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Decimus Burton and the Urban Picturesque

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The idea of an 'urban picturesque' might seem, at first, to be a contradiction in terms. Urbanism and urban planning do not appear to marry well with landscape garden design with its bucolic and arcadian associations. But the term is a valid one when referring to the landscaped parks of early nineteenth century London which were a new kind of urban space.

The relationship between architecture and landscape is part of the picturesque conundrum that featured in the aesthetic debate at the end of the eighteenth century. This is seen in the writings of, amongst others, Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price which codified the principles of Picturesque design theory. This set of design philosophies and influences encouraged new solutions to old problems as well as innovation in the urban landscape in the 1820s. I want to concentrate on how Decimus Burton (1800–81) created an appropriate landscape for a city setting and the aims and ideology behind his designs. I will also consider the relationship of these aims and ideals to the Picturesque tradition. Burton had to face the problem of designing these new types of landscapes early on in his career. His solutions to these problems can be seen in his designs, many of which were unexecuted, for the royal parks in London.

This paper does not set out to look at Burton's complete urban plans. There is an important difference between these and the urban parks owned by the crown. The latter were designed and laid out to be in the service of the monarch and the state. They had no profit making function. There were even philanthropic undertones in the concern to provide city dwellers with open spaces and fresh air. The urban plans, although they included landscape elements, had a different rationale behind them. They were primarily domestic developments which were intended to make a profit. The most well known of these are the Calverly Estate in Tunbridge Wells, Kent for John Ward (1828 onwards) St Leonard's, Sussex with his father James Burton (1830 onwards) and Fleetwood, Lancashire for Sir Peter Hesketh – Fleetwood (1836–43). But there are many other schemes by Burton which were never completed or even begun. Moreover, Burton's landscape projects carried out in the 1820s can be seen as the last in a long line of symbolic landscape garden designs that can be termed Picturesque. I do not, however, claim that there is no connection between these and Burton's later urban plans. Indeed, many of the Picturesque planning questions dealt with in Burton's town plans were influenced by his experience with the fundamental problems raised in designing urban landscapes in capital cities.

We must first examine the philosophy of the Picturesque in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century England. The English predilection for making architecture and especially landscape appear 'picture like' reached its apotheosis in this period. Price, Knight, Gilpin and others drew together the disparate strands of the eighteenth century movement codifying them into Picturesque theory. One of the chief preoccupations at that time was

the relationship between architecture and landscape. Architects were exhorted to follow the examples of classical landscape painters such as Claude or Poussin and even the English Baroque architect Sir John Vanbrugh to escape the restrictive forces of classicism and to create a greater fusion of architecture and landscape.

From this two important ideas emerge. Firstly the approval or encouragement of architects who in pursuit of a Picturesque effect should achieve according to Richard Payne Knight in his *Inquiry* (1805)

‘no blamable inconsistency in uniting the different improvements of different ages and countries in the same object’

This could be seen as a license for stylistic eclecticism as well as a call for the return to the primitive – the most important element being the overall effect. Secondly, there was a widespread rejection of the work of Capability Brown who was viewed by contemporaries as being too ‘natural’. Instead ‘Italianate’ garden design was favoured with its steps, terraces, trellises and disorganized formality. In extreme cases formal layouts were favoured compared to a layout by Brown.

Burton absorbed many of these ideas during his formative years as an architect. Sir John Soane, John Nash, and to a lesser extent William Wilkins, played important roles in many aspects of Burton’s early training. Importantly here, their work introduced him to the principles of picturesque planning and design.

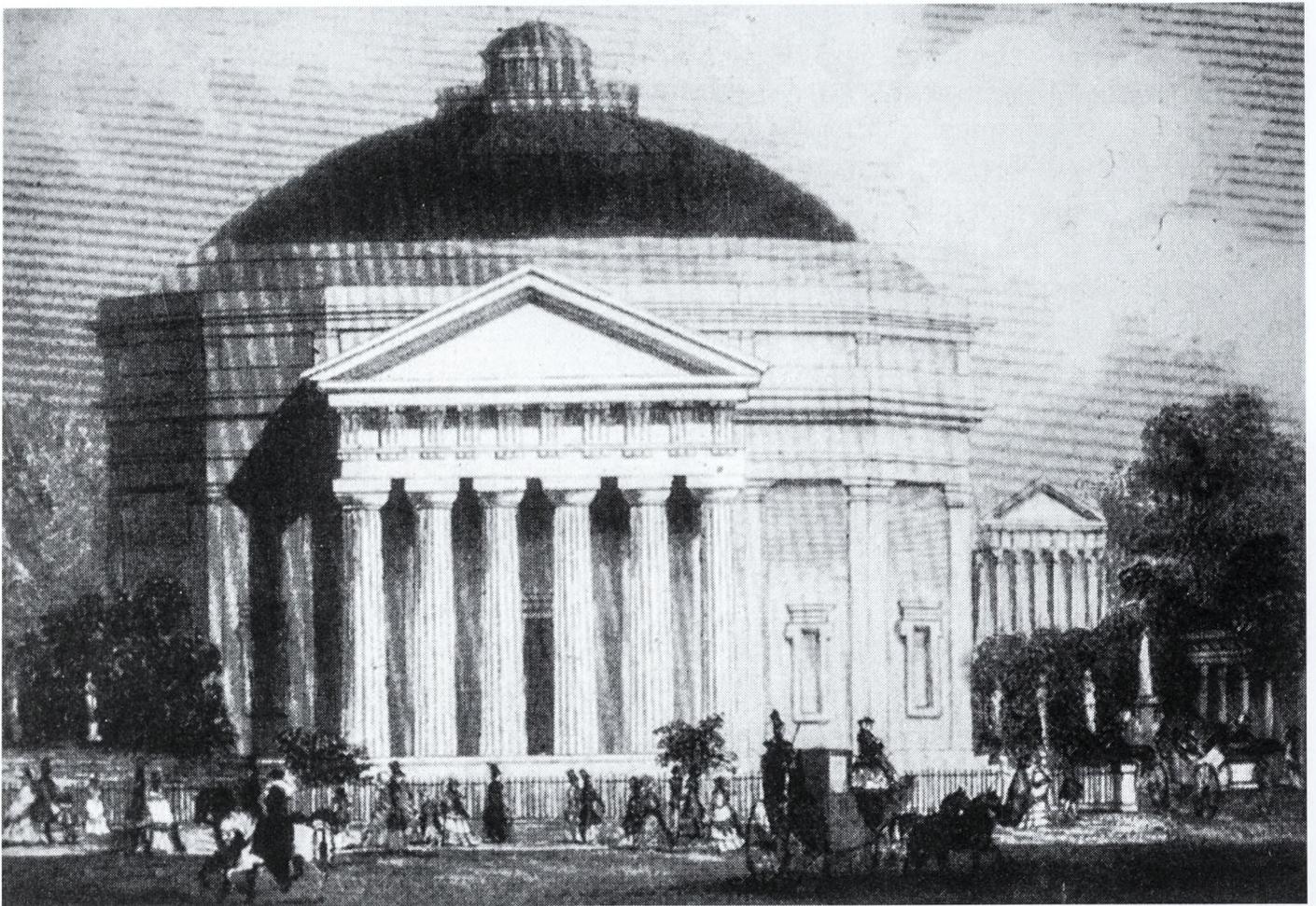


Fig. 1 Decimus Burton, *The Colosseum, Regent's Park. 1823–7.*

Sir John Soane (1753–1837) understood the dilemmas behind the principles of Picturesque design of architecture and landscape. These were explored in the lectures

Soane delivered during his time as President of the Royal Academy (1806–36). Soane explored the possibilities of light and space in his designs, drew on classical sources and experimented with primitive forms. He also understood the expressive qualities of architecture (which are fully discussed in another paper). Burton entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1817. The importance of Soane to Burton's development as an architect has been greatly underrated. It is not our subject here, but in the context of this paper Soane's influence can be seen in many of Burton's designs discussed below.

Burton worked in William Wilkins's (1778–1839) office for some time in mid 1820s. But Wilkins's influence may have been felt earlier in his designs for *The Grange* (1812). This shows the problems of placing pure classical, in this case Greek, architecture in the middle of a landscaped park. This was a question Burton had to face on several occasions whilst designing the royal parks with arguably more success than Wilkins.

The Colosseum in Regent's Park designed by Burton for Thomas Hornor (1822–3) shows the influence of Soane and Wilkins in terms of its scale and setting. (Fig. 1) Despite its name, it was an octagonal version of the Pantheon. The building housed a circular panorama of the view from the Cupola of St Paul's Cathedral. The viewing gallery, situated near the top of the vast single space interior was reached by one of the first mechanical lifts. The feeling of classical grandeur aroused in the style of the building and its public function were important elements in Burton's developing approach to the urban Picturesque.

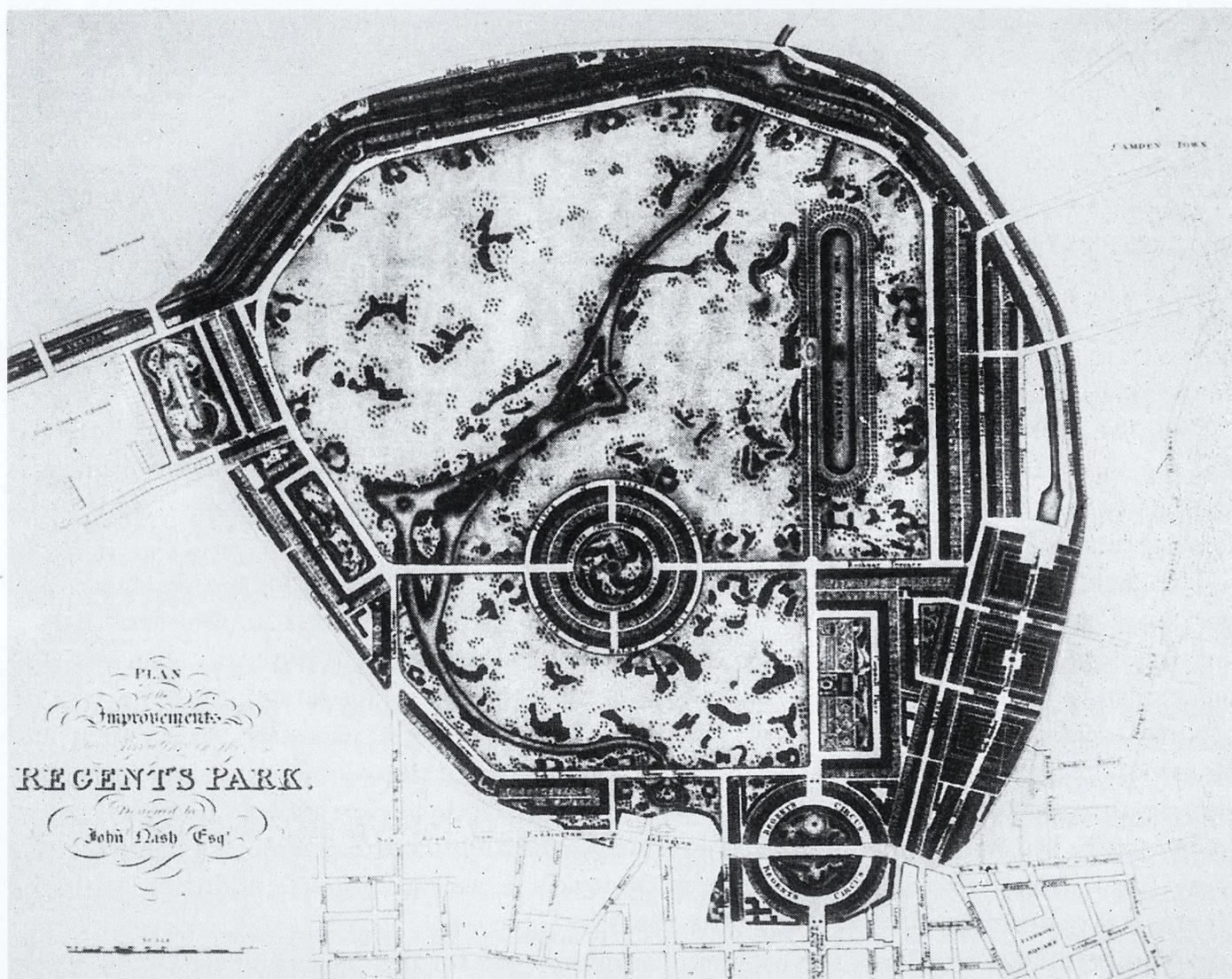


Fig. 2 John Nash, *Plan for the Improvement of Regent's Park*. 1811.

Burton's early career and work is closely connected with John Nash (1752–1835) who oversaw the development of Regent's Park and Regent Street for the Prince Regent (later George IV). James Burton was one of the principal speculative builders for the project through this connection Decimus Burton may have spent time working in Nash's office. Nash synthesized many of the ideas of Gilpin, Price and Knight in his designs. Cronkhill (1802) sums up their praise of Claude as it is related to drawings in his *Liber Veritatis* and the call for Picturesque architecture to be made up of the most astylar vernacular elements as well as the most sophisticated features of classical design. Nash was also influenced by French architecture and planning. This can be seen in two ways. Firstly, the influence of Mansart's long façades at Versailles and the terraces at La Place de la Concorde in Paris on Nash's idea for long terraces in Regent's Park. Secondly, the adoption of the model of French Rationalist planning for projects like the Regent's Park villas and landscaping and general layout. Nash's original plan (1811/12) shows two concentric circuses of terraces and a more formal landscape arrangement. (Fig. 2) The geometric order Nash imposed on the 'nature' of Regent's Park was gradually broken down during the course of the project due to financial constraints. The result is a layout that resembles something like our idea of the Picturesque – that is to say a more irregular system of layout and planting. In many ways this is parallel to what happened with Burton's design and plans for the royal parks.

It is also important to consider the influence of contemporary architectural theory on Burton. Once again, France of particular importance here, especially French Rationalist theory as seen in the work of architects like Charles Nicolas Ledoux and Louis Pierre Balthard. This was known to Burton through his studies at the Royal Academy and possibly through Pugin the elder who worked in Nash's office, after escaping from France in 1793, and who was known to both James and Decimus Burton.

Ledoux's idea of *La Ville Ideale de Chaux* (1804) was influential for town planning and the development of the notion of public urban space. Ledoux's *Ville* contained public parks in which were situated monuments to amongst other things the Cult of Moral Values and to the New Ethics. This introduces two important themes which are essential to Burton's approach to designing the parks. The idea of the monument to the values of the state and/or the population at large and the notion of the public urban space.

Both the Picturesque theorists in England and the French Rationalist planners believed that the design of landscapes or cities could have a symbolic and narrative content. This is seen in for instance in the presentation of the *Aenaead* at Stourhead or Ledoux's Barrières – the monumental entrance ways into Paris.

The eighteenth century preoccupation with nature and its associations with reason and sentiment precipitated in the late Romantic period a feeling of correlation between nature and freedom. These elements were seen by most of Europe as typically English and encapsulated in the principles of landscape garden design. This moral message was an important element in the design of the urban landscape. The victories at Trafalgar and Waterloo, the power of the British Empire and the emerging status of London as a world city were represented in the landscaping of the parks. The Picturesque theorists had established the symbolic and narrative functions of landscape and architecture. Here, this language was being used in the service of the state as opposed to an individual landowner, with the French Rationalists providing some of the syntax.

It is important to establish the original, complete plan for the parks and palace. A report on the state of Hyde, Green and St James's Parks was ordered from the Office of Woods by

The Treasury in 1823. In 1825 Burton was appointed architect to oversee the improvements including the design of the many new monumental entrance ways into the parks. Burton's work can be divided into two main areas each having significance for our subject. Firstly, his designs for the monuments, residential buildings from royal palaces to modest lodges for the park keepers. Secondly, his plans for the realigning and reorientating of the roads and walkways through the parks to connect these focal points. The most important building here is Buckingham Palace to which the royal parks acted as the landscape garden setting. George IV made the decision to move to Buckingham House from Carlton House in the early 1820s. By the mid decade plans for the royal parks and the Nash's remodelling of the house into a royal palace were well under way.

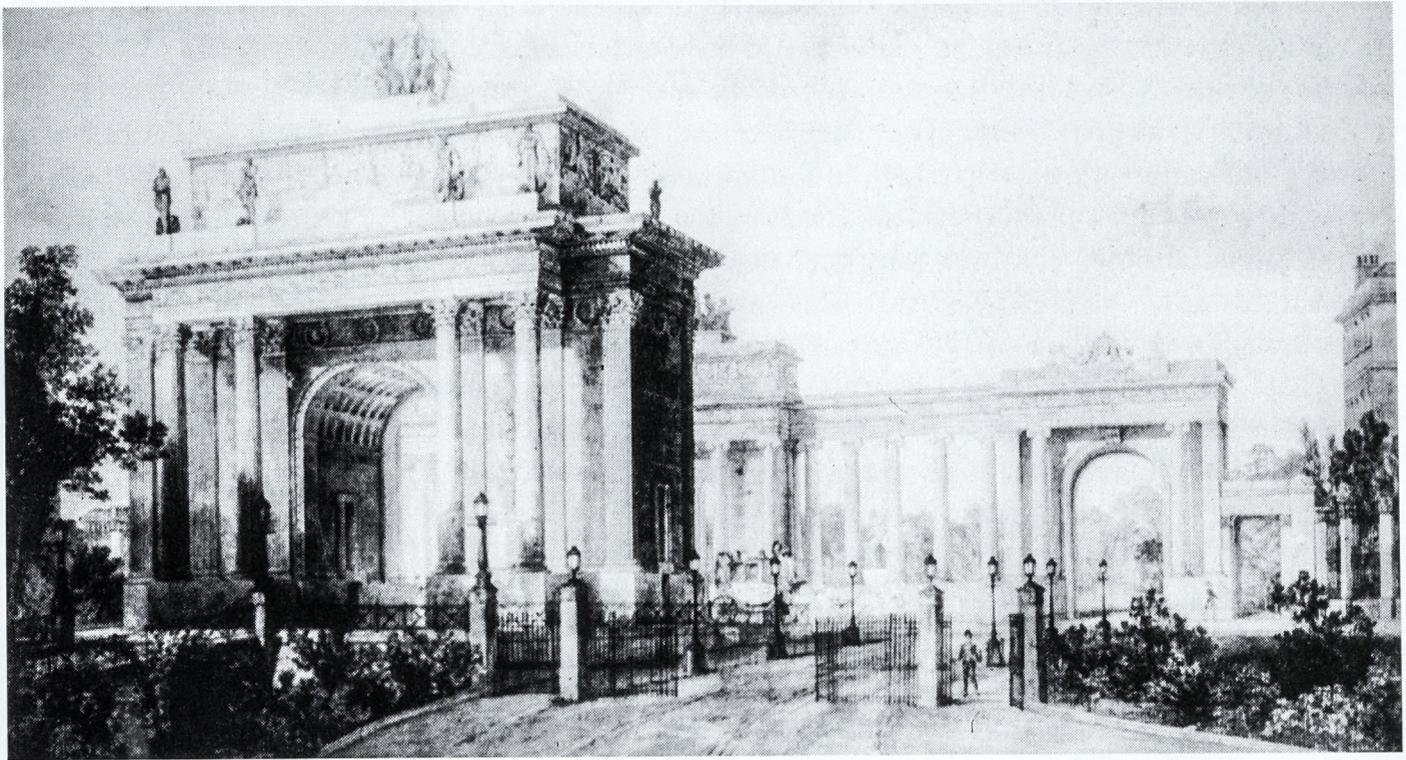


Fig. 3 Perspective of the Hyde Park Screen and the Entrance to Buckingham Palace Gardens. Unsigned, undated watercolour. RIBA drawings collection.

In the early 1820s Burton began working on the designs for the monumental entrance ways to Hyde Park and Green Park. (Fig. 3) The Green Park Arch had grown out of an idea going back to the 1770s of having a gateway into London from the west. Encouraged by Ledoux's *Barrières* and the need for a monument to celebrate the recent victories at Trafalgar and Waterloo the scheme was revived but instead of straddling Piccadilly the gateway was turned to serve as an entrance into Green Park and the back garden of Buckingham Palace. This was aligned with the entrance into Hyde Park and the Achilles statue which had been erected as a tribute to Wellington in 1822. The composition in terms of the strong axis from national hero to royal palace and the sculptural decoration, which was mostly unexecuted, celebrates Britain's naval and military prowess and the intellectual and artistic talents of the nation. The Hanoverian dynasty are not excluded – an equestrian portrait of George III was to crown the Hyde Park Screen and roundels containing the initials GRIV were to adorn the Green Park Arch. This notion is strengthened further if these plans are seen in tandem with Nash's equally ill fated Marble Arch. The planned narrative sculpture of all three arches and the motif itself of a triumphal arch make up a compelling part of the overall picture of the parks.

The pivotal role the palace played in the design of the parks is not always easy to determine. Nash, in his evidence to the 1828 Parliamentary enquiry, claimed to know nothing of the Green Park Arch and was unaware that it was intended as an entrance into the back garden of Buckingham Palace. It must have been hard to miss! The planned network of axial roads to link the monuments and gateways to the palace was never completed. Indeed, it was only after the death of George IV that his successor William IV gave any thought to the building of a road leading up to the Green Park Arch from the palace side of it. In April 1831 the king commanded the archway should be used as an entrance into Green Park and was prepared to give up part of his garden in St James's Park to make this possible. Burton was consulted and presented three solutions of varying cost. His preferred and most costly plan was to create a new road leading in a straight line from the arch to the Mall as he believed it would have the best effect of all.

The idea of a visual link between the parks and the buildings therein is developed further in St James's Park in 1834. The occupiers of houses fronting Bird Cage Walk between Storey's Gate and the new barracks lodged an objection to the Office of Woods. The part of the park adjoining their houses had become a public thoroughfare open till late at night during parliamentary sessions and was noisy. Moreover, the irregular step of ground has become an annoyance. The Office of Woods also wanted to improve the area as the mall connected Storey's Gate to the new State Paper Office. The Commissioners were keen to exclude from view broken line of wall belonging to houses and provide a small area in front of the houses towards the park. Burton was requested to report and present the best plan. This met the requirements of the memorialists and provided a 'most handsome line of approach and communication' between the new palace and the splendid buildings before alluded to and Hyde Park and the Public Departments in Westminster (the new State Paper Office). Furthermore, it was felt the piers and railings of Storeys Gate should be removed and replaced by a handsome gateway forming 'a royal entrance to the park and Buckingham Palace from the Houses of Parliament, the Brighton Palace &c which it would have a very good effect on the general design of the park and to those entering the town from Westminster Bridge'.

Many of the park lodges designed by Burton resemble small classical temples situated in a landscape setting. The compact form of the Prince of Wales Gate (mid 1820s) with its doric portico is typical. Conversely some designs had a more romantic feel as seen in the unexecuted, circular Bayswater lodge which in many ways echoes the pure forms of the Colosseum.

Once the decision had been made in the early 1820s to open the royal parks great emphasis was placed on the public's enjoyment of them. Underlying this is the question of why the decision was made to open up the parks. The state felt the design and layout of the parks was a two way contract – creating a sense of public well being, edification and peace in these public open spaces. In the light of the French Revolution this was not a bad idea. The sense of common ownership and careful presentation of symbols of monarchy and state were an important part of the planning behind the metropolitan improvements in London.

For references and a full bibliography see forthcoming University of London Ph.D thesis: Dana Arnold, *Decimus Burton (1800–1881): Architect and Town Planner*