



The Royal Crescent Lawn

Stephen Little

Were John Wood the Younger to come back and view his best-known creation, Bath's Royal Crescent, he would surely be gratified by what he saw. Gone are the mews and carriage houses at the back; street lights have sprouted up on the pavement; where horses and carriages would pass to and fro he would be baffled by the sight of horseless carriages. But his concept of a one-sided crescent overlooking a rural outlook remains as it was when the Royal Crescent was completed in 1775.


On 20th December 1766 he had bought a tract of land from Sir Benet Garrard. The sale included a covenant ensuring that no buildings of any kind, nor plants, shrubs or trees of any kind were built or planted on the Lawn. John Wood subsequently sold 30 plots to individual potential residents and builders who constructed houses behind the uniform façade specified by John Wood to their own varying designs.

Original deeds to each of the 30 houses in the Royal Crescent contained a clause granting the owners and their successors "the free use of the whole area or space of void ground called or intended to be called the Royal Crescent in Common with other the owners and occupiers for the time being of the Houses building and to be built in the Royal Crescent". Another clause required that the owner and his successors "shall and will pay his and their proportional share in Common with other the owners and occupiers of Houses in the Royal Crescent of forming and bounding in with neat Iron Rails or pallisadoes the Grass plot intended to be in front of the said Crescent and of keeping the same in repair for ever afterwards". There was also a plan to include a system of water tanks under the Lawn to aid the supply of water to the houses, but that did not materialise. A ha-ha separates the Lawn from the field below, which did not become Royal Victoria Park until 1830.

The Lawn thus became a common front garden for all Royal Crescent residents. Records of the Royal Crescent Society, now lodged in the Bath Record Office in the Guildhall, show that, with varying degrees of efficiency, residents have maintained the Lawn, ha-ha and surrounding railings in accordance with their deeds since at least 1825.



Aerial view of the Royal Crescent Lawn
from the south-west



When the Royal Crescent Society was formed in 1974, partly prompted by the poor state of the Lawn at that time, it took over responsibility for the maintenance and collection of subscriptions to the Lawn fund.

Although it had always been clear that the onus of maintaining the Lawn and its borders fell to the residents, it had never been clear who owned the Lawn. Consequently in 2003 the Society applied to the Land Registry for title to the Lawn on the grounds of its long record of maintenance, and absolute title was granted to the Crescent Lawn Company which now holds the freehold on behalf of residents, who all pay an annual subscription entitling them to use the Lawn.


Residents recognise that the Lawn is far more than their front garden – it is an integral part of the landscape envisaged by John Wood. This has been acknowledged by writers since its creation, as evidenced by the following quotations:

“... a building shaped like a half-moon, and more magnificent than any I had seen in London. It is surrounded by an iron fence, and a terrace slopes down 50 fathoms in successive stages, through a beautiful expanse of green.”¹

“The pleasing impression which this building never fails to give the stranger by sudden grandeur of its appearance is even surpassed when he turns his eye to the enchanting prospect it commands”²

“... the Crescent, the very situation of which lends charm to its imposing effect. It appears to the spectator almost suddenly, with a broad sweep of lawn stretching in front of it, from end to end.”³

“... Royal Crescent is beyond question the summit of Palladian achievement in Bath, ... the full majesty of the Crescent, with its superb sweep of Ionic columns facing an open prospect, creates an overwhelming impression.”⁴



“... a large half-ellipse facing down a grassy slope, nowadays into the fine and varied trees of the Victoria Park, originally just into fields. ... the conception of an open composition was something new in town-planning, and something very English ... It was here applied for the first time to a terrace of houses, ...”⁵


“The Crescent has been fortunate in its ambiance. The fields have given way to a green sweep of grass and to Victoria Park, but there has not been the obtrusion of trees which has spoilt the vistas of Queen Square and the Circus.”⁶

“... its wide lawns running away beyond the ha-ha down the hill below, and all is suddenly space, and green, and leisure. [The Crescent] is like the grandest of all rows of seaside villas, standing on a promenade before a sea of grass.”⁷

“Wood’s Royal Crescent is carefully sited within the landscape and this is essential to the success of the building which rises from what is now a gently sloping lawn. ... Royal Crescent reflects the later fashionable ‘Brownian’ landscape of a country house rising from the turf of a parkland setting.”⁸

“... the old tag from Martial – rus in urbe – rings true ...”⁹

“... Royal Crescent theatrically embraces its elevated site, overlooking, like a vast stage set, the landscape beyond.”¹⁰



The Grade I listing of Royal Crescent in the 1950's extends to the Lawn, and the Lawn itself is included in English Heritage's Historic Parks & Gardens Register (ref: SMR 4284). The Lawn is alluded to in the nomination by UNESCO for World Heritage Site status, and its importance is recognised in the Council's World Heritage Site Management Plan.¹¹

Further information about Royal Crescent can be found on the websites noted below.¹²¹³

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.

Endnotes

- 1 Composer Joseph Haydn in 1794. Quoted by HC Robbins-Landon, Haydn in England, 1976
 - 2 The Original Bath Guide, 1811
 - 3 Mowbray Green, the 18th Century Architecture of Bath, 1904
 - 4 Walter Ison, The Georgian Buildings of Bath, 1948
 - 5 Nikolaus Pevsner, N. Somerset & Bristol, Buildings of England series, 1958
 - 6 Charles Robertson, Bath: an architectural Guide, 1975
 - 7 Jan Morris, Introduction to Bath: An Architectural Guide, by Charles Robertson, 1975
 - 8 Christopher Pound, Genius of Bath, 1986
 - 9 Apollo magazine, 1973, quoted by Peter Borsay, Image of Georgian Bath, 2000
 - 10 Michael Forsyth, Pevsner Architectural Guide to Bath, 2003
 - 11 World Heritage Site Management Plan, B&NES Council, 2003 *et seq*, www.bathnes.gov.uk
 - 12 www.royalcrescentbath.co.uk/HistoryRoyalCrescent.htm
 - 13 www.thercs.co.uk/a-history-of-the-royal-crescent
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