

‘The Gardens will be illuminated’: Gendered and Georgian Pleasures in Sydney Gardens

Cynthia Imogen Hammond



Fig. 1: **George Wise, Sidney [sic] House from the Garden, c.1815, aquatint** - Bath in Time, no. 11802

‘One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other.’
Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815)

On a January morning in 1801, Jane Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra regarding an upcoming visit to Bath. Reflecting on where in the city they might take lodgings, she observes, ‘it would be very pleasant to be near Sidney [sic] Gardens! We might go into the Labyrinth every day.’¹ The Labyrinth and gardens to which Austen refers were part of Sydney Gardens (see **fig. 1**). Often referred to as the Vauxhall of the West, these gardens are today home to Bath’s Holburne Museum.

¹ Letter of 21st–22nd January 1801, in *Jane Austen’s Letters*, (ed.), Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.80.

Laid out in 1792 by Bath architect Thomas Baldwin (1750–1820), finished by Charles Harcourt Masters (1759–c.1817) in 1795, and updated by John Pinch the Younger (1796–1849) in the early 1830s, Sydney Gardens is a fine example of Georgian heritage.² Despite its demise as a paying pleasure destination in 1853, when the Bath Proprietary College became the tenant of the hotel and grounds, the gardens have otherwise been open to the public in various ways for almost all of their 219 years.³ In 1855, just two years after its closure as a pleasure garden, part of the terrain reopened for musical events and flower fêtes. Eventually, in 1908, the city of Bath purchased the gardens, and repurposed them as public green space. Since the mid-1990s, Bath City Council has undertaken numerous restoration and refurbishment works on the buildings and gardens of the site.⁴

From the bifurcation of the gardens in 1840, with the construction of the Great Western Railway, to the need to keep up with fashions in pleasure tourism, change came continuously to the gardens throughout their existence. Unlike many pleasure gardens of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sydney Gardens were not destroyed. These four hectares are thus widely acknowledged to be a special survivor of Georgian landscape architecture and garden design.⁵ Sadly, few records of that design survive, with the result that prints, drawings and descriptions of the time, as well as the gardens themselves, are precious historical resources. None, however, provides a complete picture of the many features that would have been on offer during Austen's visits to Bath, roughly spanning 1799–1806.

This essay thus begins with a simple question: what was it about these pleasure gardens, and specifically the Labyrinth, that held out such appeal for Austen? As an architectural historian interested in gendered spatial experience, I am intrigued by Austen's rare display of enthusiasm for any aspect of Bath, especially one that would seem to embody all that the author disliked about Bath's social whirl and frivolity. I am also intrigued that the Labyrinth in particular was a destination that Austen envisioned with pleasure for herself and her sister. The aim of this article is not, however, to dwell upon Austen as an individual, or on her tastes; instead, I wish to explore Sydney Gardens

2 See Ruth Gilding, *Historic Public Parks: Bath in 1997* (Bristol: Avon Gardens Trust, 1997).

3 Barbara Snaddon, *The Last Promenade* (Bath: Millstream Books, 2000), p.43.

4 Cathryn Spence, 'Sydney Gardens' in *Water, History and Style: Bath, World Heritage Site* (Stroud: The History Press, 2012), p.91.

5 Stewart Harding and David Lambert, (eds.), *Parks and Gardens of Somerset* (Bristol: Somerset Gardens Trust, 1994).

suggestively, using feminist readings to open up the typology of the pleasure garden, and to understand the specifics of the Sydney Gardens' design and use. My purpose is to gain some ground, or illuminate the question of how pleasure landscapes of the period produced *gendered* subjects, and how, in turn, female visitors to the gardens shaped this typology's form and offerings.

In my past work, I have investigated the role that women have played in the production of the built environment.⁶ In this, I have drawn from the theoretical and archival approaches of feminist architectural historians such as Lynne Walker, Gwendolyn Wright, Annmarie Adams and Jane Rendell, among others. These scholars have adapted Henri Lefebvre's oft-cited theory of the 'production of space' as a means to enlarge the scope of the architectural. Understanding space not simply as that which is designed but also that which is produced by all who use it, is an important basis for exploring the spatial practices of women who did not necessarily train to be, or were recognised as architects and landscape designers, but who produced space nonetheless, through their actions, choices and preferences.⁷

Jane Rendell's 2002 book, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, provides an insight about space and gender that is particularly useful to this essay.⁸ Rendell begins her study of gender, space, and Regency architecture with two seemingly disparate texts; French philosopher Luce Irigaray's 1977 essay, 'Women on the Market', and Georgian journalist Pierce Egan's *Real Life in London*, of 1821.⁹ The former is an exploration of the commodification and objectification of women, while the latter is an example of the literary genre of the urban ramble, in which

6 Cynthia Hammond, *Architects, Angels, Activists and the City of Bath, 1765–1965* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); 'Suffragette City: Spatial Knowledge and Suffrage Work in Bath, 1909–1914', *Bath History*, Vol. XIII (Sept. 2013), pp.74–98.

7 Lynne Walker, 'Drawing on Diversity: Women, Architecture and Practice', in *Drawing on Diversity: Women, Architecture and Practice*, exhibition catalogue (London: RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1997); Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago: 1873–1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses, and Women, 1870–1900* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1996). See also Sherry Ahrentzen, 'The Space Between the Studs: Feminism and Architecture', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (2003), pp.179–206.

8 Jane Rendell, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Gender, Space & Architecture in Regency London* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

9 Pierce Egan, *Walks Through Bath: Describing Every Thing Worthy of Interest, Including Walcot and Widcombe, and the surrounding vicinity, also an excursion to Clifton and Bristol hot-wells* (1819).

men describe their pursuit of ‘urban sites of leisure and entertainment’.¹⁰ Reading these two texts against one another, Rendell underscores how in the Regency period, ‘men move and look, whereas women move or are moved between men, as commodities’ and, likewise, how ‘men and women are distinguished from each other in relationship to property and space: men own property/women are property; men *own and occupy spaces* and women *are space*’.¹¹

Rendell seizes upon the dynamism of this otherwise depressing historical observation, pointing to the centrality of space in any discussion of gender, and vice-versa. She rejects the well-trodden binary of public vs private, as discrete and essentially discursive realms where normative gender roles were rehearsed, because this binary positions space as simply a neutral background — passive vessel — for human action. Drawing out the gendering of space itself is a means to complicate the binary of public and private. In this view, works of architecture cease to be ‘isolated and static objects’ and reconfigure instead as part of the vital knit between designed environments and human subjectivity.¹² Because of the richness of this relationship, no one account of a designed space can account for its full dimension or affect for various genders. But it is possible to explore how designed spaces are agents or, to put it another way, collaborators, in the process of human subject formation as much as humans, in turn, are agents in the production and daily reproduction of space.¹³ With Rendell’s insights in mind, Bath’s ‘Vauxhall of the West’ can shed light on how landscape design provides a platform for diverse expressions of gendered pleasure, in space. The link, in this case, is the garden.

10 Rendell, *Pursuit of Pleasure*, p.4.

11 Rendell, *Pursuit of Pleasure*, pp.3-4, my emphasis. The point is not only historical. The most sought-after architects today are called ‘form-givers’ — in other words, they succeed in giving form to supposedly neutral space and matter. Most such top-tier architects are male, and the culture of the profession is highly gendered. See, for example, Vanessa Thorpe, ‘Zaha Hadid: Britain must do more to help encourage its women architects’, *The Guardian*, 17th Feb. 2013 (online) <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/feb/17/architecture-misogyny-zaha-hadid>, [accessed 28th July 2014].

12 Rendell, *Pursuit of Pleasure*, p.6.

13 Psychologists James and Eleanor Gibson elaborated upon what they called the ‘affordances’ of the designed environment as having a key role to play in human development. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1979); also Eleanor J. Gibson and Anne D. Pick, *An Ecological Approach to Perceptual Learning and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).



Fig. 2: J.C. Nattes, 'Sydney Gardens and rear of Sydney House', from William Miller, *Bath: A Series of Illustrated Views* (London and Bristol, 1805) - Bath in Time, no. 11422

The Pleasure Garden

Roy Porter once wrote that 'nothing could better epitomize the Georgian love of pleasure than the pleasure garden'.¹⁴ The eighteenth-century garden resort was a form of entertainment for men and women of, if not all classes, then at least 'all with a few shillings to spare'.¹⁵ Period paintings of pleasure gardens show expansive walled gardens with formal axial layouts; integrated architecture such as orchestra pavilions and follies; entertainments such as music, dancing, and performances; and myriad opportunities to drink and

¹⁴ Roy Porter, 'Material Pleasures in the Consumer Society', in Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts, (eds.), *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p.27.

¹⁵ Porter, 'Material Pleasures in the Consumer Society', p.29.

eat, including those offered by the rows of decorated supper boxes which provided views of the rich pageant all around. Men, women, children and sometimes pets populate these images, traversing the open spaces, stopping at various dining or entertainment destinations, moving in pairs, groups, or solo. Generous promenades afforded views of one's company, of course, as well as the purpose-built attractions promising the most up-to-date attractions. The pleasure gardens also provided access, in a rapidly urbanizing age, to nature. Or, more precisely, pleasure gardens enveloped their paying customers in artful *mises-en-scène*, in which nature was carefully cultivated for human enjoyment.

What pleasure gardens tend to be remembered for, however, is not this integration of the organic and the conceptual, but rather the stunning variety of diversions within. For Vauxhall's usual one-shilling entrance fee the visitor had access to fireworks, fountains, live music, *al fresco* dining, balloon-rides, bowling, dancing, berry-picking and 'illuminations' — marvellous structures lit by hundreds of tiny oil lamps. For two shillings, visitors to a Grand Gala at Sydney Gardens in 1812 could enjoy an appearance by the Band of Pandians from Vauxhall, a 'grand display of fireworks', an 'exhibition of the Cascade' and illuminations, 'in a style peculiarly brilliant and novel, and decorated with Chinese Lanthorns, the Transparency of the Town and Harbour of Cadiz; and various Devices, emblematical of the late Glorious Victories in Spain by the Marquis of Wellington'.¹⁶ In addition to the dramatizations of such historic events as the Napoleonic Wars, the eruption of Mount Etna, the Siege of Valenciennes or the Battle of Gibraltar, pleasure gardens also included shows of lion tamers, waltzing horses and performances of all kinds.

The gardens thus provided the setting for large-scale social gatherings. *The Historic and Local New Bath Guide* of 1812, eager to position Bath as a 'vortex of amusement', swiftly points out the city's pleasure gardens to readers, noting that, 'ladies are ... entertained with a Breakfast, a Concert, and a Dance ... to which 1000 only can be admitted, in the same manner as the evening's entertainments'.¹⁷ Whether promenading in their best clothes with a backdrop of live nightingale song, or watching ordinary people rub shoulders with 'the quality', patrons of the famous pleasure gardens of the

16 Advertisement for Sydney Gardens, *Bath Chronicle* (24th September 1812).

17 *The Historic and Local New Bath Guide* (1812), p.112.

eighteenth century described these spaces as magical. 'The brilliancy of the lights' at Ranelagh inspired Fanny Burney's *Evelina* to feel she 'was in some enchanted castle, or fairy palace, for all looked like magic'.¹⁸

The pleasure gardens of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were, however, spaces of ambivalence as well as pleasure. As one of the objects of an emerging discourse on taste that sought to sever the fine arts from more 'effeminate' or 'rank' pleasures, these gardens relied on their popularity to combat an increasingly hostile view of their allegedly feminine frivolity. Others looked askance upon the pleasure gardens, denouncing the ways these secluded, intricately designed retreats thwarted chaperones and encouraged illicit encounters, pickpockets, the mixing of social classes and 'low taste.'¹⁹

The combination of careful planning, planting and sumptuous display were the hallmarks of the great pleasure gardens of Georgian England: Ranelagh, Cupper's, Marylebone and Vauxhall, all in London. Peter Borsay observes that these four gardens were only a fraction of the proliferation of pleasure gardens across England in this period. To focus on these major gardens, he writes, skews the 'picture of the role of the pleasure garden as a leisure type'. Most of what today are called pleasure gardens were in fact mineral-water or tea gardens: places that emphasized delightful floral settings rather than blockbuster entertainments. In fact, the only 'common factor' among landscapes designed for public pleasure in the long eighteenth century is that they were gardens, a fact that, Borsay observes, 'has tended to be neglected'.²⁰

Sydney Gardens fall somewhere between the major pleasure gardens of London and the smaller tea gardens found throughout the country. Bath's reputation as spa town meant that Sydney Gardens participated in and benefitted financially from the entwining of pleasure and health tourism in this city. The gardens also benefitted from the high population of women

18 Fanny Burney, *Evelina: Or, the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (London: Thomas Harrison, 1854), p.31

19 On the condemnation of the supposedly low, feminine, and socially chaotic qualities of the pleasure garden, see John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.76.

20 Peter Borsay, 'Pleasure Gardens and Urban Culture', in Jonathan Conlin, (ed.), *The Pleasure Garden from Vauxhall to Coney Island* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p.51.

in Bath.²¹ Several historians of pleasure in the eighteenth century have observed that women outnumbered men in their consumption of pleasure gardens.²² Describing the strategies Jonathan Tyers, Vauxhall's manager, David Coke and Alan Borg write:

The clear feminine bias of much of Tyers's marketing, closely echoed in the choice of subjects for the supper-box paintings and for the songs, is further evidence that he was directing his publicity at the huge and largely unexploited female market and that he purposefully manipulated the public image of the gardens to appeal to it. He was probably influenced in this course by [John] Lockman, who had translated the Marquise de Lambert's *New Reflexions on the Fair Sex* in 1729, and so was presumably sympathetic to the precepts that formed its main thesis, that the intellectual and behavioral contribution that women can make to society is as valuable as men's.²³

Pleasure gardens were useful to marriage-minded women and their guardians, and they undoubtedly provided a venue for romantic assignations and sex work. I wonder, however, if this aspect of the pleasure garden has been overstated. If we consider the larger cultural and economic dynamics in which women's power as consumers drove the production of art, fashion, entertainment, and even the urban realm itself, then the popularity of the pleasure garden, for women, comes into a little more focus.

In the case of Bath, this is especially true. G. J. Barker-Benfield writes:

the connection between refined pleasure and women's susceptibility to nervous disorders played a fundamental part ... in the renaissance of spa towns during the eighteenth century²⁴ ... the builders of spa ... towns' social infrastructure, and of the urban renaissance as a whole,

21 Women outnumbered men in Bath between 1820–1914, in certain parts of the city by three to one, but even in Austen's time the marriage market in Bath meant a steady influx of women visitors and consumers. See Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall, *Bath: A New History* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), p.204.

22 Brewer *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.73.

23 David Coke and Alan Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens: A History* (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Yale University Press, 2011), pp.179-80.

24 G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.29; see also Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660–1770* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.33.

wished for and assumed the presence of women in redesigned public environments.²⁵

In Georgian Bath, the commercial impetus of health and healing, as well as the social — and material — economy of the marriage market intensified the relationship between women and the developing urban realm.²⁶ Women may have been perceived as passive property but, Barker-Benfield contends, ‘at spas, women’s wishes and women’s complaints could be the purpose’.²⁷

‘Women’s wishes and women’s complaints’ were a constitutive factor in the shaping of the built environment of Georgian towns. Bath responded to an influx of female clientèle through the creation of women-friendly bathing establishments, hotels, shops, theatre and assembly spaces, and lending libraries. The visibility and sociability of fashion was part of the practice of these spaces as much as their design and use. Bath had many tailors, milliners, places to buy ribbon, gloves, textiles, and so forth. A shop at no. 5, Henrietta Street, which advertised undergarments for ‘the ladies’ in the late 1790s, for instance, made a point of mentioning its proximity to Sydney Gardens in its advertisement.²⁸

Some garden designs explicitly hailed women, such as Liverpool’s ‘Ladies Walk’, whose seaside situation and ambulatory purpose prompted Peter Borsay to suggest that ‘such walks involved not only a passive presence *in* but also an active engagement *with* nature’.²⁹ Pleasure gardens were, like promenades, squares, crescents and circuses, the binding agent that fused the changing shape of the eighteenth-century city with what Barker-Benfield calls the ‘public heterosociality of the joint pursuit of pleasure’.³⁰

25 Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, p.98.

26 See also Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, p.29.

27 Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, p.30.

28 See the *Bath Journal* (26th June 1815), p.3.

29 Borsay, ‘Pleasure Gardens and Urban Culture’, p.57. A description from the time bears out this assessment. ‘It was a sort of a terraced gravel walk, having four rows of fine Lombardy poplars, and seats underneath. On fine evenings all the gay and fashionable world of Liverpool used to take the air and show off their hoops and high heels, and the gentlemen their brocaded silk coats, and three-cornered hats’: James Stonehouse, *Recollections of Old Liverpool, By a Nonagenarian* (Liverpool: J.F. Hughes, 1836), p.67.

30 Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, p. 30.

Bath's Pleasure Landscapes

Relative to other eighteenth-century towns, Bath was big but, when compared to London's population of about 1 million in 1800, it was still small, at only 35,000 inhabitants. That said, six pleasure, tea and mineral-water gardens could be found in the Bath area at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Generally, these gardens were situated along the course of the River Avon; as **fig. 3** indicates, they favoured the eastern side of the city.³¹ The balance that many pleasure gardens attempted to strike between urban pleasure and rural setting was found here. Villa Fields Gardens were built on the fields surrounding the now-demolished Bathwick Villa. To the south was King James Spa, also called King James Palace Gardens in Lyncombe Vale, which was built near Lyn Brook. This tea garden had a more affordable entry fee than Sydney Gardens, which in 1819 was charging 2s. 6d. for a single entry on gala night or, for a three-month walking subscription, roughly the same price as a new novel, 7s. 6d..³² Better known today are Harrison's Walks and Assembly, located in St James' Gardens, later the Institution Gardens (1708). Across the river were Spring Gardens (c.1730–98).³³ Grosvenor



Fig. 3: **Map showing approximate locations of Bath's pleasure, tea and mineral water gardens, c.1750–1850** - Google Maps (2013)

31 There are two reasons for this: an earlier wave of urbanization meant less land was available to the west of the river; in addition, the early industrialization of the south-west riverside meant that by the mid-1700s this area was strongly associated with dirt, smell, the poor, and crime. Marshy Bathwick was developed later in the Georgian period.

32 'A novel would cost at least 7s.6d., a work of history or belles lettres a guinea.' Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin, 1982), p.252.

33 Today this site is home to Bath's Recreation Grounds.

Vauxhall Gardens opened east of the city in 1792 and Sydney Vauxhall Gardens opened in 1795.

Harrison's Walks and Spring Gardens both closed a few years after Sydney Gardens opened. Advertisements of the era show that these destinations all tended to offer the same amenities in terms of food, entertainment and spectacle. Undoubtedly the desire for novelty was one reason for the appeal of Sydney Gardens, but so too must have been the far greater scale of the gardens, which allowed for diversity within the grounds. Its situation also afforded a flat walk to and from town. Until Royal Victoria Park opened in 1831, Sydney Gardens were the city's largest green space and even afterwards it has remained the city's largest gated green area.



Fig. 4: Charles Harcourt Masters, *Plan of Bath* (detail), 1795

This detail of Charles Harcourt Masters' plan of 1795 (see **fig. 4**), based on Thomas Baldwin's original plan, conveys the layout of the lozenge-shaped gardens as planted in 1792, prior to the introduction of the Kennet and Avon Canal in 1810. The canal, which subtly divided the gardens in two, in time boasted two 'Chinese bridges,' which to this day allow picturesque views over the riverboats and adjacent footpath. On the left of the property is what would become Sydney Hotel, today's Holburne Museum. It had a gated drive, allowing for distinguished arrivals via Great Pulteney Street. Immediately east of the hotel was an open area flanked by refreshment or 'supper boxes', an ingenious union of picnic tables and row-housing that permitted dining out of doors, without fear of being drenched in a sudden shower. The supper boxes also gave onto the gravelled circular walk, where visitors might stroll in time to the music of a moveable orchestra.³⁴

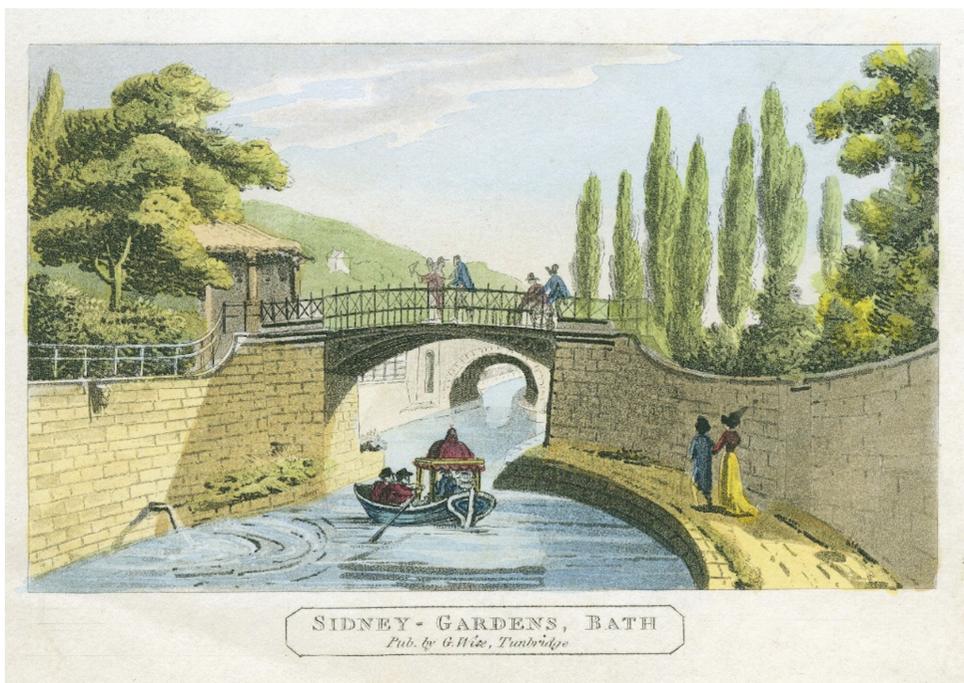


Fig. 5: **G. Wise, *Sydney Gardens, Bath*, c.1820, aquatint - Bath in Time, no. 11605**

³⁴ Stewart Harding and David Lambert indicate that there were several. Harding and Lambert, *Parks and Gardens of Somerset*, p. 67.

The long, straight walk linked one end of Sydney Gardens to the other. At the eastern termination was a loggia, providing visual continuity with Harcourt Masters' neoclassical hotel to the west. A perimeter ride encircled the gardens, separating the more intricately designed spaces within from the gardens' exterior walls. Central to the illusion of finding oneself in another world were the winding pathways and plantings, which, as Stephanie Poynts observes, would have provided layers of privacy for clients³⁵ while facilitating an exaggerated sense of the site's size. Circuitous pathways led visitors to a given site or attraction, while obscuring their visibility to others. In the early days the key sites included the faux ruin of a castle (complete with moat), a 'hermit's hut' tucked against the inner southern boundary and two bowling greens. But as can be seen from its relative size on the plan in **fig. 4**, the star attraction was the Labyrinth.

The Labyrinth

The authors of *The Universal Gardener and Botanist* of 1778 define the Labyrinth as, 'a sort of wilderness plantation, abounding with hedges and walks, distributed into many winding and intricate turnings, leading to one common centre, extremely difficult to find out; designed in large gardens by way of amusement.'³⁶

The Labyrinth at Sydney Gardens was a special draw for visitors. Stephanie Poynts explains that the Labyrinth was one of the Gardens' original features, built shortly after the opening in 1795.³⁷ At 'half a mile long' the maze 'could take up to six hours to traverse'.³⁸ The plan of the Labyrinth illustrated here was possibly also the plan that was offered for purchase at the entrance for an additional 3d. on top of the admission cost. It shows several adjacent attractions including a 'picturesque folly of a ruined castle' and the 'Hermit's Cot'.³⁹ The

35 Stephanie Poynts, 'Report on the History and evolution of Sydney Gardens', Bath & North East Somerset (Mar. 2007), p.56 <http://idox.bathnes.gov.uk/WAM/doc/BackGround%20Papers-156444.pdf?extension=.pdf&id=156444&location=VOLUME1&contentType=application/pdf&pageCount=1>, [accessed 15th Aug. 2013].

36 Thomas Mawe and John Abercrombie, *The Universal Gardener and Botanist: or, a general Dictionary of Gardening and Botany* (1778) n.p.

37 Poynts, 'Report on the History and evolution of Sydney Gardens', p.44.

38 Paula Byrne, "'The unmeaning luxuries of Bath": Urban Pleasures in Jane Austen's World', in *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, Vol. 26 (2004), p.16.

39 Sarah Jane Downing, 'Green and Pleasant: England's Pleasure Gardens', Secret Britain (feature), *The Guardian/Observer*, 5th April 2009 <http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2009/apr/05/pleasure-sydney-gardens-vauxhall-bath>, [accessed 20th June 2013].

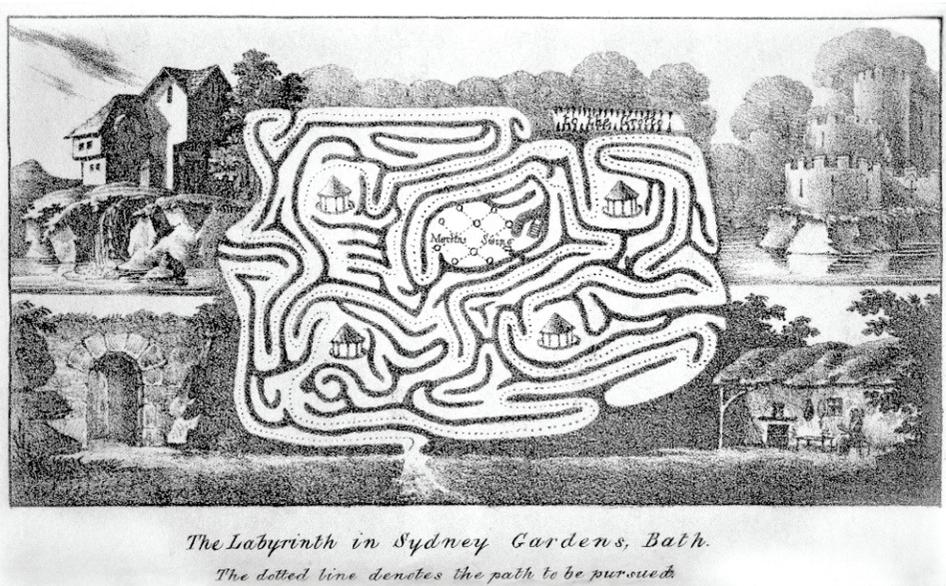


Fig. 6: **The Labyrinth**, from a plan in John Kerr's *The Syllabus or Descriptive Representation of The Numerous Productions of Nature and Art, presented in This Extensive Establishment; Particularly embracing those improvements and additions that have been lately effected — The New Aviary, The Labyrinth, Merlin's Swing and Grotto, The Millers House and Water Mill, Hermits Cot, Cosmorama, etc.* (1825) - Bath in Time, no. 11803

latter featured a hermit puppet whose aim was to 'give the impression that the recluse lived miles from anywhere without human contacts, and his purpose, in a pleasure garden, was to darken the mood momentarily'.⁴⁰ Also visible at top left of the plan is a portion of the 'Cascade', which a contemporary advertisement described as a 'very large and ornamental piece of Scenery and machinery, prepared at a very great expense, representing a Beautiful Perspective View of a village and Grand Cascade, a Water Mill at work, a Bridge with various Passengers'.⁴¹ At bottom left of **fig. 6** is the entrance to the 'Grotto', which appears to have led out, underground, from a passage originating at the centre of the Labyrinth. Visible in this plan is the reward or discovery at the centre of the maze: one or several 'Merlin's Swings'. Inventor John-Joseph Merlin (1735–1803) was a wonderfully eccentric character who, according to a description written in the year of his death, was 'fond of

40 Snaddon, *Last Promenade*, summarising the 1825 guide, p.23.

41 Snaddon, *Last Promenade*, citing an advertisement from May 1810, p.21.

representing the character of Cupid at places of public amusement ... forging his own darts, and these he likewise very successfully aimed against the fair sex'.⁴² When designing these special swings, Merlin named the invention after himself, a mark of honour he had thus far withheld from his other innovations, which included roller skates, wheelchairs and the automaton of a swan. It is not completely clear what the Merlin swing looked like, as historic accounts are not consistent (perhaps its design was modified over time). What is certain is that Sydney Gardens had swings in several locations, but the centre of the Labyrinth was reserved for the Merlin swing alone.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the word 'labyrinth' had become associated with losing one's moral way, and with the quest for — and risks found in — women's sexual organs in particular.⁴³ This was in no small part due to the labyrinthine nature of the ever more intricate Georgian pleasure gardens, whose 'dark walks' and 'lovers' groves' had become explicitly aligned with the abandonment of social constraint and morality, and the possibility of sex.⁴⁴ Journalist Pierce Egan's *Walks Through Bath* of 1819 provides a description of the struggle to reach the swing:

it might puzzle any *cunning* person, if left to himself and without a *clue*, for six hours, to acquire the much wished-for spot; and it is rather a difficult task when the explorer of the *Labyrinth* has the direction pointed out to him from a man stationed in the swing.

The *inns* and *outs* necessary to be made, it is said, measure *half a mile*. When the swing is made, and the *secret* unravelled, the guardian of this sort of *Fair Rosamond's* bower conveys the visitor once more into the public walks⁴⁵

42 R.S. Kirby, 'The Life of Mr John Joseph Merlin', in *Kirby's Wonderful and Eccentric Museum: Or, Magazine of Remarkable Characters, including all the curiosities of nature and art, from the remotest period to the present time, drawn from every authentic source* (1803), Vol. 1, p.276.

43 Rendell, *Pursuit of Pleasure*, p10.

44 Venetia Murray writes: 'By the time of the Regency (1811–1820) the gardens [at Vauxhall] had become a maze of secluded alleys, groves and secret arbours. The names of the various walks indicate one of the main attractions of Vauxhall: the Dark Walk, the Druid's Walk and the blatantly named Lovers' Walk, for example. There was even an official, specially created, "Wilderness".' Venetia Murray, *High Society: A Social History of the Regency Period, 1788–1830* (New York: Viking, 1998), p.104.

45 Egan, *Walks Through Bath*, p.185. Emphasis in original. Egan makes reference here to the fiction that Rosamund Clifford, one of the lovers of Henry II, lived in a hunting lodge that he built for her, surrounded by a labyrinth, presumably to keep her in, and other men and his jealous wife out.

Egan's description suggests that failing to reach the 'much-wished for spot' — especially under the watchful eye of a male 'guardian', already in the swing — seems akin to sexual insecurity, possession and reward.⁴⁶

Is one only to think, then, that the Merlin swings bore some resemblance in purpose to the swing used by fickle lovers in Honoré Fragonard's famous painting, *The Swing*? (fig. 7) Baroness Frances Bunsen (1791–1876) was an artist who visited Sydney Gardens



Fig. 7: Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767, oil on canvas - Wallace Collection

as a child. In her memoirs she recalls 'a Merlin swing, in which the swingers sat two and two, opposite; those at the corners pulling ropes alternately by which the swing was set in motion. Two gentlemen, who had joined us in our walk, acceded to the desire of the ladies in mounting the swing.' So far it would seem that Fragonard would be hiding in the bushes, ready to paint the next scene. However, Baroness Bunsen recalls the movement of the swing was neither gentle nor romantic. She then 'saw one of these gentlemen become paler and paler, til he almost fainted'. In the end, the unfortunate individual had to be 'helped out of the swing by the gardener'.⁴⁷

In another account, this time a visual one, a sketch depicts the mysterious apparatus as somewhere between a traditional, seated swing and a swing-

46 It is important to bear in mind Egan's biographer's assertion that he 'was always prepared to embellish the truth in the interests of entertainment' and provide spice to his accounts. Dennis Brailsford, 'Egan, Pierce', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press (2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/8/101008577/>, [accessed 25th June 2013].

47 Augustus John Cuthbert Hare, *The Life and Letters of Frances Baroness Bunsen*, Vol. 1 (London: Daldy, Isbister & Company, 1879), p.31.



Fig. 8: John Nixon, *Sydney Gardens, Bath*, c.1800, watercolour - Victoria Art Gallery⁴⁸

boat, designed for two people to ride together. While his gently satirical image depicts only two people per swing (fig. 8), John Nixon's watercolour of c.1800 resonates nonetheless with Baroness Bunsen's description of people not coyly flirting, but rather holding fast with determination. Nixon's benign scene, like Bunsen's memoirs, appears to support Julie Wakefield's assertion that the Merlin swing 'was not some Fragonard-inspired decorative swing for lovers' but a form of exercise machine, and perhaps a rather vigorous one at that.⁴⁸ Advertisements from the era, such as that shown in fig. 9, bear this assertion out, clearly stating that the swing was 'thought most conducive to health'.⁴⁹ Where then, was the pleasure in the labyrinth for Austen?

The popular print culture of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is

48 Julie Wakefield, 'Jane Austen in Bath: The Sydney Garden Galas, Part 1: Music', in *Austen Only: Jane Austen's Life, Times, and Works Explained and Discussed*, 12th March 2010 <http://austenonly.com/2010/03/12/jane-austen-in-bath-the-sydney-garden-galas-1-music/>, [accessed 29th July 2013].

49 The Merlin swing at Bath was not the only one of its kind. The anonymous 'Brighton gleaner' describes the Royal Brighton Tea Gardens as having all the same attributes and features as Sydney Gardens, including a labyrinth with a Merlin swing at the centre: *The Brighton Gleaner; or, General repository of literary selections, general occurrences, etc.* (1823), p.398.

SYDNEY-GARDEN VAUXHALL,
 OPPOSITE
GREAT PULTENEY-STREET.
 —o—o—o—o—o

THIS GARDEN having become the pleasure-
 able resort of the most fashionable Company re-
 siding in, or resorting to BATH,—J. GALE returns his
 most grateful thanks for the very liberal encourage-
 ment given him, which he will endeavour to merit by
 continuing to render the refreshments, of all kinds,
 as reasonable as possible, and of the best quality. He
 also begs leave to inform the publick, that the Garden is
 constantly receiving improvement, and from the *superior*
and novel style in which, it is designed, its visitants, and par-
ticularly admirers of picturesque plantations, will be much
gratified in contemplating its rising beauties.

MERLIN'S SWING is now open, and as it is thought
 most conducive to health, a SUBSCRIPTION has been re-
 quested at 5s. for three months; NON-SUBSCRIBERS'
 TICKETS to be had at the Bar at 6d. each through a
curious Grotto; and 3d. each through the Gate of the
 Labyrinth, which being so perplexing, correct plans of
 it are sold at the Bar, price 6d.

Large Breakfast Parties are requested to give timely notice.

Subscriptions for Walking—2s. 6d. for one month, 5s.
 for three months, until Christmas 6s. only; for Bowling,
 2s. 6d. Non-Subscribers 6d. each for admission.—Sub-
 scribers, as well as others, are entitled to Tea for 6d.

Horns and Clarionets every Thursday evening.
 § Servants in Livery not admitted.

Fig. 9: Merlin's Swing, advertised in the *Bath Chronicle*, 20th August 1795 - Bath in Time, no. 30670

rich in writing on women, gardens and landscape.⁵⁰ Publications dedicated to the cultivation and layout of gardens, such as *The Beauties of Flora Display'd, or Gentleman and Lady's Pocket Companion to the Flower and Kitchen*

50 On print culture and gender in the long eighteenth century, see Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines, 1693–1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972); Teri Perl, 'The Ladies Diary ... Circa 1700', *The Mathematics Teacher*, Vol. 70, no. 4 (April 1977), pp.354-8; Temma Berg and Sonia Kane, (eds.), *Women, Gender, and Print Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Memory of Betty Rizzo* (Plymouth: Lehigh University Press, 2013).

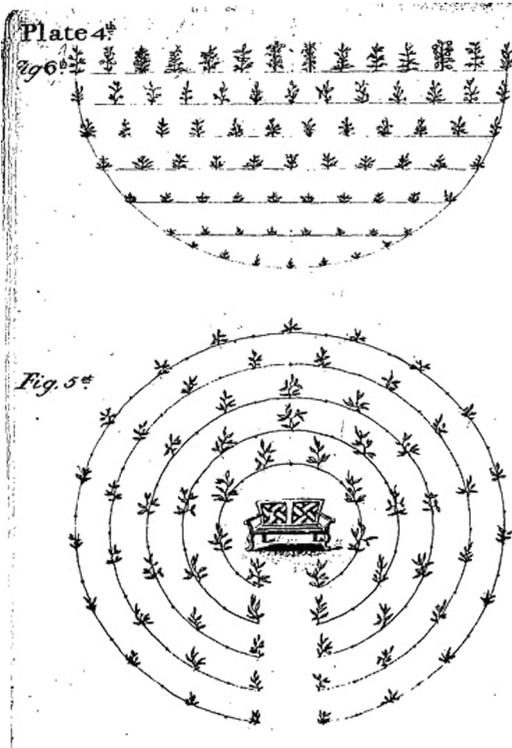


Fig. 10: Design for a spiral garden, N. Swindon, *The Beauties of Flora Display'd, or Gentleman and Lady's Pocket Companion to the Flower and Kitchen Garden: On an Entire New Plan, with a Catalogue of Seeds Necessary for Each of Them* (1778), p.ii

Garden (1778) addressed women as well as male readers. The author included advice on the 'most desirable situation for a Pleasure Garden' for domestic use. A number of plates represent 'spiral plantations,' a somewhat simpler form than the garden labyrinth, which the author recommends placing so as to give onto a view (fig. 10). Yet even here, the gendered and spatial politics of looking are in play. Like Egan, the author assumes a male reader. Swindon asserts that these plantations, if well designed, can afford 'an agreeable retreat'. But, he specifies, 'a Lady gracing [this garden] may, by spectators from the distant hills, be taken for Goddess Flora'.⁵¹ Thus men may retreat in their garden, but that same garden puts women on display. One can begin to imagine how a labyrinth, the way it resists and confounds the gaze, might be a welcome reprieve.

Other publications, such as *The Ladies' Diary or Woman's Almanack*, had their readers test their intellectual and deductive powers through lengthy series of 'brain-teasers'. Readers of the *Ladies' Diary*, which included men, were given complex spatial challenges to work out. Interestingly, the authors of the puzzles frequently used the image of a garden to anchor and elaborate the challenge. A brain-teaser from 1754, for example, reads:

51 N. Swindon, *The Beauties of Flora Display'd, or Gentleman and Lady's Pocket Companion to the Flower and Kitchen Garden: On an Entire New Plan, with a Catalogue of Seeds Necessary for Each of Them* (1778), p.iii.

Within a rectangular garden, containing just an acre of ground, I have a circular fountain, whose circumference is 28, 40, 52, and 60 yards distant from the four angles of the garden. From these dimensions [determine] the length and breadth of the garden, and likewise the diameter of the fountain.⁵²

In this case a male reader, or reader with a male pseudonym, responded with a detailed diagram to prove the answer. In another example from 1788 (see **fig. 11**), Mr Alex Rowe submits a puzzle of deduction, again taking the image of a piece of land, which 'A lady' would like to divide in such a way as to yield the most profit possible. The answer by 'Gemini', likely a woman, demonstrates a powerful grasp of geometry and economics.⁵³

VI. QUESTION 673, by Mr. Alex. Rowe.

A lady having bought a piece of land (for which she is to pay 3000 guineas) to be cut out, in the form of a right-angled triangle, from a large common: now, the only limitation besides is, that the sum of the hyp. and \perp is to be 100 chains; she requests the diarian correspondents will inform her what dimensions to take that she may have the most land for her money, with the price per acre it will cost her.

Answered by Gemini.

Put $a = 100$, the sum of the hypotenuse and perpendicular, and $x =$ the perpendicular of the triangle; then is $a - x =$ the hypotenuse, and $\sqrt{(a^2 - 2ax)} =$ the base; hence $x\sqrt{(a^2 - 2ax)} =$ (double the area) a maximum. Which put in fluxions, &c. there results $x = \frac{1}{3}a$ the perpendicular, $a - x = \frac{2}{3}a$ the hypotenuse, $\sqrt{(a^2 - 2ax)} = a\sqrt{\frac{1}{3}}$ the base of the Δ , and $\frac{1}{2}a^2\sqrt{\frac{1}{3}} = 962.25$ square chains = 96.225 acres; which produce 31.1769 guineas an acre, or 32l. 14s. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. nearly.

Fig. 11: 'Brain-teazer' from *The Ladies' Diary or Woman's Almanack* (1788), p.389

52 *The Diarian Repository: Or Mathematical Register Containing a Complete Collection of All the Mathematical Questions which Have Been Published in The Ladies' Diary from the Commencement of that Work in 1704 to the Year 1760, Together with Their Solutions, Fully Investigated, According to the Latest Improvements* (1774), pp.605-7.

53 *The Mathematical Questions, Proposed in the Ladies' Diary, and their Original Answers: Together with some new solutions, from its commencement in the year 1704 to 1816*, Vol. 2 [compiled by Thomas Leybourne] (1817), p.389.

What these and numerous other examples suggest is that, as a print culture dedicated to women's pleasure, the *Ladies' Diary* and other periodicals and pocket-books helped to foster enjoyment in the solving of mathematical and geometrical problems. Furthermore, they exercised their readers' capacities to determine the spatial characteristics, dimensions and relative scales of gardens and plots of land *they had never seen*.⁵⁴ It seems possible that the skills attained aided in solving the very pleasant problem of the Labyrinth in Sydney Gardens, whose organization was invisible from the outside. Perhaps, in this sense, the swings were not the only reward of reaching the centre. If so, there is a strong literary tradition in England in which women have used the image and metaphor of the labyrinth, in Jennifer Munroe's words, to 'imagine making space for [themselves]'.⁵⁵

Austen read popular print sources directed at women for pleasure, to gauge reactions to her books, and as a source for her novels. The conclusion of *Emma*, her 1815 novel, is a rebuttal of an account in the November 1802 edition of the *Lady's Magazine*, of a Mr Knightley who marries a 'deserted orphan'.⁵⁶ Austen's fictional Mr Knightley marries the intelligent and discerning, if single-minded, Emma, while the deserted orphan — Harriet — marries a farmer closer to her class position. As a consumer of such publications as the *Lady's Magazine* and the *Spectator*, which also published reviews of her books, Austen was likely familiar with the brain-teasers and logistical spatial puzzles of the eighteenth-century women's press.

But perhaps the greatest indication that Austen may have been drawn to the Labyrinth for its spatial and deductive pleasures is the emphasis that experts have placed upon these aspects of her work. In the 1950s Vladimir Nabokov painstakingly mapped the spatial arrangements of *Mansfield Park*, from the proximities between characters within specific rooms and carriages, to the

54 The Ladies' Diary ran from 1704–1840. Margaret Beetham writes, 'even after its merger with the Gentleman's Diary in 1841 it continued to keep alive ... the idea that ladies as well as gentlemen might enjoy intellectual puzzles'. *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.37.

55 Munroe is here discussing the early modern writer, Lady Mary Wroth, and the figure of the labyrinth in her work: Jennifer Munroe, *Gender and the Garden in Early Modern English Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p.113; also pp.114-7.

56 Edward Copeland, 'Money', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.137-8. On page 190 Copeland writes: 'From an early age [Austen] read like a potential author. She looked for what she could use — not by quietly absorbing and reflecting it, but by actively engaging, rewriting, often mocking it.'

relative distances between ‘real and imaginary places mentioned in the text[s]’.⁵⁷ More recently, literary historian Janine Barchas has used maps to understand the factual and historical aspects of Austen’s work, spatialising both. Michael Suk-Young Chwe has dedicated an entire book to the topic of Austen as a progenitor of game theory, a highly mathematical field that attempts to analyse choice and motivation.⁵⁸

Suk-Young Chwe presents Austen as ‘a theoretician of strategic thinking’ because of her ability to make visible to the reader both the careful deliberations and machinations of certain characters, and likewise the ‘conspicuous absence of strategic thinking’ in others, particularly social superiors. In a nod to the cheerfully anachronistic Hollywood film adaptation of Austen’s *Emma*, Suk-Young Chwe refers to this absence of strategic thought as ‘cluelessness’.⁵⁹ While the stretch to game theory may be too far for some, this point about cluelessness does take us directly back to the most detailed description of Sydney Gardens’ Labyrinth to survive from the Georgian era: Egan’s *Walks Through Bath*, in which a man — socially, economically, and legally any woman’s superior — goes hunting for his ‘Rosamund.’ The pertinent passage is worth quoting a second time: ‘it might puzzle any cunning person, if left to himself and *without a clue*, for six hours, to acquire the much wished-for spot’.⁶⁰

For clueless male consumers of the Labyrinth in Sydney Gardens, the pleasure of finding the centre, Cupid’s invention, had to do with the spatialisation of the mechanics of sexual desire, chase, and conquest. Egan could not be more direct: ‘The inducement to enter [this sort of Fair Rosamond’s bower] is ... Merlin’s swing.’⁶¹ The pleasures of swinging, no matter how healthful, were clearly also libidinous for Egan’s imaginary reader. But this is not the end of the story of swinging in the Georgian era, as it were. While the sexual pleasures of the labyrinth for women were surely present — and who is to say that they were exclusively heteronormative — there also seems to have been the rather different pleasure of *having a clue*. The pleasure of solving spatial problems in real space, in effect, of experiencing spatial mastery,

57 Janine Barchas, *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), pp.11-2.

58 Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Jane Austen, Game Theorist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

59 Suk-Young Chwe, pp.18-20. *Clueless* was released in 1995, directed by Amy Heckerling.

60 See note 42, my emphasis.

61 Egan, *Walks Through Bath*, p.185.

cannot be underestimated in an age when women regularly developed their intellectual capacities in precisely this way and were, furthermore, finding more and more opportunities to share in the fullness of public space.

Conclusion

The Historic and Local New Bath Guide gleefully reported in 1812 that the ‘goddess of pleasure has selected this city as the place of her principal residence’.⁶² Clearly that goddess smiled upon both women and the proprietors of Sydney Gardens because, as the Guide continues, ladies visiting these gardens were wonderfully ‘entertained’.⁶³ This essay has aimed to suggest some ways in which this ‘entertainment’ could have exceeded passive consumption, and moved towards active engagement with the spatial and material specificities of the pleasure garden. As public places where women with some means could exercise preference, knowledge and skill, pleasure gardens can be understood to have afforded new opportunities within class and gender constraints. They thus belong to the growing range of spaces that feminist historians such as Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus have underscored as important to eighteenth-century women’s individual and collective identification.⁶⁴ The fact that women who could afford to do so returned over and over again to such sites suggests that the experience of the commercial pleasure garden at the turn of the nineteenth century was as manifold as the offerings it sought to supply. In repeatedly choosing that manifold experience, women seem to have chosen the exercise of their abilities, tastes and capacities — in shared space, with other women, with pleasure.

62 *The Historic and Local New Bath Guide*, p.96.

63 *The Historic and Local New Bath Guide*, p.96.

64 Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus, *Women’s History, Britain 1700–1850: An Introduction* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004); *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations, and Responsibilities* (London: Longman, 1997).

About the Author

Dr Cynthia Imogen Hammond is Associate Professor and former Chair of the Department of Art History, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. During her postdoctoral fellowship at the School of Architecture, McGill University, she studied the relationships between architecture, philanthropy, and gender. In 2012 she published *Architects, Angels, Activists and the City of Bath, 1765-1965* (Ashgate), in which she analyses the politics of heritage and memory in this UNESCO World Heritage Site, using research-creation as part of her feminist method. Hammond has published numerous essays on art, architecture, gender, and urban landscapes in journals such as *Architecture & Ideas*, *Women's Studies*, and *Studies in the Social Sciences*. A practising artist, Hammond's recent creative work includes two artist residencies that address the relationship of women's history to urban gardens. Her research-creation projects are documented at cynthiammond.org. Hammond is Director of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University.