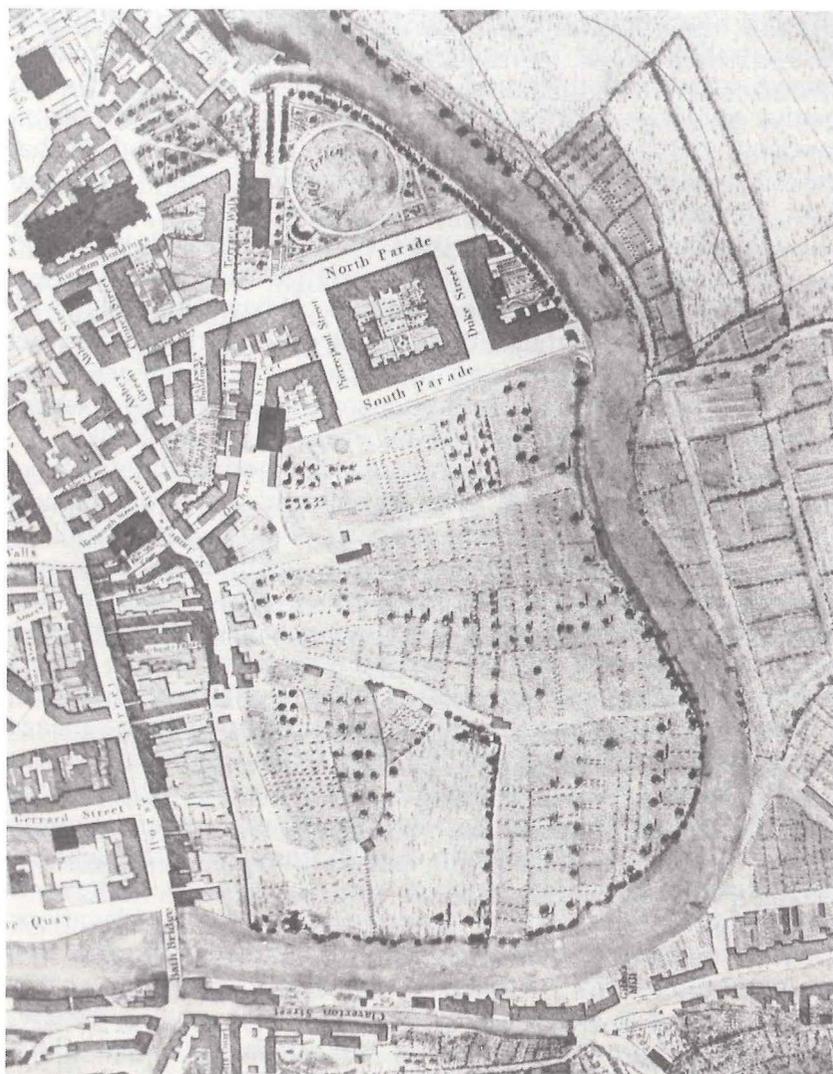


## A TRIAL-RUN FOR REGENT'S PARK: REPTON AND NASH AT BATH, 1796

Tim Mowl

Eighteenth-century Bath developed against all the geographical logic of its site. The map of the city published in 1794 by Charles Harcourt Masters shows the great terraces climbing high up the slopes of Lansdown and the Bathwick Estate spreading out on the other side of the Avon. Yet the Ham, a broad tract of level ground close to the Abbey, the fashionable heart of the city, and the two rival Assembly Rooms on the terrace above the Abbey Orchard, remains an untidy tangle of market gardens and rented small-holdings, known for 'the fine cauliflowers in Macphersons Beds'<sup>1</sup> and little else.

The reasons for this curious void at the side of an expanding city are to be found in an unlucky sequence of dynastic marriage, ill-timed deaths and foolish philandering associated with the Pierrepont family. It was a basic misfortune for Bath that the area most suited to residential development should have fallen into the hands of absentees with little awareness of the city's needs and character. The Pierreponts were a Nottinghamshire family with their chief seat at Thoresby in the north of that county. By adroit Whig politicking they had risen fast up the peerage during the seventeenth century and, as part of the general distribution of rewards following the Hanoverian succession, George I had elevated Evelyn, the Pierrepont Marquis of Dorchester and Earl of Kingston-upon-Hull, to be the first Duke of Kingston. That was in 1715. By that time the new Duke's only son William had married a rich West Country heiress, Rachel Baynton, and then, in 1713, died, leaving the extensive lands around Bath and Bradford-on-Avon which she had brought into the family, to an infant son, a second Evelyn, born in 1711. These lands included the Ham.



- 1 Detail from the Harcourt Masters map of 1794 showing the undeveloped area of the Ham.

Evelyn Pierrepont, the first Duke, died in 1726 just as the land values in Bath were rising fast and when a landlord with a decisive mind and informed tastes could have given the city positive guidance. But he was succeeded by his fifteen-year-old grandson, the second and last Duke, an ill-educated orphan whom Horace Walpole would later describe as 'a very weak man, of the greatest beauty, and finest person in England'.<sup>2</sup>

In default of a Pierrepont initiative, the architect, John Wood, newly returned to Bath, proposed in 1730 to build a circle of houses, 260 feet in diameter, on the Abbey Orchard at the northern tip of the Ham.<sup>3</sup> Although one of the three roads which pierced this circle was to lead out onto a new bridge across the Avon, the rear elevations of the houses presented only a ragged backside of kitchen premises to the river. It was not built.

Wood's next project for the Ham was his more ambitious Royal Forum to cover the whole area. The North and South Parades which, with their connecting streets, were actually built in 1740-3, were intended merely as the north side of a great rectangle of houses all raised up on a terrace with a high rusticated base. Once again the river was ignored, though a bridge was proposed. Only when interest in his Forum flagged did Wood produce a scheme which featured the Avon in relation to the architecture. This third plan projected an amazing piazza, exactly bisected by the river, the two halves connected by two bridges carrying the raised terraces that linked the whole. In the centre the river widened into an octagonal basin where commerce could be carried on beneath the complacent eyes of the parading elite. Predictably it was ignored; the city appears to have no memory of its lost opportunity and Wood prepared no elevations.

It was probably at this point that the Ham schemes lost their real momentum. The Woods, father and son, turned their attention to the King's Circus and the Royal Crescent, driving the city's social centre of gravity northwards and uphill. With the building of Robert Adam's Pulteney Bridge (begun 1769) the Bathwick estate was opened up and soon the terraces of Thomas Baldwin were to raise their orderly but predictable elevations.

It was in 1769 also that Evelyn Pierrepont, the second and last Duke of Kingston, went through a form of marriage to a high-spirited adventuress, Elizabeth Hervey, née Chudleigh. This lady now began to style herself Duchess of Kingston and be received

as such at Court, when she was the actual, though reluctant, Countess of Bristol. The misadventures, secret marriages and deceptions of this connection read like one of Richardson's novels, but they are not strictly relevant to Bath except in their conclusions. Blissfully contented with his bigamous bride the Duke, who only survived another four years, made a will leaving all his real estate, including of course the Ham, to his 'Duchess' for her lifetime. This was on the condition that she did not marry again, a provision made to save the too-susceptible Elizabeth from the attentions of any male adventurer. After her death all the Pierrepont inheritance was to pass to a nephew, Charles Meadows, a gallant captain in the Royal Navy, who had captured the French 'Hermione' after a ship-to-ship battle.

Between the Duke's death in 1773 and her own in 1788 the false 'Duchess' cavorted about the courts of Europe, supremely indifferent to the housing potential of the Ham. She should be considered alongside such women as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Countess of Craven as a cheerful proto-feminist. At Potsdam she danced drunkenly before an intrigued Frederick the Great. She sailed her yacht right up a swollen Tiber into Rome and in Russia she presented by mistake two of her deceased 'husband's' paintings – a Claude and a Raphael – to Count Chernieff, then made herself look foolish by vainly trying to retrieve them. Even her bigamy trial before the peers had an air of high comedy: the verdict was 'guilty', but as Countess of Bristol by her earlier secret marriage, she escaped branding on the hand. Her death left Europe a slightly duller continent.

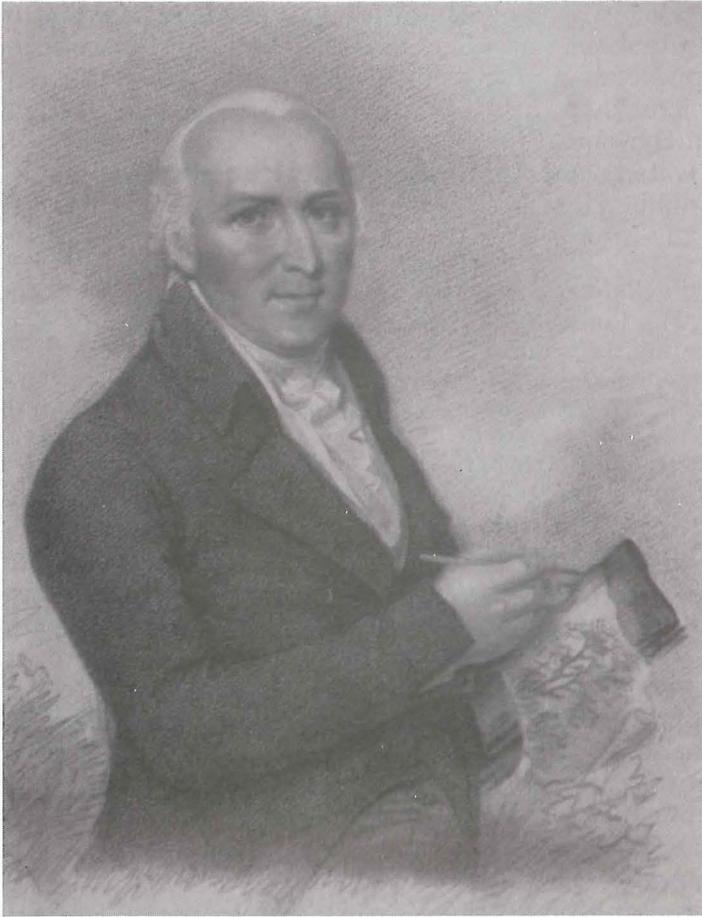
In 1788, on coming into his delayed inheritance, Charles Meadows took by sign manual the surname and arms of Pierrepont, was created Viscount Newark in 1796, and in 1806 Earl Manvers. But the long hiatus of the 'Duchess' as absentee landlord was closely followed by the outbreak of the Revolutionary Wars and the consequent slump in house building, so it was not until 1796 that Charles Meadows Pierrepont, Lord Newark, began to consider schemes for developing the Ham in a style to match the great crescents and squares on the northern slopes of the city.

If Lord Newark had been able to act swiftly after her death in 1788, something might still have been achieved. The years between 1788 and 1792 were still buoyant; many of Baldwin and

John Palmer's fastidiously refined terrace façades went up at that time in a mannered, provincial version of the Adam style. Newark's error in tactics was what, in fact, makes the whole episode so valuable. Instead of relying on the jealously exclusive circle of native Bath architects, he called in competing designs from the outsiders Humphry Repton, James Lewis and the elder William Wilkins. This meant that he was given three very different schemes representing a wide spectrum of current taste with the Repton scheme in particular anticipating the grandest London work of 1812–30. It meant, however, that nothing came of his admirable projects. Commercially speaking, Bath and its corporation were a closed world. Robert Adam, Timothy Lightoler and the younger William Wilkins were the only outsiders to be permitted even a slight measure of work within the city. Effectively, Lord Newark destroyed his chances of conducting profitable building operations by choosing three non-Bathonians to execute them.

The particular interest of the three schemes which he commissioned lies in their illustration of a peculiar shift to grandiosity in English urban aesthetics, when the design of terraces was moving from the relative restraint of 18th-century classicism towards an assertive palace style that would express the nation's conscious imperial status. John Nash's terraces for Regent's Park were to be the most notable examples of this new style and one of the three designs for the redevelopment of the Ham almost certainly represents a partnership between Nash himself and Humphry Repton – Nash's first projection, therefore, on such a scale and in this new imperial mood. The maps and designs for the three alternative developments, hitherto unpublished and unconsidered, have been preserved at Thoresby Hall, the Manvers' family seat, and are reproduced here by kind permission of Hugh Matheson.<sup>4</sup>

Repton had been familiar with Bath since at least 1784 and had been working successfully for Charles Pierrepont, as he still was, on the park at Thoresby since 1790. Another earlier Repton watercolour of the Pump Room is signed and dated 1784.<sup>5</sup> Then in 1788 he was afflicted with alarming symptoms of nervous giddiness for which he was recommended to take up fishing. Spurning the advice he chose to sojourn for a while in Bath with his family and this more civilised remedy proved effective.



2 Humphry Repton (1752–1818) engraved by H.B. Hall after a miniature by Samuel Shelley.

By 1791 he had created a cascade for the park at Thoresby, bringing entire rocks complete with bushes from Cresswell Crags to create a natural appearance. This was the subject of an engraving which he made for the July issue of *Peacock's Polite Repository* and to be celebrated again in a short poem written for his *Odd Whims and Miscellanies* (1804) which also mentions 'Lord Viscount Newark'. A particularly close association between Repton and the Bath area began in 1795 when he was working at

Stoneaston. In 1796 he was working with John Nash for the first time at Corsham and, unaided, at Newton Park. The Repton Red Book for Newton Park in the Mellon Collection dates from 1797. Rather later than the period of the Thoresby watercolour he did work at Dyrham (1801–3) and Brentry (1802).

The watercolour in question is unfortunately not dated but it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1799. Underneath it carries the inscription:

To the Right Honble Lord Viscount Newark this Sketch for improving His Lordships Property at Bath by building on the ground opposite the South Parade & keeping the Coach Roads on a level below the Walks & Parades is humbly inscribed by His Lordship's obedient & obliged servant H. Repton.

It is essentially a practical capriccio. It shows the existing terraces of the South Parade linked by a round-arched colonnade. Facing them across parkland is an exact replica. The east side of the forum is left open to the river and a circular carriage drive below the level of Wood's raised terraces serves all the houses. The inspired element of the design is the west side where a colonnaded crescent of 33 bays, terminated by deep Corinthian porticoes, sweeps around to connect the two parades. The terrace of the South Parade extends under the loggia to provide a grand promenade. All carriage traffic is kept isolated on the park below.

Had it been built Bernini would have come to Bath. The problem is that, though Repton obviously executed the painting, he is most unlikely to have devised a central feature of such style and grandeur. His approval of 'Grecian' architecture was watery at the best and he reserved particular disapproval for porticoes, except on a church, calling them an 'Applique' with 'too often the appearance of a Grecian temple affixed to an English cotton mill'. 'How seldom', he wrote, 'a very lofty portico can be useful in this climate, where we have little perpendicular sun'. The 'beautiful Corinthian portico to the north of the Mansion House' drew a smile from him by its impracticality every time he passed it: 'in our cold and rainy atmosphere such a portico towards the north, is a striking instance of the false application of a beautiful model'.<sup>6</sup> Yet the 33-bay 'portico' which he proposed for the Bath forum would have faced east and cast the principal rooms of all three storeys into the deepest shadow for most of the day.



The inspiration has to be that of John Nash. Repton was working on the park at Thoresby in the early 1790s; his Bath watercolour was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1799. Charles Pierrepont had begun to negotiate a *quid pro quo* with Bath corporation in 1796, offering an exchange of properties to improve the roads around the Pump Room in the vain hope of persuading the councillors to approve his projects for the Ham.<sup>7</sup> It is reasonable, therefore, to date Repton's involvement between 1796 and 1799. These were just the years, beginning in 1796 at Corsham, of his most harmonious relations with Nash when they were in partnership. It is likely that the naive, but infinitely scenic, colonnade of the watercolour marks a first step towards the romantic stage scenery of the Regent's Park terraces. The opening of the forum to the river Avon and to the hills beyond would be Repton's contribution to the composition but another foreshadowing of Regent's Park.

Nash's most obvious inspiration, if he was indeed the inspiration behind Repton's design, has to be the Royal Crescent. It would have been typical of the man who later designed Cumberland and Carlton House Terraces to react with an imaginative impatience to the younger Wood's attached Ionic columns, shake them loose and then project them a few yards into a supremely disfunctional but grandiose rain shelter. 'Imperial' is the only word to apply to such a superb folly and there is an absolute spiritual gap between this design and the only other possible near-contemporary inspiration: a terrace illustrated in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for September 1786 and drawn by George Dance junior for a Mr James Hedges who was hoping to build in St George's Fields, Southwark.

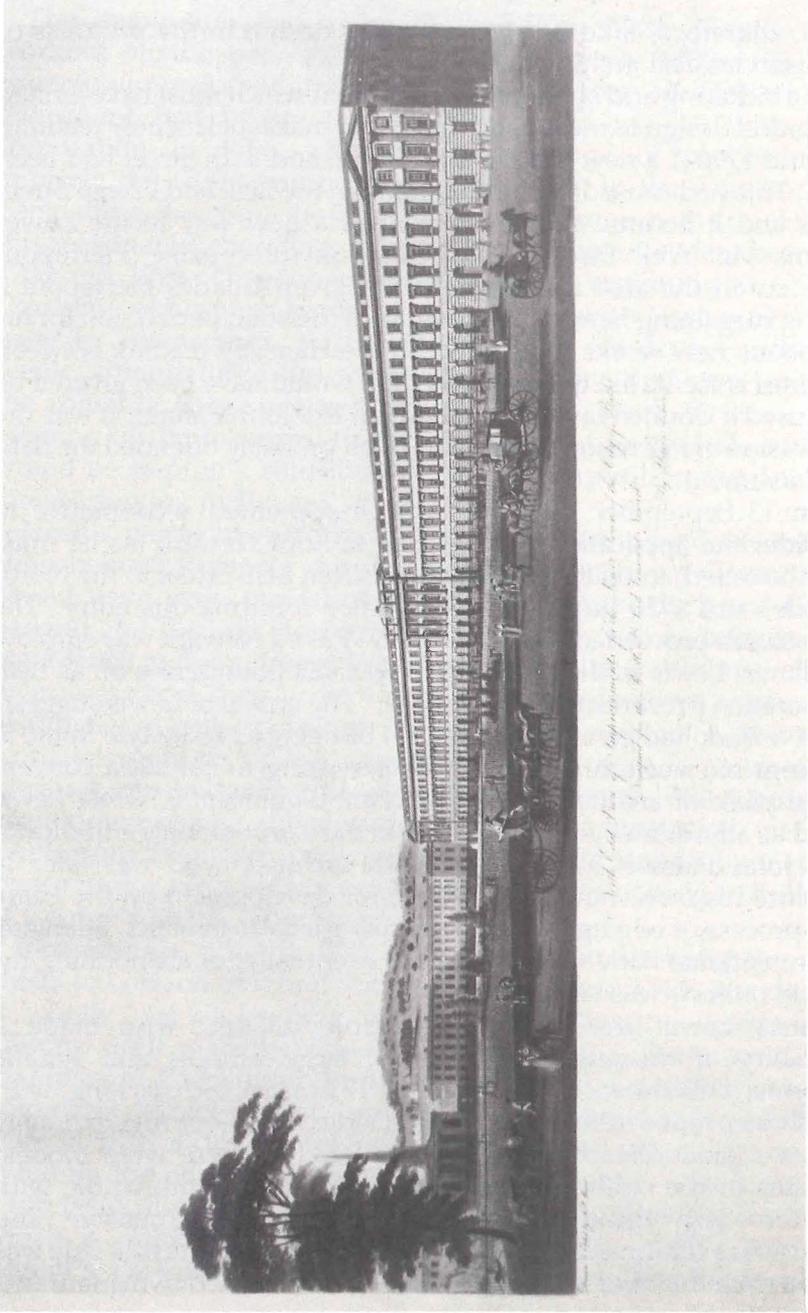
Interestingly, though Bath was once again showing the way ahead to London as it had done in the 1730s and 1740s, the design is wholly out of keeping with the way classical design was refining itself in Bath between 1790 and 1820. There are a few examples in Paddington and Bayswater of the infinitely refined volumetric terraces which John Pinch was to build at New Sidney Place in 1808 and Sion Hill Place (1818–20), but generally London opted for the palatial swagger of which the Repton watercolour is a foretaste. Even supposing that it was painted as late as 1799, which is unlikely, its great crescent predates Nash's work at Regent's Park by a remarkable twenty years. The watercolour

must, therefore, take its place as a key design in the progress of English classical architecture.

The bickering and bureaucratic argument which must have limited this grand design to mere paint and paper make melancholy reading. Around 1790–1 a new Great Pump Room and Bath Street had been built. This had caused much rebuilding in the Stall and Cheap Street areas and it became expedient to drive a new way to the Lower Rooms via York Street. That would involve some Pierrepont property in the area and should have given Charles Pierrepont a strong bargaining hand with the Council to obtain permission for his ambitious new works to proceed on the Ham. By reading between the lines it seems likely that permission would have been given if he had used a Council-favoured Bathonian like John Palmer. It was the succession of Pierrepont outsiders which probably offended the Bath establishment.

On 13 September 1796 the Council appointed a committee to consider the application of the agent of Lord Newark (as he must now be called) to build a carriage road from Stall Street to the North Parade, and a 26 June 1798 conveyance confirms this entry. The negotiation proceeded badly and by 1799 Lord Newark was employing James Lewis in the deal, which was still floundering on as Bath corporation prevaricated and cavilled.<sup>8</sup> The arrival of Lewis suggests that Newark had given up the idea of bringing a Nash-style Rome to these green western hills and was preparing to submit a conventional piece of architectural gigantism. Significantly, while Lewis acted as adjudicator for Lord Newark, the Corporation's adjudicator was John Palmer, a successful Bath architect who was later to produce his own, now lost, scheme for development on the Ham. The process of edging Newark into using a Bath architect, following a conventional Bath street plan and, eventually, of abandoning the whole project, was well under way.

James Lewis was a minor London architect who made a speciality of designing institutions: large schools and lunatic asylums. This shows in the terrace of 17 houses, 59 bays long, with which he proposed to front the west side of the square. Obviously it was a practical scheme for all its length. There were modest features in the centre and at each end to justify the whole with pilasters and three-quarter columns but no expensive and shadowing colonnades and porticoes. Once again the east side was left open to the river. Houses of a lower rate formed two quadrants

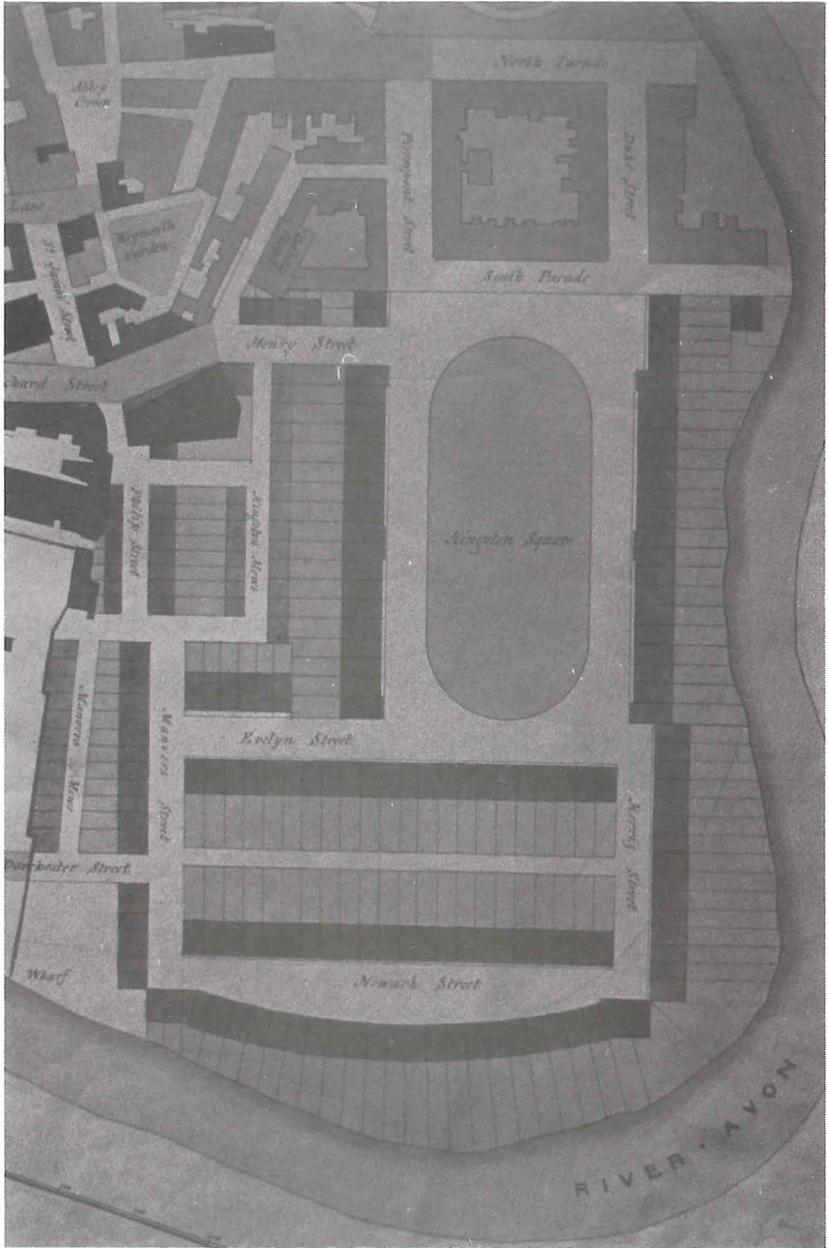


4 James Lewis' design for the Ham. (Courtesy of Hugh Matheson Esq.)

to the south and Wood's proprietary chapel from the 1739 scheme made a reappearance with a portico and an elegant spire to provide some vertical foil to the almost infinite horizontals.

Lewis's handling of the negotiations with the Council over compensation for the demolition of Pierrepont property needed to effect the York Street scheme must have been as clumsy as his proposals for the Ham. The Council backed out of the discussion and refused firmly to pay Lord Newark the ten guineas which he was claiming as a moiety of the twenty guineas which had been paid to the adjudicators. After James Lewis had been eased out Lord Newark decided to try again: clear proof that his intentions were serious. After conversations with John Palmer, the Pierrepont agent in Bath, Mr Boord renewed the proposed exchanges and demolition proposals. This time Newark, who had learnt little about the Bath mafia, sent in another outsider, William Wilkins senior, a Norwich architect, probably recommended to him by Repton. Following nine days of talks, agreement was made 3 March 1802 to demolish the late William Cottle's house and part of the Three Tuns inn. The way was now open to create York Street and now Lord Newark hoped to have his developments on the Ham approved, so the third scheme was put forward, this time from William Wilkins. Only a plan survives to show what Wilkins hoped to build, that and a perturbed letter as innocent Norwich tangled with devious Bath.

The Wilkins plan proposed 175 houses to be packed tightly together in seven new streets around a much reduced central Kingston Square. All the riverside houses presented their backs to the river. It was a pedestrian scheme in the melancholy downward sequence from the exhilarating Repton watercolour through Lewis's cheaper but manic elevations. Lord Newark was trying to read the mind of Bath council but his attempt was vain. What he should have responded to before ever Wilkins was sent to Bath was another move described in the bound volume at Thoresby *Bath Records from 1801*: 'Plans which Mr Palmer had made were sent to his Lordship with proposals for again renewing the treaty'. This was the clearest hint from Bath that matters would go easily if Lord Newark employed a Bath architect. Presumably the drab Wilkins plan was scaled down to follow the lost Palmer plan but Newark had missed the point. He had not taken up the Palmer offer but used his own man. In a letter dated



5 William Wilkins' plan for 175 houses around a central Kingston Square on the Ham. (Courtesy of Hugh Matheson Esq.)

29 January 1805 a bewildered Wilkins reveals that he has finally understood the complexity of the situation: 'I never yet have seen either Palmer's or Mr Lewis's plans for Bath – indeed I did not even know they had made any – nor have any of Mr Lewis's other papers been in my possession'. If that was the truth Newark, Palmer and the entire Bath establishment had been playing a remarkably secretive game.

Finally realising the hopelessness of the situation Newark, exalted now to be Earl Manvers, put out feelers to make a new Pump Room and baths. The Council stalled for time and on 5 September 1808 asked lawyers for an opinion. On 21 September 1808 the city's seal was at last affixed to the Manvers-Corporation exchange deal. Bath had its York Street. Manvers had nothing; understandably he lost interest.

An opportunity had passed, not for the first time in Bath's long architectural saga. A railway station, a Catholic church, an underground car park and an unrelated assortment of commercial buildings now cover the Ham. Behind them, unkempt and neglected, clipped within steep embankments, the Avon flows, a still unrealised asset.

## Notes

- 1 J. Ashley, *Murdock Delany's Description of Bath* (Bath, 1794), p. 4.
- 2 *Dictionary of National Biography*
- 3 Lincolnshire Archives Office, Monson MSS XLIII, f.21. This plan and Wood's other schemes for the site are discussed in Tim Mowl and Brian Earnshaw, *John Wood: Architect of Obsession* (Bath, 1988).
- 4 The documents are in a volume entitled: *Bath Records from 1801*; the title page reads: 'A Register of Proceedings and Other Memorandums Respecting the Estates At Bath Belonging to the Right Honorable Charles Meadows Pierrepont Lord Viscount Newark of Thoresby Park in the County of Nottingham 1801'.
- 5 It was exhibited at the R.A. in 1787 and the original is now in the Mellon Collection. Provenance: Josephine, Countess of Annesley (via her husband George Seymour Repton); Christie's, 21 November 1978 (51). For this and the following information on Repton's connections with Bath and the surrounding houses I am indebted to Nigel Temple.
- 6 Humphry Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening including some remarks on Grecian and Gothic Architecture* (London, 1805), pp. 205, 196.
- 7 Bath Record Office, Bath Corporation Minute Books, 15 Sept 1796.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 10 July 1799.