



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Mark Girouard, 'The Georgian Promenade',
Life in the Georgian Town, Georgian Group
Symposium, 1985, pp. 26-33

THE GEORGIAN PROMENADE

Mark Girouard

IN 1698 THAT INDEFATIGABLE TRAVELLER Celia Fiennes visited Shrewsbury, and wrote about the city in her journal. Among other features, she described the gardens by the Abbey church, on the edge of the town, and how a second garden opened out of the first

much larger with several fine grass walks kept exactly cut and rolled for company to walk in; every Wednesday most of the town the ladies and gentlemen walk there as in St. James's Park and there is an abundance of people of quality lives in Shrewsbury.

The passage demonstrates the existence both of the custom of walking in a particular place at a particular time in an English provincial town, and of a similar custom in London. What Celia Fiennes was referring to in the latter case was the Mall, on the northern edge of St James's Park, in the days before it was converted to a boulevard for processions and visiting heads of state. It was originally laid out and planted with four lines of trees by Charles II in about 1660, on his return from Europe, as a place in which to play the game of Pall Mall. This was a mixture of golf and croquet played on a long enclosed pitch. It had come to London from Italy, probably by way of France, in the reign of Charles I. Charles I's ground became the street still known as Pall Mall, and was replaced by Charles II's new ground, next door.

Charles II and his courtiers played the game in their Mall on summer evenings, and other fashionable people came to watch them and to stroll up and down in the shade of the trees. By the end of the century the game had gone out of fashion, but the walking up and down continued, and developed into one of the social phenomena of London. The Mall was described by a foreign visitor in about 1720 as follows:

Society comes to walk here on fine warm days, from seven to ten in the evening, and in winter from one to three . . . The park is so crowded at times that you cannot help touching your neighbour. Some people come to see, some to be seen, and others to seek their fortune: for many priestesses of Venus are abroad, all on the lookout for adventure.¹

Royalty was to be found in the Mall, as well as great numbers of aristocracy and gentry; a picture in the royal collection, once attributed to Samuel Wale, shows Frederick, Prince of Wales, walking among his courtiers in the centre of the throng. The custom of promenading had come to England perhaps ultimately from Italy, but immediately from France: the Mall was London's equivalent of the evening parade of French society on the central walk of the Tuileries gardens. The objectives of the people who came there, in the much-used contemporary phrase, 'to see and be seen' were varied. In the days before wireless, telephones, or society columns in newspapers, it was a way of announcing that one had arrived in London, and of gathering and spreading news; in the latter respect it was society's equivalent of the crowds that thronged the Royal Exchange in the City. And, like the Exchange, it was a place for disposing of or acquiring stock or goods: mothers brought their daughters there with a view to marriage, men and women started or developed liaisons there, adventurers came on the look out for rich widows, and even prostitutes were tolerated, as long as they were sufficiently well dressed. More generally it was a way in which what was coming to be called 'polite society' or just 'society' could establish and re-inforce its sense of identity. Celia

Fiennes's phrase about the Abbey Gardens in Shrewsbury, 'most of the town the ladies and gentlemen walk there', is suggestive: it is like saying 'everyone was there' meaning 'everyone who mattered was there'. Those in doubt as to whether they mattered or not could test the social waters by parading on the Mall and seeking out how warmly, if at all, they were acknowledged by the people who undoubtedly did matter. The 'priestesses of Venus' were in a different category; they were there because the male members of polite society wanted them there.

The cartoon, as Dr Corfield commented in her paper, was one sign of the sophistication of urban society in the eighteenth century; parades, as in the Mall and elsewhere in the British Isles, lent themselves to satire, and a sizeable number of cartoons of them were produced. But it was equally possible to romanticize them, as Gainsborough did in his wonderfully evocative depiction of the Mall, painted in 1783, or Sir Richard Phillips did, when reminiscing about it as a nostalgic old man in 1817:

How often in my youth have I been a delighted spectator of that enchanted and enchanting assemblage! Here used to promenade, for one or two hours after dinner, the whole British world of gaiety, beauty and splendour. Here could be seen in one moving mass, extending the whole length of the Mall, five thousand of the most lovely women in this country, all splendidly attired and accompanied by as many well-dressed men.²

What were called variously walks, malls, parades and, a little later, promenades, were to be found in all eighteenth-century towns in which polite society played a prominent part, but above all in spas and resorts; it is even arguable that in England the custom started in the latter, rather than in London. In Tunbridge Wells what were originally just called 'the Walks' (Upper and Lower) but are today known as the Pantiles were first laid out and planted with trees in 1638, although it was probably not until several decades later that they became the setting for formal parading. By 1687 a row of shops selling luxury goods and a 'Long Room' for dancing and gambling had been built along one side of the Upper Walk. The Lower Walk was given over to a market; the fashionable people on the Upper Walk could amuse themselves by looking down on the animated market, as well as at each other. Shops were only occasionally to be found on the earlier parades, but Long Rooms (later often to develop into Assembly Rooms) and something to look at outside the parade itself were to become common adjuncts.

The spa at Hampstead had its Well Walk and Long Room by 1701, the spa at Epsom its New Parade and Long Room by 1711; as far as I have been able to establish Epsom was the first place in which the term 'parade' was used for social as opposed to military activities. But it was at Bath that parading reached its apogee; there, above all, one can observe it being used as a tool for social engineering, and also leading to new developments in town planning.

The social-engineering aspect is referred to by Oliver Goldsmith in his life of 'Beau' Nash, the previously needy adventurer who established himself as the social arbiter of Bath in the early eighteenth century. Before his day, according to Goldsmith:

General society among people of rank or fortune was by no means established. The nobility still preserved a tincture of Gothic haughtiness and refused to keep company with the gentry at any of the public entertainments of the place . . . But when proper walks were made for exercise, and a house built for assembling in, rank began to be laid aside, and all degrees of people, from the private gentleman upwards, were soon united in society with one another.³

Goldsmith mentions, in fact, two tools for the creation of an integrated society — of course, involving only 'all degrees of society, from the private gentleman upwards', a phrase related to Celia Fiennes' 'most of the town, the ladies and gentlemen'. One was the Assembly Rooms, the other the Walks. Assembly Rooms were to play a vital role in eighteenth-century towns, but are not what this paper is concerned with.

Goldsmith was writing in the 1760s. A similar view of Nash has been expressed by Lady Luxborough, writing to a friend in praise of Bath in 1752: 'To promote society, good manners and a co-alition of parties and ranks; to suppress scandal and late hours, are his views'.⁴ Here she extends the idea of social engineering to include fusion of parties as well as ranks; it is worth noting that a similar view of the effect of a spa is expressed in Toland's *Description of Epsom*, written as early as 1721: 'A Tory does not stare and leer when a Whig comes in, nor a Whig look sour and whisper at the sight of a Tory. These distinctions are laid by with the winter suit in London, and a gayer easier habit worn . . .'.

The architectural and town-planning development of the parade at Bath is also very interesting. The first parade was in Orange Grove, next door to the Abbey Church. Here was Nash's original 'proper walk' later described by John Wood the Elder, in his *Description of Bath* (1749):

a paved walk of two hundred feet in length and twenty seven feet in breadth . . . Here the company repaired in the afternoon, when they had drunk the hot waters, to complete the day with walking, while the music was playing to them . . . three rows of tall sycamore trees lined out two other alleys, parallel to the former, which were spread with gravel, for the use of the common sort of people.

Development from the Orange Grove walk to something much more sophisticated was due to the two Woods. It started with Queen Square, designed and in part developed by John Wood the Elder in 1729–36. For Wood, a town square was not the quiet green enclave into which it was later to develop in England, but a place 'for people to assemble together'. Queen Square was designed as a single splendid whole, resembling the forecourt of a palace with one especially magnificent façade. Along one side was to have been a wide paved walk, which 'was to have made a grand place of parade, before the whole front of our supposed palace'. A splendid and integrated architectural whole was, in short, to act as a backcloth for the integrated society which would parade up and down in front of it.

In fact, the Queen Square parade was never formed, because Wood failed to raise the necessary capital to get the extra land and level the ground. But in the 1740s he tried again, and in part succeeded, on a different site. What was to become familiar to visitors from all over the British Isles as the 'Grand Parade' or just 'the Parade' was laid out (along with the lesser South Parade nearby) in 1740–43. A broad paved walk, raised up on a terrace was constructed above an existing bowling-green and gardens, and next door to Assembly Rooms. A terrace of houses acted as a backcloth to Grand Parade on one side. But on the other side it had more than a view of the gardens: it looked out to woods, hills and open country across the pleasant waters of the Avon.

Wood failed to raise the money for the grand Corinthian order, which was to have made the terrace on the parade into another 'supposed palace'. But, as he himself wrote

notwithstanding this, the Grand Parade still deserves its name; it is the principal place of public resort in the city, as the paved alley on the south side of Orange Grove was formerly; and the buildings on this parade, with the country before it, reflects a beauty to each other which has the power of charming and delighting the eye of almost every beholder.

The parade became the place where Bath's special mixture of rich and fashionable visitors, invalids and adventurers congregated between the hours of twelve and two, to pick up the news, meet friends, plan excursions or parties, and enjoy the view.

The concept of a parade with an extensive view was a new one, and was to be extremely influential. In Bath itself John Wood the Younger achieved a combination of magnificent architectural backcloth, parade and view, by the creation of the Royal Crescent in 1767–75. In 1780 Fanny Burney compared and contrasted it both to the parades by the river and to Wood



FIGURE 1.
Taste à la Mode 1745.
A print after J. Boitard,
showing the west end of
the Mall in London.

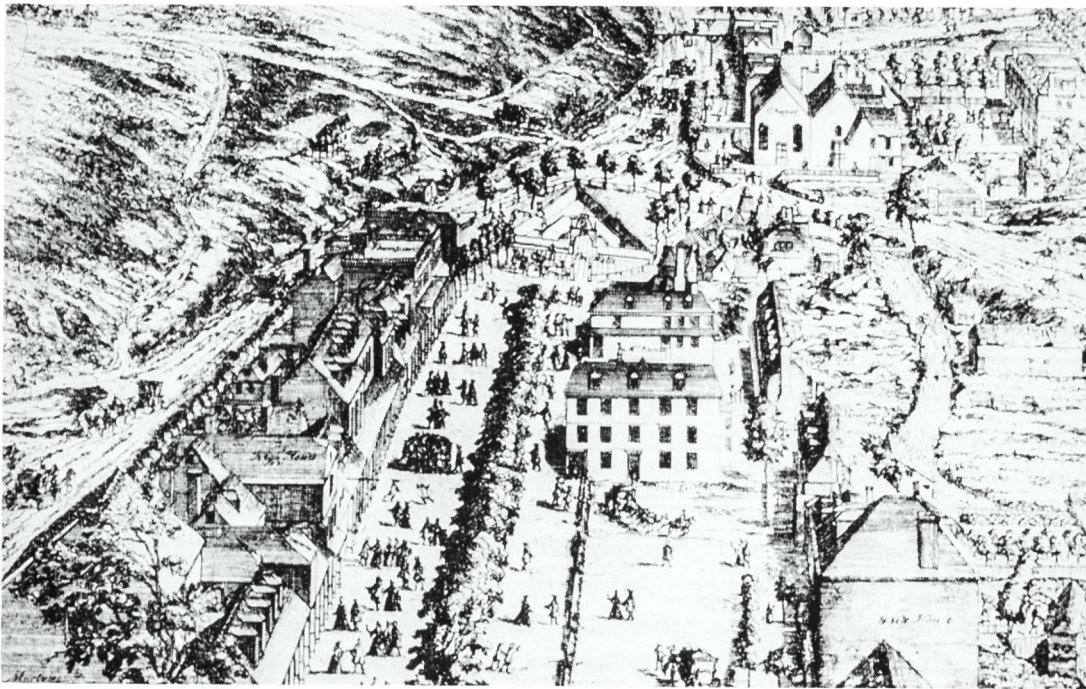


FIGURE 2.
The Walks (today the
Pantiles) at Tunbridge
Wells, from an early
eighteenth-century
print.



FIGURE 3.
The Brighton
promenade at Lewes
Crescent, Kemp Town,
from a print of c. 1830.

the Elder's King's Circus, another inward looking space, like his Queen's Square: it was 'the exquisite crescent, which to all the excellence of architecture that adorns the Circus, adds all the delights of nature that beautify the parades'.⁵ In fact, it took over from the Grand Parade as the fashionable promenade of Bath, just as the new Assembly Rooms nearby took the fashionable away from the old Assembly Rooms. It was round Crescent and Assembly Rooms that 'lo! a new nation starts up on the hill', as a poem of 1811⁶ described the upper town, with its succession of crescents and terraces looking out over open country; these often had a broad walk laid out as a subsidiary local parade before them.

Similar developments were to be found in other spas and watering places: the Royal York Crescent in Bristol, for instance, was laid out in the 1790s complete with a broad terrace for promenading and a wonderful view down into and across the Clifton Gorge. By then another type of view was beginning to be exploited for parades: a view out to open sea. Bathing, and even drinking, salt water had been promoted by the publication of Dr Russell's *Dissertation on the use of sea-water* in 1750, but it was not until the 1780s that Brighton developed as a social rival to Bath. To begin with, however, society in Brighton paraded away from the sea, around the open space known as the Steyne, where the fishermen laid out their nets to dry next door to what had been the little fishing village of Brighthelmstone. Fashionable promenaders could divert themselves with watching the fishermen while a band played, much as the promenaders on the Upper Walk at Tunbridge Wells had watched the market.

It was round the Steyne that the first fashionable houses were built, including the Prince Regent's Marine Pavilion, later to be metamorphosed into Nash's oriental fantasy. The Pavilion and its neighbours had only a sideways glimpse of the sea: the idea of houses built along the sea for amenity was, to begin with, an unfamiliar and perhaps unpleasing one. It was not until the 1790s that promenading turned the corner and a Marine Parade was built, complete with houses, next to the Steyne. Out of this developed the superb backcloth of terraces and crescents stretching from Hove to Kemp Town, before which the fashionable paraded along the sea both on foot and in carriages or on horseback; and from Brighton, marine parades and promenades spread all over the British Isles, and all over the world.

Parading flourished with especial intensity in resorts, whether by the sea or inland, but they were to be found everywhere in the eighteenth century. At a very modest provincial level, for instance, a delightfully naive painting of about 1700 appears to show the 'ladies and gentlemen' of Presteign in Radnorshire parading in the churchyard there.⁷ At the other end of the scale was the New Walk at York, laid out along the river between 1733 and 1740 for the benefit of the 'polite society' of city and country gentry and aristocracy for which York was especially notable: Robert Davies, the York historian, commented that 'our friend Mr Etty says that he does not know any public walk in Europe superior, if equal, to it'.⁸ In Dublin a French visitor described one function of the parade in the Rotunda Gardens in the 1790s:

Worthy mothers were thin on the ground and seem worried; young ladies, on the other hand, were very numerous and seemed happily occupied; in a word, I have no doubt that this Promenade perfectly achieves its object of helping women to find lovers.⁹

Parades can be studied from a number of different stand points. Something has already been said about their social aspects; about the part which they played in opening up eighteenth-century towns to the surrounding countryside, or to green spaces introduced into the town fabric; and to the way in which they encouraged the development of integrated terraces and crescents. But they can also be studied as tools for raising property values. A parade, along with the theatre and assembly rooms which often appeared in its neighbourhood, often stimulated the development of a fashionable residential neighbourhood; a successful parade could move the centre of social gravity in a town, and in some towns rival ground landlords promoted rival parades.

In Norwich the fashionable parade in the mid eighteenth century was the walk of trees planted on the edge of the town, in Chapel Field, in 1746. An Assembly House followed in 1754, and a theatre in 1757. The whole area seems to have been promoted by the 'proprietors of the Chapel Field Estate', an interesting group of some twenty-four people, which included both local aristocracy and country gentry on the one hand, and prosperous city merchants, manufacturers and at least one shop-keeper on the other.¹⁰ A fashionable residential quarter grew up around it. In Waterford the handsome new streets, suitably named George Street, King Street and Hanover Street, which had been laid out on the west side of the town in the early eighteenth century lost out as a fashionable neighbourhood when a Mall was planted at the other side of the town in about 1735. It was just outside the town walls, next to a bowling-green. 'Nothing can be more agreeable' wrote Charles Smith, the Waterford historian, 'than to see this shady walk crowded with the fair sex of the city, taking the air, enjoying the charms of a pleasant evening, and improving their healths; nor need I inform the reader that the city has long been celebrated for the beauty of its female inhabitants'.¹¹ A terrace of fine houses and a Theatre and Assembly Rooms combined in one building were built on the Mall in the 1780s. Round this nucleus grew up the 'best' neighbourhood in Waterford.

The fashionable area of Dublin might have been expected to develop to the west of the city centre, upstream and therefore away from the docks and warehouses, and with the added attraction of Phoenix Park and its Viceregal Lodge. In fact it spread in the opposite direction, in two rival areas, to the north-east and south-east, both with their own parades. The south-east area was the first to develop, around the nucleus of St Stephen's Green, which was laid out by the City Corporation in 1663, and planted with walks of trees in 1678. Grand houses were built round it, and one walk, the Beaux Walk, became especially frequented as a parade. When Luke Gardiner set about promoting his estate across the river as a rival residential neighbourhood, one of his tools for doing so was a rival parade. This was Gardiner's Mall, laid out in the late 1740s along the middle of what was to be called Sackville Street and later O'Connell Street. The Mall was fenced in with rails and stone obelisks, and ladies and gentlemen paraded up and down inside the enclosure, rather like horses in the paddock of a racecourse. The Rotunda Rooms were built as Assembly Rooms at the far end of the Mall in 1757, and ultimately the fashionable parade moved up from the Mall to the Rotunda Gardens. The whole area was a success, and became just as prestigious as the district across the river. The Mall has long since gone, but its influence is still felt in the great width of O'Connell Street.

At Cheltenham at least four different parades ultimately competed with each other. The first was what became known as Well Walk. It was laid out in 1739 by Henry Skillicorne, who owned the land, to either side of a mineral spring just outside the little town. He built a Long Room by the well, and presided over the Walk, according to the inscription on his monument, with 'conduct ingenious and manners attractive'. George III came to Cheltenham in 1788, promenaded on Well Walk along with all the other visitors, impressed them with his affability, and helped boost the reputation of the town. On nearby estates the Montpellier Spa and Gardens were developed by Henry Thompson in 1801-25, and the Sherborn Spa and Gardens by the Harward brothers around 1818. Each had their own main walk or promenade, and their own methods of promotion. The Montpellier Gardens went in for an illuminated musical promenade in the evening. 'There are few scenes more animated and inspiring', according to a contemporary guide-book, 'than the Montpellier Promenade . . . between eight and ten, with the presence of the lovely, the titled and the fashionable, as they parade up and down the Grand Walk, to the sound of music'.

The terraces and crescents of late Georgian and early Victorian Cheltenham grew up around these tree-planted walks and gardens. The Grand Walk in Montpellier Crescent was

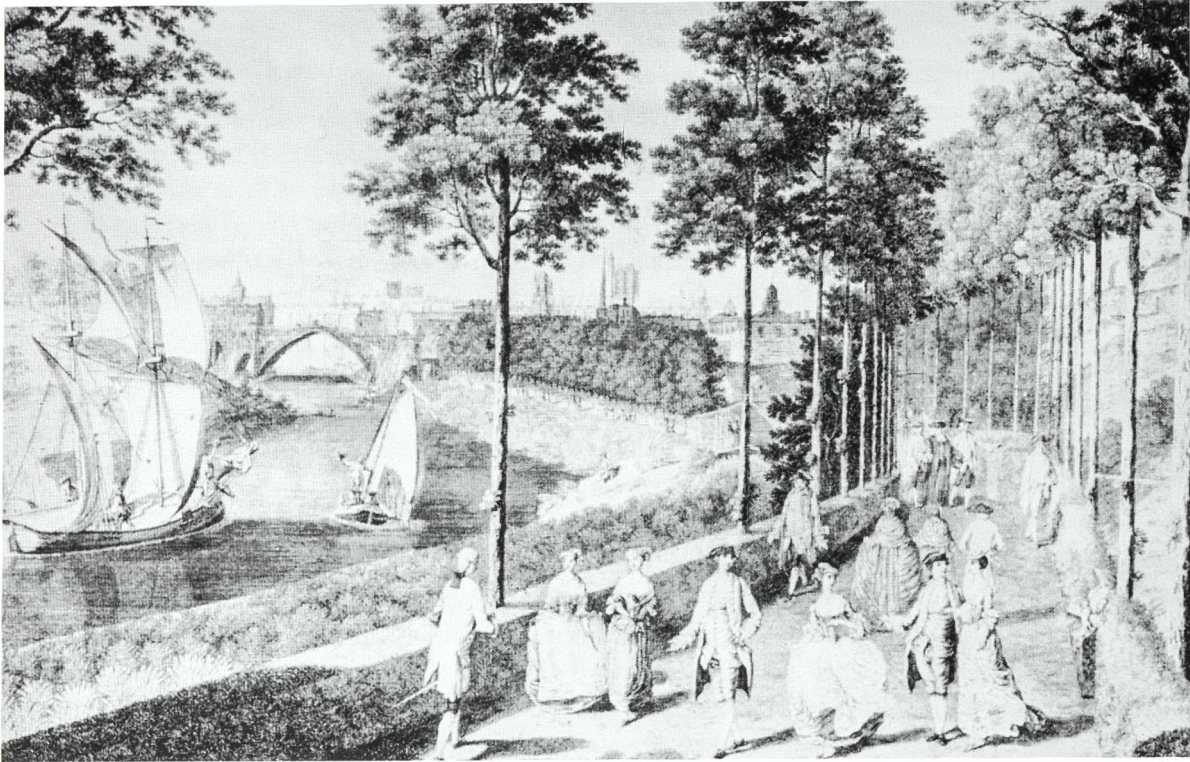


FIGURE 4.
The New Walk,
York, from the
drawing by
Nathan Drake
engraved by
Grignion in
1756.



FIGURE 5.
Gardiner's Mall
on Sackville
(today
O'Connell)
Street, Dublin,
from a print of
c. 1750.



FIGURE 6.
A new view of
Cheltenham in
1748, showing
Henry
Skillicorne's
Long Walk.

later developed as a fashionable shopping parade. The main walk in the Sherborne Gardens developed into the Promenade, the main street of Cheltenham. Meanwhile, on the other side of the town Joseph Pitt set out to develop his property as yet another fashionable area, complete with spa, gardens and parade, and called it Pittville. The architecture was grand, the lay-out attractive, but the combined competition of the other three areas was too great. Pitt went bankrupt, and his architect was had up for embezzlement and transported to Australia.

The social thrust of late Georgian and Victorian Leicester was conditioned by the New Walk. It is still perhaps the most agreeable feature of the town. It was laid out on previously open Corporation land to the south of the town in 1785. Terraces of pretty houses followed in the early nineteenth century, the racecourse was laid out at the end of the Walk, and along this axis fashionable Leicester expanded to the south culminating in Stoneygate where the richer Leicester manufacturers and businessmen built their big houses in mid-Victorian times.

A nice example of a parade influencing architecture can still be observed in a metropolitan context in Park Lane. It was the result of the revival of Hyde Park as a carriage parade. Carriages had paraded there in the reign of Charles II, in imitation of the carriage parade on the Cours La Reine in Paris. In the eighteenth century the custom seems to have fallen into relative disuse, but it was revived in a big way in the nineteenth century. The whole eastern edge of Hyde Park became, at the right hour, a glittering cavalcade of carriages and riders, watched by an equally glittering throng of pedestrian promenaders. The houses along the western edge of Mayfair, which had previously turned their backs on the dim little road known as Park Lane, went, so to speak, into reverse, and their park-side façades were embellished with a dazzling sequence of windows and verandahs, from which to watch the show. Much of this has been destroyed, but two splendid sections still survive.

This paper can end with an excursion into the late nineteenth century. A drawing in George and Weedon Grossmith's *Diary of a Nobody* (1892) illustrates an episode at Broadstairs; it is captioned 'Lupin positively refused to walk down the Parade with me because I was wearing my new straw helmet with my frock-coat'. Parading continued to flourish through Victorian days and into this century, perhaps especially in a sea-side context. The social spread and social distinctions involved make a fascinating study; but that, of course, is another story.

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