



THE  
GEORGIAN  
GROUP

---

Geoffrey Tyack, 'John Nash and The Park Village', *The Georgian Group Journal*, Vol. III, 1993, pp. 68-74

# JOHN NASH AND THE PARK VILLAGE

Geoffrey Tyack

Regents Park has long been recognised as one of the triumphs of English urban design. Here John Nash recreated the Picturesque beauties of the landscaped country-house garden on the edge of the of the world's biggest metropolis, with a backdrop of gleaming stucco terraces evoking the glories of imperial Rome. The park provided the inspiration for countless urban landscapes on both sides of the Atlantic, but its significance does not end there. Tucked away beyond the north-eastern corner there is a small group of houses, Park Village East and West, which played an even greater part in the evolution of the modern city. For in this deceptively modest development Nash gave definitive form to the newly-emerging villa suburb, still for many people the most desirable setting for urban life.

The villa first emerged as an architectural entity in ancient Rome. It reappeared in Renaissance Italy and spread in due course throughout western Europe. By the early 18th century places like Richmond and Twickenham had already become favoured settings for aristocratic *villegiatura*, and by the end of the century most of the other villages within easy reach of London contained detached villas for successful merchants and professional people, often strung out along roads or facing greens or commons, like the houses of the high-minded Clapham Sect. So popular was the idea of villa life that Nash originally intended villas to be scattered throughout Regents Park, although in the end only a few were built, and those of a size which could only appeal (like those recently built to the designs of Quinlan Terry) to people of very substantial means.

Regents Park was laid out on Crown land, and at the north-eastern corner of the Park, beyond Albany Street, there was a seven-acre site which belonged to the Crown but had failed by 1823 to attract any speculative builders. This was partly, no doubt, because it faced onto the backs of the terraces and was bisected by a branch of the Regents Canal, one of Nash's speculative ventures. To the south, moreover, there was a barracks, and beyond it the canal basin, around which Nash laid out a market (the Cumberland Market) and streets of artisan and lower-middle-class housing. To the east lay the expanding settlement of Camden Town, whose drab charms were later to be poetically celebrated on canvas by Walter Sickert and his circle.

Nash offered to take a building lease of this constricted and somewhat unpromising piece of ground in June 1823, more, as he later said, "for amusement than profit".<sup>1</sup> But in his letter to Alexander Milne, one of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests – the government agency responsible for managing the Crown estate – he said that the proximity of the barracks would make the land suitable only for houses "of the smallest class". This, he believed, need not be detrimental to the Crown, either from an aesthetic or a social point of view. The houses could be "scattered about in an irregular manner, as Cottages with plantations between", and in this way "a very delightful Village might be formed through which the Canal would pass and if arranged with Taste and the Buildings truly to partake of the Cottage Character, the whole would become an ornamental feature", while at the same time providing suitable housing for the "humble yet the better sort of the class of people who require such small dwellings".<sup>2</sup> This rather vague reference to the potential clientele suggests that Nash had as yet given little thought as to who might actually choose to live in the houses.

It is obvious from a plan which Nash produced in December 1823<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 1) that he originally intended the village to be a larger and more spread-out version of the self-consciously rustic-looking “hamlet” he had designed for the retired employees of the Quaker banker John Harford at Blaise Castle near Bristol in 1810–11; indeed one cannot help wondering whether at this stage the ageing, childless Nash did not subconsciously see himself in a similar patriarchal role to that of Harford. The houses, some of them single cottages, some semi-detached pairs or groups of three, were to be arranged not around a green but on either side of two “village roads”, one of them (Park Village West) forming a loop on the western side of Albany Street and the other (Park Village East) meandering along the other side of the canal bank with another loop at the southern end. Trees would be carefully planted “to form & preserve the village character”, and larger plantations laid out to screen out “the more offensive parts of the cottages, separate them from each other & give intricacy to the scenery”.

Nash clearly wanted above all to avoid the bricky monotony of the normal London speculative building development of the 1820s. The serpentine windings of the streets would allow ample opportunities for arranging pleasing groups of houses and trees, and the presence of the canal in between the two parts of the village would add a further element of the “variety” so much admired by theorists and practitioners of the Picturesque, like his former partner Humphry Repton. The plan is enlivened by sketches of houses which were, according to Nash, “specimens of the kind of Buildings intended to be erected but may be varied enlarged or otherwise grouped as shall be required by the Proprietors”. Some are in the rustic neo-vernacular idiom already employed at Blaise Hamlet, others in a parsonage-like neo-Tudor, and there is one with a round cone-topped corner tower in the irregular Ital-

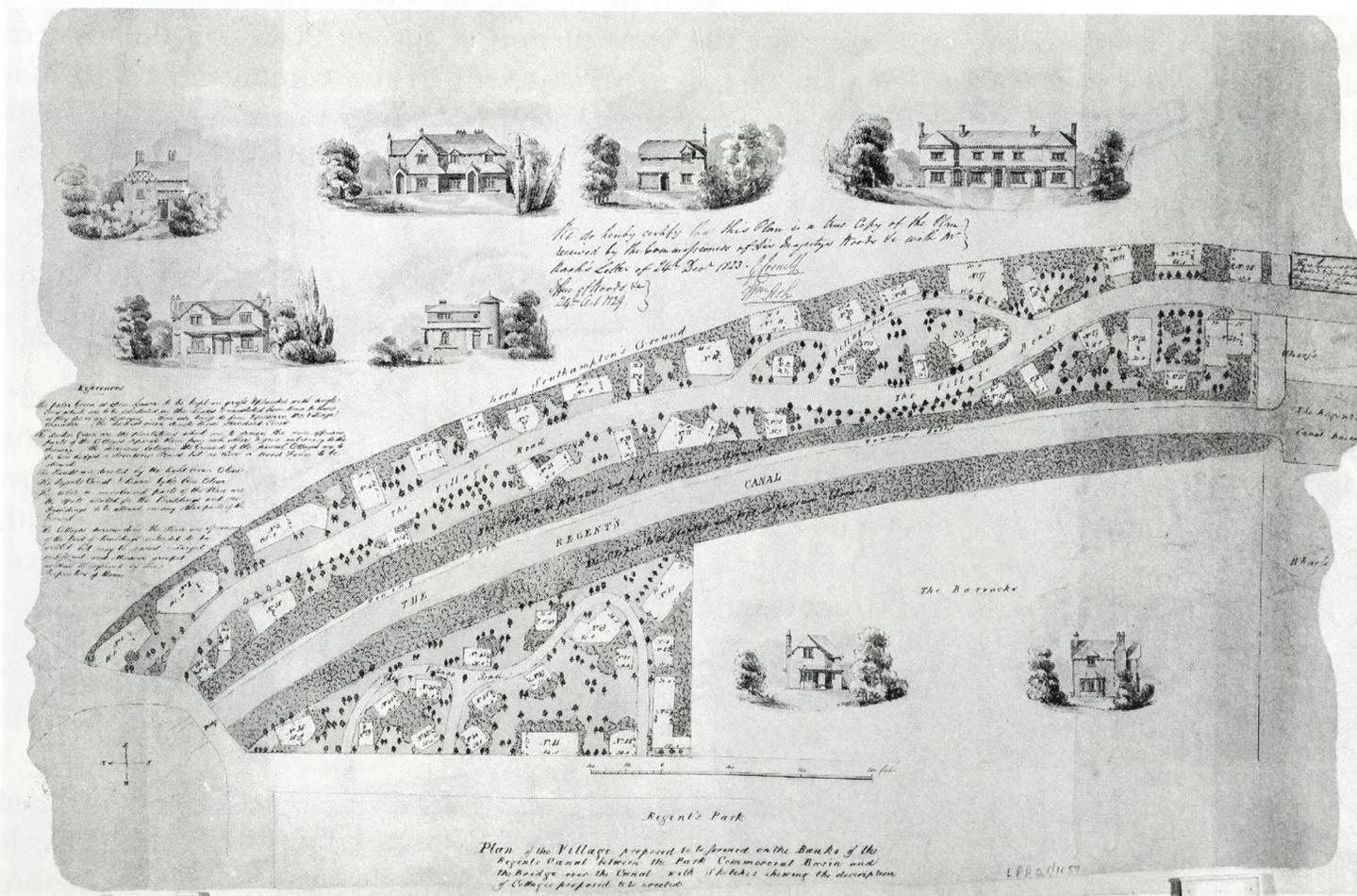


Fig. 1. John Nash, Plan for Park Village, 1823 (Public Record Office).

ianate style which Nash had deftly used in two of his earlier country houses, Cronkhill, Shropshire, and Sandridge Park, Devon, and which had been taken up by other architects like Robert Lugar in his *Architectural Sketches for Cottages, Rural Dwellings and Villas* (1805). These styles would all in their different ways conjure up those warm, communal feelings which the Romantics associated with the word "village". Oliver Goldsmith had bemoaned the desertion of a village; Nash would build a new one in suburban guise.

Nash was granted a 99-year building lease of the ground early in 1824, in which he agreed to pay a peppercorn rent for the first three years and then a rent of £5 per acre, going up by degrees to £40 per acre. The Crown was to make the main sewers and plant the trees, but Nash was to lay out the gardens and there were the usual covenants relating to the width of frontage (not less than 18ft per house) and the exclusion of obnoxious trades.<sup>4</sup> Nash was soon forced to come to terms with the fact that the cottages shown in his 1823 plan would not attract a wealthy enough clientele to make the speculation financially attractive. For all their charm, they were too small and too rustic-looking to appeal to the middle-class suburbanite with his family and servants. So the houses were re-designed on a larger scale and the village of 1823 became the villa suburb we see today. There was already a precedent for a middle-class settlement of this sort on the Eyre estate in St John's Wood, on the other side of Regents Park, a much larger development than the Park Village.<sup>5</sup> But although the development of St John's Wood was well under way by the 1820s, there is no evidence of there having been a single mind behind both the layout of the streets and the design of the houses. Nash can therefore take the credit for having initiated the first architect-designed villa suburb in London, and probably the world.

It took 14 years for the village to be built in its entirety. Work began in Park Village East, and by April 1825 craftsmen were being paid for plumbing and slating the "cottages", while in May 1826 there were payments for plasterwork on three houses to Joseph Brown, who had built one of the houses in the Quadrant in Regent Street. The builder, William Smith, had recently been responsible for the construction of Sussex Place, on the western side of Regent's Park.<sup>6</sup> A revised plan of the street was sent to the commissioners in May 1826,<sup>7</sup> and the houses on the eastern side were shown in a pair of illustrations by T. H. Shepherd in James Elmes's *Metropolitan Improvements* (1827), their shrub-filled gardens separating them from the roadway and from the banks of the canal (Fig. 2). Unlike the bijou cottages of the 1823 plan, these were substantial houses of brick and stucco, with basements for the kitchen on the canal side and three main reception rooms (drawing room, dining room and parlour or study) on the ground floor: a normal complement for early 19th-century middle-class villas.<sup>8</sup>

Externally, the rustic idiom proposed in 1823 was dropped in favour of a series of variations on the Italianate and Tudor-Gothic themes popularised in the pattern books of the time. There were many cunningly contrived variations in plan. Four of the houses (now numbers 6–8 and 10–12) were semi-detached – still a relative novelty at the time – with broad overhanging eaves and verandahs on the canal side. The remaining houses (numbers 14 and 16) were plain detached structures, but both had unconventional plans which suggest a degree of conscious experimentation. To the north, but not shown in Shepherd's view, there is a striking pair of semi-detached Gothic houses (numbers 2–4), designed to be "read" as a single house with details reminiscent of Nash's now-demolished Aqualate Hall, Staffordshire.

By 1829, when the estate was surveyed by Philip Hardwick,<sup>9</sup> four more semi-detached pairs had been built further south, one of them (numbers 18–20) in the Gothic style (demolished after damage in the Second World War); one (numbers 36–38) with bargeboard gables to the street front; and the other two (numbers 22–24 and 26–28) loosely Classical,

with an emphasis on the word “loose”. Numbers 22–24 (also called Albany and Sussex Cottages) were carefully designed to appear like a single house, with a slightly off-centre pediment on the street front and bands of rustication – a Nash speciality – across the facade, while numbers 26–28 (Piercefield and Wyndcliff Cottages) are distinguished by the presence of large arched windows within relieving arches on the slightly projecting end bays. These stand well apart from the common run of speculative housing of their date. There was also by 1829 a group of houses in the “island” formed by the so-called Serpentine Road at the southern end, including one with a conical roofed round tower in the Cronkhill manner.<sup>10</sup> These have all been demolished. The remaining houses on the canal side of the street (numbers 30 and 32–34) were built in the early 1830s.

The houses on the eastern side of the street came later, largely no doubt because they did not have the benefit of a view over the canal; only five had been built by 1831, but another 13 followed between then and 1834.<sup>11</sup> The attractions of this part of the development were, alas, severely diminished with the construction of the main line of the London and Birmingham Railway to Euston Station in 1836–38, an event memorably depicted in a well-known engraving by J. C. Bourne. When the line was widened in 1906 the eastern houses were demolished, so that today the front doors of the houses opposite look out onto a brick wall, with the roar of trains in and out of the station filling the cutting below – a far cry from the seclusion originally intended.

The houses in Park Village East display several of Nash’s mannerisms, and yet it is unlikely that he devoted very much time to the design of each individual building. The village was certainly his brainchild, and the building of the houses was organised from his office. But this did not preclude his delegating much of the detailed work to his assistants, especially since for most of the later 1820s he was preoccupied with the building of Buckingham Palace for George IV. A reference in his office ledger to “Mr Mathews village houses” suggests that one of the assistants involved in Park Village East was Charles James Mathews, a former pupil

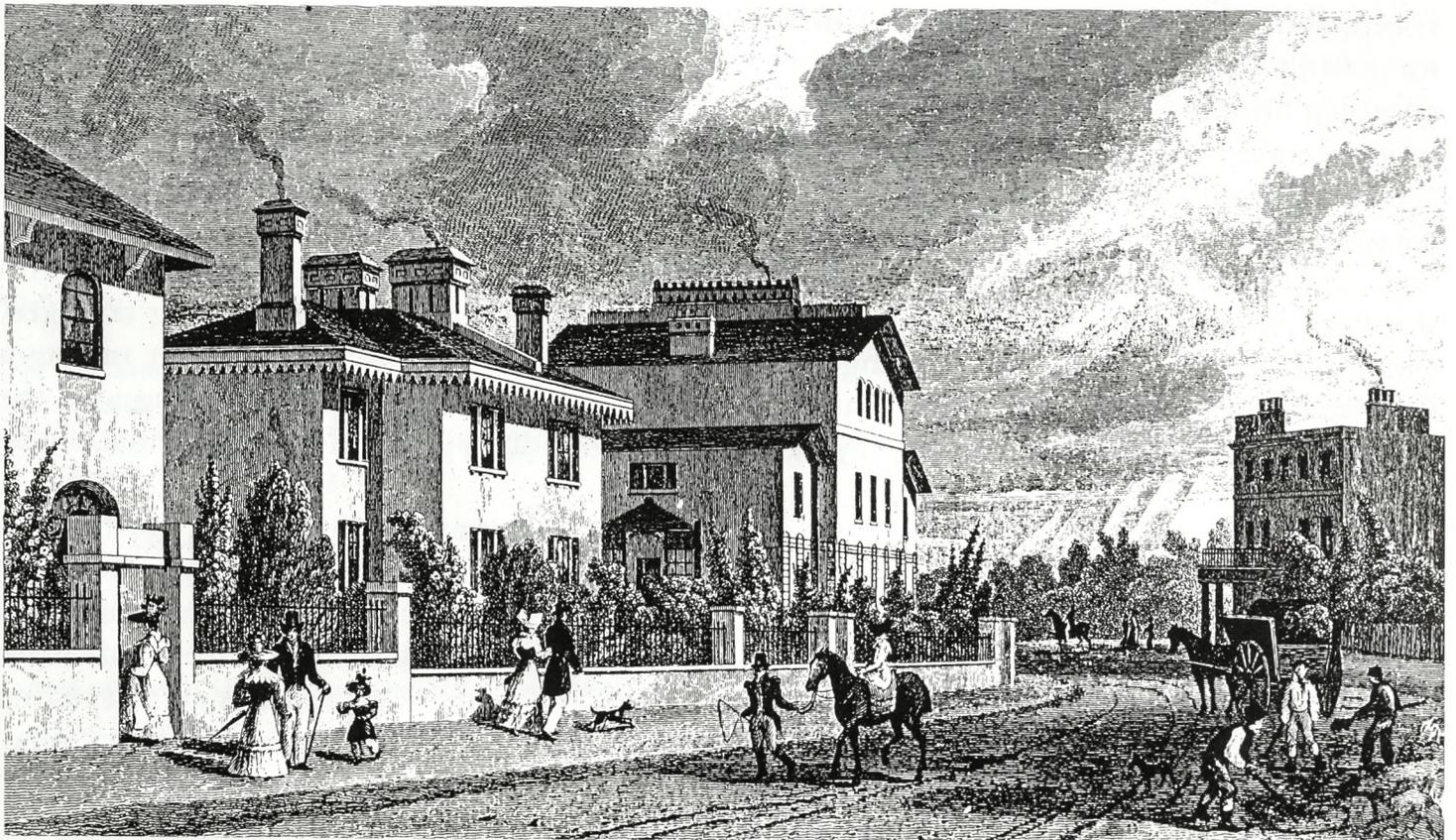


Fig. 2. Engraving of Park Village East.

of the French emigré artist Augustus Pugin, one of Nash's main collaborators; Mathews later became district Surveyor for Bethnal Green and Bow, but retired from architectural practice in 1835 to become an actor. Unfortunately, none of the original designs survive for any of the houses in either part of the village, so it is impossible to say who else, if anyone, was involved at this stage.

As developer of the site, Nash made his profit from selling the leases. Several of those in Park Village East were bought by Thomas Courtney Lancefield, who in turn sub-let the houses.<sup>12</sup> Other purchasers included Francis Joshua, a grocer and tea dealer in Regent Street, who was living at Wyndcliff Cottage in 1834, and Adam Duff, a wine merchant in the Regent Street Quadrant. The final occupiers of the houses were solidly middle-class, with a few academics like Cardinal Newman's brother, Professor of Latin at University College, London, who was living at number 14 in 1851.<sup>13</sup>

Nash's vision of a quasi-rural idyll may have vanished from Park Village East, but it can still be captured in Park Village West, which has fortunately remained intact save for the replacement of two of the houses (numbers 15–16) after war damage. Here the arrangement of the houses around a loop road meant that the development must always have had a cosier character than Park Village East, a character reinforced by the profusion of trees. The site remained empty until the middle of 1832, when Nash told the Commissioners of Woods and Forests that he was about to enclose the ground; two months later he said that the loop road needed to be built "in order that the Houses already built may be rendered fit for occupation".<sup>14</sup> These houses were at the southern end, and consisted of a terrace of seven rather plain two-storied houses with mildly Tudor details (numbers 1–7), and three larger houses (number 17–19) within the loop. Number 17 was designed in the spiky Tudor-Gothic manner which Nash had employed 30 years earlier at Longner Hall, Shropshire,<sup>15</sup> while numbers 18–19, which are joined together at the waist like Siamese twins, display the full picturesque repertoire of steep roofs, overhanging eaves, tall chimneys and bay windows. These are among the most attractive houses in the whole development.

Nothing was done about the rest of the site until the end of 1883. The loop road was completed in the spring of 1834, and in November the commissioners were discussing plans for letting the remaining plots on building leases.<sup>16</sup> By this time the 82-year-old Nash had given up his architectural practice to his former chief assistant, James Pennethorne, a cousin of his second wife (though not, despite salacious rumours, the illegitimate son of George IV). Nash had given Pennethorne an expensive training, including a spell in the drawing office of Augustus Pugin and a two-year stay in Rome, and had placed the management of some of his later metropolitan improvement schemes in his hands. Pennethorne had been involved with the Park Village since at least 1832, when he referred in his diary to "sketching cottages" there and making unspecified arrangements for the houses with Nash's business manager Charles Nixon.<sup>17</sup> When Nash retired he took over the whole project, corresponding with the commissioners and conceivably supplying, or at least modifying, the designs of most of the houses.

The later houses consist of a pair on the northern part of the "island" formed by Albany Street and the loop road (numbers 14–15), a smaller semi-detached pair (numbers 13–14) built between 1835 and 1837 at the corner of Albany Street, and three detached houses (numbers 10, 11 and 12) on the northern and eastern sides of the loop. All these houses were built in the Italianate manner, but as in Park Village East there is an interesting variety of treatment. Numbers 10 and 11 have plain facades, like those of many Regency villas, but number 14, facing Albany Street, is a paradigm of the tall three-storied double-fronted house found throughout the once-prosperous railway suburbs of mid-Victorian London.

The most striking house of all is number 12 (Tower House), an inventive essay in the

irregular villa style which had gained renewed popularity with the publication of books such as Charles Parker's *Villa Rustica* (1832). The entrance is in the base of an octagonal conical-roofed tower at the focal point of the loop road, and the main reception rooms occupy a bow-windowed block facing over the canal. The house was leased, along with the two adjoining plots, to Nash's doctor James Johnson, who was also physician to William IV, but he soon sublet it, and it later became the home of the successful Victorian genre painter William Powell Frith. It is impossible to say whether the final design was supplied by Nash or Pennethorne, but Pennethorne certainly examined the final lease after the house was finished in July 1834, and he used a similar octagonal tower in one of his very few country houses, Swithland Hall in Leicestershire. He went on in 1836–37 to design Christ Church, Albany Street, just to the south of the barracks, its neo-Classical austerity and plain stock brick elevations making a sharp contrast to the stuccoed whimsy of the Park Village and pointing the way towards his own mature style as an architect of public buildings. The last house to be built was number 8, at the south-eastern corner (now known as Casina Lodge), designed in 1838 on ground leased by a solicitor, Joseph Baxendale, who had already purchased the leases of numbers 1–7. The architect here was another of Nash's pupils, Charles Lee, who went into partnership after Nash's retirement with James Morgan, his former associate in the Regents Canal Company and the lessee of the ground immediately to the north of Park Village West.<sup>18</sup>

The Park Village is the *beau ideal* of the arcadian middle-class suburb. Its influence can be seen in most of the better-known 19th-century planned suburban communities, starting with Decimus Burton's Calverley Park estate at Tunbridge Wells (1827–28) and extending to places like Rock Park in Birkenhead, the Park estate at Nottingham and even the St John's College estate in North Oxford. The development was successful because Nash grasped the architectural implications of the restless individualism which has done so much to shape the modern world. One of the most striking things about the Park Village is the enormous variety of different architectural styles and house plans to be seen there. Nash understood that there was a large clientele of people from the professional and commercial middle classes who were prepared to pay for houses which satisfied their yearning to be different, to be private, and to enjoy the illusion of *rus in urbe*. He was able to articulate this commercial insight with the wit and panache which had been a hallmark of his work throughout his career. So, in his old age, this most inventive of architects made one of the most far-reaching 19th-century contributions to the way in which we live now.

## NOTES

1. *Parliamentary Papers* 1829, III, 118.
2. Public Record Office (PRO), Cres 2/778.
3. PRO, MPE 911. The plan is reproduced in John Summerson, *The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect*, 1980, pl. 37A.
4. PRO, Cres 2/778.
5. The development of St. John's Wood is discussed in Mark Girouard, *Cities and People* 1985, 276–78.
6. RIBA MS NAS/1 (Nash's office ledger for 1825–26); Summerson, *Nash*, 86, 120.
7. PRO, MR 1905/4.
8. There are measured drawings and ground plans of several of the houses in Park Village East and West, with information about some of the owners, in *Survey of London XXI*, 1949, 153–58. Some of the houses are also illustrated in M. Mansbridge, *John Nash: a Complete Catalogue*, 1991.
9. PRO, MPE 907.
10. Known only from a watercolour of c.1850 in Swiss Cottage Library (London Borough of Camden), Heal Collection A IX 64.
11. Swiss Cottage Library, St Pancras parish rate books.

12. PRO, Cres 2/778; MR 1905/3. I have been unable to discover who Lancefield was, but there was a firm of merchants of that name trading in Fenchurch Street and recorded in trade directories of the 1820s.
13. PRO, HO 107/1493.
14. PRO, Cres 2/778; Cres 6/155, 310.
15. In 1845 the lease was acquired by Lord John Manners on behalf of the first community of Anglican nuns to be set up since the Reformation: T. J. Williams & A. W. Campbell, *The Park Village Sisterhood*, 1965.
16. PRO, Cres 19/6, 226.
17. The diary was seen by the late Sir John Summerson in the 1930s, but it has since disappeared without trace. Numbers 1–7 are attributed to Pennethorne in Ann Saunders, *Regent's Park*, 1969, 118.
18. Cres 19/22, 119. Lee did a survey plan of the whole village in 1836: PRO, MR 1905/2.