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THE PRINCE REGENT'S ROLE IN THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF REGENT STREET AND REGENT'S PARK

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The creation of Regent Street and the development of Regent's Park was the largest single urban construction project undertaken to that date by the British government. It entailed the acquisition and redevelopment of houses along a line from Carlton House in Pall Mall to Langham Place, north of Oxford Circus, a distance of approximately one mile, together with the redevelopment of the 544 acre Marylebone Park. Initial planning began as early as 1797, and building, which got underway in 1815, lasted for some ten years. The initial cost was estimated at £314,000, but the final sum expended by the government was £1.7 million; this, of course, excluded the cost of the houses and buildings along the New Street and in Regent's Park, which was the responsibility of the various individual developers. The timing of the project was also interesting, because work was delayed until the final cessation of hostilities against France following the victory at Waterloo. The twenty odd years of war had left the British government with huge debts and an economy which was entering a serious post-war recession, which in turn would be exacerbated by the demobilisation of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and seamen. With the prospect of massive unemployment, the government was deeply concerned that serious public unrest could arise.

The project was under the overall control of the Office of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues, a government department which reported directly to the Treasury.¹ The Office had been systematically

reformed in the late eighteenth century by its then Surveyor-General, John Fordyce, and this process was continued after his death in 1809 by his successor, Lord Glenbervie.² Following Glenbervie's retirement in 1814 his position as the Office's First Commissioner was taken by William Huskisson, a close associate of Lord Liverpool with extensive business and economic expertise. In day to day control was the Office's Joint Secretary, Alexander Milne, an experienced and able senior civil servant.

Regent Street and Regent's Park were followed by a number of additional projects in London, including Suffolk Street and various improvements to the Charing Cross area, and these were, *inter alia*, chronicled in James Elmes's 1827 publication, *Metropolitan Improvements; or London in the Nineteenth Century*.

It has long been assumed that the Prince Regent was a prime mover in Metropolitan Improvements, and that he took a personal interest in the planning and design of Regent's Park and Regent Street. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, writing in 1934, identified Napoleon's improvements to Paris as being the inspiration for the development of the Park and Street, and he assumed the Prince Regent's was the guiding hand:

When the French Emperor had the Rue de Rivoli built, the English Regent must needs also have a splendid thoroughfare. The First Gentleman of England, however, wanted the street to form an artery leading from Carlton House to the country house he had planned to build surrounded by the big park with its fine views.³

In *John Nash, Architect to King George IV*, first published in 1935, John Summerson was less emphatic about the Prince's role than he was later to become, commenting that '[A]t this point [October 8, 1810] we are frustrated by tantalising ignorance of the relations existing between Nash and the Prince of Wales'.⁴ However, referring to Nash's report, he commented that 'the commissioners, and after them the Treasury, and, most important of all, the Prince, seem to have been completely captivated'.⁵

It is quite understandable that such a link should have been assumed; both the Park and the New Street are named in his honour, the development was on Crown property and the plans were under consideration soon after his elevation to the Regency. Additionally, the project architect was John Nash, who, in early 1814, 'at the personal behest of the Prince Regent, [was given temporary] responsibility for all the royal palaces'.⁶ Nash worked on Royal Lodge, Windsor, from 1813 to 1815, and again in 1820–22, and was responsible for conversion works at Carlton House and for the temporary structures erected in the gardens of Carlton House for the 1814 grand fête to celebrate Wellington's victories and the centenary of the Hanoverian succession.

In terms of architectural history, it is of more than passing interest to establish whether a major building project was undertaken at the behest of a ruling sovereign. Where a clear link can be established, the historian can seek to interpret the architecture in terms of the public approbation of the monarch or the dynasty. The form and location of particular buildings could be expected to have some symbolic significance, and the allocation of public finance to such a project would be indicative of the perceived relationship of the monarch to the state. This article will explore this theme and will examine the recorded links with the Prince Regent, suggesting that his identification with the project has little documented support. Lord Glenbervie, when First Commissioner of the Office of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues, records only one meeting with the

Prince where the topic was discussed; this was on 21 October 1811, the day before formal Treasury approval was given to John Nash's first plan.⁷ There is no record that the Prince had been provided with copies of the plans before that meeting, and Nash was not instructed to make any changes as a result of it. The New Street Commissioners⁸ met on a regular basis throughout the course of the planning and building process and there is no mention of royal involvement in their minutes during the crucial first five years of the project,⁹ nor have I found any allusion to the Prince's involvement in Nash's frequent memoranda to the Commissioners, which covered all aspects of his involvement in the project.¹⁰

Elmes's *Metropolitan Improvements* is one of the most comprehensive near-contemporary publications to have considered Regent's Park and Regent Street. His dedication to George IV is somewhat effusive: 'The splendid and useful improvements that have been effected in this METROPOLIS, under your MAJESTY'S auspices [...] will render the name of GEORGE THE FOURTH, as illustrious in the British annals, as that of AUGUSTUS in those of Rome'.¹¹ But his ensuing commentary makes no mention of any personal involvement by the King. Although clearly not exhaustive, my review of various nineteenth-century works on London has also not found any direct suggestion of his involvement.¹² Edward Walford in *Old and New London* (1897), mentions a proposed proposed villa or *guinguette* for the Prince, but certainly gives the impression that it was not a serious proposal:

The present park was commenced in 1812, from the designs of Mr Nash, the architect, who had lately finished Regent Street [. . .] It was at first proposed to build a large palace for the Prince Regent (after whom the park is named) in the centre, but this plan was not entertained, or, if entertained, it was speedily abandoned.¹³

In *Georgian London*, first published in 1945, Summerson somewhat reassessed his earlier view of

the relationship between Nash and the Prince Regent, now firmly linking the latter to the project:

From 1811, the Prince and Nash were clearly the moving powers in the planning scheme. The Prince talked enthusiastically about eclipsing Napoleon's Paris, while Nash designed a *guinguette*, or Royal pleasaunce, for Regent's Park and planned Regent Street as a 'Royal mile' from Carlton House to the *guinguette*.¹⁴

This gives the impression that the subject was frequently discussed by the Prince, but Summerson's footnote makes clear that it was in fact a reference to one specific occasion, a dinner party, recorded in a letter of 24 October 1811 written by Thomas Moore to James Corry in which Moore reported the Prince to be 'so pleased with this magnificent plan, that he has been heard to say "it will quite eclipse Napoleon"'. It is quite understandable that the Prince had a passing interest in the scheme, and in the context of dinner party conversation, he may well have expressed enthusiastic support, but this in itself cannot be construed as evidence of the Prince's active involvement. This letter, dated two days after Treasury approval of the plans, is the only recorded instance that I have found of the Prince Regent referring to the scheme, nor have I located any correspondence on the subject in Aspinall's edited volumes of the Prince's letters.¹⁵ Summerson gives no reason for his revision of the Prince's role, nor, beyond the Moore letter, does he provide a source for his fairly sweeping assertion, but his thesis appears to have been accepted without further research by a number of subsequent writers on the topic.

The Portland Estate was immediately to the south of Marylebone Park, as Regent's Park had previously been known, and the third Duke of Portland had purchased the lease of the Park in 1789. The original idea for building an imposing house in the Park can be attributed to the Duke's surveyor, John White,¹⁶ but it is more likely that he had in mind a new London residence for the Duke rather than for the Prince Regent. White's 1809 proposals

had been submitted to John Fordyce, Glenbervie's predecessor, and were taken into account when James Pillar, Joint Secretary to the Commissioners, drafted instructions dated 8 October 1810 to the Office's surveyors, Thomas Leverton and Thomas Chawner, and to its architects, John Nash and James Morgan, requesting their proposals for the Park. He specifically requested that a villa be provided for 'a Person of Rank and Fortune', a form of terminology which could refer either to the Prince of Wales or to the Duke of Portland.¹⁷ This document would certainly have been discussed with the Treasury before it was circulated to the two teams of architects.

Spencer Perceval, Prime Minister at the time of Glenbervie's meeting with the Prince Regent, had fallen out with the latter through his earlier support of Princess Caroline and through his insistence on the stringent restraints contained in the Regency Bill; the Prince retaliated by discussing a possible change of government with opposition leaders, but this came to nought. In view, therefore, of the highly sensitive political and personal relationship which existed between the two men in the latter months of 1811, there is a strong circumstantial case to be made that the *guinguette* was Perceval's idea. The Duke of Buckingham suggested just such a political motive:

[Spencer Perceval] sought to gratify the Regent in every way. Here is the first indication of that improvement in the metropolis, by which the temporary title of his Royal Highness has been perpetuated. 'The Prince, it is said is to have a villa on Primrose Hill, and a fine street, leading direct to it from Carlton House. This is one of the "primrose paths of dalliance", by which Mr Perceval is, I fear, finding his way to the Prince's heart'.¹⁸

The extent of the Prince's enthusiasm is a matter of speculation, but there is evidence in the form of a letter of 31 January 1812 from Glenbervie to an unnamed Treasury official, quite possibly its Joint Secretary, Charles Arbuthnot, that the progress in obtaining an Act of Parliament for the New Street

was going slowly. Since Glenberrie addressed the question of whether finance could be raised from private investors, it is possible that the Treasury had doubts on this score at the time and was reluctant to press forward and risk having to openly commit public funds to the project. Significantly, Glenberrie's catalogue of supporters did not include the Prince Regent:

Will you give me leave to write to you in this manner on a subject which necessarily occupied very much of my thoughts. I mean the projected communication from Maribone Park (*sic*), by Portland Place to Westminster. I have had many opportunities for the last five or six months, of having that measure talked of, in many different societies, and by many persons of different classes and descriptions, both as to their rank in life, their political economical and financial opinions, or prejudices, their weight from property, of different sorts, territorial and commercial, and their character for abilities and understanding [...] But depend upon it there is no such diversity of opinions with regard to our New Street – which has been in the contemplation and favour of the public for a great many years, but, if not adopted now, will, in all probability be abandoned for ever.¹⁹

Glenberrie's final comment is of interest because it implies that the intention of building a New Street had been common knowledge, at least in more influential circles, for some considerable time. The most likely explanation is that early soundings had been taken when the project was first mooted in order to gauge the reaction of property owners, potential investors and leading developers. If this were the case, it adds a new dimension to the planning process, and suggests that a broad consensus had been achieved well before the two teams of architects were asked to prepare their proposals.

I have found no reply to this letter, but it seems that the Treasury continued to prevaricate, because on 7 December 1812 Glenberrie wrote to his commissioner colleague, William Dacres Adams, mentioning, for the first time, the possible involvement of the Prince Regent as a way of gaining

support for the scheme: 'Between ourselves, if a certain personage is in earnest and will give his political and personal weight to a project which could do credit and honour to his reign, the thing will succeed. If he will not it will fail and with it half the lustre and income of Marybone Park'.²⁰ This document, written over a year after Glenberrie's meeting with the Prince to discuss the plan, supports the argument that the Prince was only asked to back the scheme in order to put pressure on the Treasury. If this interpretation is correct, it would help to explain where the idea that the Prince *was* involved came from, and it might also shed light on a curious paragraph in an 1814 publication by John White's son: 'The current remark, that the New Street is merely an avenue from Carlton House to the Regent's Park is scarcely worthy of notice, as it can by no means be expected that future kings would choose a palace on so limited a scale for their royal residence.'²¹

On the assumption that the Prince Regent was closely involved with the planning of Regent Street, a number of writers have suggested that its creation may have had an added political and symbolic significance. Dana Arnold, for example, has argued that the New Street was part of a grand scheme conceived by the Prince Regent and his ministers which 'was closely connected with the desire of the monarchy to underline its own status and authority' and that the various Metropolitan Improvements 'invited [every Londoner] to celebrate the nation's security, thanks to the king, through the memorials and triumphal archways'.²² Although governments have frequently used architectural symbolism to further political objectives, there is little evidence that the Liverpool administration had such a policy in mind. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic War, an over-riding objective was to reduce public expenditure, particularly where there might be any suggestion of waste or extravagance.²³ At the beginning of the 1817 Parliamentary session, for example, Lord Castlereagh, the leader in the

House of Commons, moved to set up another Select Committee on Public Expenditure, in order to 'sift [...] the financial concerns of the country to the bottom', and he made a point of instructing its members to 'go into the inquiry with candour, with the wish of emulating each other in exertions for the public good'.²⁴ The Liverpool administration was ruthless in its search for savings, cutting back on government establishments, reducing the Civil List, and enforcing a ten per cent decrease in official salaries. The total reduction achieved between 1816 and 1818 was £19 million, which represented approximately 25 per cent of the total 1815 expenditure.²⁵

The Treasury, writing to the Commissioners of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues in November 1813 in connection with plans for the New Street, make quite clear their view of public edifices: 'Any expenditure incurred in the erection of Public buildings will have no effect whatever except that of trenching upon the funds and rendering an excess beyond the original Estimation'.²⁶ Norman Gash, writing about the political climate after Waterloo, raised the very interesting proposition that the administration's resolve to reduce government expenditure went beyond financial rectitude, and was, at least in part, aimed to assuage public disillusionment with the recent war:

The wars of 1793–1815, so the argument ran, had been a deliberate attempt by the British aristocracy to crush revolution and support despotism and tyranny on the continent because they feared the triumph of liberalism and democracy at home. Heavy taxation after 1815, therefore, was not only politically objectionable but morally wrong because it was to pay for the consequences of a cruel and unjust war.²⁷

The Prince Regent's extravagance on his own building projects at Carlton House and the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, was causing the government grave concern, and in March 1816 a joint letter was sent to him by the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, Lord Castlereagh, the Foreign Secretary, and

Nicholas Vansittart, Chancellor of the Exchequer, which spelt out the extremely difficult economic position of the country, and concluded:

Your Royal Highness's servants humbly submit that the only means by which [there] can be a prospect of weathering the impending storm is by stating on the direct authority of your Royal Highness and by your command, if it should be necessary, that all new expenses for additions and alterations at Brighton or elsewhere will, under the present circumstances, be abandoned. Your Royal Highness's servants are perfectly convinced that Parliament will never vote one shilling for defraying such expenses, if unfortunately they were to be persevered in.²⁸

Given the general postwar climate of opinion and government austerity measures, national monuments celebrating victory would not have been considered appropriate and Linda Colley has pointed out that successive British governments refrained from honouring naval and military commanders by way of public monuments.²⁹ J. Mordaunt Crook has drawn attention to designs for, *inter alia*, a Trafalgar obelisk by Smirke and a tower by Gandy-Wilkins to be placed at the northern end of Portland Place; they all, however, 'remained dreams, ruled out on grounds of cost'.³⁰ Nelson Column, in Trafalgar Square, was not completed until 1843, whilst the large equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington by Matthew Cotes Wyatt was not erected until 1846. It is also, of course, problematical whether architectural symbols of state power would have greatly impressed the lower orders, and indeed they might even have acted as a focus for popular anger, as happened during the French Revolution when, on the same day, rioters tore down the giant equestrian statue of the king in Place Louis XV (now the Place de la Concorde), and demolished that of Louis XIV in the Place des Victoires.³¹

At no stage, to the best of my knowledge, was the argument advanced by the government or any other politician that the cost of Regent Street was justified either as a celebration of the victory in the war with

Napoleonic France or as a mark of approbation of the Prince Regent. As far as Parliament and the general public were concerned, no public money was to be employed. When the Commissioners presented their report to Parliament for approval in 1812 it contained what in retrospect was a wholly inadequate financial evaluation by Nash; this showed that the New Street could be fully financed by borrowing from various insurance companies and that the capital sum invested would be fully amortised over a twenty five year period assuming interest at five per cent per annum.³² The Commissioners subsequently asked Leverton and Chawner to review Nash's figures, and they, despite using somewhat different assumptions, reached a much more realistic figure which was surprisingly close to the eventual sum expended. The decision to proceed, therefore, suggests that the senior government politicians involved believed that the long term economic benefits outweighed the substantial extra sums of public money likely to be required.

I have argued elsewhere that a strong case can be made that the development of Regent Street and Regent's Park were part of the government's plans for tackling the potential unemployment of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers and seamen demobilised after the final victory over Napoleon.³³ This project, together with the Poor Employment Act, 1817, and the Church Building Act, 1818, would provide employment for large numbers of unskilled labourers whilst effecting much needed infrastructural improvements in the Capital and constructing new churches for the increasing urban populations of the towns and cities.

George IV was extravagant with money throughout most of his adult life. He was a collector of some discernment and was constantly reordering and redecorating his various residences. He transformed Carlton House, and spent lavishly on the rebuilding of Buckingham Palace, where Nash acted as his architect, and on the modernisation and improvement of Windsor Castle. He entertained

lavishly, as evidenced by the 1814 celebrations at Carlton House to mark the Treaty of Paris. The result was that the government was forced on a number of occasions to pay off his debts, something which hard-pressed ministers such as Lord Liverpool found extremely irksome. He was also deeply unpopular with the public for much of his Regency and subsequent reign, particularly because of his treatment of and divorce from Princess Caroline, and, whilst Prince of Wales, had been the butt of savage mockery by political satirists, who lampooned his alleged gluttony and morals.

These factors all need to be taken into account in assessing the role of the Prince Regent in the Regent Street and Regent's Park development. Coupled with the absence of any documented direct involvement, and with the admittedly circumstantial evidence set out in this article, the Prince's contribution is unlikely to have extended beyond a passing nod of approval. Apart from his initial meeting with Glenbervie in October 1811, he appears to have had no further discussions with any of the New Street commissioners, and there is no documented evidence that he showed any interest in having a residence in the Park. Indeed, apart from Pillar's instructions and the first draft plans, this idea appears to have been abandoned by the commissioners at a very early stage.³⁴ Furthermore, the idea of creating a 'Royal mile' in the Prince Regent's honour would, in the political climate immediately after Waterloo, have been unacceptable to both Parliament and the general public.

NOTES

- 1 The Office of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues was responsible for managing Crown lands. It subsequently merged with the Office of Works and in 1956 it became The Crown Estate.
- 2 For details of the various reforms and organizational changes made see James Anderson, 'Urban Development as a Component of Government Policy in the Aftermath of the Napoleonic War', *Construction History*, XV (1999), pp. 23–37.
- 3 S. Rasmussen, *London, the Unique City* (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 202. First published 1934.
- 4 John Summerson, *John Nash, Architect to King George IV* (London, 1949), p. 106.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 6 J. M. Crook, *The History of the King's Works*, VI, (London, 1973), p. 100.
- 7 W. Sichel (ed.), *Glenberrie Diaries* (London, 1910), p. 152. The relevant passage reads: 'I had, before I left London to go to the Isle of Wight, an interview with the Prince Regent on the subject of Marybone Park.' Sichel then notes: 'A long discussion follows about this now uninteresting affair in which the Prime Minister Perceval, too, was concerned'. Summerson reports that the relevant section of the diary is missing and my inspection of the diaries in the National Library of Scotland indicates that the complete volume which would have covered this period is indeed missing.
- 8 A separate body, the New Street Commission, was set up by Act of Parliament to manage the Regent Street project; the commissioners were the commissioners of the Office of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues.
- 9 National Archives (hereafter NA), CRES 26/1 through 26/4 cover the period from July 1813 to October 1818.
- 10 NA, CRES 2/1736 includes a report from Nash dated 17 April 1814 in which he refers to efforts to 'open a treaty with Lady Berkeley all of them under the direction or approbation of the Prince Regent.' The property referred to, however, is a house in Berkeley Square and this was not required for the New Street.
- 11 J. Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements or London in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1827), p. iv.
- 12 The following publications were reviewed: S. Leigh, *New Picture of London* (London, Volumes for 1822, 1823, 1824 and 1825); J. Britton, *The Original Picture of London Enlarged and Improved* (London, 1826); C. Knight (ed.), *London* (London, 1841); C. Knight, *Knight's Cyclopaedia* (London, 1851); H. Wheatley, *London Past and Present* (London, 1891).
- 13 E. Walford, *Old and New London* (London, 1897), V, p. 263.
- 14 John Summerson, *Georgian London* (Harmondsworth, 1991), p. 181.
- 15 A. Aspinall (ed.), *The Letters of King George IV, 1812–1830* (Cambridge, 1938), and *The Correspondence of George, Prince of Wales, 1770–1812*, VII (London, 1971).
- 16 See James Anderson, 'John White Senior and James Wyatt: An Early Scheme for Marylebone Park and the New Street to Carlton House', *Architectural History*, XLIV (2001), pp. 106–114.
- 17 NA, CRES 24/6, para. IX.
- 18 Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, *Memoirs of the Court of England during the Regency, 1811–1820* (London, 1856), I, p. 163. The source is a letter from Thomas Moore to Lady Donegal, of 28 October, 1811.
- 19 NA, T/1 1226. The letter is actually dated 31 January 1811, but since it refers to a meeting John Nash had in August 1811 with Spencer Perceval, this must be a mistake for 1812. Judging by the handwriting and spelling of a number of Glenberrie's personal letters, he appears to have been in the habit of dashing these off after having spent a convivial evening dining, and to mistake the year at the end of January is quite understandable.
- 20 NA, PRO 30/58/12A.
- 21 John White Jnr., *Some Account of the Proposed Improvements of the Western Part of London, by the formation of Regent's Park, the New Street, the New sewer etc., etc.* (London, 1814), p. 39. John White Jnr. was the Surveyor of the Parish of St Marylebone and the son of the Duke of Portland's Surveyor, John White.
- 22 Dana Arnold, 'Rationality, Safety and Power: the street planning of later Georgian London', *Georgian Group Journal* (1995), p. 49.
- 23 Immediately following Waterloo, the House of Commons voted in favour of a commemorative monument, but this was not proceeded with. See S. Brindle, 'The Wellington Arch and the Western Entrance to London', *Georgian Group Journal*, XI (2001), p. 63.
- 24 P. Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption': The Politics of Economic Reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford, 1996), p. 168. The quote is from *Hansard*, 35, col. 271 (7 February 1817).

- 25 N. Gash, 'After Waterloo: British Society and the Legacy of the Napoleonic Wars', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, series 5, VIII (1978), p. 155.
- 26 NA, T29/126, f.471.
- 27 Gash, 'After Waterloo', p. 153.
- 28 Quoted in C. Hibbert, *George IV* (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. 518–9.
- 29 L. Colley, 'Whose Nation? National Consciousness in Britain, 1750–1830', *Past and Present*, CXIII (1986), p. 106.
- 30 J. M. Crook, 'Metropolitan Improvements: John Nash and the Picturesque', in C. Fox (ed.), *London – World City* (New Haven and London, 1992), pp. 91–2.
- 31 S. Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1989), p. 669. William Huskisson, who succeeded Lord Glenbervie as First Commissioner at the Office of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues in 1814, was resident in Paris from 1783 until 1792. He was present at the fall of the Bastille, as too was Lord Liverpool, and probably at the attack on the Tuileries in 1792. See their entries in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Personal experience of revolutionary violence may well have left a lasting impression on the minds of the two men, both then only in their late teens.
- 32 NA, CRES 60/2, the 1812 Report of the Commissioners of Woods Forests and Land Revenues, p. 13.
- 33 Anderson, 'Urban development' *passim*.
- 34 Nash may, however, have cherished hopes of resurrecting the scheme. J. Summerson, *The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect* (London, 1980), p.126, mentions a plan of 1828 by Nash (NA, MPE 1/912) showing a proposed 'Royal Guinguette' facing Cumberland Terrace.