



# TO SEE ALL BATH AND FOR ALL BATH TO SEE: RALPH ALLEN'S HOUSE AND GARDENS AT PRIOR PARK

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Ralph Allen died at Prior Park in Bath on 29 June 1764, aged 71. Six days later, he was buried according to his wishes in St Mary's churchyard in Claverton village 'as privately and decently as possible, without pomp'.<sup>1</sup> A Cornish innkeeper's son, Allen was widely recognised both locally and nationally as a successful businessman, entrepreneur and philanthropist. Government contracts had enabled him to reform and expand the postal service throughout the country, in time yielding him 'profits in the order of £12,000 per year'.<sup>2</sup> His domination of the Bath stone industry had improved its efficiency and helped to transform Bath into probably the country's most fashionable and attractive health and leisure resort after London. His estate had grown to approximately 3000 acres in size.

At the heart of Allen's property lay his landscape gardens and Palladian style house at Prior Park, enjoying dramatic views of Bath from their vantage point southeast of the city, high up the Widcombe valley. The house, completed by 1745 and originally designed by John Wood the elder in the fashionable Palladian style of the times, was, in the words of an eighteenth-century local guidebook, 'a noble Seat which sees all Bath, and which was built, probably, for all Bath to see'.<sup>3</sup> It was a central colonnaded mansion with two long curving wings. The gardens below rolled down the valley towards the city. Prior Park became 'an object of curiosity to all strangers who came to Bath'<sup>4</sup> and 'a centre of culture and hospitality'<sup>5</sup> for many prominent literary figures, politicians and royalty of the time.





An extract from Thomas Thorp's 'An Actual Survey of the City of Bath and of Five Miles Around' c.1742




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



## Prior Park House

Planning and building Ralph Allen's house at Prior Park probably began in the late 1720s. According to John Wood, the architect, Allen's bid in 1728 for a contract to provide the stone needed to build Greenwich Hospital in London was turned down in favour of stone suppliers from Portland. During negotiations, some of Allen and Wood's opponents compared Bath Stone 'to a Cheshire Cheese, liable to breed Maggots that would soon Devour it'.<sup>6</sup> All this so angered Allen that, in John Wood's words, he resolved to build a house which would display Bath Stone 'to much greater Advantage, and in much greater Variety of Uses than it had appeared in any other Structure'.<sup>7</sup>


From the very beginning, Prior Park house was intended not only as a family home but as a commercial showcase. John Wood, who provided the original Palladian style designs for the house, planned five buildings along three sides of a dodecagon, a quarter of a mile in diameter. In this way, Wood gave a flow to the building which complemented the flow of the land at the head of the valley. It also created the illusion of a theatre with Bath as the stage set. A key feature of the building, also to be seen in Palladio's own villas, was the idea of a main block with elongated wings. It was based on Colen Campbell's first published but never completed design for Wanstead House in Essex. Work on the house began about 1734 but disagreements between Allen and Wood over its design were so great that Wood was later dismissed as project manager and replaced by Richard Jones, Allen's Clerk of Works. As a result, the building, when fully completed by 1750, was different from Wood's original conception.<sup>8</sup> Anthony Walker's engraving of Prior Park drawn in 1750<sup>9</sup> gives an impression of the final version of the house in which the pavilions have been joined by wings and connected to the main block by covered arcaded passages. Allen moved into the house with his wife in 1741.<sup>10</sup>



## Prior Park Gardens

Work began on Prior Park gardens in about 1734.<sup>11</sup> Thorp's map of 1742<sup>12</sup> and Walker's engraving published in 1752 show that by the end of their first stage of development around 1744, the gardens were laid out to the north of the house in a generally formal style. The straight central axis, flanked by woodland planting and serpentine paths, terminated halfway down the valley with a central ornamental pool and dam. To the south of the house, Allen laid out formal tree lined avenues. Utilitarian gardens with fruit and vegetable plots and greenhouses were planted to the north east.

West of the central axis was a woodland pleasure garden or 'Wilderness', carefully planted and laid out with serpentine paths, shrubberies, water features, sculptures, statuary and other artefacts, all designed to delight and entertain the senses through contrast and variety. Immediately below the house, a dramatic statue of Moses striking the Rock loomed over a cascade, a Serpentine Lake, a stone arched Sham Bridge and a mysterious Grotto, lined with Cornish minerals. At the heart of the 'Wilderness' was a Cabinet, an 'outdoor room' surrounded by shrubbery and evergreens. Throughout this period, Alexander Pope, well established poet, landscape designer and gardener, advised Allen on the planning and planting of his gardens, particularly in the 'Wilderness' area.<sup>13</sup> Here, Pope helped to create a garden in the fashionable 'poetic' style, arranging landscape features so that they resembled paintings in the spirit of the Roman poet Virgil and a vanished Golden Age.



Thorp and Overton's map of Allen's estate (c.1762)<sup>14</sup> and Thomas Robins' water colours of 1758 show that significant changes took place in the landscape during the second phase of development between 1744 and 1760. After purchasing the lower slopes of the valley in 1743, Allen extended the garden's downhill sweep, created a cascade halfway down the valley and transformed the medieval fishponds at the bottom into lakes with dams. Having built a Gothic style Cottage in 1740 and a Gothic Temple in 1754, Richard Jones constructed the Palladian Bridge in 1755 as the focal point in the valley. It was a modified copy of a bridge over the river Nadder at Wilton House near Salisbury. Allen progressively introduced informal planting along the western and eastern edges of the garden's central axis. By 1760, the western pleasure garden was complete, and trees were growing in the vegetable garden to the east.


In the third and final phase of the garden's development between 1760 and 1764, Allen opened out the valley further by removing the central pool and cascade, possibly with the assistance of 'Capability' Brown. Over thirty years, the gardens progressively developed away from a generally rigid, formal landscape into a more relaxed, naturalistic design, displaying more and more of the fashionable garden features of the time. Prior Park increasingly established a balance between beauty and utility, formality and informality and order within variety. In fact, even after Pope's death in 1744, landscaping at Prior Park continued to reflect Pope's well-known principle that gardeners should not impose their wills on nature but work in partnership with it and 'consult the Genius of the Place in all'.<sup>15</sup>

## The Later Years

After Allen died without an heir in 1764, followed, two years later, by his wife Elizabeth, a succession of owners managed the estate.

No major changes were made to Prior Park's landscape until Bishop Augustine Baines purchased the house and grounds in 1828. Later, in 1834, he converted the house into a seminary in the east wing and a boy's school in the west wing, dedicating them to St Peter and St Paul, respectively. Most of Wood's west wing was lost at this point. Further changes to the building followed, including the building of a staircase for the north side of the house, designed by H E Goodridge, and, in 1844, the church of St Paul. There were two major fires, one in 1836 and another in 1991 which destroyed most of the interior of the house. The buildings, now separated from the grounds, are used as a school.

Throughout these years, the layout of the gardens has remained largely unchanged. In the 1830s the Serpentine Lake was filled in and a carriageway added to the north side of the house which separated the Grotto from other parts of the 'Wilderness.' The Palladian Bridge was overgrown by 1856 and other features fell into decay. The Gothic Temple was sold in 1921. After the National Trust acquired the gardens in 1993, however, a major restoration and conservation programme began, including repairs to the Sham Bridge, the Palladian Bridge and dams, and a reconstruction of the Serpentine Lake and Cascade. Further work is planned to restore the garden to its original appearance in 1764 in a way which continues to apply Pope's vision of working with the 'Genius of the Place' and his principle of planting to create contrast, variety and successive garden episodes, each with its own atmosphere. The plan includes further restoration of the lakes and dams to be completed in 2021. Today, after over 200 years, some consider Prior Park house as 'the most ambitious and the most complete re-creation of Palladio's villas on English soil'.<sup>16</sup> The gardens still retain their breath-taking views towards the city in much the same way as they did in Allen's day, serving as a fine synthesis in miniature of some of the most popular landscape garden features of eighteenth-century England.





Prior Park in Somersetshire, the seat of Mrs Smith. Drawing by W Watts after Thomas Hearne. (1785)



View from Prior Park Mansion towards Bath, 2018



# 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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<sup>1</sup>R.E.M. Peach, *The Life and Times of Ralph Allen* (D Nutt, London, 1895), 241.

<sup>2</sup>B.J. Buchanan, 'Allen, Ralph' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009).

<sup>3</sup>P. Thicknesse, *The New Bath Prose Guide for the Year 1778* (London, 1778), 76.

<sup>4</sup>B. Boyce, *The Benevolent Man: A Life of Ralph Allen of Bath* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1967), 219.

<sup>5</sup>Buchanan, 2009.

<sup>6</sup>J. Wood, *A Description of Bath, 1765* (Kingsmead Reprints, Bath, 1969), 426.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, 427.

<sup>8</sup>For detailed information about the architectural development of Prior Park house from inception until c.1836, see T. Mowl and B. Earnshaw, *John Wood: Architect of Obsession* (Millstream Books, Stroud, 1988), 101-118. Also, N. Forsyth, *Bath* (Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 2003) and R. Durman, *Classical Buildings of Wiltshire and Bath* (Millstream Books, Stroud, 2000).

<sup>9</sup>Walker's engraving is inscribed as follows: 'Drawn from Mr Allen's Road in the year 1750, Publish'd Dec. 12th, 1752'.

<sup>10</sup>Boyce, 117.

<sup>11</sup>G. Clarke, *Prior Park: A Compleat Landscape* (Millstream Books, Bath, 1987) and T. Mowl and M.Mako, *Historic Gardens of Somerset* (Redcliffe Press, Bristol, 2010), 93-100, contain useful accounts of the history of the gardens.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas Thorp, *An Actual Survey of the City of Bath in the County of Somerset and of Five Miles Around*, c.1742.

<sup>13</sup>See M. Harney, 'Pope and Prior Park: A Study in Landscape and Literature', *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 27 (3), 182-196.

<sup>14</sup>A Survey of the Manours of Hampton, Claverton with Widcombe belonging to Ralph Allen Esq taken by Tho: Thorp and Jno: Overton. This is a six-foot square contemporary map of Ralph Allen's estate drawn by hand at a scale of about 1:3,200. Kept in Bath Record Office, it appears to be a composite of several maps made by more than one author from the 1740s up to the early 1760s. It is usually dated notionally as either 1758-63 or, as more recently, c. 1762.

<sup>15</sup>A. Pope, 'Epistle to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington' (1731), Alexander Pope, *The Major Works*, Pat Rogers, 242-250 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1956).

<sup>16</sup>Forsyth, 94

