



# The Royal Crescent Ha-ha

Stephen Little

What is a ha-ha, and why is it so called?

It is a construction comprising a stone wall and ditch designed to create a boundary which does not interrupt the view, and is more usually to be found in settings such as rural parkland to control the movements of livestock. This design originated in France in the early 18th century and the idea of such an invisible boundary spread to England later that century. The etymology of the word, which came from the French name and was also known as a hawhaw, is the subject of several theories: it may originate from the expression of surprise, ha! ha!, that one might make on suddenly coming across such an obstacle; another theory is that it is a contraction of half-ditch and half-wall.

The Royal Crescent ha-ha is said to be the longest urban ha-ha, at around 150 metres. It is not known whether it was created, as appears probable, around the same time as the houses were completed in 1775, because early drawings offer conflicting evidence, but it seems certain that it is at least 200 years old.

In the intervening years, both the ditch and the wall of the ha-ha suffered from the effects of time, with the ditch getting shallower and stones being damaged, loosened or even removed altogether. By the 1990s, it was clear that major repairs were required. In preparation, a survey was undertaken by Wessex Archaeology to establish the original profile of the ha-ha. This revealed that there was more of the wall hidden than visible, and that the ditch had been partly infilled, both deliberately and naturally, without ever having been cleaned out. This may have been because of frequent flooding of the ditch, which, having a base of clay, would not have drained well.

Fragments of glass and pottery showed that this infilling started to happen over 200 years previously. It was also discovered that the wall was built without foundations, but directly on the clay bed. Some traces of lime mortar were found in the lower courses of the wall, but dry-stone construction was used for the majority of the wall, with no mortar to impede drainage of water from the lawn. The wall was a facing for the stable clay behind it rather than a revetment holding back a large volume of soil, except at either end where it was higher and required some mortar to strengthen it where it adjoins the road.




Now you see it.....  
Royal Crescent ha-ha from the south



.....Now you don't  
Royal Crescent ha-ha from the north





The discovery of a single course of stone and brick fragments, about a foot wide and three and a half feet south of the wall, still within the ditch and parallel to the wall, was an unexplained mystery. Dating from about a hundred years after the original wall, it may have indicated that some form of structure had been built against the ha-ha, but its form and purpose can only be guessed at.

Records now in Bath City Archives show that in the 1800s, various repairs were carried out, culminating in 1897 when 68 stones were replaced, parts of the wall were rebuilt, some repointing was done, the ditch was cleared out, and the sloping bank levelled. This cost £22 16s 0d (£22.80), which the residents at the time might have considered a lot, but the work now required was obviously going to cost much, much more!

Although the ditch is on public land, having been part of Royal Victoria Park since 1830, the wall is part of the Royal Crescent Lawn, which is the responsibility of the residents. It was they who initiated the restoration project, and fund raising for it, and with a considerable contribution from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and the support of English Heritage (now Historic England) and Bath Preservation Trust, work was able start early in the next decade. With the contribution of much time, advice and expertise from Council officers as part of their overall management of the Royal Victoria Park enhancement scheme, the project was finally completed in 2007.

The ha-ha could then at last be seen almost as originally designed. Recent growth of vegetation, unchecked in the unusual circumstances of 2020, has partially obscured the profile of the ditch, but it is hoped that it will not be long before that is rectified.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Little is a retired racecourse bookmaker who has lived in Bath for over 40 years, and has been involved with the immediate area of the Royal Crescent, including the regularisation of the ownership of the Lawn and its boundaries, for over 25 years.

