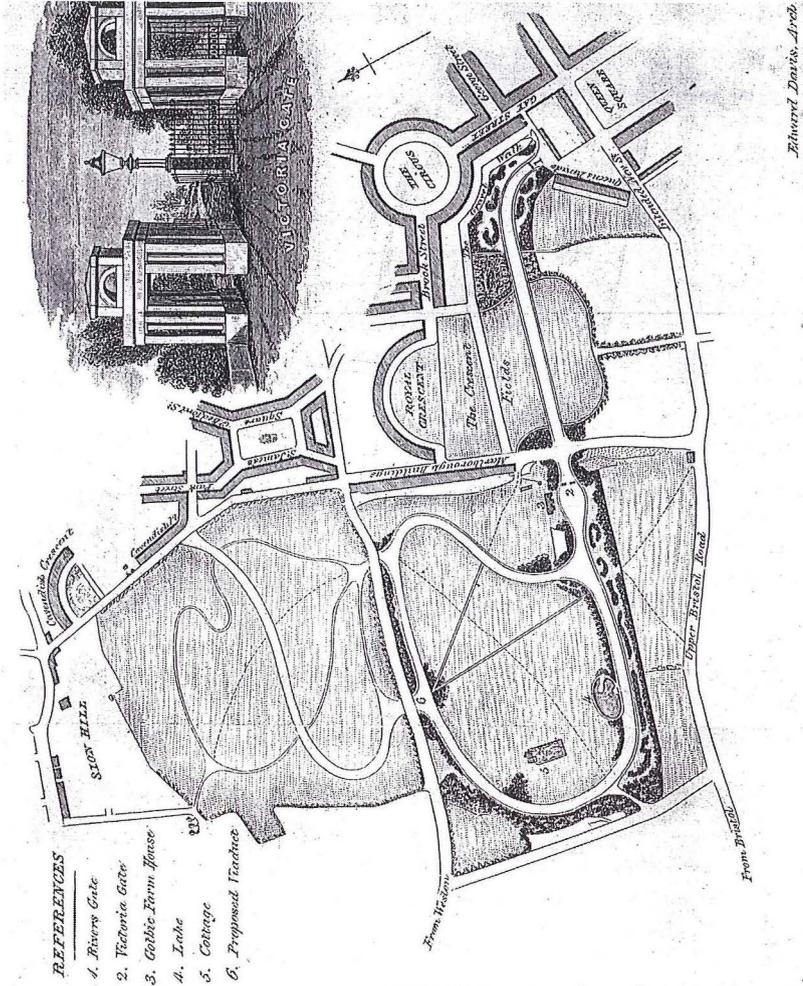


Fig. 1 Plan for the park, Edward Davis, 1829.

deputy was appointed to obtain the approval of the Corporation and the Freemen to develop part of the Middle Common as a public park.¹² Permission for the approach to the park through Crescent Fields had to be obtained from Lady Rivers and she readily agreed to the granting of a lease for the land required. A plan was prepared by Edward Davis, architect practising from Westgate Buildings, and at first glance the layout appears very similar to what we see today. All the main features are already indicated: an outer ride or drive¹³ surrounding the Middle Common; a pond or lake, which was to be enlarged in 1879; and the main gateways – here called Rivers Gate (after Lady Rivers who had consented to the making of the Royal Avenue across the Crescent Fields) and the Victoria Gate, which must have been the name given after the opening by the Princess Victoria. In Davis's design the gate is called 'Spry's Gate' (Fig. 4) after the current Mayor of Bath. The Gothic farm-house on the plan is thought to be the one designed by Davis.¹⁴ The most obvious development not on the plan concerns the area below the Weston Road and north-west of the central area (Middle Common), in the place marked 'Cottage'. Here the botanic garden was formed in 1887, although an earlier attempt had been made in 1840 to establish one on this site. The plan also shows a proposed passage to link the Middle and Upper Commons under the Weston Road. This was never built, and nor were the carriage drives on the Upper Common.

However, what is distinctly misleading on Davis's plan, and yet becomes clear on consulting the plan drawn for the purchase of the Bath Common (Freemen's Estate) and other lands by Bath Corporation in 1879, is that only the *perimeter* of the Middle Common (this included the lake, the entrance area by Park Farm and the quarries on the north-west edge of the Common), was leased by the Freemen to the Park Committee (Fig. 2). The Middle Common, the Cottage and environs, and the area immediately behind Marlborough Buildings (still called the Ring Common on the Corporation document), all remained part of the Freemen's Estate until the change of ownership. It is for this reason that the *Annals of Bath* refers to the space as comprising only about ten acres; the *History* of 1872 confirms this, saying that the Freemen agreed to letting 'ten or twelve acres of land at the sum of £6 per acre'.¹⁵ However in 1857 Frederick Hanham, described as a surgeon, gave the area as just over forty-six acres, which suggests he was including the rest of the Common which was still, strictly speaking, not leased to the Park Committee. It needs emphasising that although the ownership passed to the Corporation in 1879, the control, management, and finances of the

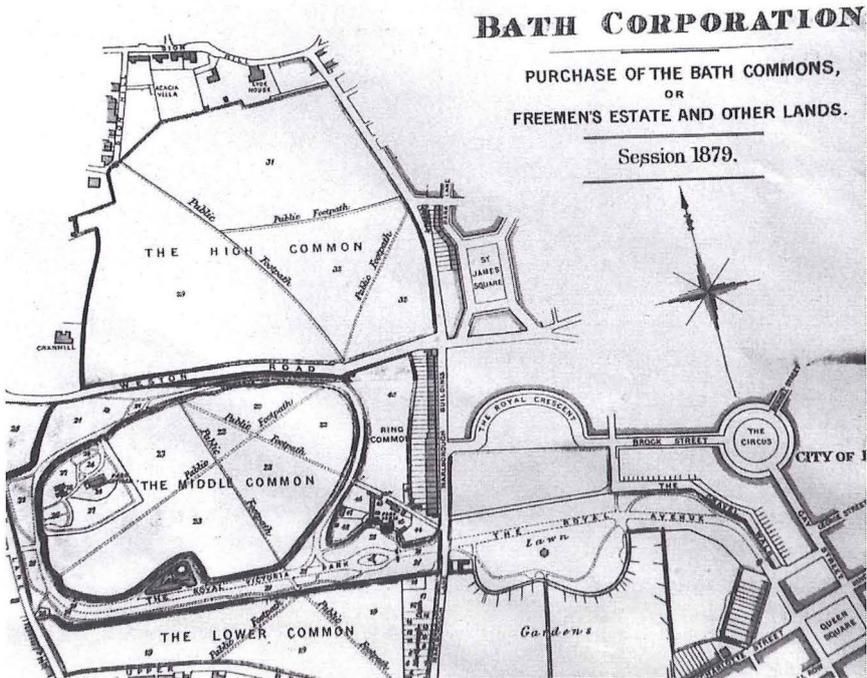


Fig. 2 Surveyor's Plan for the Purchase of the Bath Commons, 1879. (Courtesy Bath Record Office)

park remained with the Park Committee until the Corporation finally took it over in 1921. The central area on the plan within the circuit of the drive would, however, have remained open to walkers visiting the Park who could use the public footpaths criss-crossing the Common.

The plan of this part of the park with a ride and promenade round the outside occurs frequently and might be compared with the design of many parks that were established elsewhere. For example Loudon's Derby Arboretum (opened in 1840) included a serpentine walk round the outside and straight paths across the centre constructed around focal points. Once it is realised that Davis's plan fails to make clear that the lease excluded the centre of the Middle Common, then we understand why he had no option but to make a drive round the perimeter.

Much has recently been said about the style of architecture employed by Davis for the Rivers Gate, Victoria Gate and Park Farm.¹⁶ Following in the footsteps of the important neoclassical revivalist Sir John Soane,

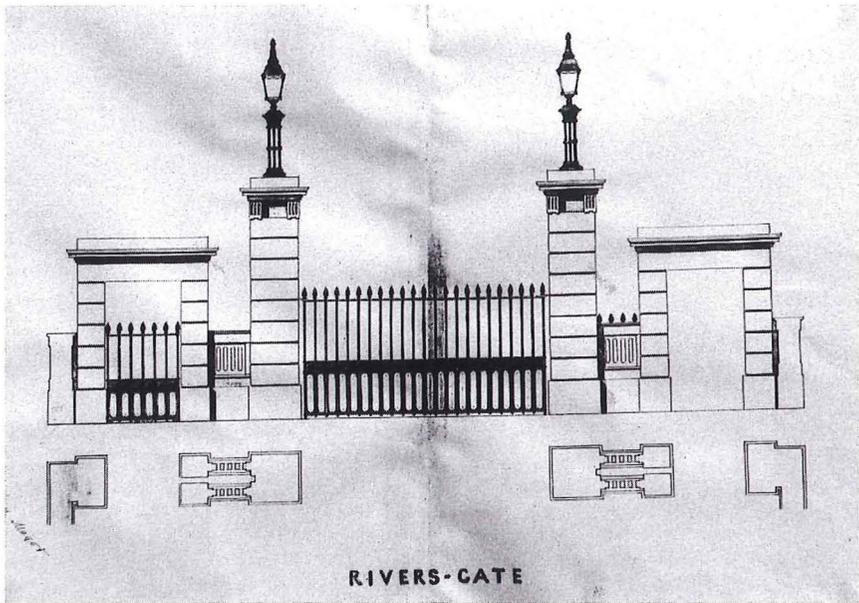


Fig. 3 Design for Rivers Gate, Edward Davis, 1830. (Courtesy Bath Record Office)

Davis, a pupil of Soane from 1824–1826, designed the Victoria gateway with its triumphal arches over the side portals bearing much similarity to the work of his former master. The Rivers Gate on the other hand with its pillars, flat lintels and capping stones is more independent, although the Greek Revival ironwork for the designs of both gates is very similar and partly unifies the style of the two entrances (Figs. 3 & 4). The Park Farm belongs wholly to another movement, the Picturesque, which had begun in the late eighteenth century with a new attitude to landscape, and culminated in the early nineteenth century with landscape gardeners and architects such as Nash and Repton, who collaborated on the picturesque landscape at Blaise Castle, Bristol. In their various publications, others (such as J.B. Papworth 1818, P.F. Robinson 1823 and J.C. Loudon 1833), virtually provided pattern books for all types of picturesque cottages. For example, compare the illustration of 'A cottage in the Old English Manner' by Loudon with Park Farm¹⁷ (Figs. 5–6).

At the public meeting held on New Year's Day 1830 a Park Committee was appointed and an appeal was launched for funds to develop the proposed plan for the park, to make the drives and walks through

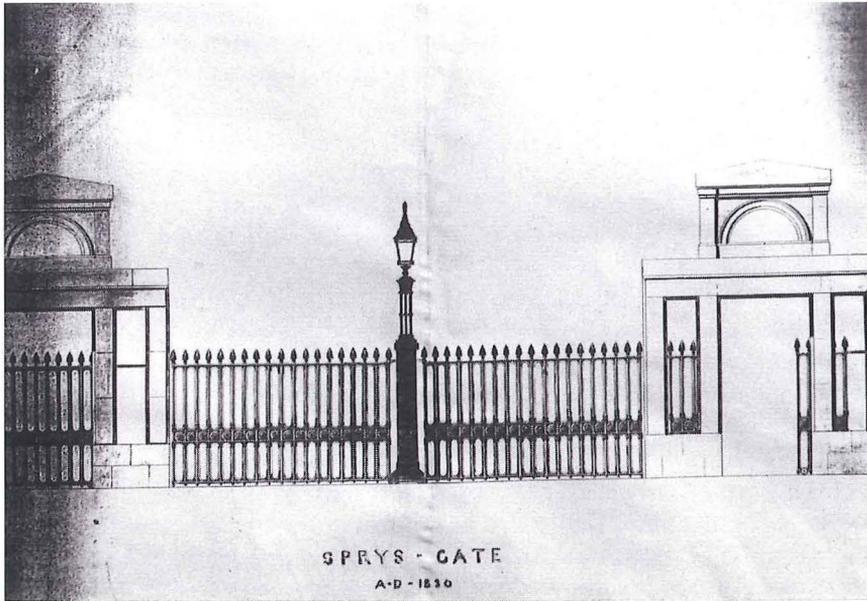


Fig. 4 Design for Spry's Gate, Edward Davis, 1830. (Courtesy Bath Record Office)

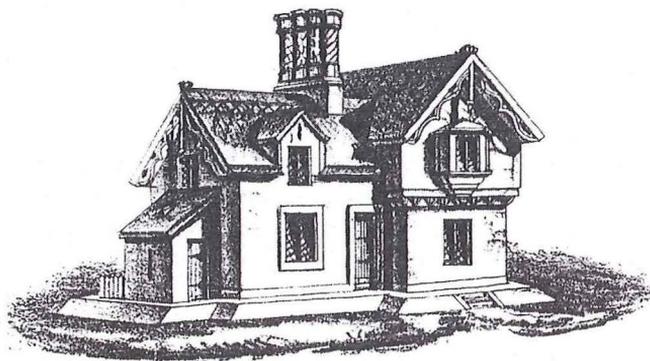
the Common fields, plant the gardens, create the lake, and build the entrance gates. The Corporation voted to give £100 to the immediate outlay, and £100 per annum for contingent expenses. In the first year the public responded well and a total of £4699 was received. A list of subscribers and amounts was published in the annual report. As a result of the successful appeal the park was opened on 23 October 1830 by the Princess Victoria while on an opportune visit to Bath.¹⁸ The Princess completed a circuit of the whole drive and indicated her desire that the park should be called 'The Royal Victoria Park'. There were other parks to be laid out in the nineteenth century in the name of the Queen, but only Bath was granted the notable 'Royal' designation. At this stage the park was public, but not municipal; pedestrians were not charged admission but those who wanted to ride or drive had to become subscribers.

By the time the park was in public use the Rivers Gate and Victoria Gate were in place, walks had been created and a drive constructed extending to 2163 yards, and the plantations were thriving with 'more than 25000 evergreens, forest trees, and shrubs'.¹⁹ The ornamental pond was formed by concentrating the scattered streams on the Common, and



Fig. 5
Watercolour
sketch for Park
Farm. (Courtesy
Bath Record
Office)

Fig. 6
A Cottage in
the Old English
Manner' from
J.C. Loudon,
*An Encyclopedia
of Cottage, Farm,
and Village
Architecture*
(London, 1833),
p.103.



the picturesque Gothic farmhouse was planned. The date over the porch indicates it was completed in 1831.

Over the next few years the Park Committee constantly appealed for further funds, and the upkeep of the park particularly involved the regular maintenance of the carriage drives. Vandalism appears to have been a problem and a Park Keeper was appointed. More iron railings were erected to restrict access, and in particular to prevent entry to the Park at night when the gates were closed. In 1835 it was necessary to institute night patrols. In 1837 the Committee decided to commemorate

the Princess Victoria reaching the age of majority by laying the foundation stone of an obelisk on that day, 24 May 1837. This column of triangular section with crouching lions at its base had been designed by G.P. Manners to stand just inside the Victoria Gate opposite the Park Farm. It was erected during the following year and was officially 'opened' on Queen Victoria's coronation day, 28 June 1838.

At this time in spite of the celebrations and the appreciation of this new monument there seems to be some evidence that the park was at a low ebb. The financial concerns of the Committee have already been referred to, and destruction in the plantations had pushed them into providing better railings for the park; but although it appeared to be providing a useful recreational area for visitors and residents of Bath, not all were satisfied. The *Bath Journal* reported in 1837 that the park was neglected and dirty and a 'reproach both to our morality and decency'.²⁰ This conflicts with the general tenor of the annual reports. For example in 1835 the Committee argued 'that the increasing beauty of this suburban improvement, its attractions, and its utility as a place of recreation, become each succeeding year more apparent.' Later in the 1837 report we can note further achievements: 'the transformation of an unsightly stone quarry into one of the most pleasing and rural features of the Park'.²¹ The conversion of this quarry beside the Weston road into the ornamental dell we now call the Great Dell seems to have been complete by the time the Jupiter head was placed there in 1839. Its present character of largely coniferous trees may well have been in part due to the informal advice of the builder of Fonthill Abbey, William Beckford, who moved to Bath in 1822.²² Jerom Murch, the Unitarian Minister who joined the Park Committee in 1840, refers in *Biographical Sketches* to the regular visits of Beckford to the park. Murch describes the planting of the Great Dell:

My employment then was that of converting an exhausted stone quarry into something like a dell by planting coniferae...every afternoon while the work lasted he [Beckford] came to see what progress had been made. In reply to some pleasant remark on what I was doing I said how glad I should be to receive any advice from him.²³

The ornamental plantations and shady walks referred to in the early stages of the development of the park were later to be seen by Frederick Hanham and others as 'instructive' and not solely recreational. The public park movement, particularly after the evidence presented in 1833, emphasised the moral value of providing not only a place for leisure and

recreation, but more significantly one for education. The notion of an arboretum as a place to learn about trees was early and strongly promulgated by Joseph Paxton, head gardener at Chatsworth and engineer of the Crystal Palace. Loudon also was convinced of the instructional value of a collection of trees, all clearly labelled and arranged along a walk forming a circuit; it is therefore significant that Paxton praised the enterprise at Chatsworth in Loudon's *Gardener's Magazine* in 1835:

In another generation, when all ranks and descriptions of persons shall be better educated than they now are, and when botany and natural history will form as much a part of general education as writing and arithmetic do at present... we [shall] rejoice in the idea of an arboretum... which never can be sufficiently commended, open every day in the year, and shown to all persons, rich and poor, without exception.²⁴

In general the public parks took this notion of education to heart and the arboretum was developed with this in mind. It is clear that Hanham in his manual for the park had been instrumental in transforming what originally was just seen as picturesque plantations into a collection of botanical specimens, each one labelled with its scientific nomenclature, description, height, place of origin and date of introduction. In his manual he refers to Loudon's Derby Arboretum, one of the first public gardens, which had been designed specifically to give instruction on trees to the residents of Derby. Hanham gives us his contemporary view of the arboretum in general, 'now happily becoming so numerous and fashionable throughout the kingdom, combining science with recreation and pleasure'.²⁵ The character of the arboretum by the 1840s and 1850s was defined by a preference for evergreens. Hanham in his manual includes a long quotation from William Barron's book on *The British Winter Garden* (1852) which made an urgent plea for the planting of evergreens. Hanham took much of his writing to heart in planning the arboretum at Bath:

The foregoing observations of Mr. Barron are not introduced here with the view of doing away altogether with deciduous plants and introducing nothing but Evergreens, far from it; for in a public pleasure ground, the latter exclusively would be much too sombre and not afford sufficient variety, but that they may predominate in a general and good selection would be desirable for the Winter's resort and promenade, if not for the Summer.²⁶

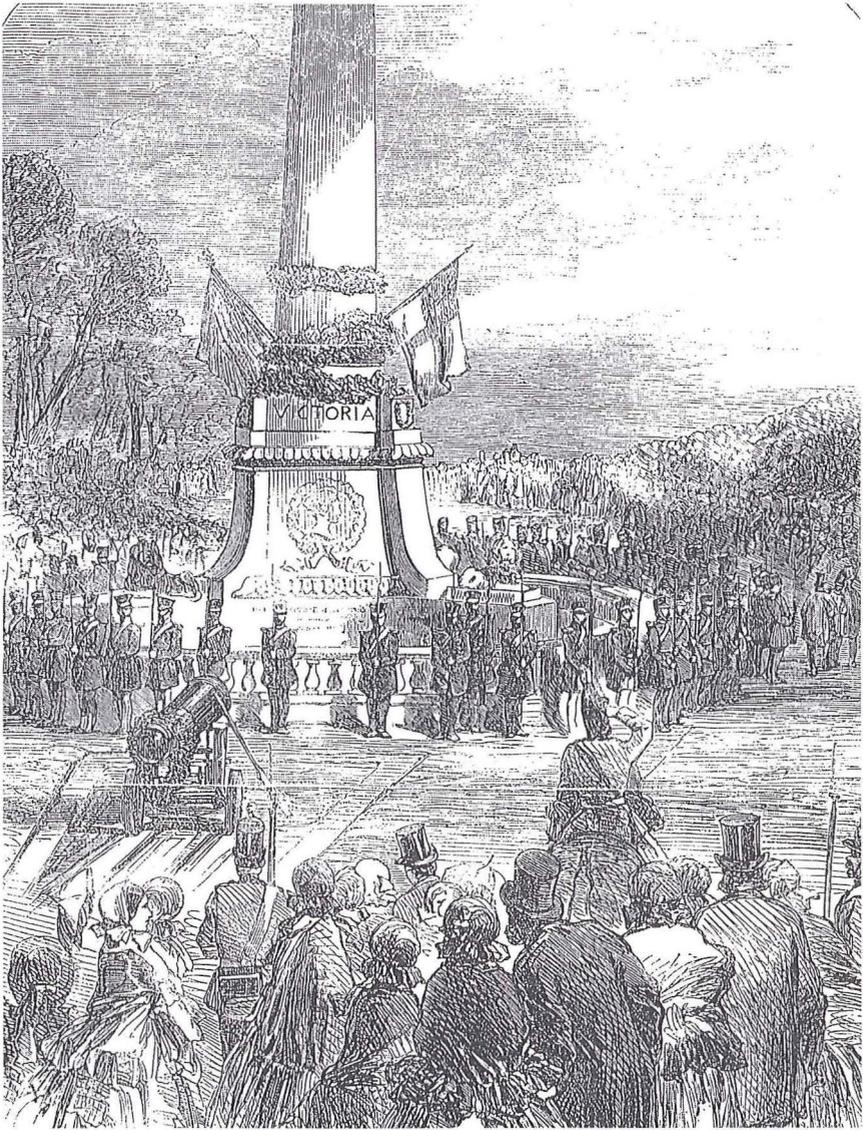


Fig. 7 'Inauguration of Russian Trophies at Bath', *Illustrated London News*, 26 Sep 1857. (Courtesy Bath Central Library)



Fig. 8 The Cannon by the Obelisk opposite the Picturesque Park Farm, c.1900. (Courtesy Bath Central Library)

The Committee Reports for 1855 and 1857 talk of the planting of a large number of conifers. It is uncertain whether these included the famous Redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*) and the Wellingtonias (*Sequoia gigantea*) which were introduced into England only in the 1840s and 1850s respectively. However the report for 1871 mentions specifically 22 Wellingtonias being planted on ground adjoining the north walks, and judging by the frequency with which these trees are found in public parks the fashion for evergreens and these trees in particular spread rapidly throughout mid-Victorian England.

Another dominant theme in nineteenth-century British parks is the concept of nationalism embodied in the ideal of Queen-and-country. At Bath the concept is manifest in many aspects of the park – most obviously in the name, and in the column raised for Princess Victoria's majority, followed by the celebrations in the park for the coronation. Similarly the sculpted lions by the obelisk and the ones on the piers of the Rivers Gate entrance are a symbol of royalty and strength. These last, of Coade stone and once bronzed, were donated in 1831–32 by one C. Geary, who in 1829 had attended the first meeting about the park. On 10 March 1863 the 'Prince of Wales oak' was planted near the west end of the column, to

mark the marriage of Princess Alexandra of Denmark to Edward, Prince of Wales. Then in 1880 the 'Victoria Vase', erected next to the lake, commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the park. In 1887 another oak was planted for the Queen's Jubilee.

The park of course provided the public with a forum for recreation, but at all stages in its development during the nineteenth century it served to persuade its visitors of particular dominant values. The history of wars and the colonies found expression in the trophies and memorials that were erected. One of the most telling at Bath was a pair of Russian guns from the Crimea, presented by Lord Panmore, Secretary of War. The inauguration ceremony took place on 9 September 1857, the second anniversary of the fall of Sebastopol, and the proceedings were reported in the *Illustrated London News* on the 26th (Fig. 7). The guns were placed on the east and west side of Victoria's column symbolically defending the Queen's country and realm (Fig. 8). The ceremony included a virtual military procession, headed by 'A beautiful trophy, consisting of shields inscribed with the British Victories'. Once in place the guns were fired in triumph and the scene was described graphically by the *News* reporter:

the iron tongues of these grim trophies of the deadliest struggle ever waged within the memory of man were loosed... again and again came the roar of the cannon, mingled with *jeux de joie* from the gallant old pensioners, maimed and scarred, and spangled with medals – standing now side by side with the heroes of Alma and Inkerman.²⁷

The carriages for the guns were cast at Woolwich and presented to the city by J. Williams of the Pickwick ironworks.

To either side of the bandstand on the lawn below the Royal Avenue stand the marble vases once given by Napoleon Buonaparte to his wife the Empress Josephine in 1805. They were apparently brought back to England after the Peninsular War by a Colonel Page and bequeathed by Joseph Fuller of Lansdown Crescent to the park in 1874. The *Bath and County Graphic* in November 1902 mentions three vases of the Empress Josephine placed on the lawn around the bandstand. The Committee Report for 1875 however refers only to two Carrara marble vases designed by Canova and executed under his direction. It seems most likely that there were never three, but if one had been destroyed then it might explain the present inscription over the vases informing us of their restoration and protection in 1914.



Fig. 9
The so-called
Jupiter head,
depicted still in
the workshop of its
sculptor, John
Osborne. (Courtesy
Bath Central
Library)

Culture too was symbolically enshrined in the monuments of the park. The most unusual and eccentric of them all is the huge head of Jupiter which stands on a high plinth in the Great Dell (Fig. 9). The foundation stone for this plinth, designed by the painter Thomas Barker, was laid on 9 September 1839 at a 'galaday' ceremony. This monument above all the others seems to have fascinated travel writers, and visitors' guidebooks to Bath invariably refer to the Jupiter head. One such account by A.B. Granville in his *Invalid's and Visitor's Handbook* (1841) magnanimously and eloquently compares the work to a giant statue by Giambologna at Pratolino in Tuscany, a garden that by the end of the sixteenth century was one of the most famous in Europe.²⁸ Clearly a sense of wonder was created by the Jupiter, the head alone described as seven feet high, which inspired comparison with awesome giants. The guidebooks are full of its

history: sculpted by John Osborne (1795–1839), ‘the untutored...ill-fated genius’,²⁹ from a single block of stone weighing eight tons, his last work, and erected in the park after his death. Osborne himself is always supposed to have denied that the sculpture represented Jupiter – was it just the gigantic size which enthused people to think of the all-powerful god? Granville continued to play on a sense of fantasy in the park: ‘the invalid will find himself at once in a sort of fairy land...parterres enamelled by brilliant flowers’.³⁰ At this point the park is seen as offering more than recreation, culture and education; now the visitor is presented with spectacular sights. In keeping with this idea was the earlier proposal for a zoological garden.³¹ It is this role of the public park in providing a spectacle which is hard for us to assimilate with our notion of the public garden in the late twentieth century.

The Shakespeare Memorial, a votive altar raised in 1864 on the three-hundredth anniversary of his death, was designed by Edward Davis’s son (or nephew?), Major Davis, city architect and surveyor from 1863. The cult of Shakespeare had been growing ever since the first Shakespeare Jubilee held in Stratford in 1769, and certainly by the mid-nineteenth century wide interest in all things medieval and Elizabethan was flourishing – the Gothic Revival in architecture was another testament to this. We can only speculate on who might have been the key agent in moving the Park Committee to honour Shakespeare. Jerom Murch would certainly be one candidate as he was still on the Committee and also taking an active part in the Bath Literary Club. Alternatively Canon Ellacombe, Rector of Bitton, who actively supported the park, could have instigated the idea of honouring the anniversary – Ellacombe’s first publication, *Plant Lore and Garden Craft of Shakespeare* (1878) is evidence of his long-standing interest in the playwright.

Another monument of literary culture is the alleged Miller Vase (Fig. 10), also referred to as the Batheaston Vase; it is said to have been found in 1769 at Frascati, near Cicero’s villa, and afterwards brought to England by Lady Miller who instituted a literary salon at Batheaston; weekly gatherings were held where guests were invited to place an original verse in the antique vase. On her death it is said that the urn was purchased by Edward Dowding of Bath who had it set up in the park at the end of the lower drive, with the canopy shown in the illustration. The vase is recorded in *Notabilia* as only ‘Vase and canopy’ and there is no mention of the connection with Lady Miller. An article in the *Bath and County Graphic* (1902) cast some doubt on the vase being the one used at Batheaston for the reception of verse. It pointed out that the vase is solid and could not



Fig. 10 The alleged 'Miller' Vase on Lower Drive, *Bath and County Graphic*, March 1903, p.130. (Courtesy Bath Central Library)

therefore have been the receptacle of the alleged poems.³² In 1895 an attempt was made to upset the Batheaston Vase, and assuming such vandalism continued then this was presumably the reason why the vase was removed from its position near Park Lane and re-sited in 1924 on a new foundation at a point just off the Royal Avenue and forming a focal point for those approaching from Upper Church Street. This time it was erected without its canopy which perhaps had already been destroyed.

Bands and music were an important attraction of eighteenth-century pleasure gardens, so with this precedent it is not surprising that musical entertainments became a feature of the park. In 1855 the annual report explained that an attempt had been made 'to increase the attractions of Bath during the summer months, by engaging an excellent German band to play in public places'.³³ The Committee henceforth agreed to regular performances in the park. The map in Gibbs' *Illustrated Bath Visitant* (1862) shows no hint of a band or a bandstand in Victoria Park but the entry for Sydney Gardens mentions musical promenades as one of

the attractions there.³⁴ However by 1865 we read in Peach that a band played regularly in the park.³⁵ The 1888 O.S. map shows an 'octagonal orchestra' on the lawn below the Royal Avenue, and from the Borough Property Committee minutes on 11 February 1886 we know that Major Davis presented a proposal for building a new 'shell' bandstand. This was accepted by the Property Committee and from the description, and in the absence of any plans, there is no reason to suppose that the present bandstand was not built shortly afterwards to Davis's designs. By 1891 the annual report was able to record that the band was playing six times a week.

The botanical interest of the park had long been a feature for the enjoyment and education of visitors. As we have seen, the early planting was well documented by the botanical record compiled by Frederick Hanham in 1857. Another development was the idea of a Bath Winter Garden which was perhaps stimulated initially by the success of the Crystal Palace exhibition in 1851. The annual report for 1876 (mentioned also in the report for 1874) talks of receiving a deputation for 'a proposal to erect a Winter Garden on the Middle Common'. Eventually the Committee decided 'not to entertain the idea' on grounds that they did not want the further erection of any buildings on the Common to 'rob it of that rural character which has hitherto been considered one of its greatest charms'.³⁶ A related proposal, but apparently a quite separate one, had been made earlier in 1859 for a Pavilion to include a photographer's workroom, a café restaurant, a ladies' retiring room, and a newspaper room. There was no mention of this Pavilion in the Park Committee reports.³⁷

Although rejecting the idea of a Winter Garden the Committee continued to encourage the association of the park with horticulture, particularly since the Royal Horticultural Society held the first of its grand provincial shows in the park in 1873. When C.E. Broome, an outstanding local botanist at Batheaston, died in 1886 leaving his collection to the Park Committee, interest in a botanic garden revived. Hanham (1857) had referred to W.H. Baxter, later curator of the famous Oxford Botanic Garden, as laying out the original botanic garden at Bath in 1840 – presumably around the area occupied by the Park Cottage. Hanham also spoke of many 'rare, fine, and beautiful specimens' still on the site of the former botanic garden,³⁸ while a notice in Loudon's *Gardener's Magazine* in 1837 had announced the laying out of a botanic garden at Bath by a Mr Forrest – this being probably Richard Forrest who designed the botanic garden at Syon House, Middlesex, in 1835.³⁹

Further evidence for the earlier existence of a botanic garden appears on the map produced for the purchase of the Bath Commons in 1879 and the O.S. map of 1885; both show ornamental gardens surrounding the cottage (Fig. 2), and interestingly enough the *Gardeners' Chronicle* referred in 1902 to the collection of trees being selected by Loudon and planted by W.H. Baxter.⁴⁰

Having been presented with the Broome collection, the Committee engaged John Milburn from Kew Gardens to take charge of the old collection of plants and to supervise the planting of the donation in a new lay-out prepared by the curator J.W. Morris. During the restructuring of the garden the cottage was demolished, now made possible by the ownership having passed from the Freemen to the Corporation in 1879. Reference has already been made to the possible involvement of Canon Ellacombe in the park and his assistance with the making of the botanic garden is likely. The annual report of the Park Committee alludes quite frequently to gifts of plants from the Canon (in 1879 for example the report refers to a present of plants from 'the Rector of Bitton'). A more recent article on the Bath botanic garden⁴¹ claims that William Robinson, a close friend of Canon Ellacombe and a respected horticulturalist and garden publisher, also gave advice on his frequent visits to Bath, and his magazine *The Garden* featured the botanic garden in June 1901. There appears to be no other evidence for his involvement with the park. Perhaps Milburn's greatest achievement in directing the planting was the creation of the rock garden by gouging out a shallow ravine on the gentle slope, and using large pieces of local limestone similar to those in the rock garden at Kew.

Among the few additions to the botanic garden since the late nineteenth century, the Temple of Minerva deserves mention. The City of Bath exhibited this so-called replica in the Civic Hall of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924, and in the words of the official guide to the exhibition, 'the chief cities of the country have in this way an opportunity of bringing their claim before a larger public than ever before' – a clear piece of tourist advertising. When the exhibition finished the temple was returned to Bath and re-erected in the botanic garden, which was then extended with additional landscaping to form the present pool, bridge and cascade.

Outside the botanic garden no major new landscaping has taken place within the bounds of the original park, as depicted in the plan by Edward Davis, with one exception. A close look at the pond on Davis's plan reveals an elliptical pool with a promontory on the eastern side. The Park

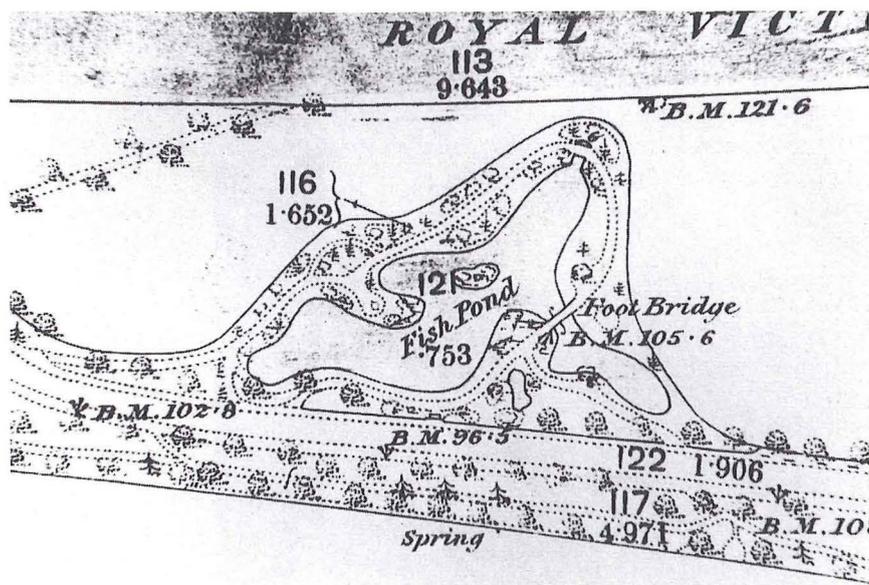


Fig. 11 'Fish Pond' in the Park, 1888. (Courtesy Bath Record Office)

Committee's reports had constantly raised the problem of the water supply to the pond and the difficulty of keeping it clean. In 1878 they called in the landscape gardener, Edward Milner, a protégé of Paxton with a considerable reputation, to address the problem of the pond. He proposed making it shallower and considerably increasing its area. The O.S. map of 1888 indicates that significant changes were made, the pond now forming a highly irregular shape, with an island and a bridge (Fig. 11). By this device the pond's overall extent would be concealed, and it would appear much larger than it really was. Paxton had employed such techniques in a much larger lake in Birkenhead park in 1843. The bridge at Bath was constructed in a rustic style, popularised at the time by such works as Shirley Hibberd's *Rustic Adornments for Homes of Taste*, first published 1856. The illustration (Fig. 12) depicts a slightly later rustic bridge, and more recently it has undergone further changes with a partly stone balustrade and plain timbers replacing the rustic wood.

Bath is pre-eminent in having one of the earliest public parks; public in terms of access, although the land remained outside the control of the Corporation and the park was financed by voluntary subscriptions

Royal Victoria Park. Bath.

Fig. 12
Rustic Foot-
bridge over the
Pond, c.1910.
(Courtesy Dr
Stephen Briggs)

and donations. It was free, certainly for walkers, but subscription, while apparently not obligatory, was encouraged for carriages and horse riders. The Committee was at pains to point out in the report for 1874 that 'the fact seems hardly to be realized that the park is a private drive, from which the Committee have power to exclude non-subscribers, and with the concurrence of a general meeting determine the payments which shall entitle those who keep carriages to use it.' There was much debate in the 1850s about whether or not visitors should be allowed to walk on

the lawns in front of Royal Crescent (no large area of lawn would have been available on Middle Common – this was still meadowland leased by the Freeman). On the whole the Park Committee were against walkers on the lawns because they thought it destructive. Eventually subscribers had their way and walking on the turf was allowed, but not at the time the band was playing. This had to be paid for. The prohibition on walking on the grass seems absurd by our twentieth-century standards, but the view of the Committee is redolent of a very different attitude to the idea of recreation in the park.

The name of Jerom Murch had often been mentioned in connection with the park, and when he died in 1895 the Committee paid a special tribute to his long service and dedication to the success of the park for the citizens of Bath. The Park Committee continued to manage the gardens after 1879 by which time, though, the property had passed to the Corporation. It was not until 1921 that the Committee finally handed over management and financial responsibility to the city. There is a continuing tradition of good planting in the park, together with fine summer displays of bedding plants, so much a favourite of the mid-Victorian flower garden. This system of using mainly half-hardy annuals to make colourful beds and patterns is almost the *sine qua non* of the public garden throughout the country. Some commemorative trees are still planted, but donations to the park of vases, statues and trophies of wars have ceased. Public will and social attitudes have changed. One of the last vases to be left to the Park was probably the one by the Rivers Gate entrance, a vase from Italy donated in 1914, when all things Italian were so much the fashion in gardens. The most significant twentieth-century development must be the play area for children south of the Middle Common – a feature thought to be utterly superfluous in nineteenth-century England.

Overall the style of the park remains deliberately mixed reflecting a broad taste. Joseph Newton, a nineteenth-century landscape gardener, writing in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* on the style of public gardens in 1864 (perhaps the decade in the century when public gardens were foremost in municipal thought) lends support for such variety: 'There is ample scope for diversity of arrangement, for pleasing intermixture of design'. However his more far-reaching conclusion agrees with nineteenth-century aspirations for parks that they promote certain values. His key concern is that we should be cautious about how these gardens are designed and plants displayed because parks take an important part in developing 'taste'; they are, he insisted, 'For the instruction of the public...'.⁴²

Notes

- 1 *A Brief Account of the Proceedings, relative to the Formation of The Royal Victoria Park at Bath, with The Report of the Committee, Presented at the First Anniversary, Held on the 7th January, 1831* (Bath, 1831); *The Park Committee's Annual Reports; History of the Royal Victoria Park, Bath* (Bath Express and County Herald, [1872]); N. Jackson, *Nineteenth Century Bath: Architects and Architecture* (Bath, 1991).
- 2 Freemen of the city acquire their title and their privileges by apprenticeship of seven years to a Freeman resident within the City of Bath – *History* [1872], op.cit., p.2.
- 3 R. Mainwaring, *Annals of Bath from the year 1800 to the Passing of the New Municipal Act* (Bath, 1838), p.281.
- 4 *A Brief Account*, op.cit., p.4.
- 5 *History* [1872], op. cit., p.3.
- 6 For general information on public parks see H. Conway, *People's Parks* (Cambridge, 1991).
- 7 *History* [1872], op.cit., p.3. For comment on Bath's lack of prosperity at this time see J. Kite, 'A good bargain: the struggle for a public library, 1850–1924', *Bath History*, Vol.4 (1992), p.136.
- 8 *Gardener's Magazine*, Vol.6, 1830, p.529.
- 9 *Ibid.*, Vol.11, 1835, p.644.
- 10 *A Brief Account*, op.cit., pp. 9–13.
- 11 For a brief summary of Bath's eighteenth-century gardens and the pleasures of Sydney Gardens see *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 10 Jul 1886, p.43.
- 12 *A Brief Account*, op.cit., p.4.
- 13 An autograph letter in the Bath Central Library, number 188, dated 15.9.1830, mentions a 'road for carriages, another for chairs, and another for walkers – so that they cannot interfere with each other'.
- 14 The unsigned watercolour here illustrated is included with various plans of the park at Bath Record Office.
- 15 R. Mainwaring, op.cit., p.347, and *History* [1872], op.cit., p.4.
- 16 N. Jackson, op.cit., pp.95–100.
- 17 J.C. Loudon, *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture* (London, 1833), p.103.
- 18 A contemporary chronicler described the opening by Princess Victoria in *The Bath and County Graphic* Jun 1897, p.11.
- 19 *A Brief Account*, op.cit., p.24. The First Report is confusing – saying both that more money is needed to complete the entrance gates and that 'portals' have been erected. We must assume that much work had been done but not completed by Jan 1831.
- 20 *Bath Journal* 21 Aug 1837. (I am grateful to Alex Kolaczowski for this reference).
- 21 These quotations are from the transcriptions of the annual reports pub. in F. Hanham, *A Manual for the Park* (London, 1857).
- 22 Beckford's landscape achievements at Fonthill are well documented and in particular his planting of the so called 'American Garden', one of the best-

- known in the country, where he planted hardy species from North America.
- 23 J. Murch, *Biographical Sketches of Bath Celebrities* (London and Bath, 1893), p.299.
 - 24 *Gardener's Magazine*, Autumn 1835.
 - 25 F. Hanham, op.cit., pp.iii-v.
 - 26 *Ibid*, p.xxxvii.
 - 27 *Illustrated London News*, 26 Sep 1857.
 - 28 Pratinolo's huge mannerist statue, representing Mount Apennine, its grottoes and automata, together presented a complex allegorical programme which gave expression to man's power over nature.
 - 29 A.B. Granville, *The Spas of England* (London, 1841), p.423.
 - 30 A.B. Granville, *The Invalid's and Visitor's Handbook to the Hot Springs of Bath* (London and Bath, 1841), pp.97-98.
 - 31 A plan by Manners dated 1838 in the Bath Record Office shows the proposed site for the Bath Zoological Garden, now occupied by the botanic garden. Loudon also writes in the *Gardener's Magazine*, Vol.8, 1837, p.540: 'The Botanical and Zoological garden at Cheltenham, one at Manchester, and another at Bath, all laid out by Mr. Forrest, are in progress'.
 - 32 *Bath and County Graphic* Nov 1902, p.79.
 - 33 F. Hanham, op.cit., p. xxviii.
 - 34 Gibbs' *Illustrated Bath Visitant, or New Guide to Bath* (Bath, 1862), p.58.
 - 35 R.E. Peach, *Objects of Interest in the City of Bath and its Neighbourhood* (Bath, 1865), p.14.
 - 36 For an illustration of the proposed Winter Garden see N. Jackson, op.cit., p.100.
 - 37 Plans for the Pavilion are in the Bath Record Office.
 - 38 F. Hanham, op.cit., p.vi.
 - 39 See note 31 above.
 - 40 *Gardeners' Chronicle* 8 Mar 1902, p.156. There is no other evidence that Loudon worked on the Royal Victoria Park, but his designs for the Abbey Cemetery are documented in C. Pound, *Genius of Bath* (Bath, 1986), p.86.
 - 41 *Gardeners' Chronicle and Horticultural Journal* 10 Sep 1982, p.28.
 - 42 Joseph Newton, 'The Style of Public Gardens', *Gardeners' Chronicle* 4 Jun 1864, p. 533.

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