



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Elisabeth Hall, 'The Georgian Gardens of
the Royal Naval Dockyard at Chatham',
The Georgian Group Report & Journal,
1988, pp. 61-66

THE GEORGIAN GARDENS OF THE ROYAL NAVAL DOCKYARD AT CHATHAM

Elisabeth Hall

A visitor to the recently opened 'museum' of the former Royal Naval Dockyard at Chatham cannot fail to be surprised to see such a pleasantly landscaped setting for the principal Georgian domestic buildings. Closer observation reveals that not only are the public areas agreeably planted with trees and grass but that there are large walled and terraced gardens set into the hillside sloping down to the river Medway, both behind the Commissioner's House of 1703 and nearby at the back of the twelve imposing dwellings that form the Officers' Terrace of c.1720–30. It is then more astonishing to find indications that the basic pattern of the officers' gardens could well survive much as originally planned, while the acre or so of the Commissioner's Garden retains an approximation of the terrace layout that inspired John Evelyn to comment on a visit in 1663 that it had a 'pretty garden, banqueting house, potts, statues, cypresses, resembling some villas about Rome'.¹

The inspiration to create a fashionable Italian garden seems to have come from Peter Pett (1610–74), of the famous family of ship builders, who had been appointed Commissioner in 1648 but was dismissed after allegations of inappropriate activities during the Dutch raid on the Medway in 1667. In June 1668 he complained to Samuel Pepys that he could not get returned 'his great dial, gardenpots, figures and marble table' which he felt were as much his 'as the clothes off his own back' — a revealing comment both as to the possible ornamentation of the terraces and the extent of Pett's personal involvement.² Among Edward Dummer's plans of the royal naval dockyards of 1698³ is one of Chatham showing the terraces and the banqueting house — the latter mentioned by Pepys as a point of access for the nut tree⁴ — and their position in relation to the Commissioner's House (which was to be rebuilt on the same site five years later). A new development on the lowest terrace is a Dutch-style water garden — designed after 1688⁵ — aligned upon the banqueting house, with a baroque fountain as central feature enclosed by two sets of parallel L-shaped canals. The second terrace is divided into plain rectangular grass plats,⁶ separated by a wall from the third terrace which may have been reserved for vegetables.

Altogether this is the most sophisticated of the Commissioner's gardens surveyed by Dummer. However the Dutch water garden did not last long, not being indicated on a recently discovered survey c.1714 which depicts the dockyard gardens in fascinating detail.⁷ At this period the middle terrace is the most elaborate, with a parterre divided into four rectangular beds, the corners shaped into concave curves at the two points of entry from the garden house and from the lower terrace. Each bed is shown to have a double border with sufficient space between the two edgings for further planting⁸ and a tree at the centre — just as George London had recommended for ornamenting a small parterre, suggesting 'fine stander bayes or laurustinus'.⁹ Statues on pedestals he felt should only be used for large scale projects. This transfer of interest from the lowest terrace to middle level gave better views from the upper rooms of the new house George St Lo had just built on the western part of the old site.¹⁰ An orchard is shown pencilled in on the upper terrace, and so may be a later addition to accommodate a recent purchase of fruit trees — as recorded between 1709–11.¹¹

Subsequent 18th century maps and the scale model of 1773–4 show plainer terraces as seen today, but two gazebos are notable on the southern boundary overlooking the Medway. Sometime between 1845 and 1861¹² the latter boundary was extended to bring in a greater informality, with an evergreen shelter belt framing the perimeter path, some forest trees and

an asymmetrically-placed rock and ivy-clad ice house. A partial excavation of the latter has revealed it to be similar to that described in J.C. Loudon's *Encyclopedia of Gardening* (1835), page 612. An ancient black mulberry tree nearby on the adjacent, now sloping, second terrace is represented on the 1773 model, though not the charming stone seat on a bank surrounding it (Fig. 1). Of former espaliers, Apricot Royale (introduced c.1800) and the old fig trees have been identified against the south facing wall, the latter opposite the original banqueting house.

On the other side of this wall is a formal tree-lined walk leading to a terrace, via steps, under a wrought iron overthrow — an approach presumably part of the original architectural setting for the twelve houses of the great Officers' Terrace; the arrangement is shown on the 'geometric plan' of 1755¹³ (Fig 2).

The decision to build the Terrace with its walled gardens, siting it to the east of the dockyard, was made c.1715, and by 1719 the castellated 'watch towers' at each end of the eastern perimeter wall had been built together with the new gate-house in the same Hawksmoorian style.¹⁴ Something of the building procedure can be traced in Commissioner Littleton's letters to the Naval Board which acknowledged and sometimes described the warrants he had received.¹⁵ On 31st July 1720 Littleton acknowledged receipt of a warrant 'To the officers here for carrying on the buildings of the 2 new houses according to the draught which came inclosed'.¹⁶ These were to replace the old ones for the Clerk of the Cheque and the Storekeeper. In the map of c.1714 the old gardens of the latter and other officers are clearly shown — longer and broader than the later ones. Each is divided into a linear series of parterres of varying geometric shapes, much as depicted in John James' *The Theory and Practice of Gardening* (1712).¹⁷ Their elaboration is further evidence of the long tradition of naval gardening at Chatham. In fact there is a record for an officer's ornamental 'knot' as early as 1672.¹⁸

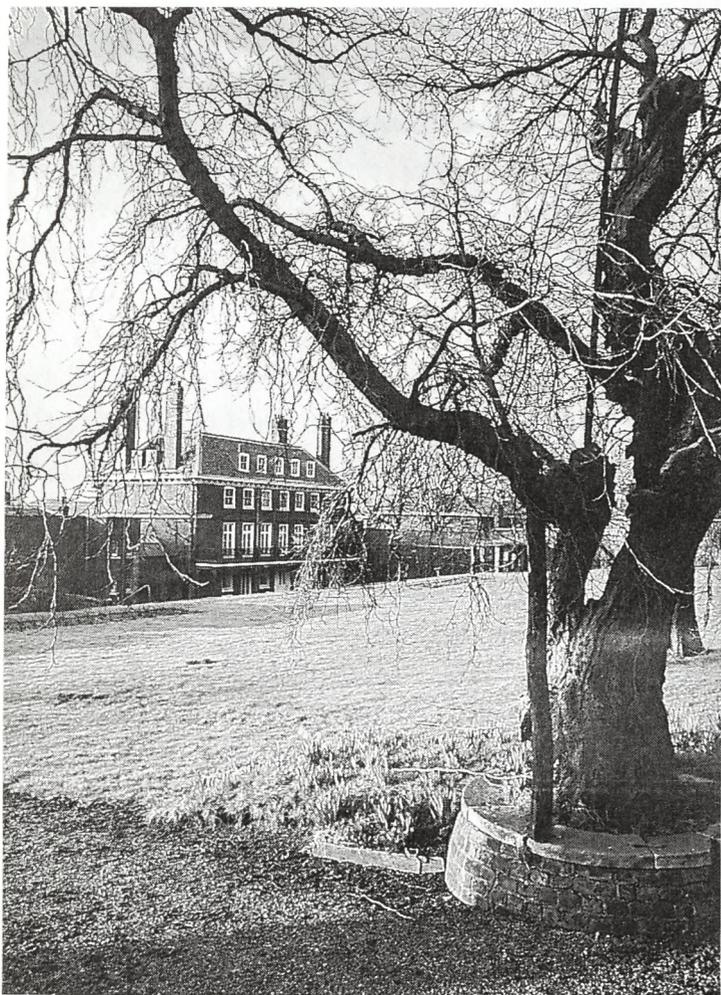


Fig. 1. The Commissioner's garden viewed from the mulberry tree on the middle terrace.

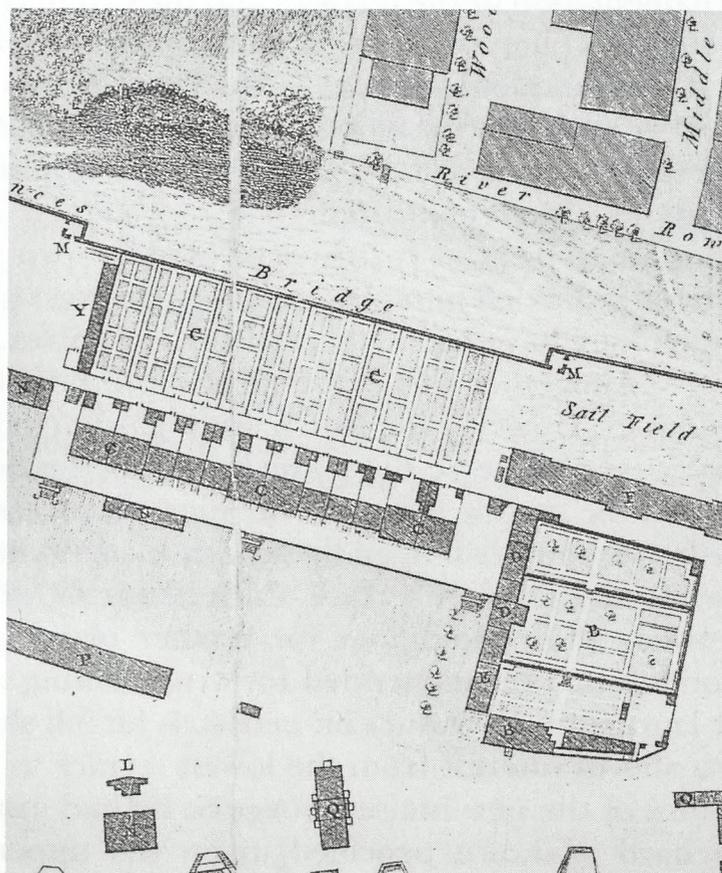


Fig. 2. 'A Geometric Plan . . . of His Majesty's Dockyard at Chatham' 1755. The plan shows the layout of the domestic areas. The Commissioner's House and garden with its three terraces is linked to the Officers' Terrace by a tree-lined walk. The houses are numbered 1-12, from the southern (right hand) side.

The first building operations for the terrace complex were described by Littleton on 7th August 1720, when 'Chalk rubbish' was being dug out of the 'cellars of the new houses and the great Bank' and 'carried away by boat'. Excavation 'of the very great quantity' must have taken a little time because it was not until August 1721 that the master shipwright at Chatham asked for four bricklayers 'for completing the Bricklayers works of the new houses, Washhouses and Garden Walls'. It seems likely that in this interval they were excavating and levelling for all twelve houses and gardens. However in May 1721 prices had been agreed with Mr Beauchamp for performing the stonemason work for the 'Buildings at this yard', while 'coping stones & chimneypieces' had arrived from 'Mr Ryall' on 4th September 1720. On 21st June 1722 the two new houses for the Storekeeper (No. 1 southern end) and for the Clerk of the Cheque (No. 6) were reported as 'near finished', but very much in need of two pumps and the chimneypieces for the Storekeeper. The 'Pavier' — later also revealed as 'Beauchamp from Greenwich' — was asked for in order to 'lay the stones in the yard' of the storekeeper's house where they remain today amidst domestic outbuildings.

The design of the new gardens is now best studied in the remarkably detailed model, 'scale 40 'to every inch' (foot) which Mr W. Phillips (a ropemaker), and a dockyard joiner were ordered to make of the whole dockyard in August 1771.¹⁹ (Fig. 3). An indication of the precision demanded of the modellers is given in the Naval Board's decision of August 1773: 'Give Orders to the Officers of several yards to cause the Models thereof to be finished as soon as possible & placed in a neat mahogany case, the top to be of Glass, to open in the middle and turn back on hinges, distinguishing the several Buildings and Walls whether of Stone, Brick or Wood, by proper colours'.²⁰ The garden historian can thus conclude that in general materials such as grass and gravel can also be identified by colours to give an unrivalled accuracy of record. For example, one can see that the small front gardens were fenced by brick-coloured

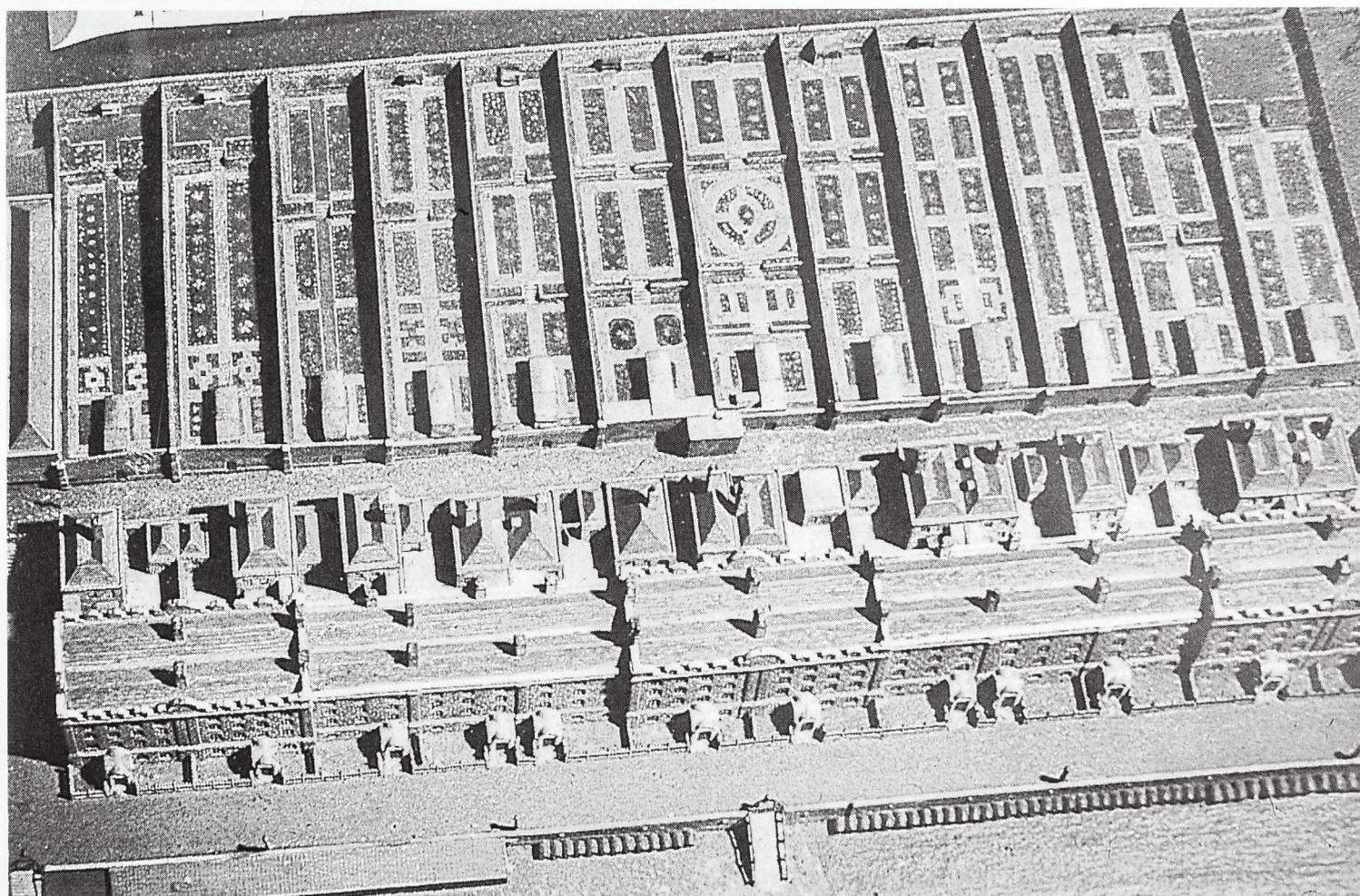


Fig. 3. Detail of the model of Chatham dockyard showing the Officers' Terrace, courtyards and gardens and garden houses. The houses are numbered 1–12, from the southern (right hand) side.

palings (in 1789 these were to be replaced by handsome iron railings made by Thomas Penn in Rochester).²¹ However the stone-paved rear courtyards, flanked by domestic offices with intriguing obelisk chimneys, were (as now) bounded by high brick walls. The latter also sustain and enclose the lowest terrace of the rear gardens, placed in a strange isolation on the other side of the back access road, a practice also found in Holland.

The route to each of the rear walled gardens is by central stairs protected by a segmentally-arched wooden roof supported on partially glazed sides. This extends at the rear into a small greenhouse or garden room, the whole resembling a ship's cabin. The two slightly larger central gardens, Nos. 6 and 7, have extra greenhouses adjacent too, and at No. 7 (often in occupation of the Master Shipwright) there is an aviary.

The gardens, which measure approximately 120' × 40', are shown still symmetrically laid out in the baroque manner, though by the 1770s the landscape garden fashion was at its full height. In each garden the regular plan is defined by the brick boundary walls and (in all but Nos. 4 and 5) by the retaining brick walls of the terraces with their stone coping and stone steps. It is a style dictated as much by the site as by early-18th century fashion. In the axial design centre paths — usually of gravel or sand — give access to simple parterres of flowers, the plants being depicted in varying shapes and colours on a brown ground in simple stone-edged beds. At Nos. 7, 11 and 12, however, there is one terrace where the gravel paths delineate a parterre of more elaborate geometric design (Fig 3). Side paths give access to the walls and the fruit trees trained on to them, such as the still-extant figs, quince, mulberries and other less exotic varieties. Unlike the Commissioner's garden lawns are rare, only to be found at the end of the gardens at Nos. 1, 11 and 12. A hooded garden seat is typically provided at the upper end of each garden, where the finest view of these delightful pleasure grounds can be obtained.

The overall pattern described has remained quite recognisable today. The high boundary walls, now stuccoed, and their overhanging greenery either side of the access road, give the area a somewhat Mediterranean appearance. The central stairs have altered in position only in Nos. 6 and 7, but except in the case of Nos. 1 and 12 the superstructures have gone or been replaced. However in the two end-most gardens the cabin-like staircase chambers form an important survival. The least altered is No. 12 with its decorative openwork panels in the Chinese Chippendale style, while No. 1 has interlocking wood treillage in the Reptonian manner and Gothick glazing in its internal window (Fig 4). The lead-lined 'Wardian case' below it is an indication of at least one of the functions of this charming room, which has the added comfort of wood panelling on the south wall. Treillage is also used in the Victorian garden house on the east side of the stairs as well as ornamenting the courtyard of Nos. 1, 3, 6 and 12.

The gardens of Nos. 1, 2, 11 and 12 retain their original plan of terracing and steps. In most gardens the old pattern of centre and side paths is also still maintained. Identical stone parterre edgings — in an excellent state of preservation — are found in several gardens. Wooden boards are also much used for this purpose. Of particular interest in the dockyard context are the iron edgings around nearly all the beds in No. 7 and round some in No. 12. Chemical tests have proved they are of wrought iron²² and therefore likely to be of a fairly early of date.²³ Another use of iron is found in one of the three short sections of flued walls — on this small scale, rare relics of a form of heating outdated after c.1816.²⁴ At No. 3 iron plates separate the two short brick flues on the south facing wall. The other heated walls are at Nos. 8 and 12 where the flue covering is of slate, brick or tile. At the latter the stove served a dual purpose, being situated in the adjacent stable, and the flue wall also served as a stand for plants within the greenhouse, which has a Portland stone floor and H-hinged door. Raised plant beds edged by brick, stone or wood are a standard feature of all courtyards and may therefore be an example of another unusual survival from the 18th century.

The explanation for the remarkable state of preservation of these twelve contiguous town gardens may lie in a combination of factors. These include suitability of the site for the original design, a single ownership, protection from outside development and the continuity of an important function in the social life of the dockyard. There may have been other factors peculiar to the dockyard which inhibited change, such as clauses in the tenancy agreement between the officer for the time being and the dockyard authorities. For example, it is standard policy on many estates to insist on a return to the status quo at the end of the tenancy. However, as such factors now for the most part cease to appertain, the abundance of historic material, especially the visual evidence, available to the investigator and conservator today is of the highest importance.²⁵

NOTE

At the time of writing a planning application has been put in for the Officers' Terrace area, a scheduled ancient monument, which could involve loss of historic fabric to make way for garages, and in the process a building site.

NOTES

1. Geoffrey Callender, *The portrait of Peter Pett and the Sovereign of the Seas* Newport 1930, p. 27.
2. P. G. Roger, *The Dutch in the Medway*, 1973, p. 149. Samuel Pepys, *Diary* 30th June 1667. Pepys comments on the pains Pett had taken to make his garden 'neat'.
3. British Museum, Kings MS 43.
4. Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, 4th August 1665. Pepys describes how Lady Slamming 'clambered up to the top of the banqueting house to gather nuts and mighty merry'.
5. 'A View of the Dockyard at Chatham. A. Plan of the Yard before the Revolution 1688. B. The same Plan with Improvements . . . 1698' (Chatham Library). The pond is shown only on 'B'. Inf. J. Lear.
6. Of Hinton St George Somerset in 1669 it was stated, 'the common usage of the gardens in England (is — where these have sanded walks perfectly levelled by rolling them with a stone roller — and between the walks several flat pieces covered with very green turf and without another adornment . . .)' (M. Aston, ed., *Aspects of the mediaeval landscape of Somerset*, 1988, p. 106 (inf. J. Harvey).



Fig. 4. No. 1 Officers' Terrace. Part of the garden house over the access stairs showing the gothic window, treillage and 'cabin' roof.

7. Public Record Office ADM/140/4. The map is headed 'A Plan of His Majesty's Dockyard and Rope Houses at Chatham'. 'The Tick lines are the additional buildings since 1714.' The survey is therefore likely to have been carried out in 1714 or shortly after (inf. B. Marchant).
8. John James, *The theory and practice of gardening*, London 1712, p. 35. The drawing is akin to James' 'third sort of Border' 'having only a verge of Grass is the Middle edged by two small Paths raked smooth and sanded. These are sometimes garnished with Yews and flowering Shrubs, or with Vases and Flower-pots set regularly along the Middle of the Verge of Grass.'
9. *The Anglo-Dutch garden in the age of William and Mary*, *Journal of Garden History*, April–September 1988, p. 103.
10. Jonathan Coad, 'Medway House Chatham Dockyard', in *Collectanea Historica. Essays in memory of Stuart Rigold*, Maidstone 1981.
11. Jonathan Coad, *Historic Architecture of the Royal Navy*, London 1983, p. 109; fruit included 'an orange apricock' and a 'red roman Nectarine' as well as plums and apples.
12. Approximate dating achieved by a specimen beech tree ring-count (141 rings) and examination of various maps.
13. 'A Geometric Plan & North West Elevation of His Majesty's Dockyard at Chatham . . .', 1755 (Rochester Library).
14. Jonathan Coad *Historic Architecture of Chatham Dockyard 1700–1850*, National Maritime Museum 1982, p. 141.
15. E.g. CHA/L/18 1719–23.
16. The receipt of the draught from the Naval Board indicates that the design for the terrace was not by a Chatham shipwright, but was probably drawn at the Board of Works. Coad (1982 p. 144) publishes the plan and drawings, one of a series at the National Maritime Museum, that is closest to the terraces and courtyards as built. He comments (p. 141) on the unity of style seen in the gatehouse, towers, sail loft and officers' terrace.
17. James, op. cit., plate I p. 204 (Gregg Press reprint).
18. In March 1672 Officer Wilson described his 'handsome knotte for flowers made with compass timber', as he required a warrant to renew the rotten oak timbers 'and making ye same into beds which will but admit of three' (in a garden 24 ft × 16 ft). (PRO ADM 106/1285; inf. J. Lear). ADM 106/2585, Naval Board Minutes August 1771: 'Ordered that the Officers of the several yards be directed to look out among their Artificers for proper persons to the no. of two that are able to make Models thereof & send us their names, and in the meantime to prepare & send us plans by a scale of 40 ft to every inch.' PRO ADM 106/2588, Naval Board Minutes 29th January 1773: 'A petition from W. Phillips employed in making a Model of Chatham yd of this day. Recd. Refer it to the Officers to acquaint the Board whether the Joyner employed has Extra.'
19. PRO ADM 106/297.
20. PRO ADM 106/2589. The model is kept at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.
21. An oval plaque denoting the name of the blacksmith remained until recently in one of the front gardens — now removed for safety. The designer was Ns. (*sic*) Phillips (PRO ADM 140/70).
22. Information from Rodney Clarke.
23. J. C. Loudon, *Encyclopedia of Gardening*, 1835, p. 560: 'plate iron' or the preferred 'cast iron' are among the suggestions for bed edgings.
24. Loudon, op. cit., p. 581. Loudon suggests that 'the application of steam to the heating of hot houses . . . extended rapidly after 1816.'
25. Research on Georgian town gardens recently published is drawn only from documents and archaeology, e.g. T. Longstaffe Gowan in *Garden History* vol. 15.2 1987, p. 136–144, and J. Harvey, *Restoration of Period Gardens*, 1988, p. 62–3. See also de Neufforges' garden models of 1763–65. In each case the later 18th century Georgian town gardens described are shown to be remarkably conservative in style as at Chatham.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is largely based on the research work of the Chatham Dockyard WEA class, and my grateful thanks is to them for help and support. Equally I would like to thank the following for assistance: John Harvey; my husband Ivan Hall; the librarians of the Royal Horticultural Society; Chatham, Rochester and Springfield libraries; archivists at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; the Public Record Office and the British Museum; and staff at the Chatham dockyard; for Fig. 3, D. Short & Fig. 4, B. Marchant.