

Kensington Meadows Local Nature Reserve, Bath

A DESK BASED HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT

Mike Chapman, BA AIFA, January 2010

Introduction

The following study deals with the historical development of a strip of open meadow ground beside the River Avon at Bath, now designated a Local Nature Reserve, situated behind the houses and gardens of Grosvenor Terrace and Kensington Place lining the south side of the main Bath-London (A4) road.

Information on the geology and history of the site and its immediate environs was obtained from all relevant maps, publications and reports (detailed below), together with old photographs and illustrations. Archaeological data was obtained from the Bath & North East Somerset Sites and Monuments Record. Current details were confirmed with a site visit.

The Natural Site – Prehistoric and Roman

Geologically, Kensington Meadows consist entirely of River Alluvium clay. Although the river Avon through Bath is generally shallow and broad, its drainage is impeded by various natural constrictions along its course which, in wet season, produce extensive flooding over the adjoining low-lying meadow ground. These floods not only bring down silt deposits, but also, in Recent geological periods, Terrace Gravel on the slightly higher ground which now stands above the flood-plain. It is on this latter material (above the 20m contour) that the London Road and the adjoining properties stand. Effectively, the northern boundary wall of the meadow, adjoining and gardens at the back of the London road, marks the division between the two geological deposits.

Despite intensive activity in this area in Prehistoric and Roman Times (the Roman town of *Aquae Sulis* stood only a half a mile further west, in Walcot Street), no structural remains have been found within the study area itself, although characteristic Roman roadside burials have frequently come to light on the properties adjoining the present London Road which still follows the line of the Roman 'Fosse Way'.

This does not however mean that the meadows were unused. From earliest times, the occurrence of winter flooding which promoted the early growth of grass and hay crop in these meadows, was a valuable asset in the days when fodder for livestock was running low before the spring. Animals were generally slaughtered at the onset of winter when there was not enough grazing for them all, and only a limited number were retained through to the following year. Early records show that the meadows around Bath were populated with cows, goats, geese, horses and (in winter) sheep.

Saxon and Medieval Meadowland

It is during the Saxon period that the manor of Walcot, to which Kensington Meadows belonged, is first mentioned, although the manor at that time was still associated with the city and therefore always known as the 'Barton of Bath'. This part of the manor, in the 'East Field', belonged to the lordship ('Barton Farm, or Grange') which was held throughout most of middle ages by the Prior of Bath Monastery, and therefore not allotted in common to the manorial tenants as was sometimes the case elsewhere in the neighbourhood such as the 'Dolemeads' in Lyncombe. This area would therefore have been enclosed with hedges at an early stage, particularly on the higher ground beside the road.

Traditional meadow names in this neighbourhood, such as 'Withymead' and 'Aldermoor', also date from this period, indicating that the banks of the Avon were planted with economically useful trees that thrive in wet conditions, and it is highly probable that the riverside here was also planted in this way. Pollard

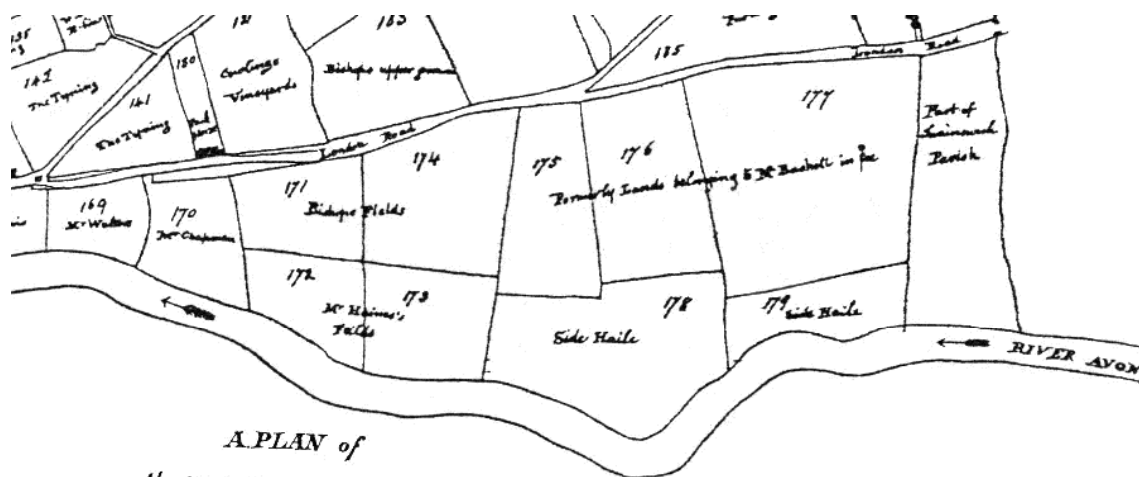
willows (a particularly noticeable feature in 18th century illustrations of Bath) provided flexible rods for wattles, hurdles, baskets, fish-traps and all kinds of wicker-work, and made good quality charcoal. Alder provided timber that did not decay in damp conditions, used for weir sluices, river piles, mill cogs and water pipes.

By the end of the Middle Ages the area of Kensington Meadows consisted of two groups of enclosed fields lying between the London Road and the River Avon, as shown on Thomas Thorpe's map of Walcot in 1740. These two groups have retained a separate identity throughout subsequent periods until recent times, i.e.;

Kensington Meadows: a block of four grounds (nos.171-174 on the plan) on the west side, then known generally as the 'East Hayes' ('hedged grounds' from OE *hæg*). Nos.172 and 173 nearest the river roughly comprise the western half of the study area.

Grosvenor Meadows: a block of five grounds on the east side. Three of these which lay alongside the road (nos.175-177) were known as 'The Furlong' and therefore presumably arable at some stage. The other two (nos.178, 179) which lay along the riverside were known as the Side Hailes (no.179 also being called 'Hook Mead'), and roughly comprise the eastern half of the study area.

The names 'Haile' and 'Hook' presumably refer to the sharp W-bend in the River near the Grosvenor Bridge, from OE *halh*, 'corner', and *hoc* 'bend or hook'. This bend, later known as 'Pile Corner', is already referred to in a Saxon boundary charter for the manor of Bathampton opposite as the 'the tight bend of the Avon' (*Nearuan Byge on Afene*).



A PLAN of
the PARISH of WALCOT
in the COUNTY of SOMERSET
Survey'd for - Gay Esq. by Tho. Thorp
1740

BATH HAMPTON

Late Georgian period – the Grosvenor Gardens Development

As the Georgian City continued to expand throughout Walcot and along the London Road in the late 18th century, these meadow grounds become ripe for development. This area still remained essentially rural, despite some industrial development next to the road, and although the Avon had been made navigable in 1727, this was never extended beyond the centre of Bath. The London Road, being level and easily accessible to the city, with fine views across the river to Bathampton, soon became one of the most attractive and fashionable routes for visitors wishing to walk or ride out to take an 'airing'. The broad strand in front of Kensington Place and Grosvenor Place was presumably laid out with this in mind. The first public intimation of a development on these grounds was in June, 1791, when it was announced that 'All those healthy and desirable meadows, situate on the East side of the London Road, between the Turnpike and Lambridge. - are to Lett for Ever on Building Leases. - the centre of the Meadows to be laid out as Pleasure Gardens.'



The City of Bath taken from the London Road. Published 30 November 1773

The London Road towards Bath, 1773, by John Robert Cozens (Bodleian Library). This view shows the road near Kensington before development, with the meadows still open on the left.

This refers to an ambitious scheme by the architect John Eveleigh and his partners who were about to build an imposing terrace of houses called Grosvenor Place with a hotel centrepiece on the Furlong (mentioned above) adjoining the road. The grounds behind it (the Side Hailes, by the river), would contain a private pleasure ground, to be run as a commercial enterprise known as the Grosvenor Gardens Vauxhall. Under the foundation stone of the hotel, laid later that month, was placed a lead plate inscribed with the legend

‘The first Stone of GROSVENOR HOUSE, VAUXHALL, was laid on June 24th, 1791, by JOHN EVELEIGH, Architect, being the Centre of 145 intended Houses, and at the entrance of Vauxhall Gardens, which will be built by Subscription, laid out with taste and elegance for the reception of Nobility, Gentry and the Public in general.’

The ceremony was accompanied by cannon firing and concluded with ‘a liberal treat of beer’ being given to the workmen and bystanders. A contemporary account records that:

‘the plan exhibits nearly a square, formed by a line of handsome houses towards the road, and the Avon, leaving a space of about 20 acres within, where there is to be a room of size and accommodation to entertain upwards of 2,000 people, and pleasure gardens are to be planted next autumn (regardless of expense and opposition) with the utmost exertion of taste and fancy - A full one-third of the above ground for these Houses is already taken’.

A most elaborate layout for the pleasure gardens had been devised, including;

‘a saloon with organ, mechanism and orchestras, hot and cold greenhouses, conservatories, kitchen gardens, vineries, aviary, temple with chimes, labyrinth with merlin swings and cave, grotto, alcoves, etc.’

During May 1792 Eveleigh advertised that the forward state of the gardens enabled him to invite those who intended to subscribe to send him their addresses so that a committee of management could be formed. Subscriptions were to be £100 per share, entitling the subscriber to two tickets of admission to the gardens for each year.

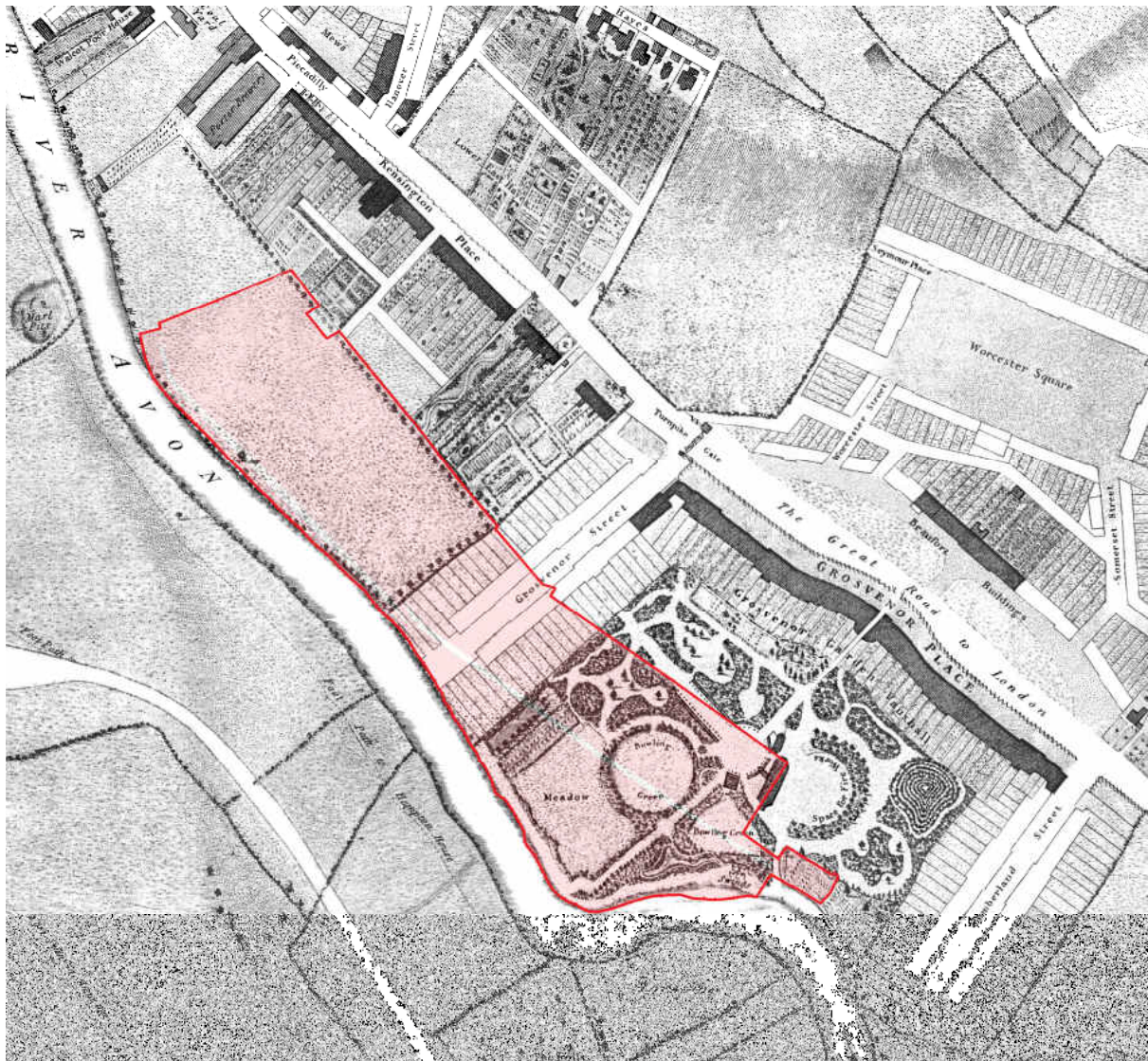
On 12 May 1792, the *Bath Herald* noted

‘The annals of horticulture cannot produce an instance of so rapid a change from a common grass field to a luxuriant, highly cultivated spot, as is now displayed in Grosvenor Gardens. It is scarcely one year since the plan was first proposed, and in that time a row of elegant buildings has been erected; a complete garden has been made. - spacious walks well gravelled have been formed, and the whole of a plan so admirably projected, brought to such a state of forwardness, as to claim the admiration and wonder of the numerous companies who daily frequent it. Nothing but the greatest success can attend exertions so deserving the public patronage.’



Left: The Grosvenor Garden Vauxhall, as it appears on Thomas Chantrey's map, published in Taylor and Meyler's *New and Accurate Plan of the City of Bath to the present year 1793*.

Below; C.Harcourt Masters' *Plan of the City of Bath*, first published in 1795, showing the outlines (in red) of the study area superimposed.



By the following September pleasure boats were plying between Eveleigh's wharf in Bathwick (now Grove Street) and the gardens, where parties were accommodated with teas. Unfortunately the optimistic tones of the *Herald* were somewhat premature. As national trade slackened at the end of 1792, and as the supply of houses in Bath increased, it became difficult to obtain the liquid funds needed to complete any unfinished building projects. As a result, confidence in the financial system faltered, and already in July 1792 the local banks were in trouble. The war with France, which had started in January 1793, added to the strain, and on 21 March the Bath City Bank (financiers of Eveleigh's scheme) closed its doors to join the Bath and Somersetshire Bank in bankruptcy.

Eveleigh's failure to obtain the necessary public funds to support of his scheme, upon which he had already spent over £7,000, forced him to offer his share in the unfinished buildings for sale by auction in November 1793, just before he and his partners were adjudged bankrupt and summoned to appear with other builders (including the architect James Baldwin) at the Argyle Coffee House for a disclosure of assets. There was however continuing optimism in the scheme, and Eveleigh's interests were purchased for £5,500 by the mortgagees of the property, who put forward fresh proposals in May 1794. Although much of the remaining £5,000 required to complete the hotel and gardens was raised from numerous investors in £50 shares, this was to no avail, and Eveleigh's successors were also bankrupted.

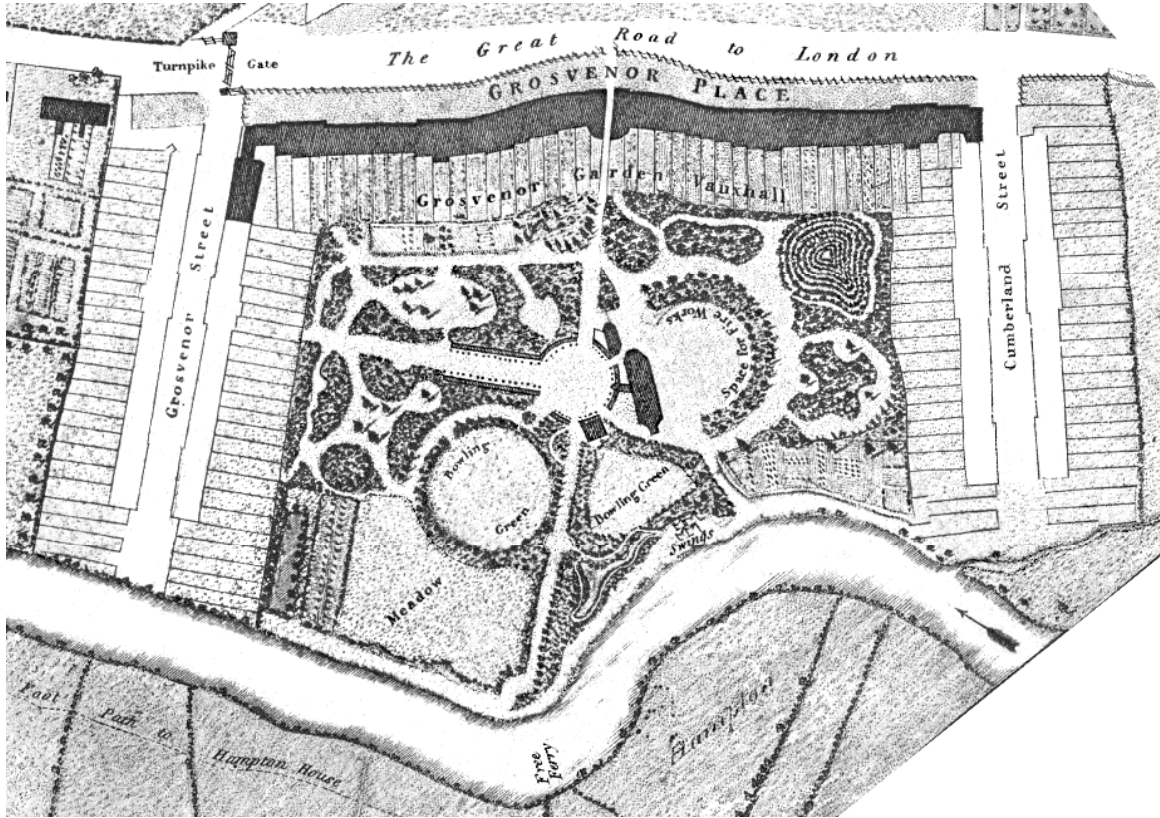
In the meantime a less ambitious project had also started along the London Road in the adjoining East Hayes meadow grounds which also consisted of a terrace of houses, known as Kensington Place. Designed by the architect John Palmer, it was completed in about 1795, with Percy Place added to the east end and Lower East Hayes to the west. However the back gardens of these houses did not extend into the two grounds adjoining the river which remained as a single open field, known henceforth as Kensington Meadows, with an entrance drive through the middle of Kensington Place. An exception to this pattern was Warren & Clarke's Porter Brewery, a separate massive building at the extreme western end of the development, already built in about 1780. For some reason the brewery premises had also acquired a strip of ground along the western boundary of the meadow, forming a linear garden leading to a landing place by the river.

Despite the continuing difficulties in completing the buildings in Grosvenor Place, the Gardens themselves were quickly opened and for some years enjoyed considerable popularity. In 1801 *The New Bath Guide* was able to announce that:

'In Grosvenor Gardens is now erecting a spacious Hotel with a delightful garden, of near 14 acres, laid out with great taste for summer and winter amusements ... It is so far completed that Company may be accommodated with breakfasts, afternoon teas, and dinners, at proper notice. Subscribers for walking in the gardens pay 7s. 6d. the season, for bowling 3s. 9d., and for angling 3s. 0d. Pleasure boats attend.'

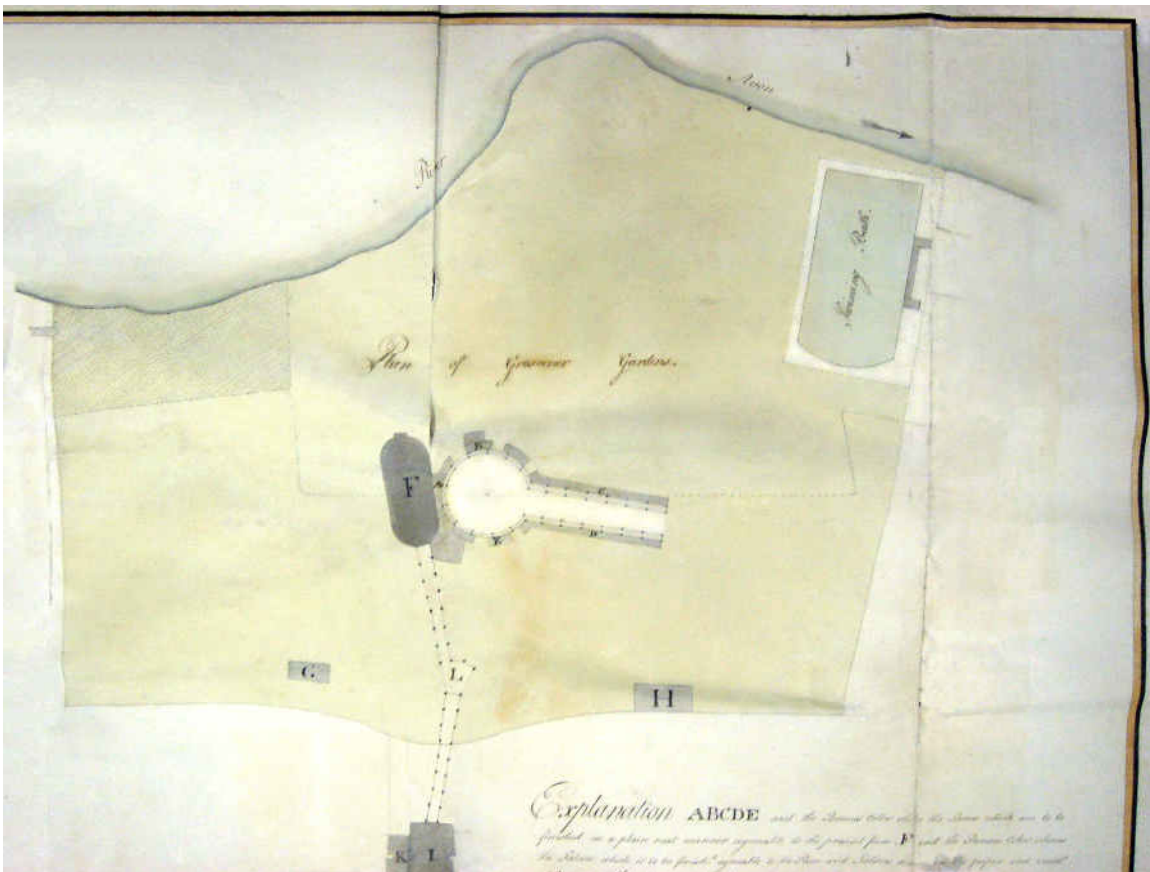
The approach to the pleasure ground was originally by a carriage way through a wide arch in the centre of the hotel itself (now Nos.22 and 23 Grosvenor Place), leading to a Porter's Lodge beyond at the entrance to the gardens. From here a covered walkway led to the centre of the garden, where there was a large and elegant Banqueting Hall or 'Saloon' attached to a circular Orchestra or arena surrounded by viewing boxes. Details of the garden layout are particularly well illustrated on Harcourt Masters' *Plan of the City Bath*, first published in 1795, which shows on the east side a Maze or Labyrinth, a Bowling Green, and a semicircular 'Space for Fire Works'. Among the shrubberies, gravel walks, and flower beds there was also a Greenhouse, Hot House, and an Archery Green. Adjoining the river can be seen a Serpentine Canal or Fishpond, and an area with Swings. Rowing boats were available on the Avon (at a shilling an hour) or, by taking a 'Free Ferry' across the river, walks along the meadows in Bathwick and Bathampton.

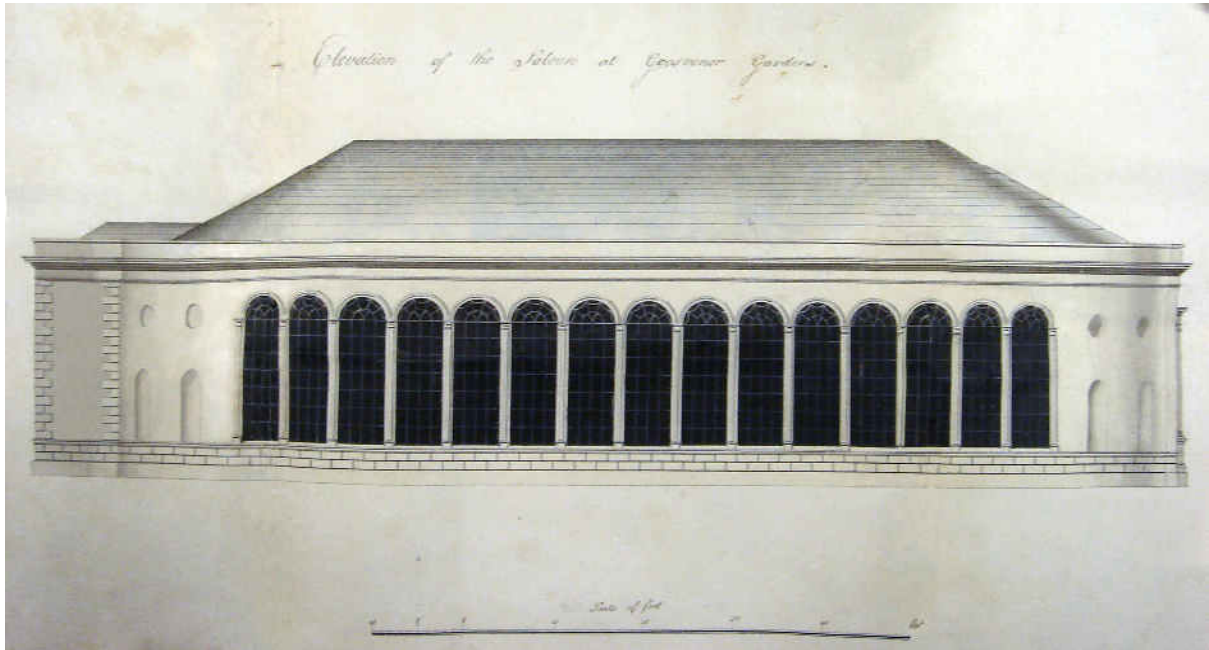
On the west side another Bowling Green is shown, together with a 'Meadow' and, in the secluded south-western corner near the river, a Swimming Bath. Masters' map shows the latter as a long canal flanked by a stream or cascade, but other sources suggest that it was actually built as a large rectangular pool with a rank of Dressing Rooms and private plunge-baths along the eastern edge, as shown on Eveleigh's original plan. It may have been supplied by a spring in the grounds, but more probably from the reservoirs further up the hill on the opposite side of the London Road, near the top of Claremont Road in Larkhall.



Above: Details of the layout of Grosvenor Garden Vauxhall shown on Masters' map. The streets on the east and west sides were never built.

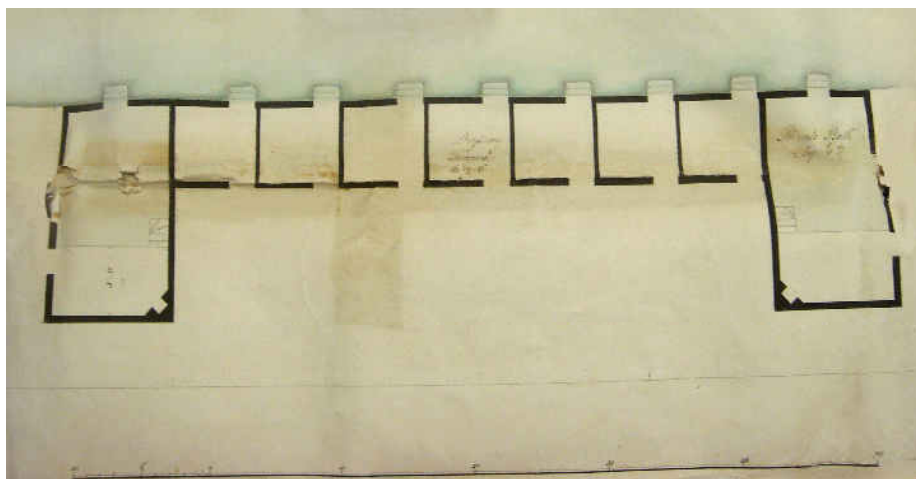
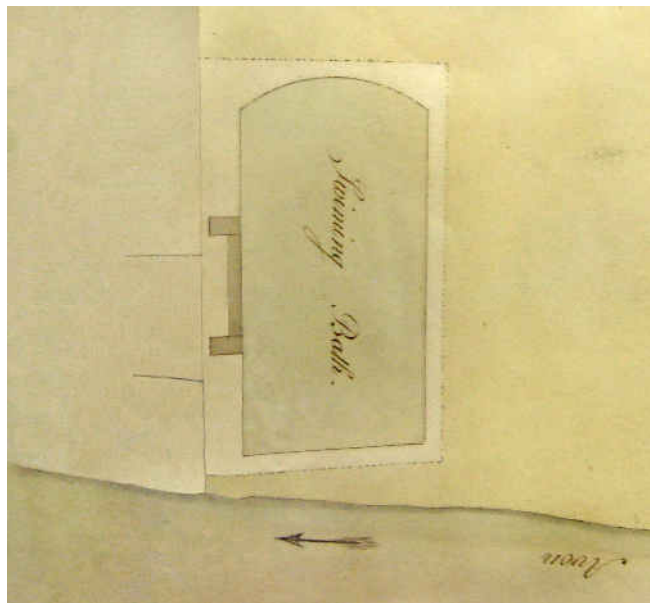
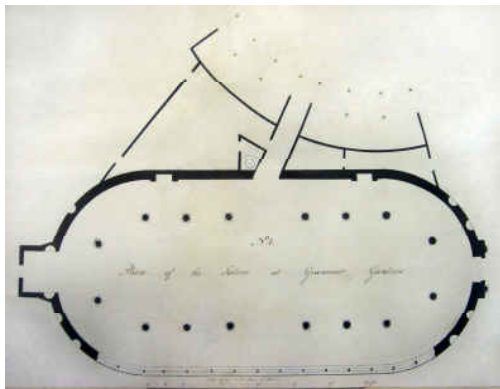
Below: Eveleigh's outline plan of the buildings in the garden, included in the Articles of Agreement for the development drawn up on 4 August 1794 (BRO Ac.0473/1/1/2).





Details taken from the Articles of Agreement plans:

Above: Elevation of the Saloon or Banqueting Hall.
 Below: Ground plan of the Saloon.
 Right: Plan of the Swimming Bath, with the Dressing Rooms on the west side.
 Bottom: Ground plan of the Dressing Rooms and Private Baths.



However, in 1812 the shareholders of the gardens come to the conclusion that, since the bankruptcy of the developers had rendered the 'further prosecution of the undertaking hopeless and abortive' and 'the little property that now remains on the premises in a ruinous & dilapidated state of decay', the gardens should be put up for sale by auction. Although the gardens still appear on maps in 1818, it is unlikely that they were still in use, and Egan in his *Walks through Bath*, published in 1819, commented that the hotel and many of the houses still remained in an unfinished state.

Although the failure of this enterprise may well be put down to financial mismanagement and changes in fashion, the choice of site was in any case unfortunate. Being subjected to mists and floods, it would have been in a poor position to compete with the Sydney Gardens on the opposite side of the river which had been opened in 1795 on a more amenable site and with easier access from the city. Indeed, it is quite probable that the state of decay mentioned in 1812 was caused by Bath's first flood 'disaster' to be put on record, in 1809, when three houses were washed away with the loss of seven people and two horses in Bedford Street at the western end of Kensington Meadows.

The 19th Century

Grosvenor College

The Grosvenor hotel, today considered one of Bath's more unusual Georgian buildings, was eventually completed, but without its central archway to the gardens. In the early 1820s the premises were acquired for a 'gentlemens' boarding' school by the Rev. Daniel Race Godfrey D.D. who, in 1837, went on to establish the Grosvenor College there 'for the Sons of Noblemen and Gentlemen', an event which seems to have coincided with the break-up in the early 1830s of the former pleasure gardens into a series of rectangular garden grounds and irregular riverside meadows. These plots were mainly acquired by the residents of Grosvenor Place or businessmen from the city as their own private pleasure grounds, but many belonged to the Rev. Godfrey for the use of the College, as mentioned in his 1865 *Prospectus*:

'Grosvenor College ... fairly claims priority for local advantages. On the south side are about thirteen acres of land for Cricket grounds, &c., attached to the College, and undisturbed by any public approach or interference ... '.

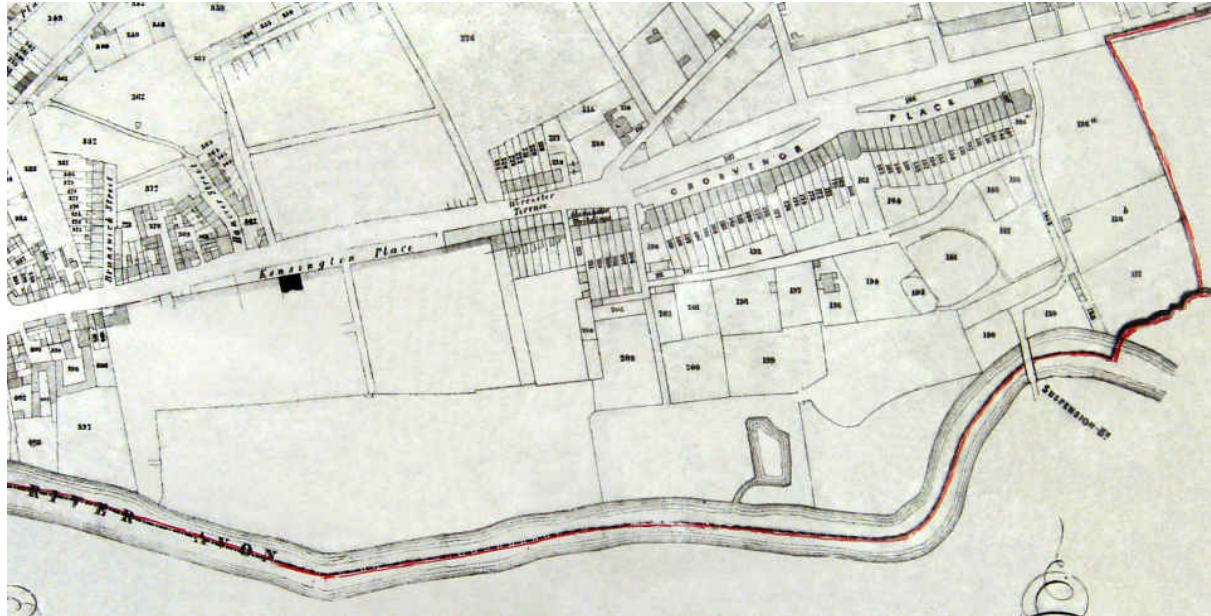
However, the 1840 tithe map for Walcot shows that many of the outlines of the former pleasure grounds still survived, particularly the curved boundaries of the bowling greens and the oval foundations of the banqueting saloon. Among the new features, listed in the parish rate books, were five or six cottages, a coach-house with stable and paddock, a Lodge House, a summerhouse and garden, and laundry house. The most notable of the cottages, in the centre, seems to have been enlarged in the 1860s into a detached house called Chestnut Cottage or Chestnut Villa, together with the building of Rose Cottage and Griselda Cottage nearby. Elsewhere (confusingly) there were Grosvenor *Cottages* at the west entrance to the garden, and Grosvenor *Cottage* beside Grosvenor Bridge Road, at the east.

Toward the river, most of the garden area was returned to pasture. Only the site of the swimming bath remained, but now converted to a fishing lake ('Grosvenor Pond') with an inlet from the river. In *The Handy Guide to the Fishing in the Neighbourhood of Bath*, published in the 1880s, this stretch of the river was said to have

'.. the best roach swim in the neighbourhood of Bath; probably within ten miles. Unfortunately, this is a too well-known fact, as being so near the city it is much frequented by anglers. In that part of the river ... below the horse-shoe shaped bend, called Piles Corner, especially in the immediate vicinity of Grosvenor Suspension bridge, some very fine pike may be taken. GROSVENOR POND is situated at the rear of Grosvenor, and is connected with the Avon by means of a dyke or ditch. Pike of extraordinary size have had their habitation there.'

Despite the disappearance of the Grosvenor Gardens, the idea of pleasure grounds continued to have a strong influence in this neighbourhood, the reference here to the Grosvenor footbridge, Bath's first suspension bridge (now replaced with a ferro-concrete structure) being a good example. It was designed and built in 1830 by Thomas Shew Esqr., an amateur artist, as a commercial enterprise (a toll of ¹/₂d was paid at the toll-house) to improve the value of his property at the eastern end of Grosvenor Place

(Grosvenor Villa, sometimes known as ‘The Picture Gallery’) by attracting walkers to the pleasant walks on each side of the river - as expressed enthusiastically by Mainwaring in his *Annals of Bath*,
 ‘..The delightful walks which this bridge enables the pedestrian to accomplish are, indeed, infinite and unbounded. The beautiful scenery which unfolds itself in every direction, is enchanting to the eye of a picturesque traveller ...’.



Extract from the Tithe map of Walcot of 1840. The plots without numbers were tithe-free. Note the curved boundaries of the former bowling greens, and the outlines of the Saloon on the east side of Chestnut Cottage in the centre. Below is the fishing lake with its connecting dyke to the river.

The main beneficiary however seems to have been The Folly, a farm on the opposite bank in Bathwick, which immediately opened as a Tea Garden and Tavern. In the 1850s, its orchard was converted to a pleasure ground called the Cremorne Gardens which continued to provide entertainment for the next hundred years until destroyed by a stray bomb in WWII.

Earlier however, in 1815, a piece of waste ground in Bathwick, almost opposite the abandoned Grosvenor Baths, was adopted for the site of a new swimming bath known as the Cleveland Swimming Baths after the then owner of Bathwick, the Duke of Cleveland. In July the *Bath Weekly Chronicle* announced:

‘The Public are informed, that a PIECE of GROUND is secured near the Marl-Pits, for the purpose of forming PLEASURE BATHS, and erecting Apartments for dressing, &c. The object in view is to provide a place in connection with the River, where those who swim, and those who do not, will be alike accommodated. – As the completion of the plan will depend on the first Subscriptions, those Gentlemen who wish to encourage it are requested to insert their names, in a Book opened for the purpose, One Guinea the Season – Seven Shillings and Sixpence per Month – Non-subscribers Sixpence’.

Again, Mainwaring records; ‘1815 - The Pleasure Baths in the vicinity of Sydney gardens were this year erected, and have proved in each succeeding one, a high source of gratification to those who delight in the healthful recreation of bathing and swimming’, being ‘admirably designed to form a connection with the river, which sends a running stream constantly through the baths ...’. Among the beneficiaries were the pupils of Grosvenor College, the *Prospectus* of 1865 announcing that ‘The tenant of the Cleveland Baths reserves the hour between twelve and one o’clock for the pupils of this College *exclusively*.’ These baths, though presently out of use, are now of considerable architectural interest, being one of the earliest examples of out-door lidos in this country, and efforts are presently being made for their restoration.

Downstream from the Cleveland Baths, opposite the western end of Kensington Meadows, is the Bath Boating Station and restaurant. This concern, also situated on what had been waste ground adjoining a marl pit, seems to have originated as a small tea-garden with boating facilities soon after the opening of the Cleveland Bridge in 1827. Its success however was assured when it began catering for the Avon Rowing Club founded in 1864, with boat-building facilities and 'well laid out grounds, comprising lawn tennis grounds, &c'.

This enterprise probably inspired another on the opposite side, just beyond the western end of Kensington Meadows. The Porter Brewery, mentioned above, closed about 1809 and was demolished soon after, to be replaced by York Villa, the residence it is said, of Frederick Augustus, Duke of York. The adjoining property however belonged to the Porter Butt tavern which had once been a successful coaching inn until the coming of the railways. In the early 1840s the land at the back of the inn leading down to the river, formerly used for grazing horses, was developed as a pleasure garden, advertising 'rowing matches', river Galas, fireworks, and a 'skittle ground'. Unfortunately, like the Kensington Meadows, it too suffered from flooding and was soon closed. Flooding was evidently the reason why there were virtually no further developments on the Kensington Meadows side of the river during the 19th century, as opposed to those on the south side which, being less prone, experienced greater success and have survived in some form or other to this day.

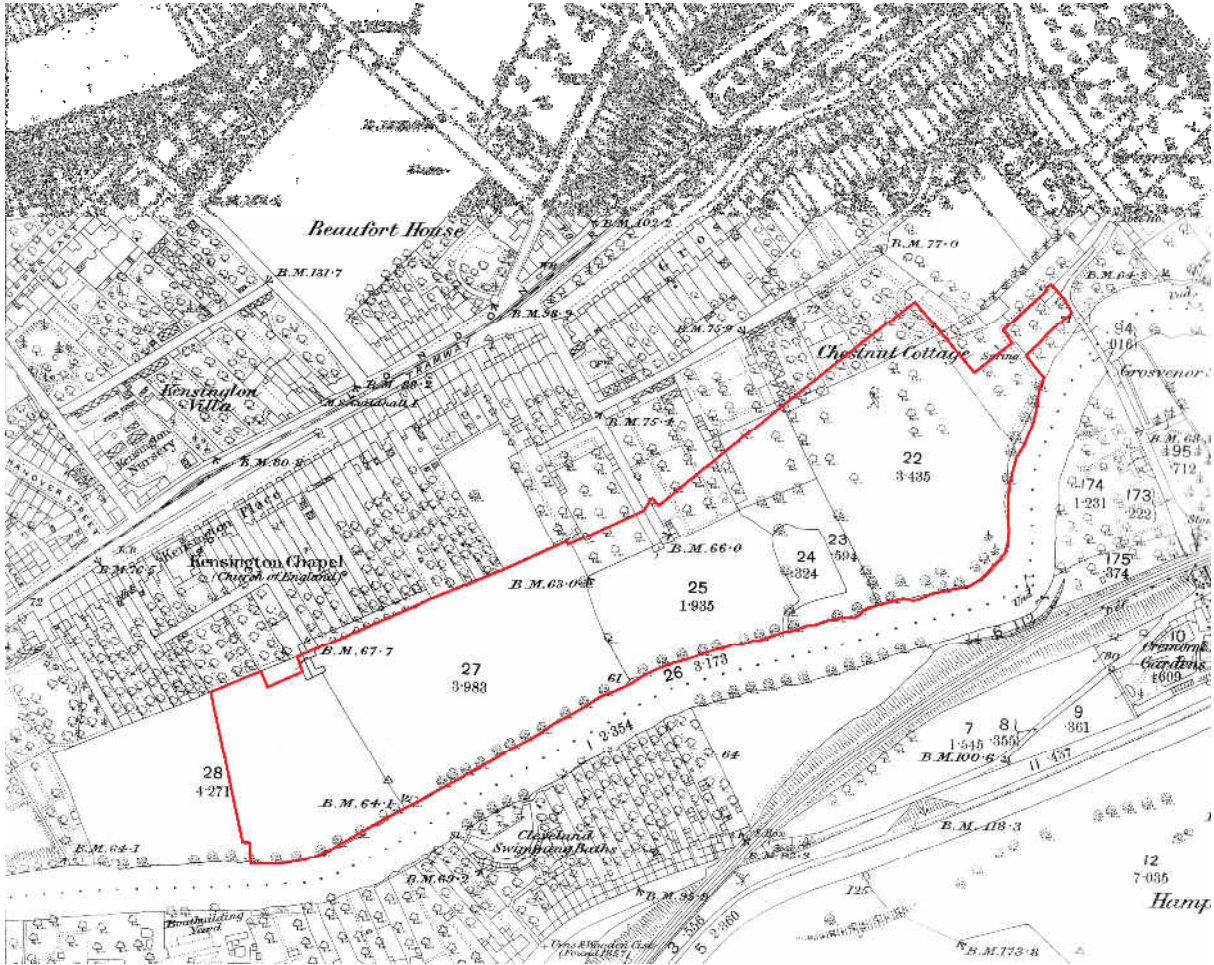
The Great Western Railway

It was also during the early 19th century that the south side of the river was opened up as a new communication route, starting with the Kennet & Avon Canal in 1810. Viewed from the river, this involved little disruption to the landscape, and was even regarded as a picturesque embellishment to the Sydney Pleasure Gardens through which it passed. It also provided a pleasant walk along the towing path for keen rambles like Jane Austen who would have appreciated the fine views of Kensington meadows and Grosvenor Gardens on the opposite side of the river. Nor did the opening of the new Warminster Road (now A36) in 1834 have any appreciable impact on the landscape (though a considerable engineering project - Brunel himself was called in to advise), allowing good access and views across the river. However, the construction of the Great Western Railway through Bath in 1840 was more intrusive. Although J.C.Bourne's view of 1846 shows the agreeable prospect for passengers from the line at Pile Corner, the high railway embankment (which actually runs along the river bank at this point) effectively forms a wall overshadowing the river opposite Kensington Meadows, obscuring the slopes of Bathampton Down to the south and restricting access to the southern bank of the river.

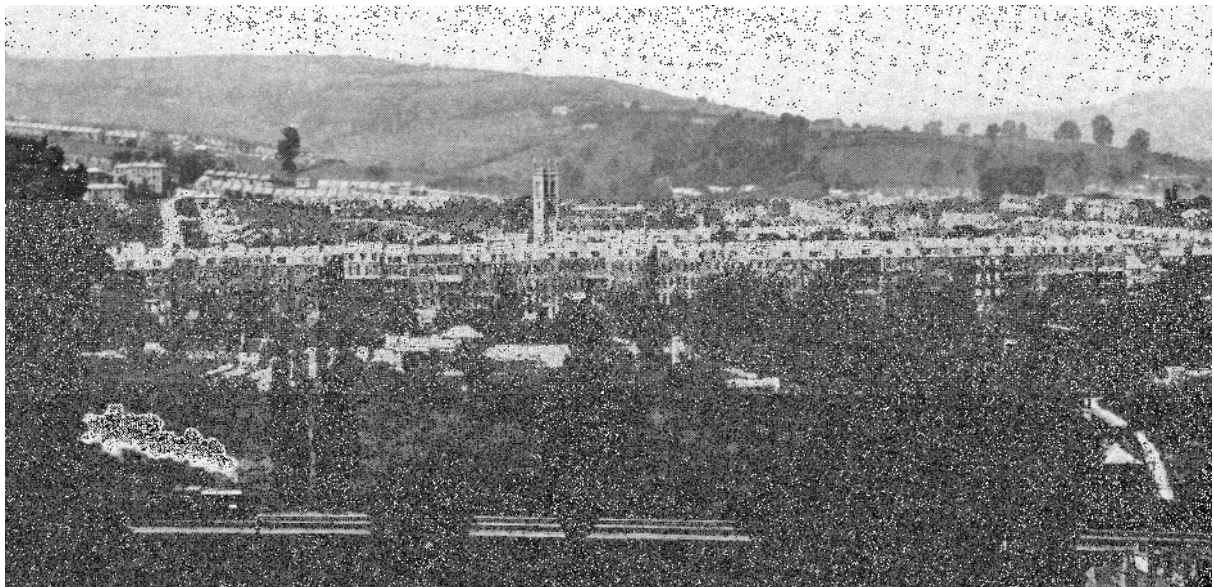


'The Railway and Avon near Bath' by J.C.Bourne, in *The History and Description of the Great Western Railway*, 1846.

This view is taken at Pile Corner, showing the Grosvenor Meadows on the left and, beyond that, the Grosvenor Suspension Bridge in the distance.



The study area (marked in red) as shown on the OS 25 inch map of 1885. Note on the south side of the river, the Boatbuilding Yard/Boating Station, the Cleveland Swimming Bath, and the Cremorne Gardens (crushed between the canal and railway embankments).



A view of Grosvenor Meadows taken in the early 1900s from the Kennet & Avon Canal. In the centre is Chestnut Cottage and its surrounding gardens, greenhouses &c. To the right, Grosvenor Suspension Bridge is also visible, together with the rooftops of the Cremorne Pleasure Gardens. The river lies behind the railway embankment, and the fishing lake is hidden behind the tree on the left.

Early 20th century to the Present

It was not until the opening of the 20th century that Kensington Meadow saw any appreciable change, initially at the western end. In 1880 the stables of the Porter Butt Inn had been adopted as the depôt for the new horse-tram system, but when this was replaced by electric trams in 1904, a new depôt for the tramcars was opened in the Beehive Yard in Walcot Street. However, a year later it was decided to supplement the new system with motor buses, and York Villa and its grounds were acquired for a separate motor bus depôt. As the bus service expanded, another acre of land was taken out of the western end of Kensington Meadow, possibly before WWI.

When, in June 1924, the rest of the meadow (about 7¹/₂ acres, at that time divided into two fields) was put up for sale by the owner, Mr.R.P.Jones, it was decided by the Council Surveying Department that the opportunity should be taken to acquire the site, 'which would be suitable as a tip', for the price of £2,000. Despite a deputation of residents of Kensington Place and Grosvenor Place objecting to the use of the land for this purpose, the sale was confirmed in August. Several of the residents subsequently offered to purchase the land from the Corporation, but this was declined and the City Engineer was instructed 'to commence tipping as soon as possible'.

The Sports Grounds

In the event, this did not happen until much later. Already in the early 1900s, the eastern field (like many other meadows in the immediate vicinity of Bath) was already being rented out as a cricket ground, whilst the western end contained several tennis courts. Not only was the Corporation satisfied to continue with these arrangements, but encouraged the further use of the fields for sports. The western field, for example, was used as a Rugby football pitch by St.Stephen's R.F.C., who in 1925 were granted a rent rebate of a half (£7.10s) on the grounds that 'owing to the flooded condition of the meadows they had not been able to use them except on one occasion this season'. This was a common request from tenants over the next twenty years or so. Other events included the annual Larkhall Flower Show over the August Bank Holiday, the Liberal (Party) Fête and, later, the Bath & Twerton Cooperative Society Fête. The annual rent for the cricket pitch was £10 (to Canning's College), the football pitch £15, and the Flower Show £12.10s. The tennis courts however seem to have disappeared by the 1930s, together with some old sheds at the entrance, later replaced by a small sports pavilion. The fishing rights were also rented out - to the Bristol Adult Schools Angling Club at 25s.per annum, but offers to rent were also invited from local angling clubs. However, an enquiry by the proprietor of the Bathwick Boating Station to be allowed a strip of land on the river bank, and 'to plant shrubs and trees thereon', could not be pursued, as the land was already let. Another request, to rent a half-acre for use as a fowl-run, was apparently also unsuccessful.

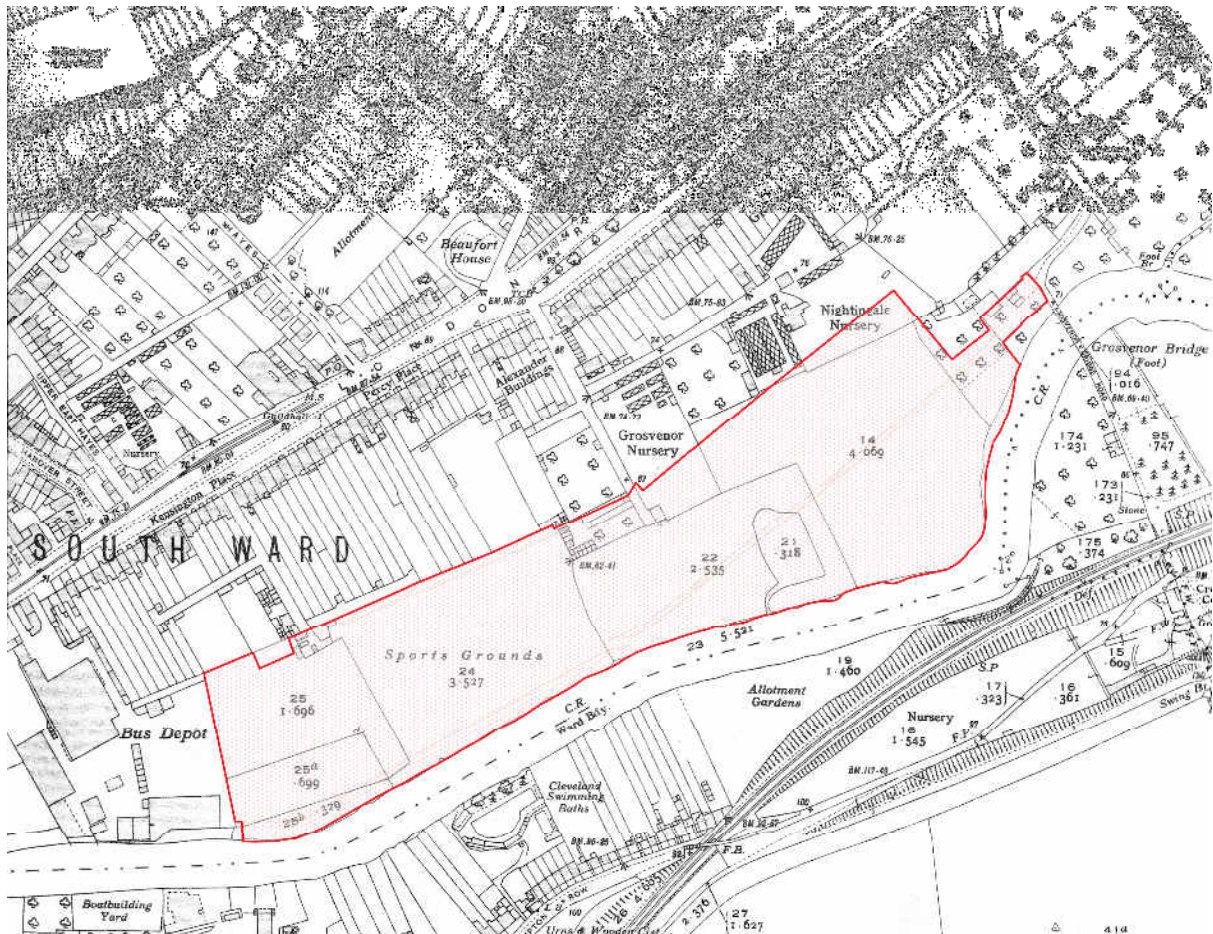
By the 1930s developments elsewhere in the town (mainly to do with the increase in motor traffic) were also to have an impact. They meadows were chosen, for example, as a temporary site for 'tenants of yards and premises who will be displaced in connection with carrying out the improvement scheme under the Bath Corporation Act of 1925', although there is no further information about it. However, an offer by the Bath Electric Tramways Ltd to purchase another acre of land from the meadow for their bus depôt was recommended by the City Improvements Committee, and in October 1930 the land was sold for £500. Again there appears to have been some concern about the appearance of the meadow when a request was made that 'the corrugated iron buildings on the land which was recently part of the meadows should be painted'. Although this was quickly remedied by the Tramways Motor Co., the request that 'trees should be planted on the river bank' does not appear to have been taken up by the Council.

The Children's Playground

More important perhaps was the increasing concern in the city about children's education. The Education Committee had made frequent requests for elementary school children from Walcot Boys' and other schools to use the eastern field for games in the summer and, (when possible) in winter, but these could only be arranged through the tenants. The Watch Committee, who were also concerned with children playing in streets, suggested that it should be adapted as a playground. Eventually, in March 1938 it was recommended that the meadow ('which was acquired in 1924 for tipping purposes') should be appropriated for children's playing fields, and in September the whole site was transferred to the

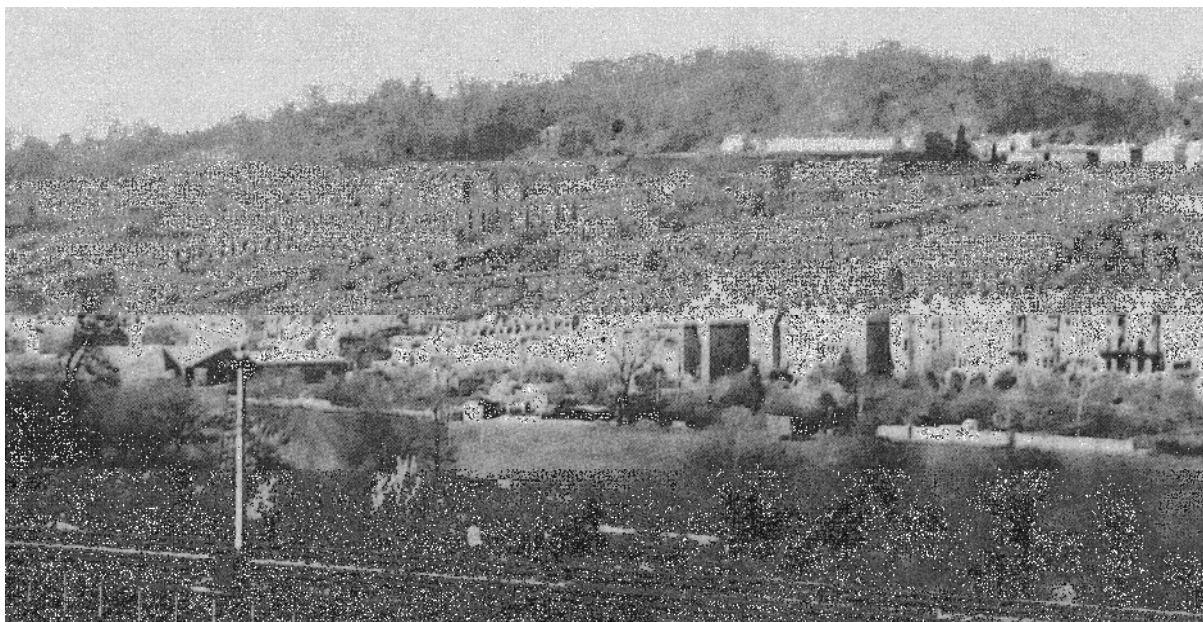
Education Committee for the sum of £2,000. Consent to the exchange was issued in the following year by the Minister of Health for the purposes of the Education Act (Elementary) 1921.

Accordingly, a new layout of the playing field was prepared in 1939, and a groundsman, Mr.T.H.Pitson, appointed at £2.10s per week, with a temporary assistant during his absence. A motor mower was purchased from R.Membery, Ltd, Bath, for £58.16s, and stable near the meadow was rented at £7.10s p.a. to accommodate the groundsman's equipment, motor mower, games materials, &c. Tenders were also put out for fencing, 'to be erected the length of the playing fields to prevent access to the river'. During the summer holidays the meadows were to be available to children from 9am to 9pm on weekdays and Saturdays; the 17th (1st Walcot) Scouts were also allowed to use the meadows on Friday evenings for cricket at 2s 6d per occasion.



The study area (marked in red) as shown on the OS 25 inch map of 1936. The bus depot has appeared at the end of Kensington Meadows, then sports grounds, together with the nurseries on the north side of Grosvenor Meadows.

At the same time it was decided that the surface of the western field, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres, should be raised 3 feet above the existing lowest point, presumably to provide a level ground rather than to avoid flooding. Tipping was evidently now necessary, although this was delayed so that 'consideration could be given to the question of draining the land by means of cutting away parts of the bank near the river'. An application of the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Co.Ltd for permission to tip material on the meadow to support a retaining wall on their land was not approved, but in April 1940 it was recommended that 'part of meadows be offered as a free tip for suitable hard core material, the groundsman to prepare the area for tipping and to supervise generally'.



An undated photograph of Kensington Meadow, presumably taken in the 1930s, before tipping. The bus depôt is visible on the far left, with the hedge boundary with Grosvenor Meadow coming into view on the right.

The Second World War

By this time of course the country was at war, and in October 1942, a few months after the attack on Bath, it was recorded that ‘the proposals of the City Engineer with reference to the levelling of these meadows were submitted and approved’ – confirmation it would seem of the local legend that bomb damage was tipped on at least part of the meadows. Surface shelters were suggested by the ARP for the playing fields in 1941, and early in 1943, after the bombing, permission was given to erect two prefabricated Maycrete huts on Kensington meadows to provide emergency accommodation. It is not clear whether either of these works were carried out, but meals were made available in a ‘British Restaurant’ (dubbed the ‘Riverside’) in one of these huts sited beside the river behind the Porter Butt inn. This building has continued to serve a variety of purposes since then, including a Day Nursery and (presently) a Youth Centre.

However, in 1944 topsoil loam was already being spread over the infill of the meadow, and early in 1946 the ground on the west side was opened for football and for the Victory Celebrations Committee in June. Various new facilities now appeared, including a hired motor roller and the installation of a lavatory near the river. It was probably also at this time that some form of small pavilion or hut was erected near the entrance gate from Kensington Place. It was possibly also about this time that an electricity power line was put through to Bathampton carried on three pylons situated along the southern edge of the field by the river.

There seems to have been an immediate rush to use these fields, such that, by September 1946 the Education Committee had great difficulty in scheduling all the applications ‘in view of the acute shortage of school playing fields in the City’. The schools involved during this period were Walcot Secondary Modern, Walcot Council Boy’s School, Kensington High School, Oldfield Boy’s School, Bath School Sports Association (on Saturday mornings), and the Youth Service Organisations (on Saturday afternoons). Unsurprisingly, a complaint was received from a resident in Kensington Place about damage to their garden by children, requesting reinstatement of a fence.

In 1946 work also seems to have started on filling the eastern field, the Bath Gas Company being granted facilities for free tipping there, and in 1947 the City Engineer was authorised ‘to commence the controlled tipping at the eastern end of this playing field and to proceed ultimately with the western end until the whole of the field is raised to one level’. It was presumably at this stage that the decision was made to raise the infill to its present level, several feet higher than the original three feet authorised in

1939. For this purpose, approval was given to share the cost (£50) of the hire of a bulldozer, and tenders were invited for delivery of 200 cubic yards of topsoil at an estimated cost of £175.

In April 1949, while the eastern field was reaching completion, the Surveying Committee made the recommendation that the Grosvenor meadows further east (about 7¹/₂ acres including the fishing lake) should also be acquired, as it 'would also be needed for controlled tipping purposes and ultimately for use as a playing field'. This was approved in April, sanction being requested from the Minister of Health to borrow £1,515. Following the purchase, it was agreed in early 1950 that until it was required for tipping, the land could be used for a temporary soccer pitch and as a site for short-stay caravans, as well as for grazing. From this time onward the two areas, Kensington Meadows and Grosvenor Meadows, have remained amalgamated into one.



Detail from a large scale OS map of c.1950 showing Kensington Meadow in a transitional state of tipping. The adjoining Grosvenor Meadow is not yet affected, but an electricity line runs across both towards Bathampton.

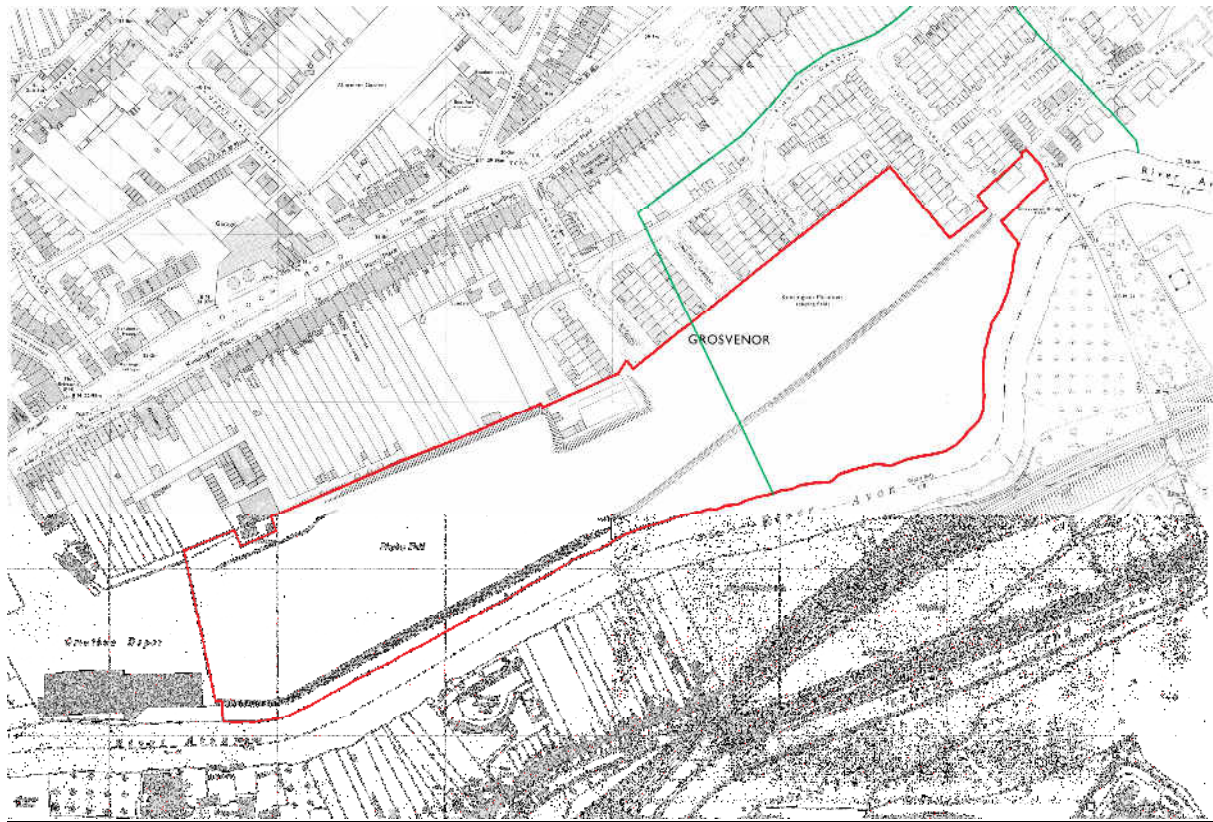
The title 'Villa Fields' is misplaced, and belongs to the opposite side of the river in Bathwick, behind the boating station.

Ringswell Gardens

By the early 1960s the tipping was complete, the bank separating the raised playing field from the river being provided with a fine revetment of coursed Bath Stone slabs, and planted (it would seem) along the edge of the western section with trees, mainly Ash. At the eastern end however, the bank was directed away from the river, across the bend below Grosvenor Bridge, to allow the free flow of flood water to escape from Pile Corner, leaving a triangular area now covered with willows and other wet woodland vegetation at natural river level. The fishing lake which occupied this area was also filled in at this time, although its outlines can still be traced among the trees, together with the connecting dyke to the river.

Until this time the garden grounds behind Grosvenor Place had not been affected. Before this, the connection with the College appears to have already been broken in 1882 when it was replaced by the 'Grosvenor Ladies' College' which continued through to 1932. The building subsequently served as a warehouse and, in the 1960s, a youth club (precursor of the famous 'Keel Club' at Bathampton Mill) before returning to residential use. The gardens themselves however were acquired in about 1894 by William Webb, Nurseryman and Florist (formerly a carpenter and builder in Southgate Street) for a market garden known as Nightingale Nursery based around 'Chestnut Cottage', the latter accordingly renamed 'Nightingale House'. Throughout the early 20th century, OS maps show the grounds progressively occupied by greenhouses and orchards, those on the west side of the house as 'Grosvenor Nursery', suggesting perhaps the involvement of more than one concern. However, after WWII new housing was already beginning to appear in Grosvenor Park to the east, and during the 1960s the housing development now known as Ringswell Gardens was progressively extended westward by Messrs. Beazer and Son, resulting in the complete disappearance of the Nurseries. This made it possible to rationalise the

irregular outlines of the playing field at the east end, and in the late 1960s various corners of land were exchanged to produce the regular shape of today. It was also about this time that the electricity pylons were removed from the field.



Kensington Meadows in 1973, following the completion of Ringswell Gardens. The outlines of the Grosvenor pleasure gardens are shown in green

The Supermarket

The main change in recent years has followed the building of a supermarket store on the site of the bus depôt in 2000, which provided the opportunity to improve access to the meadows. To the original entrance from Kensington Place has been added two new entrances, one through the supermarket itself at the west, the other from Grosvenor Bridge Road on the east, linked with a gravelled footpath along the river bank. Near the old entrance the sports pavilion, long fallen out of use, still remains behind its fence, though now buried under thick vegetation.

Conclusions

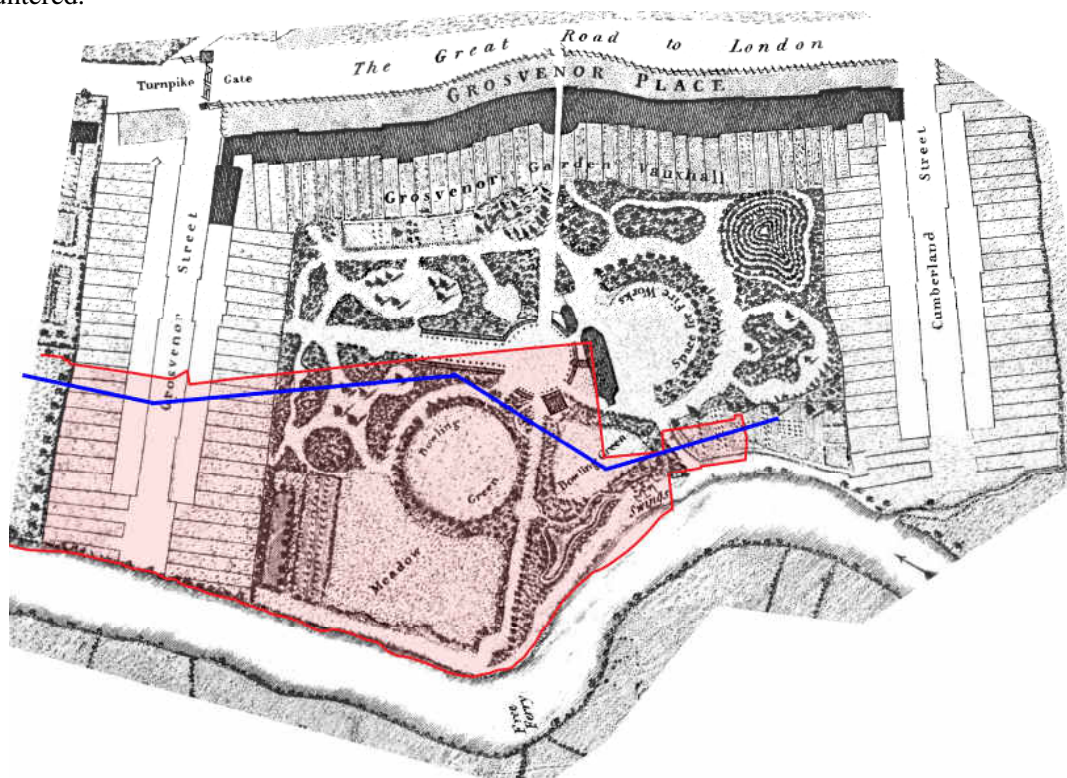
Despite the lack of standing remains, the Grosvenor Gardens are now of particular historical interest (recorded on the Council Sites and Monument Record – site MBN 11405), and contain several areas of high archaeological potential. A large proportion of the original garden space (about 50%, including part of the Banqueting Hall and Orchestra) lies within the north-western sector of the study area, and although buried under a layer of tipping, is archaeologically accessible.

The feature most easily identified is the fishing lake, the outlines of which are still visible, which may provide evidence of the Grosvenor Gardens swimming bath, one of the earliest examples of open-air lidos in the country. It is also possible that other features of the gardens have survived in the area below Pile Corner, such as the Serpentine Lake, although this is less likely.



The outlines of the fishing lake lie in the wet ground visible among the trees on the left. In the foreground, the line of the connecting dyke can be seen crossing the footpath, towards the river on the right.

It now appears that other important structural features of the gardens survived after their closure, the most notable being the walls of the Saloon or Banqueting Room, which are clearly shown on later maps until at least WWI. Smaller features seem also to have been adapted within the garden grounds of Chestnut Cottage, and in 1948 Ison recorded seeing a fragment of a building there in the form of an arch decorated with Doric columns, forming part of a rotunda. Any standing features of this kind were almost certainly destroyed when Ringswell Gardens were built, and much of the surface would have already been disturbed when the grounds were converted to market gardening. An archaeological watch taken during the Bath Pollution Prevention Scheme, 1995-1998 (SMR report EBN 2797) found no stratigraphic evidence of gravel walks and plantations, although subsurface structures such as sewers and drains were encountered.



The coverage of the study area (in red) over the original Grosvenor pleasure gardens. The blue line represents the approximate line of the Bath Pollution Prevention Scheme survey.



Details of Chestnut Cottage gardens, from the OS 1:500 map of 1885, showing the outline of the walls of the former Banqueting Hall enclosing a small garden (A). Above it in the next plot, is a small plunge bath (B) and in front of the house, a rotunda (C). In the adjoining field below is a spring (D), and a small pool, (E).

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