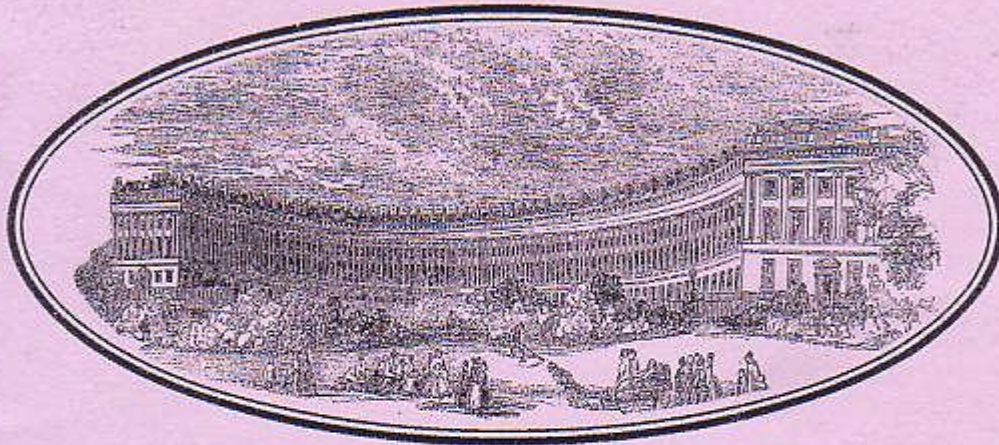


THE ROYAL CRESCENT SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER

ISSUE NUMBER 52

WINTER 2003



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FOR 4TH JANUARY 2004*

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Residents and Members,

We have had a very musical few months in the Crescent, what with the Three Tenors Concert on the Lawn in August and the Julian Slade and Friends concert in the Royal Crescent Hotel in October. There was much demand for both events, including a waiting list for tickets for the latter evening, organised jointly by the Royal Crescent Society and the Royal Crescent Club.

In this issue Stephen Little continues his fascinating description of how the Royal Crescent has been described over the centuries, concluding with the writings of artists and authors. Jenny Hardisty also writes about how the Lawn was maintained over the years following its laying out, and Michael Daw gives us the story of the telephone box outside Number 1.

Thanks go to our Treasurer Jennifer Bereska and our advertisers for helping to make the Newsletter pay for itself. Please make a point of supporting those who have taken space in the *Newsletter*.

Stephen Conlin, No.29.

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Published by the Royal Crescent Society

Hon. President

Sir John Barraclough, KCB, CBE, DFC, AFC, FRSA

Hon. Vice-Presidents

The Right Hon. The Earl of Stockton

The last issue heralded a special meeting of the Society in September to discuss the way forward for the Crescent Lawn Company (CLC), which was formed to hold the title of the Lawn and its boundaries and to manage the same on behalf of Royal Crescent residents.

The Company's directors were gratified to find that the consensus of opinion at that meeting was fully in support of what they had proposed. The revised Memorandum and Articles of Association have now been forwarded to Companies House, and the application for charitable status, comprising a considerable bundle of papers, has been sent to our solicitor, who has been recommended as an expert in this field, to be put to the Charity Commission in the best possible light.

It is believed that the last obstacle to the progress of the Heritage Lottery Fund grant for the Railings and Ha-ha Restoration project in partnership with B&NES has thereby been removed. The next stage is the historical research which HLF has stated it wishes to do to aid in deciding the exact specifications. The research already done by Mrs Jenny Hardisty into the Society's own archives will help to shorten this phase and our thanks are due to her for her continued efforts on our behalf.

Following on from the success and popularity of the Three Tenors concert, future use of the Lawn for such events was also discussed at the Special General Meeting. There was general agreement that use should be permitted, but only for events which were occasional, special and appropriate to the setting of the Crescent. Accordingly the CLC board has drawn up a list of guidelines for use of the Lawn and has written to the relevant B&NES department heads to inform them of the Society's views on this matter.

Inspection of the Ha-ha after the Three Tenors concert, and comparison with a series of photographs taken in 2000 as well as those taken shortly before the concert, revealed some deterioration in its condition, not all attributable to the concert. The CLC therefore arranged for B&NES to undertake temporary repairs to the worst spots with a view to slowing down further damage before the full restoration and avoiding a consequent escalation in total costs. Wessex Water have agreed to make a contribution towards this

B&NES has now published its World Heritage Site Management Plan, which acknowledges the importance of sites such as the Royal Crescent in attaining Bath's status as a World Heritage Site. This lengthy document can be bought at Trimbridge House, or can be read or downloaded free from the B&NES website (www.bathnes.gov.uk).

Elsewhere in this issue you will find details of the Society's annual Festive Dinner on January 4th, for which invitations are enclosed. I hope this event will continue to be as well supported as it has been in recent years. Any profits will go to the Restoration Appeal Fund.

Stephen Little

Julian Slade and Friends: 2nd November 2003

The Royal Crescent Society and the Royal Crescent Club held a musical evening with wine and *canapés* in the Royal Crescent Hotel.

Four performers gave the full house an evening to remember, with songs and excerpts from Julian Slade's musicals, the most famous of which is *Salad Days*. The actor/singers Lisa Bowerman, Christopher Dickins and Stephen Carlile were accompanied on the piano by Julian Slade himself; his solo rendition of a song about charitable committees clearly rang bells with many of those in the audience.

Julian Slade's career began almost immediately after he came down from Cambridge. He worked on several musicals in Bristol, including *Christmas in King Street*, which was later transposed for the West End stage. *Salad Days*, he reported, had been put together in a matter of weeks for a summer show. It later ran for many years in London and the provinces and was filmed for television in the 1980s.

Miss Bowerman previously played in *Salad Days* in London, and she and her fellow performers gave a beautiful rendition of the song *We said we wouldn't look back*.

The evening was great success, with profits going to the Railing and Ha-ha Restoration Appeal. It is hoped that Stephen Carlile and friends will perform a similar evening of Noël Coward songs in the coming year.

The Chairman and the Committee

of the Royal Crescent Society

look forward to meeting you at the Society's

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JULIAN ROAD, BATH - EASY PARKING

It is a regular feature of all the 'Crescents' and many of the 'Places' in Bath that the frontage overlooks a grassed area, which is a substitute for a front garden. In the case of the Royal Crescent this grassed area of lawn extends towards The Royal Victoria Park. The Ha-ha was built to delineate between the private grassed area and the public park, thus providing an uninterrupted view. It is believed that the Royal Crescent Ha-ha is one of the very few urban ha-has remaining in the country.

The Ha-ha was built simply to separate the private lawn from the public park and hence the wall acts merely as a facing wall rather than a revetment, and is not therefore required to hold back a great weight of soil.

Archaeological investigations have shown that when first built, the centre of the ditch was about one metre deeper than at present, and much more of the wall was exposed. Unfortunately the bottom of the ditch was of clay and the accumulated rainwater was unable to drain away. This situation was plainly unacceptable and relatively soon after its formation the ditch was partially filled in. During investigations by Wessex Archaeology a few years ago late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century bottle-glass and pottery was found amongst the infill which bears out this theory and also helps to date the construction of the Ha-ha. The base of the wall exposed during the archaeological investigations showed it to be in sound condition as it has been protected in the intervening years by being buried. The top of the wall is not horizontal, as one might expect, but higher at the east and west ends than at the centre.

Exhaustive searches have been made to demonstrate whether or not the building of the Ha-ha is contemporary with the building of the Royal Crescent. No documentation has been discovered to confirm this belief and early lithographs and engravings have proved unreliable. For example Watt's engraving dated 1794 shows the Ha-ha *in situ*, but that of Nattes dated 1804 does not show it at all. However the late eighteenth-century glass and pottery found by the archaeologists amongst the infill in the bottom of the ditch indicate the approximate date.

What is certain is that the area in front of the Crescent was designated for the enjoyment of the residents of the Royal Crescent and to improve the vista from the residences. In a sample *Indenture of Release* dated 20 December 1766 the new owner had to undertake that no buildings of any

kind, nor plants, shrubs or trees of any kind were built or planted on the lawn. The new owner had to create 'iron rails or pallsadoes' to enclose the lawn, and tanks under the lawn to collect water for the use of the houses in the Royal Crescent. This being the case it is reasonable to suppose the delimitation between the lawn and public park had to be marked in some way if the lawn was raised to accommodate the water storage tanks. How better to achieve this than to create a raised lawn and ha-ha? In the event the water storage tanks never were installed.

Maintenance, based on voluntary donations and contributions from residents, has been carried out since 1825. Records of the 'Committee for Improving the Royal Crescent Lawn' exist for the years 1825 to 1899 and these have been perused as to the maintenance of the Ha-ha wall. The following extracts have been taken from these:-

1843 repairs were carried out;

1848 repairs and fixing stones at the East and West ends;

1849 in April and November repairing, pointing and replacing stones;

1855 repairing and pointing wall;

1885 repairing the wall;

1888 deepening the ditch;

1892 more repairs and;

1897 extensive repairs were carried out *viz.* replacing sixty-eight defective stones, rebuilding 300 feet of wall in different places, point the whole of 470 feet with coal ash mortar together with clearing out the ditch and leveling the sloping bank (all this at a cost of only £22.16s.0d).

It is now well over two hundred years since the Ha-ha was built and we all know what a sad state it is now in. Roll on the day when work starts to restore the wall and redefine the ditch to a more acceptable state.



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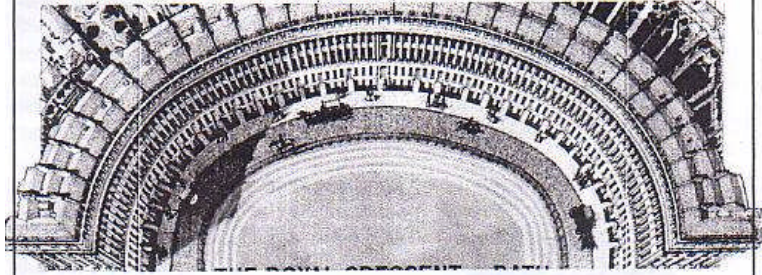
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The Upper Lawn: The setting of the Royal Crescent

The Royal Crescent in Bath was built between 1767 and 1775 to the design of John Wood the Younger, and forms a semi-ellipse of thirty Grade I listed houses arranged around a great lawn. This lawn was an integral part of John Wood's design for the Crescent; the deeds to each house refer to 'the grass plott intended to be in front of the said Crescent for ever afterwards'.

How writers regard the Royal Crescent

Architectural historians and other writers have found the setting of the Royal Crescent reminiscent variously of an English country house, a theatre, a seaside promenade, and a garden city, and have referred to this setting thus:

'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.' Composer Joseph Haydn in 1794, quoted by H.C. Robbins-Landon, *Haydn in England*, 1976.

'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.'
The Original Bath Guide, 1811.

'But in point of dignity and bold conception, the design of the Circus must yield to that of 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.' Mowbray Green, *The 18th Century Architecture of Bath*, 1904.

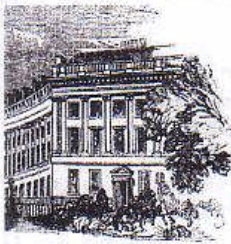
'The Younger Wood's Royal Crescent is beyond question the summit of the Palladian achievement in Bath, providing a splendid

climax to the monumental sequence begun with Queen Square. Approached from the Circus through Brock Street, with its relatively modest houses, the full majesty of the Crescent, with its superb sweep of Ionic columns facing an open prospect, creates an overwhelming impression'. Walter Ison, *The Georgian Buildings of Bath*, 1948.

(The Royal Crescent) 'is a large half-ellipse facing down a grassy slope, nowadays into the fine and varied trees of the Victoria Park, originally just into fields. Yet, even so, the conception of an open composition was something new in town-planning, and something very English, although the idea came perhaps from Prior Park, that is the villas of Palladio. It was here applied for the first time to a terrace of houses, and moreover the shape of the Crescent was here employed for the first time.' Nikolaus Pevsner, *North Somerset and Bristol, Buildings of England series*, 1958.

'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.' Charles Robertson, *Bath: An Architectural Guide*, 1975.

'...one of the most splendid *tours de force* of European design, the Royal Crescent. It lies there in a shallow arc, its wide lawns running away beyond the ha-ha down the hill below, and all is suddenly space, and green, and leisure. Though the Crescent is architecture on a truly palatial scale, and reminds many people of Versailles, to me it suggests far more pungently the seaside. It is like the grandest of all rows of seaside villas, standing on a promenade before a sea of grass'. Jan Morris, *Introduction to Bath: An Architectural Guide*, by Charles Robertson, 1975).



'Wood's Royal Crescent is carefully sited within the landscape

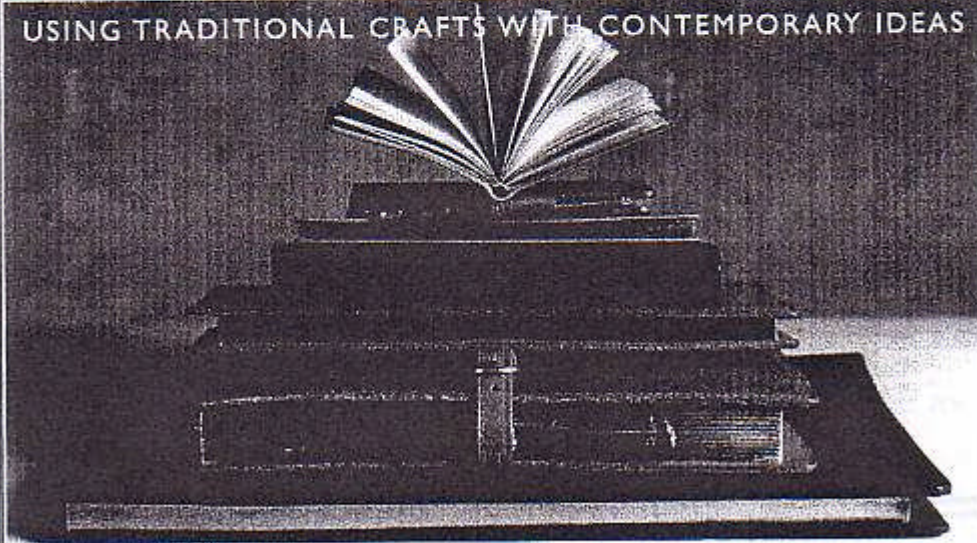
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and this is essential to the success of the building which rises from what is now a gently sloping lawn. This space was perhaps the only response to the scale and monumental style of the building. It was also in keeping with the, by then, fashionable landscapes of Capability Brown. Pevsner says of Royal Crescent, 'Nature is no longer the servant of architecture. The two are equals. The Romantic Movement is at hand.' '...Royal Crescent reflects the later fashionable 'Brownian' landscape of a country house rising from the turf of a parkland setting'. Christopher Pound, *Genius of Bath*, 1986.

In 1973 the editor of the Apollo magazine pronounced Bath 'a city where the old tag from Martial '*rus in urbe*' rings true - its special features include vistas that open out from street to street, from square to square, and from the city to the verdant surroundings.'

Bath 'remains one of the very few cities of any importance where this antique combination of splendid city life within, and lovely country at hand, still survives in perfection. It is a real - almost the only - Garden City.' Frederic Harrison, *Cornhill Magazine* April 1914.

Girouard maintained that 'With Royal Crescent the Bath style reached maturity. The pursuit of a civilized society and the pursuit of health and nature were fused together' (Girouard, *English Town*). Peter Borsay, *Image of Georgian Bath*, 2000)

'The concept of uniting a terrace of town houses with a classical palace frontage continues in the Royal Crescent, but for the first time with the character of a country house. ...the Royal Crescent theatrically embraces its elevated site, overlooking, like a vast stage set, the landscape beyond.' Michael Forsyth, *Pevsner Architectural Guide to*

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This is the story of a box. It begins in the 1950s, with an old, long gone, but once respected, organisation called 'The GPO' or simply 'The Post Office'. It alone was responsible for the Royal Mail, and for things called 'telegrams' usually used only for emergencies and the receipt of which usually caused panic. It also provided the country's only telephone service.

In those far-off days, making a telephone call was almost an adventure. Not everyone could afford or even obtain a telephone at home and those who did invariably had just one telephone 'instrument' - immovably fixed in the cold, unheated hall. Like Ford cars, these instruments came in any colour as long it was black and they were also big, heavy and slow to use. Getting one installed depended on not just whether there was a telephone line near your home, but also on the whim of the GPO: some people waited years.

So, many people used the public telephone boxes which the GPO scattered about (not too liberally - perhaps one per village) in places likely to generate revenue from their use. Calls were not too expensive, but carrying enough of the heavy pre-decimal coinage was bothersome and most calls were consequently fairly short. The days of endless chat had not yet arrived, especially for the as yet unidentified 'teenagers'.

However, the GPO did do two things which preserve its name in glory for ever. Firstly it engaged the master architect Giles Gilbert Scott to design a series of telephone 'kiosks' named variously the K2, K3, *et seq.* The K6, designed to commemorate King George V's Jubilee in 1935, was to become so famous that it became an icon of the country, appearing on posters and postcards.

Its popularity stemmed as much from the robust, satisfying and perceived Britishness of the design, as from the GPO's second masterstroke of choosing to paint it in its own corporate colour of dazzling red, sometimes with the Royal Crown picked out in gold. The colour not only made the box easy to see, but helped it become a cherished and familiar embellishment of the town and country scene.

And so the time came, in 1952, to place a K6 for the convenience of residents and visitors around the Royal Crescent. The site, under a tree and at the junction of so much unspoiled Georgian architecture gave the GPO

pause. Was the colour after all perhaps a bit garish for such a position, surrounded by all that ancient and elegant Bath stone? Would something softer, more self-effacing be appropriate? The endless Committee meetings and correspondence for such a unique departure from national practice can only be imagined.

But the result was plain for all to see. The box was painted differently. A delicate shade of battleship grey was chosen - perhaps also acknowledging the large Royal Naval contingent living and working in Bath during World War II and still here at the time. As a nod to the GPO's corporate colour, the frame of each of the small panes of glass was picked out in the traditional bright red.

Much later the GPO and its successor BT's monopoly grip on the telephone service both died, though BT continued to maintain most of the country's telephone boxes.

Meanwhile the conservationist movement had become a serious part of the Establishment and had set up the official system of Statutory 'Listing' of buildings worth preserving for posterity. One of the early structures to be so Listed - at Grade II - was the Royal Crescent kiosk. This may well have saved it from BT's ill-considered 1990s' programme to replace all such boxes with cheap and nasty glass shelters - which was stopped only by public horror and outcry, but too late to save several thousands. Many were sold at auction, ending up in design museums, private gardens and as shower cabinets!

The Listing entry for the Royal Crescent box recorded it as grey - unalterable without Listed Building and Planning Consents. And so it remained, surviving the installation of new machinery for decimal coinage, push-button dialling and other events, besides, sadly, becoming a sometime haunt for peddlers of 'recreational chemicals'. But its exterior remained and was many times repainted in its proudly unique livery for more than fifty years. Even the careless placing, in the 21st Century, of a brutish black coffin, or parking machine, too close to it served more to emphasise its superior style than detract from it.

That is, until mid-July 2003. Suddenly and in a matter of a few hours the box gleamed bright red! No Statutory Consents had been applied for or given and, even though the red is rather jolly and pretty, one wondered -



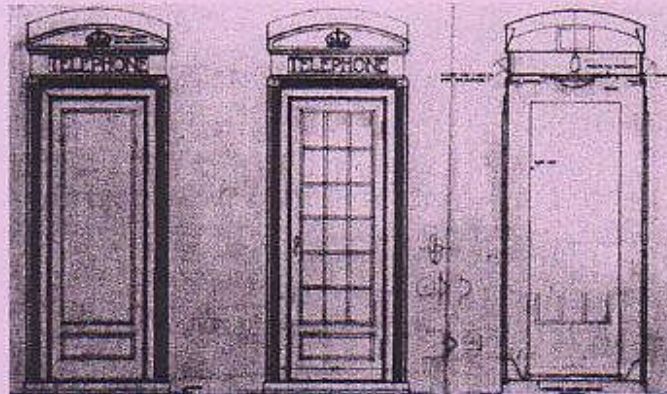
Gentle enquiries seeking an answer led to the Team Leader of BT's 'Payphone and Kiosks Customer Services Department'. He could not have been more helpful and open. Apparently each box has an individual case file, recording everything done to it, such as upgrading of equipment etc. But, whilst the Grade II Listing was clear, there was no record of an order for the colour change. Embarrassment! So he, in the office jargon of today, 'put an Issue on it' which required an 'action'.

A week later, as promised, he called back. His own embarrassment was, he said, as nothing compared with that of the individual responsible. It was not quite a case of 'heads will roll', but clearly the change of colour was unlawful without the necessary consents, etc., and so one particular head, its face as red as the new paint, was hung in shame. The change had apparently happened as part of an area-wide contract simply to paint all the boxes and the chaps were given only one colour of paint - red!

He also said that action would be taken to re-paint it grey so as to comply with the Statutory Listing requirement. Not quite the expected result of asking the motiveless and simple question 'why?', but an interesting exercise in testing officialdom and a surprisingly transparent and uncomplicated response.

Except of course that nothing has yet happened. A more recent enquiry on Hallowe'en, made so that this little story of the old grey box could be fairly up-to-date, revealed that the re-painting is still intended, and that BT's box-painting programme, which used to be confined to the drier months of March to October, has just been made continuous and year-round. So mind you don't trip over the grey paint-pots - eventually!

Michael Daw



left: the original design for K2.