

The Crescent as it Might Have Been

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In April 2008, the exhibition 'Bath As It Might Have Been' opened at the Victoria Art Gallery. This showcased prints, plans and watercolours from the Council's collections, illustrating architects' and planners' unrealised ideas for improving Bath, from the mid-eighteenth to the late-twentieth centuries. The exhibition covered a wide range of proposals, from an early nineteenth-century design for a monument the size of Nelson's Column in Laura Place, and one from the 1890s for roofing over the newly-discovered Great Bath, to the infamous 1965 Buchanan Plan, which promised to end traffic congestion in Bath, by sending cars through a tunnel underneath the city centre. Each of the exhibits in 'Bath As It Might Have Been' has a story to tell about the aspirations of its era, the ambitions of Bath architects, and what people in the past felt was needed to turn Bath into a better, more prosperous and beautiful city. This article focuses on just a few of the pieces included in the exhibition: Those that relate to one of Bath's most famous and best loved landmarks, the Royal Crescent.

The story of the Royal Crescent has been so thoroughly and so often covered elsewhere that all that is needed here are the most basic facts. Constructed between 1767 and 1775, the Crescent was designed by John Wood the Younger. It may well, however, have been loosely based on the ideas of John Wood the Elder, given the hint of paganism suggested by its moon-inspired name and, as with the approach the elder Wood developed from Queen Square onwards, the treatment of a terrace of houses as a grand, palatial unit. As with Wood the Elder's landmark constructions, the Royal Crescent was conceived very much as a whole, and it was vital to the architect that the appearance of structural unity was not to be interfered with. Even though the individual houses were constructed by different builders, strict adherence to Wood's conception was enforced through sub-clauses in the lease for each plot, committing them to execute the elevation strictly to Wood's design. Furthermore the sub-clauses stipulated that, once finished, the façades 'shall not...at any time or times afterwards be ever altered or varied'. It was clear that John Wood the Younger wanted the Royal Crescent to survive intact far into the future.

Facing: Detail of proposed improvements to the Royal Crescent, c.1850.

Fountains, railings and balustrade were proposed by the Victorians to enhance the landscape in front of the Crescent.

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Of the proposals to be looked at here, only one comes close to entirely disregarding Wood's wishes, in threatening radical changes to the Royal Crescent. This scheme is vividly illustrated in one of the most striking exhibits in 'Bath As It Might Have Been', a watercolour from 1945, illustrating an audacious proposal to turn the Crescent into a new Civic Centre for Bath. This was just a small part of a large much larger, citywide scheme, the *Plan for Bath*.¹ Commissioned by Bath City Council, the Plan sought to provide a framework for the redevelopment and modernisation of Bath in the post-World War II period. Its stated aim was 'rejuvenation with a firm hand' for areas devastated by the Bath Blitz. The city centre was to be redesigned on a more rational, 'zoned' basis, with, for example, separate areas for shopping, 'health', business and light industry. This scheme was masterminded by Patrick Abercrombie, a planner of national standing, brought in as a consultant, but the details were filled in by two Bath City Council employees, Town Planning Officer Henry Anthony Mealand, and City Engineer John Owens. The planner of choice during the 1940s, Abercrombie undertook projects to piece back together various war-torn towns including Plymouth, Hull and Bournemouth. He knew Bath well, having been involved in planning for the city since 1928, and seems to have been a figure who cut quite a dash: *The Bath Chronicle and Herald* memorably described him as 'slim and vivid' and 'a cross between Sir Christopher Wren and Walt Disney'.²

The *Plan for Bath* laid claim to the ambition to restore and protect Bath's important buildings by creating a traffic-free city centre, but this was to be achieved at a price, higher than just the redevelopment and change of use of existing buildings: Whole streets of Georgian buildings were to be demolished to make way for modern developments such as shopping precincts, a new Bath College and a much enlarged Mineral Water Hospital. True to the spirit of the *Plan for Bath*, its proposal for the Royal Crescent was radical. The central sixteen houses were to be converted into a new civic centre for Bath; they were in effect to become one single property, with a large new block added on behind to accommodate a suitably imposing Council chamber. [fig.1] It was noted that the Guildhall was too small to house all of the necessary Council departments (and also that music from the Parade Gardens bandstand was distracting Council staff from their duties!) Abercrombie, Mealand and Owens may have privately felt that redeveloping the Royal Crescent was the ideal way to make a big and very public statement of their radical vision for Bath, but publicly, they



fig 1: The proposed new Council Chamber and Committee Rooms at the rear of the Royal Crescent, 1945. The proposed east-west route through Bath passes past the spire-less St Andrew's Church and the forecourt to this unlikely development.

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were careful to provide detailed justification for the proposal on architectural and well as practical grounds, with the published Plan proclaiming:

‘The dilapidated Mews which fringe the site do injustice to this finest creation of Wood. The sweeping away of these would provide a site for a Council Chamber and ancillary rooms as an annexe linked with the Crescent [and] set within spacious gardens ... The existing elevations would remain and the unbalanced and unsightly appendages which have been added could be replaced by properly grouped and positioned sanitary annexes. At the same time the main cornices, lines and fenestration of the rear elevation could be restored in such a manner as to harmonise with the buildings

comprising the new Council Chamber.for the convenience of ratepayers a single office, representative of every Corporation department, would be established; at this office enquiries or complaints could be made, rates and other accounts paid, and attached to it there would be an Information Bureau where enquiries could be made as to road, rail or air travel, also spa and other activities of the City. The transfer of civic administration to the Crescent could be very conveniently accomplished, and the development of this great Crescent as a Centre of Local Government would create one of the finest civic centres in the country. It would be a bold scheme calling for wisdom and great courage.'³ [fig 2].

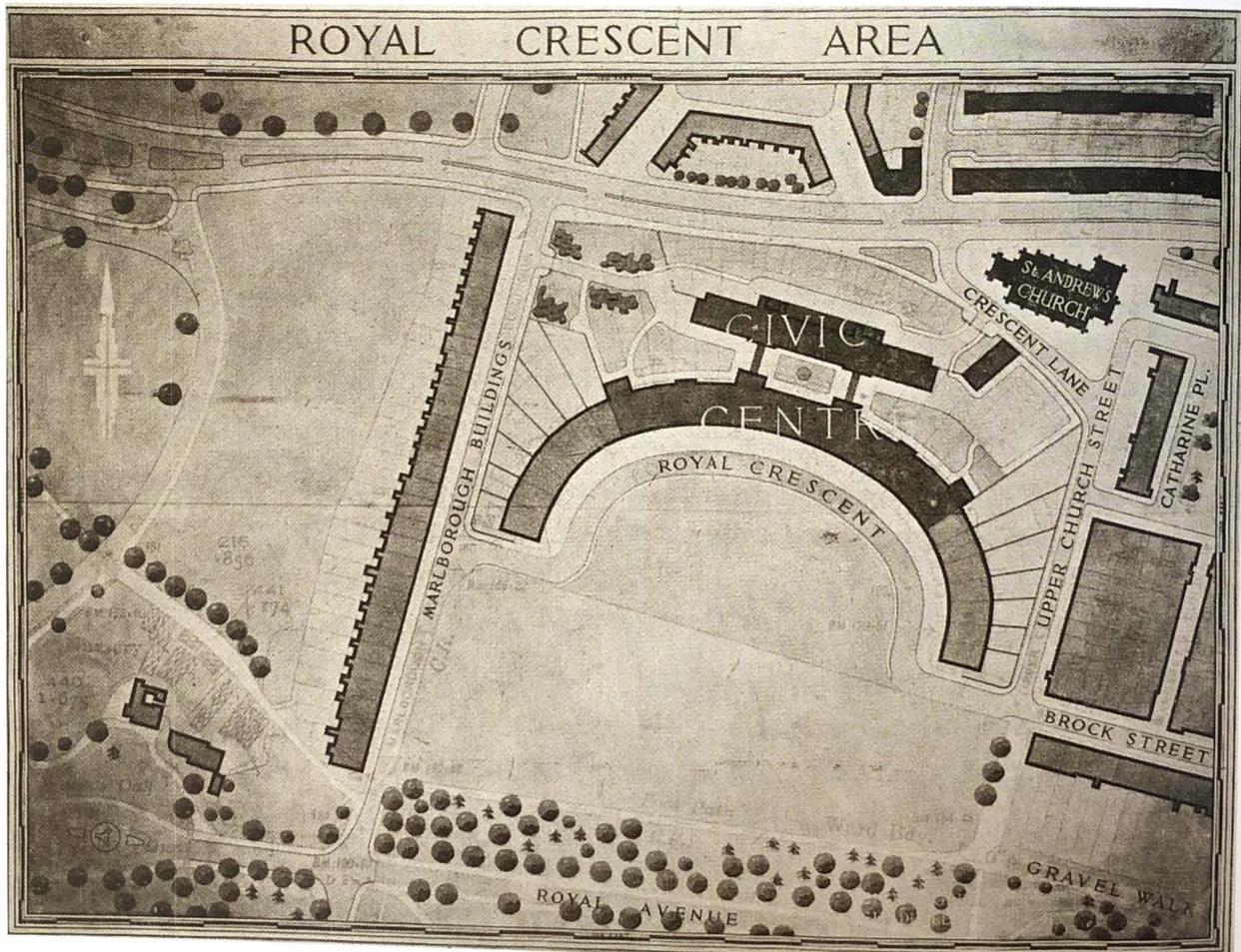


fig 2: Plan of the Royal Crescent area from A Plan for Bath, 1945.
The highlighted area in the centre shows the proposed centre of Civic Administration.
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The *Plan for Bath* was, on the whole, enthusiastically received. At first, little was made of the proposal for the Crescent, and it seemed that people barely noticed it amongst the excitement over the Plan as a whole. The promise of a city with every modern facility, an excellent road system and all traces of bomb damage removed had great appeal to the war-weary people of Bath. A public relations exercise, seeking both to publicise the proposals and test reactions to the Plan, was carried out through an exhibition at the Victoria Art Gallery during February 1945. [fig. 3]. Artists' impressions of the proposed new roads and buildings were put on display, together with a huge wooden model of the



fig 3: The opening of the exhibition for A Plan for Bath, Feb. 1945. The Minister of Town and Country Planning, the Right Hon. W. S. Morrison, M.P. M.C, opens the exhibition at the Victoria Art Gallery.
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redeveloped city centre. The exhibition brochure made the *Plan for Bath's* attitude to historic buildings explicit, proclaiming: 'Preservation without economic usefulness would be prohibitive in cost and would make Bath a museum. Fortunately most of the Georgian buildings can be adapted to modern uses justifying preservation and restoration.'⁴ Unsurprisingly, the exhibition generated enormous public interest, with up to two thousand people a day crowding in to view the proposals (in an era when the Gallery's normal daily attendance rarely exceeded two hundred). For the duration of the exhibition the pages of *The Bath Chronicle and Herald* were full of articles about the Plan. Most were tinged with admiration for Abercrombie's daring and visionary proposals, almost as if the local press was wary of seeming to throw cold water on Bath's glittering future. The paper's letters pages, too, were dominated by enthusiastic comment on the Plan, with only the occasional voice objecting to the proposals for the Royal Crescent. An A. Collins of Newbridge Road fumed: 'That part of the plan dealing

with the Royal Crescent is outrageous... to turn it into municipal offices so that the officials can entertain their friends and relations in lordly surroundings is unthinkable... it is up to the citizens of Bath to prevent squandering and an orgy of vandalism.'⁵ However, it seems that the Plan's projected huge expense and complexity of implementation, far above any belief that the integrity of historic buildings should be respected, became its downfall. Councillor Huntley, writing in *The Bath Chronicle and Herald*, claimed that: 'The Bath public has, for the last three weeks, been gazing into the future, hypnotised by this beautiful bubble. They see it, an airy-fairy bubble floating over their heads, and they are inclined to forget the more matter-of-fact business of rates and taxes.'⁶ Once the *Plan for Bath* exhibition had closed and the associated excitement began to subside, councillors began a detailed examination of the proposals. In October 1945, Bath City Council formally adopted a reduced version of the *Plan for Bath*. Fortunately, the conversion of the Royal Crescent into a civic centre was one of the first parts of the scheme to be decisively rejected by local politicians.

The *Plan for Bath* proposed radical changes not just to the Royal Crescent itself, but also to the roads around it. The A4 was to be rerouted as a dual carriageway running just behind the Royal Crescent, along Julian Road. Patrick Abercrombie always gave the creation of a modern, coherent road system the highest priority in his town plans; in Bath, with its Georgian streets and hilly surrounding area, this was a particular challenge. Abercrombie felt that rerouting Bath's main east-west road behind the Crescent had several advantages: it offered a way to bypass the city centre, freeing it from heavy traffic; also it was one of very few possible ways to turn the A4 into a wide, modern road capable of coping with projected increases in traffic levels. Furthermore, as more people (and thus traffic) would need to travel to the Royal Crescent in its new capacity as the civic centre, this enlarged road would ease access. As with the proposal for the Crescent itself, a considerable price was to be paid for these 'improvements': Many of the Georgian houses along the route were to be demolished in order to free up sufficient space to widen Julian Road into a dual carriageway. [fig. 4]. Lansdown Road would have undergone major changes, with a tunnel dug underneath it to connect Julian Road with the London Road. The civil engineering work needed to achieve this would have been enormous and expensive, and so it is hardly surprising that Abercrombie's plans for Julian Road did not go ahead.

Other exhibits from *Bath As It Might Have Been* looked at proposals to alter

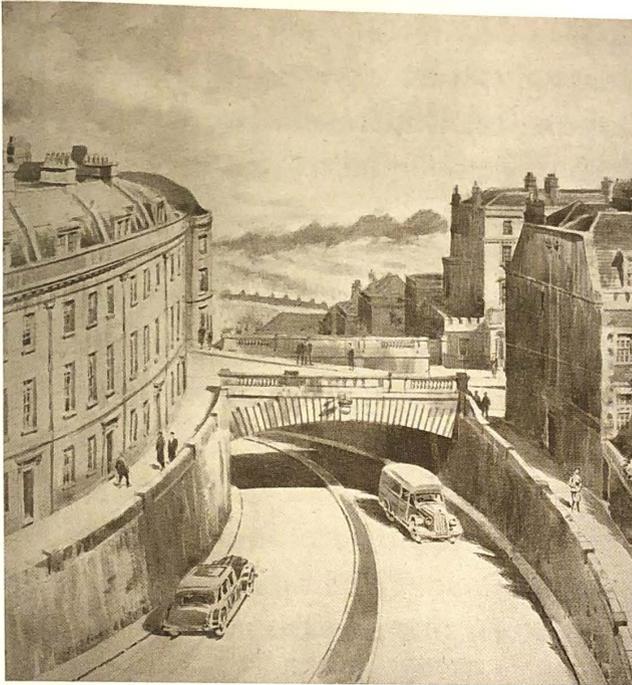


fig 4: The Proposed East-West Route (Julian Road) passing under Lansdown Road, 1945. Included in Abercrombie's *A Plan for Bath*, this radical solution was a bold attempt to solve Bath's growing traffic congestion.

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the Royal Crescent's surroundings. An engraving from 1810 illustrates a scheme to improve the view from the Crescent, perhaps indicating that residents at that time felt that the area could do with some smartening-up. At this time, Crescent Fields stretched all the way down to the (Upper) Bristol Road. As the name suggests, the area was pasture, rather than the formal park that we have now. Due to legal restrictions, there had been no development on the northern side of the Bristol Road, but the southern side was lined with a higgledy-piggledy mixture of mostly utilitarian buildings in a variety of styles. It was most unlike the smart, uniform terraces that had become characteristic of Bath. This print illustrates a proposal to build a new terrace along the northern side of the Bristol Road, in the area now occupied by Crescent Gardens. The rationale offered for this was not to provide housing or make money for developers, but instead to 'improve' the view from the Crescent by hiding the existing buildings on the southern side of the road. The print illustrates the improvements most imaginatively, with a strip of paper fastened down on one side that can be put down and then folded back to cunningly reveal the 'before' and 'after' effects of the new development. Text above the moveable strip reads:

'These two sketches are intended to shew: First the view from the Crescent as it now appears, with the existing irregular old buildings and secondly to shew that if a line of handsome

buildings were erected as proposed they would hide nothing from the Crescent but the present ugly and irregular buildings and not impede the view from thence of all the interesting part of the Landscape which would be seen over them.' [fig. 5]

The strip shows an extremely long and almost featureless terrace of identical townhouses. Unfortunately, the print does not include the normal details of authorship or even of the publisher and thus gives no indication as to who was behind this plan. The repetitious and dull quality of the proposed buildings suggests that this individual was not an architect. As the development did not go ahead, one wonders if the print backfired on the scheme, as it simply showed how dull the view would become if a line of plain townhouses were to be built along the Bristol Road. The unimaginative design of the planned development was not the only obstacle that prevented this proposal going ahead: The land belonged to Lady Rivers, who was not behind the proposal and presumably had little or no enthusiasm for it. Furthermore, legal restrictions had been placed on the Crescent Fields, stipulating that the



fig 5: Plan of Proposed Improvements on the lower part of the Crescent Fields in front of The Royal Crescent, 1810. Shown together, the top image displays the current view, the overlaid lower image the proposed improvements in the same setting.
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land had to be used for pasture. The area was absolutely not available for building on, however much the Crescent's residents may have wished for a better view. The obstacles to this scheme were thus considerable, and it took almost a century for them to be overcome and the area to be developed.

Another proposal to enhance the view from the Royal Crescent is illustrated in a mid-nineteenth century lithograph by local artist, Charles James Maggs. This is a very typically Victorian plan to adorn the grass in front of the Crescent with fountains, flowerbeds and railings. [fig. 6]. Victoria Park had opened in 1830, and this proposal was probably an attempt to bring the two parts of the park together by transforming Crescent Fields from rough, raw pastureland into a proper, formally laid-out park. The Crescent's iron railings were to be replaced by an elaborate stone balustrade. Two huge fountains were to be built, with wide basins held up by unusually large putti and water shooting so high into the air that the print shows it partially obscuring the view of the Crescent. The ha-ha, built in the 1770s to keep the livestock that grazed on Crescent Fields a comfortable distance from the houses, was to be hidden by a hedge, except for in the centre, where steps were to carry a broad path all the way from Royal Avenue

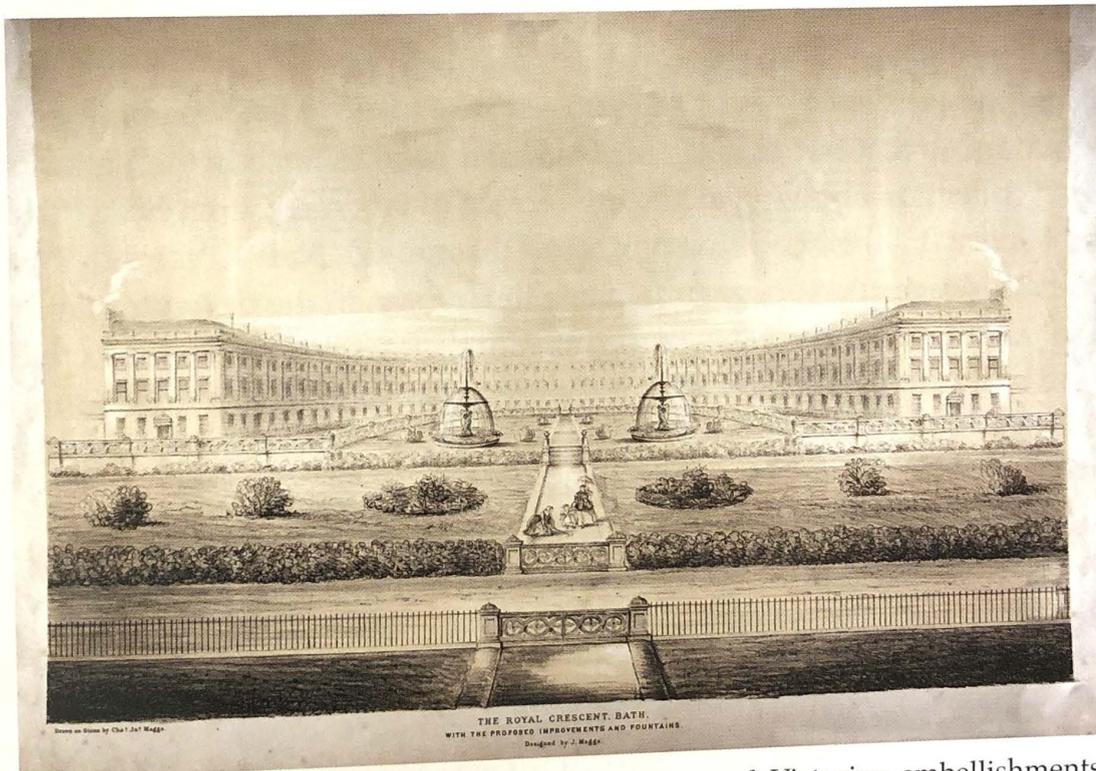


fig 6: The Royal Crescent c.1850. With the proposed Victorian embellishments. Designed by J. Maggs and drawn on stone by Chs. J. Maggs.
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to the area immediately in front of the Crescent. Expanses of lawn were to be punctuated at regular intervals by flowerbeds and shrubs. The simplicity of the grassy space in front of the Royal Crescent was to be replaced with a park full of eye-catching features. With typical Victorian confidence the print was titled 'The Royal Crescent with the Proposed Improvements and Fountains', as if there was no possibility that the alterations could have been inappropriate.

The print gives no clue that the two fountains proposed for the Crescent lawn were just a small element in a much larger scheme for fountains across Bath. This remarkable plan has been examined in detail elsewhere.⁷ Briefly, a network of fountains were proposed, stretching from St James's Square via the Royal Crescent, the Circus and Queen Square, and finishing in Laura Place. The fountains were to be connected together and fed with their own water supply, independent of the one that fed Bath's homes and businesses. It was envisaged that the water could be sourced from springs in Lansdown and would then run from one fountain to the next in sequence, with gravity keeping the supply running and the fountains playing. Unsurprisingly, the water supply was not up to the task. The scheme was thus scaled down to a single fountain in Laura Place. Once again, it was not the questioning of architectural taste and appropriateness that put paid to a scheme to alter the Royal Crescent, but practical matters instead.

Perhaps the most intriguing image of a different Royal Crescent is one that, sadly, we know the least about. This is a small pencil sketch in the Victoria Art Gallery's collection showing a curving terrace of Georgian townhouses. It is inscribed (clearly by the hand that produced the image) 'New Crescent'. The shape of the buildings and topography mark the houses in the drawing out as the Royal Crescent, but there was one significant difference - the house in the centre of the building is adorned with a classical portico. **[fig. 7]**. True to the conventions of Palladian architecture, the portico in this sketch emphasises the symmetry of the Crescent, and is the type of adornment that a structure of this kind would be likely to have. This little sketch reminds us how odd it is that the central house in the Royal Crescent, as built, is understated as a centrepiece, plain and almost undifferentiated from its fellows. This rather mysterious drawing has traditionally been ascribed to John Wood the Younger, but unfortunately there is no actual evidence to back up this attribution. The sketch was donated to the Gallery in 1923, part of a large bequest of local material from the Bath collector, A.W. Page. He believed the drawing to be by Wood, and in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, the attribution has stuck,

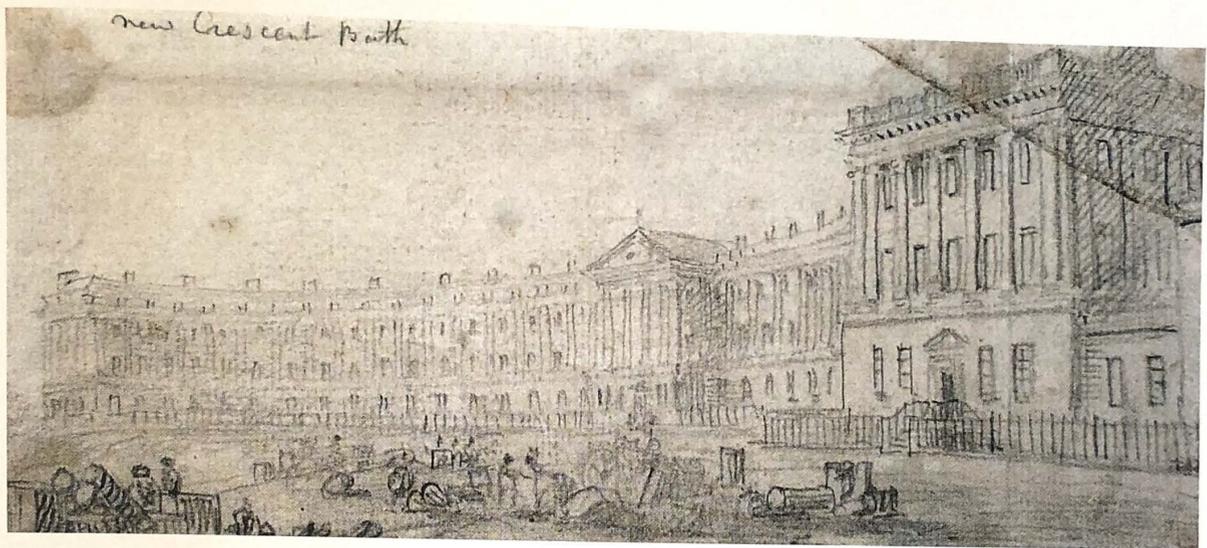


fig 7: Pencil sketch of the 'New Crescent' with alternative central feature.

Traditionally attributed to John Wood the Younger, the central part of the Crescent includes a classical portico.

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albeit tentatively. There is no knowing whether this really is a rare sketch by Wood the Younger. If it were, this would be a most remarkable find. However, putting the question of attribution aside, it shows a design that clearly works well and follows the conventions of Palladian architecture. It would be odd indeed if Wood had not considered putting a portico like the one shown on this sketch at the central part of his crescent. This mysterious little drawing serves as a reminder that this iconic Bath landmark could well have looked very different – even without the subsequent ham-fisted attempts to adapt and 'improve' the Royal Crescent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Notes

1. See Robin Lambert, 'Patrick Abercrombie and Planning in Bath', *Bath History* vol.VIII for fuller details of the Plan for Bath and Abercrombie's work for the city.
2. *The Bath Chronicle and Herald*, February 1st 1945, p.4.
3. P.Abercrombie, J.Owens and H.A.Mealand, *A Plan for Bath* (Bath, 1945), pp.55-56.
4. *A Plan for Bath* exhibition brochure, Bath City Council, 1945
5. *The Bath Chronicle and Herald*, February 13th 1945.
6. *The Bath Chronicle and Herald*, February 24th 1945.
7. M.Chapman, 'Bath and the Ornamental Public Fountain', *The Survey of Bath and District* No.22 (2007), pp.45-53.