



THE STORY OF RALPH ALLEN'S ESTATE AT PRIOR PARK IN BATH¹

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One night in late October 1759, Ralph Allen's mansion at Prior Park, high above Bath on the hills to the south of the city, was ablaze with candles lit everywhere on the side of the house facing the town below to celebrate the British army's victory over the French at the battle of Quebec.² Allen, by this time, was famous, wealthy and solidly established in two very different businesses. Since 1712, he had steadily developed a complex network of cross-country postal routes across England so that no regional mail needed to travel any longer via London. By investing his profits from the postal business 'in the order of £12,000 per year' to buy up land for stone quarrying in and around Bath, he had achieved almost complete control of the Bath stone extraction industry. Well-known locally and nationally, he had gained a wide circle of well-known friends and acquaintances from the literary, political and artistic worlds.³ He had played a major role in establishing Bath as probably the most fashionable resort in the country after London.

A year earlier, Allen's purchase of nearby Claverton Manor with about 1,300 acres of land had substantially increased the size of his estate to its fullest extent of about 3,000 acres. To the west, Allen's land now stretched as far as the old Wells Road (now Upper Bloomfield Road), and to the south along the north side of Horsecombe Vale to the fringes of Monkton Combe village. To the north and east, at its furthest it extended to the banks of the Avon. By 1759, Prior Park estate stretched continuously but irregularly for about five miles from Bathampton village along the top of the hills to present-day Odd Down with magnificent views in all directions.⁴



Combe Down and the Stone Quarries


South of Bath, the almost level limestone plateau runs along the hills from west to east through Odd Down, Combe Down, Claverton and Bathampton Downs. Here, on Combe Down in the late 1720s, Ralph Allen took some of his earliest steps to develop his Prior Park estate. Attracted by another ideal business opportunity and the chance to help fulfil John Wood's dream of Bath renewed and rebuilt as a new Roman city, he began in 1726 to acquire the land he needed to quarry Combe Down's plentiful supply of oolitic limestone and transport it down to the Avon about 500 metres below. In action from about 1729, Allen's quarrying operations were almost entirely contained within an area south of Claverton Road (now North Road), east of present Greendown Place, west of the Long Drung and north of the rim of Horsecombe Vale. After 1730, these limits remained unchanged.

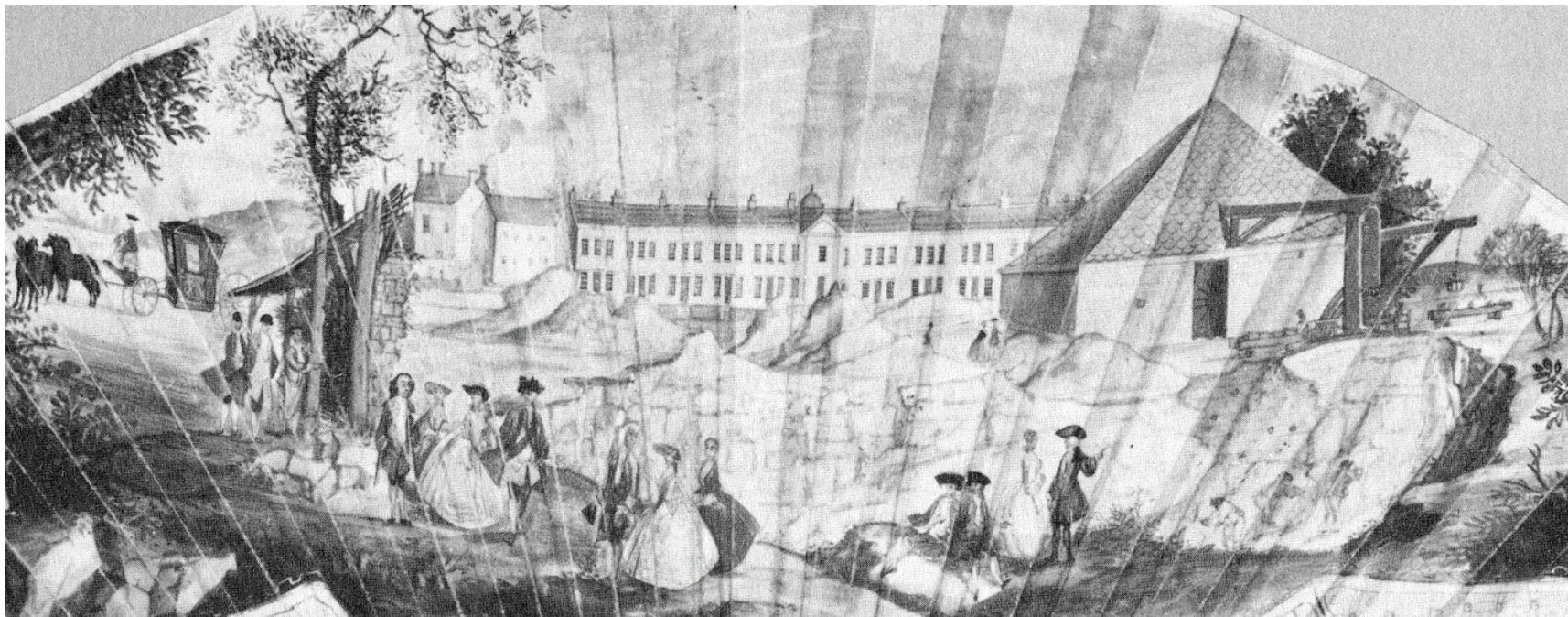
The entrance to each of Allen's underground quarries was at the bottom of a small basin sloping on one side and situated about ten metres below ground level. A crane, mounted at the top of the vertical cliff above the quarry entrance, hauled up the stone from the wagons at the quarry entrance below and transferred it to 'stone carriages.' A railway, based on the Tyneside colliery systems, transported the stone approximately two miles down the steep Widcombe valley to Allen's riverside wharf and stone-yard. From there, the stone was shipped across the river to building sites in Bath or downstream for use in Bristol, London and elsewhere. Gradually, Allen infilled and concealed the entire quarry area with fir trees and, in the 1750s, introduced surface quarrying along the southern edge. From the start, Allen dominated Bath's stone industry and transformed the organisation, equipment and management of the stone industry of his time.⁵

Prior Park and the Landscape Gardens

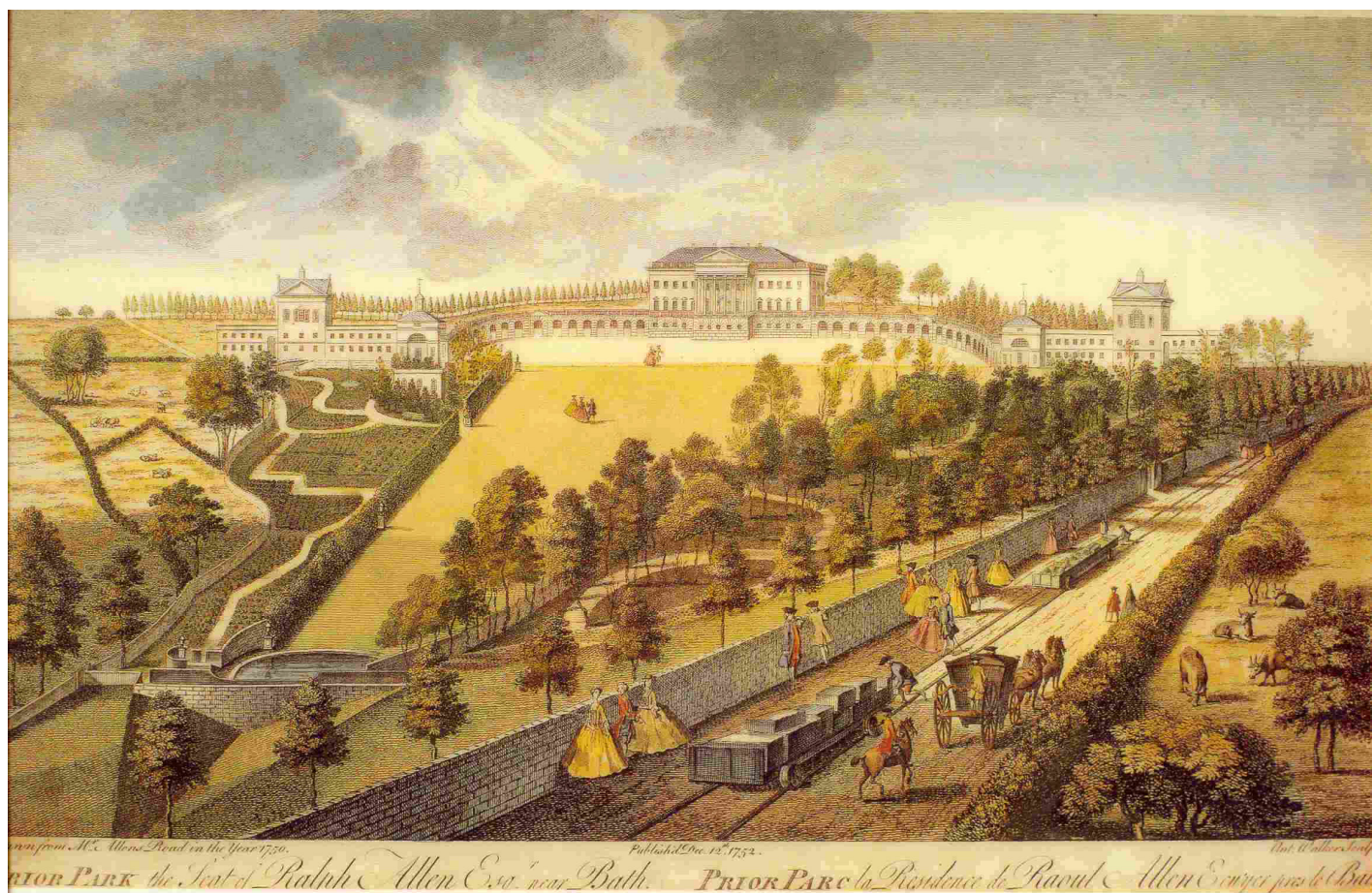
At the heart of the estate was Allen's magnificent Palladian mansion at Prior Park with its landscape gardens and grounds. During the eighteenth century, it eventually became 'the object of curiosity to all strangers who came to Bath'.⁶

Its development began in 1726 when Allen started to purchase a strip of land from the Poole estate formerly part of a medieval park, which stretched up the combe from Widcombe village to the Combe Down escarpment.⁷ A little later, in 1728, Allen and Wood, united in their concern for the future of Bath and the appeal of Combe Down oolite as building material, began to develop plans for a mansion which would be an integral part of the landscape and a showcase in which Bath stone was on display to its greatest advantage. Its construction, which began in 1734, was almost complete by 1741 when Allen and his wife took up residence there.⁸ At the crown of the valley, the house with its central colonnade, long curving wings and pavilions was 'a noble Seat which sees all Bath, and which was built, probably, for all Bath to see'.⁹





Fan image of a drawing made by Thomas Robins c.1757-9 of Ralph Allen's De Montalt quarry in Combe Down



Prior Park, the Seat of Ralph Allen Esq, near Bath, Anthony Walker, c.1750

In about 1733, Allen began to lay out the sloping gardens at the front of the mansion which ran down towards the city. A major influence on his planning in the early years was Alexander Pope, a well-known poet and landscaping consultant, for whom landscape gardening was a form of portrait painting and an active partnership with what he called 'the spirit of the place' (genius loci). Over the years, Allen added many fashionable garden ornaments, including a much-admired Palladian Bridge, a grotto, a cascade, a pinery, a Cabinet, a Gothic temple, a 'sham bridge' and various other features.¹⁰

In the 'laundes' or open pastures of a former Norman deer park immediately to the south east of the house, Allen reintroduced deer and laid out several avenues of native trees radiating out in straight lines from a central axis. He purchased a further section of the old deer park in 1743 when he bought an adjacent 50-acre strip of land with fishponds to the east of gardens. Later, in 1750, he acquired more adjoining land, this time from the Marchant estate. Here, there stood a large building in the Gothic style called 'The Lodge', a development, perhaps, from a lodge used in the medieval hunting park.¹¹

Bathampton and Claverton Downs

Towards the northerly end of the limestone plateau to the south of Bath lies Bathampton Down. It is the site of a large Iron Age enclosure, seven Bronze barrows and the remains of a Celtic field system. In Ralph Allen's time, a wall, built in 1718 to enclose a rabbit warren, divided the treeless, grassy uplands of Bathampton Down into two parts: Hampton Warren to the west and Hampton Down to the east.¹²


Claverton Down lies immediately to the south of it. In the 1700s, Claverton Down's southern part contained almost all the remains of a well wooded medieval deer park which John de Villula of Tours, the Norman bishop of Bath, had laid out in about 1091.

According to Chapman, the outlines of the original park remain in the form of Claverton Down Road in Combe Down to the south, Hanginglands Lane to the west, and Claverton Down Road in Bath to the east.¹³ Later, in 1233, the park was subdivided into the Bishop's Park to the east and the Prior's Park to the west.¹⁴ In the seventeenth century, areas of the Prior's Park were subdivided among different owners and enclosed, changes made possible by the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s.¹⁵



Outline of the bishop's park covering Claverton Down and Widcombe

Outline of the Bishop's Park covering Combe Down and Widcombe.
(M Chapman, 2008)



Ralph Allen extended his estate further by acquiring the manor of Bathampton from Charles Holder in 1743 and the manor of Claverton with about 1300 acres of land in 1758.¹⁶ Visible changes to the landscape were immediate. Allen created a large plantation of scots and spruce firs overlooking the city at the western end of Bathampton Warren. Smaller groupings of fir trees were planted elsewhere on the estate's downlands.¹⁷ Allen continued to lay out a network of carriage drives across Claverton Down, Bathampton Down and westwards towards Combe Down and beyond.¹⁸ In 1762, he built an attractive picturesque landscape feature now known as Sham Castle on the edge of Bathampton Warren.¹⁹ Allen acquired the northern side of Claverton Down in 1758, already a popular venue for entertainment, riding, walking and 'taking the air'.²⁰ Sometimes, the two-mile horse-racing course with grandstand and stables would attract around 800 carriages and 20,000 spectators.²¹

The Later Years

Ralph Allen died on 29 June 1764 at Prior Park in Bath and was buried at St Mary's church in Claverton. He had gained a widespread reputation as a wealthy, successful businessman and entrepreneur. After Allen's death, his heirs found the estate difficult to manage and, by the early 1800s, Prior Park Mansion and gardens and the manor of Claverton were no longer in the family's possession. Combe Down quarries were sold by 1807. The exception was the manor of Bathampton which remained with Philip Allen and his descendants until 1921.²²

Remains of Ralph Allen's estate live on, however, offering not only layers of history, beauty, fresh air, opportunities for exercise and breath-taking views but also the chance for people of all ages to engage with and explore the natural world and its conservation. Nowadays, the National Trust maintains about 500 acres of the original estate including Bushey Norwood, Rainbow Wood Fields and Prior Park Landscape Gardens. High above the city's southern landscape, Sham Castle and Prior Park mansion still contribute to the drama and visual appeal of Bath's unique rural skyline.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After a career in secondary and higher education, Robin Dixon volunteers as a National Trust Walk Leader and a Garden Guide at Prior Park. He is also a member of the Mayor of Bath's Corps of Honorary Guides.





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¹The main primary source for current knowledge of the details of Ralph Allen's original estate is A Survey of the Manours of Hampton, Claverton with Widcombe belonging to Ralph Allen Esqr. It is a six-foot square contemporary map of Ralph Allen's estate drawn by hand at a scale of about 1:3,200. The map is kept in the Bath Record Office and 'appears to be a composite of several earlier maps made by more than one author from the 1740s up to the early 1760s' (M. Chapman, 'A Guide to the Estates of Ralph Allen around Bath' in Documents of the Ralph Allen Estate and Other Papers (Survey of Old Bath, Bath 2008), p.1. It is usually dated notionally as either 1758-63 or, more recently, as c.1762. Chapman mentions other primary sources in Chapman (2008, 1-2).

²B. Boyce, *The Benevolent Man: A Life of Ralph Allen of Bath* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 1967), 253

³B. J. Buchanan, 'Allen, Ralph' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2009); L.N. Willies and others, 'Finished Labour of a Thousand Hands': The Archaeology of Combe Down Stone Mines, Bath, Somerset (Oxford Archaeology Ltd: Oxford, 2011), 74-77.

⁴Boyce, 245; M. Chapman, 1.

⁵Willies et al, 42-46; 71-98.

⁶Boyce, 219.

⁷J. Hawkes, 'Prior's Park from the Dissolution to Ralph Allen' in *Documents of the Ralph Allen Estate and Other Papers*, (Survey of Old Bath: Bath, 2008), 12-14.

⁸Boyce, chapter vi, passim.

⁹P. Thicknesse, *The New Prose Bath Guide for the Year 1778* (London, 1778), 76.

¹⁰Boyce, *ibid.*

¹¹Chapman, pp.7-8; Hawkes, pp.12-13. Other untranscribed, unpublished documents show that Allen made further purchases in Lyncombe and Widcombe (E. Holland, 'Introduction' in *Documents of the Ralph Allen Estate and Other Papers* (Survey of Old Bath: Bath, 2008), vi.

¹²M. Clark, *Bathampton Down: A Hill Divided 1700-2000* (Ex Libris Press: Bradford-on-Avon, 2017), 11-12.

¹³Chapman, 9.

¹⁴'In Ralph Allen's time the outline of the ancient hunting park was well known. In fact there are references to the wall still surrounding it. Ralph Allen deliberately set out to purchase it and to set his house and garden within its bounds.' (Holland, v.)

¹⁵Chapman, 7-9.

¹⁶Boyce, 245.

¹⁷Chapman, 6-7.

¹⁸*Ibid*, 4.

¹⁹Clark, 35-40.

²²Boyce, 247.

²¹Chapman, 9-10.

²²Boyce, 291.

