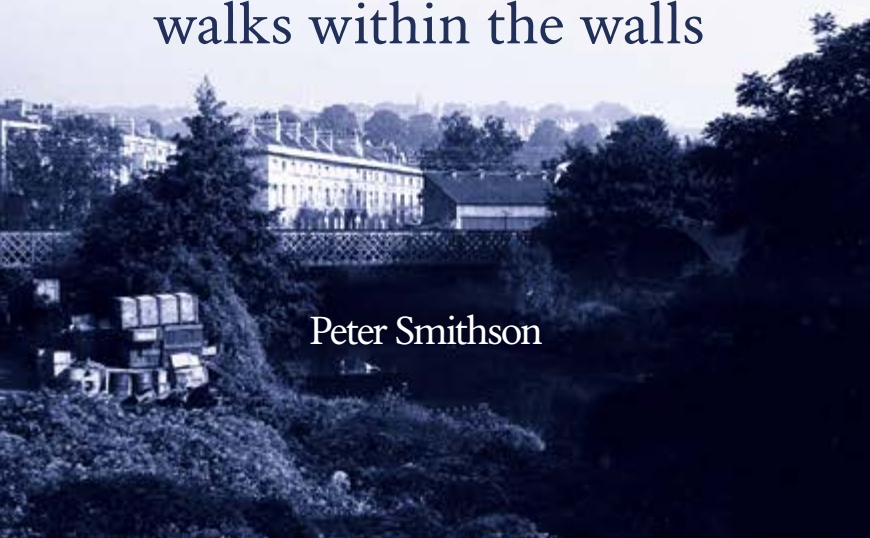




walks within the walls



Peter Smithson

Bath

Walks within the walls—a study of Bath as a built-form taken over by other uses.

Introduction

'In the second century of the Christian Era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valour. The gentle, but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury. The image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence: the Roman senate appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and devolved on the emperors all the executive powers of government. During a happy period, AD 98-180, of more than fourscore years, the public administration was conducted by the virtue and abilities of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the two Antonines. It is the design of this, and of the two succeeding chapters, to describe the prosperous condition of their empire; and afterwards, from the death of Marcus Antonius, to deduce the most important circumstances of its decline and fall; a revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth.'

From Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Bath is Rome in England: On seven hills, founded by the Romans and re-founded in conscious imitation of Roman civic virtues in the 18th century, by a will as strong as that of Rome herself, it appears today like a city of palaces and gardens turned over to other uses. A shell of a city—as was Rome in the 18th century—with overgrown terracing and mounds, disused waterways and bridges, springs, farmhouses, cows, pigs and horses, gardens and allotments all 'within the walls'. There is everywhere this feeling of being inside the shell of a previous culture.

There are very few places in the world where one can still see and feel the force of past form. Places where through choice or poverty the past still lives in the present—the doorsteps still in place, the first stones on the pavements and the roads, the original locks and hinges—not all there, but neither too elaborately restored nor replaced by counterfeits. In Dubrovnik, in Spalato, in Avignon, at Paestum (somewhat of an exception), in parts of Venice, and in parts of Rome herself, as well as in many smaller places—Yarm in Yorkshire, for example—this feeling of what it was like to live with a previous culture, with a previous technology, can still reach one through

the surviving built-form. It is nevertheless rare, and such places as there are—especially the 'art-cities'—may not survive tourism and prosperity. We have one such marvellous 'live shell' on our doorstep. Bath. Bath is unique in the extent of its embodiment of the romantic-classical dream; for its remarkable cohesion, *for a form-language understood by all, contributed to by all*. This can be seen most obviously in the humbler parts of the city, where almost everything survives. And it is these humbler parts that are most vulnerable to change—in fact, demolition for a road junction in the area south of the Wells Road, where there is one of the most remarkable groups of small houses in the world, finally terrified me into recording these *Walks within the walls* so that others could learn the 'lesson of Bath' before it is too late. Bath seems to me to be a pure exemplar, a text screaming for traditional pedagogic interpretation. Thus these Walks are in the manner of John Ruskin's *Mornings in Florence* (the only Ruskin I have been able to finish).

In many old cities, the feeling of 'control', of conscious design, is owing to the traditional use of a few materials. An easy example: look out on the roofs of 19th century London or Paris. A sea of roofs, all 'different', but in fact all the same—the same roofing material at the same pitch, with roof-lights built in the same way (but in different sizes) and so on. In total, decent, even moving; a strong feeling of order and control. But in Bath the sense of control is also the result of a conscious application of formal rules. In the course of time the rules became part of craft thinking—the *formal language being understood and contributed to by all*. That the rules were understood by all, meant they were extended far beyond the text-books. Bath is profoundly original both as organization and as formal composition. Queen Square may be Vicenza with chimneys (Walk 4), but thereafter it is a thing on its own. This single example excepted, one is never reminded, by the syntax of the buildings, of anywhere else. That Bath is 'like Rome in the eighteenth century' is an idea on another and more general level—the way in which the countryside comes into the town, the actual clear sight of fields and trees at the end of urban views, or the coming across of relics of sophisticated taste, of love and energy applied to 'trifles' in nowhere places, *the*

sense of the depth of the culture—this is what is like Rome. And one other thing, the shape of the stones in rustic walls is very like the fragments of real Rome in England—Hadrian's Wall. But in its town-organization and in its architecture, Bath is like nowhere else.

It has no town-plan in the sense of Karlsruhe or Baroque Berlin with their avenues, formal parks and civic places. In fact, as the horrible model recently made and now on display in the reference library in Queen Square shows, it has no form-structure in this sense whatever. It is a scatter of events. Separate these events from the actuality, their making and their action on, the topography of Bath—reduce them to geometric form—they are nothing.

There is no castle, no big town-hall, no central square. Bath was built as a town for—even towards—an understood soft-focus social hierarchy, each class drifting imperceptibly into the others and none being deprived of the civilizing benefits of taste.

It is in fact a housing estate. A town built of houses. In contrast to Karlsruhe, *parades* (Walk 1) are for walking and showing-off outside houses, not for military parades; *gardens and lawns* (Walk 3) are for the enjoyment of people in the houses beside them, not to isolate the palace from the town; *streets* belong to the houses on either side—they are places for carriages and sedan-chairs, for walking, for social intercourse, not for lines-of-fire and King's Birthday parades. Ordinary day-to-day living in Bath was given the attention and love that was elsewhere devoted only to the glory of the state (see 'Persuasion' - p.19.)

The walks follow pedestrian ways and quiet streets as far as possible; for to see what there is to be seen one has to walk, one has preferably to be alone or with one other person, and one should not talk. The reverie that Bath can induce is an important part of the lesson.

There is a *certainty* about these 'live-shells' that can reach and astound us still if we keep quiet. This 'certainty', of knowing what to do, what is correct, recurs in nations. It is perhaps not to be puzzled over, for like the tides it is beyond intellect, and, like the tides or the seasons, what we should do is let it flood into us. To let this happen is the **first object** of these Walks.

The **second object** is to examine carefully how the happiest relationship of houses and surroundings have been brought about.

The **third object** is to look at and enjoy the way the buildings are made—their walls, string courses and cornices, their steps, railings, hinges and coal covers.

The **fourth object** is to study the classical vocabulary at work, observe the manipulations of the elements, around corners, up and down slopes.

The first object cannot be discussed further, and the amazing variety of ground formations and layout shapes in Bath make it inevitable that discussion of the other objects of the Walks—in brief 'arrangement', 'making', and 'composition'—get mixed up together.

But let us start on **arrangement**. In addition to the 'open-to-nature' crescents—the acknowledged urban invention of Bath—there are attempts at layout shapes I have never seen anywhere else. From these arise many of the going-around-corners formal problems which have to be met by solutions without established precedent.

For example, there is an almost closed circle ([The Circus, Walk 3](#)); a triangle with a cross fall down from the flat side ([Portland Place, Walk 3](#)); an open-sided 'L' steeply hemmed in by rising ground on the open side ([Southcot Place, Walk 2](#)); a lozenge ([Laura Place, Walk 1](#)); an unfinished

indeed unrecognizable on the ground as such, elongated *hexagon* ([Sydney Gardens, Walk 1](#)); a crescent rising towards its centre ([Camden Crescent, Walk 4](#)); and innumerable conventional forms made novel by cross falls.

There is in addition every form of way; *greenways* (for example either side of [Caroline Buildings, Pulteney Road, off the Kennet and Avon Canal Towing Path, Walk 1](#)); *paved ways* (for example that of [Miles buildings, off George Street, Walk 4](#)). *Towing paths* (along the [Kennet and Avon Canal, Walk 1](#)); *raised pavements* (for example in [George Street and Roman Road, Walk 4](#)).

There are raised pavements (and indeed raised roads for example [Green Park, Walk 4](#)) with the space under them often of immense volume, containing cellarge, storage and scullerage for the houses attached. There is even a raised pavement as 'access deck' with the house gardens below it ([Widcombe Terrace, Walk 2](#)).

Reviewing the 'arrangements' from the Walks—as a walker—it would seem that five hundred feet without a *decisive* change of line or 'end' of some sort is the maximum length one can put up with without tedium.

You can see for yourself if this is true at [Green Park, Walk 4](#); Norfolk Crescent, Royal Crescent, Lansdown Crescent (the main concavity is 500 ft), all during [Walk 3](#); and at [Camden Crescent, Walk 4](#).

By this measure the dreary Paragon, Roman Road, [Walk 4](#), is twice as long as it should be, as also [Great Pulteney Street, Walk 1](#).

So on to **making**. Only two general points, concerning mason and pavior.

Firstly, going up hill seems to bring out the best in Bath masons—the handling of the transitions of level both on the façades and at the pavement is so dexterous that the only possible analogous skill is that of gymnasts, not geometers.

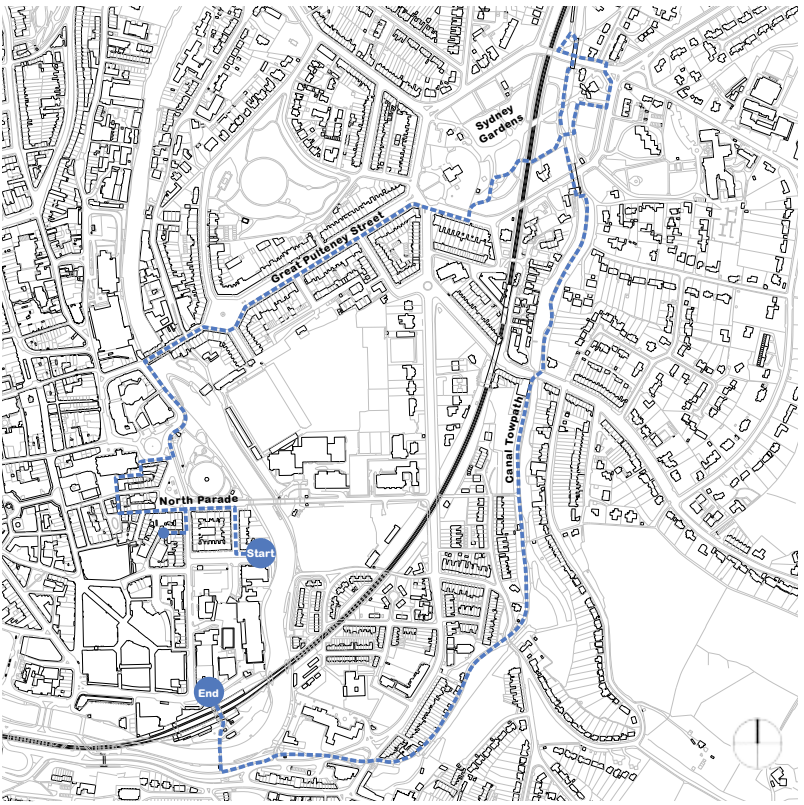
Secondly, outdoor spaces are clearly the rooms of the city and the floors are treated as such—the paving pattern indicating where to, even how to, walk and ride.

Finally, **composition**. You will understand, in those parts of the texts to the Walks which deal with the deployment of the classical elements of design on the façades of the buildings, that in the classical language a *big pediment* is all that remains of a *portico*, which is a porch, a shelter for and aggrandisement of the main way in. *Portico* is a *metaphor for big door*. *Pediment* is therefore a *metaphor for a less important (or cheaper) big door*. Columned *pavilions* are relics of sheltered looking-out places at corners; they are a *metaphor for end or corner special rooms*.

A *small pediment* is a shelter to an unimportant door or window; it is a canopy, a *metaphor for hole in wall*.

An applied *order* (like that on the Colosseum in Rome), gives the measure of what lies behind the façade. It is a *metaphor of structuring*.

To use these elements of design outside of the indication of their metaphors (or, as they would have said in the thirties, when form does not indicate content) is a serious step, and the texts to the Walks try to show where there is a breakdown of the traditional meaning of the metaphors or where new meanings are established.



Walk 1

Start walking in South Parade. This is my favourite part of Bath. Decent snuff-coloured buildings and the widest pavement I know. Thirty-three feet wide **1, 2, 3**. Under this pavement and that of Duke Street,



1, 2, 3

storage and rough work areas for the houses, with grills let into the paving; ferny and countrified in Duke Street **4, 5, 6**.

Duke Street is for foot-traffic only and is of proper street width, 50ft between house fronts, the clear paved area being about 36 ft wide **7**.



4, 5, 6

The language of the architecture is quite conventional, rectangular in plan and on a flat site it presents no special problems. The small pediments over the doors are stronger than any other element of the façades (especially as now painted—white), and leave one in no doubt that the blocks are for 'multiple occupation', that is, separate houses each with their own front doors. The well-defined 'bridges' over to the doors contribute to the clarity of the statement **3**.

Notice here for the first time in the Walks, the street name cut into the string-course and the effect it has of making the string-course look as if it was provided for that purpose. It is at the right height for easy reading, and there is the possibility of a special long thin stone for carving on **8**. To the rear of the buildings and towards the river the neglected gardens and old masonry give the first real taste of Rome in England.

North and South Parades with Pierrepont and Duke Streets are one composition, laid out by John Wood the Elder in 1738 and built in 1740-48 as part of a projected Royal Forum for Bath which was to extend to the South. (Pevsner, p.124).

1739 was spent draining the site (Smith p. 73). This may have been a factor in the decision to have raised pavements.



7, 8

In Pierrepont Street we see a pediment correctly deployed to mark a *big door*—the opening into Pierrepont Place with its fine masculine Tuscan Columns **9, 10, 11**. This whole central portion reminds me of the town hall (with open market under) on Whitby East Cliff, one the nicest common buildings of the north.

To walk through North Parade Passage towards Abbey Green is to be reminded of what Bath was like before the Woods—classical elements without classical discipline, but the craft capacity was there ready to draw on **12**. The same can be said of Abbey Green itself. Here under this tree with the world shut out, traffic very slow, stone paved road, stone kerbs still intact, stone pavement, one can still



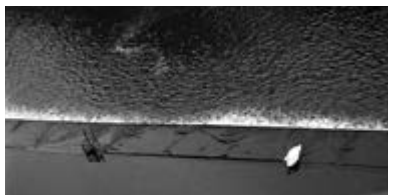
9, 10, 11



12

feel the edge of the iron/stone technology **13, 14**. This place, a real inhabited cavity in the 'live-shell', now open to whimsy but still with the hard touch of Shildon, Co. Durham—of the beginning of the railway era about it. Now walk up Church Street, round the back of the Abbey, past the obelisk and follow the roaring river along **15**. Then cross, over Pulteney Bridge.

Once over the river our real pedagogic problem begins. For in Laura Place we meet the first of our geometric oddities—of greatest interest in the resolution of corners—and the beginning of an urban exercise at the grandest scale.



13, 14, 15

I think the exercise is a failure: in Laura Place looking up Great Pulteney Street one feels a kind of desolation; one is in the grip of the continental drift towards abstract space. The houses on either side are part of the optical apparatus of an axis leading to—guess what—a small hotel (now a museum).

Street has become route. It is difficult to pause, one longs to escape—but as a lesson there must be no escape until it has been looked at closely.

This part of Bath, the New Town of Bathwick, according to [Pevsner \(p.135\)](#), was designed by Thomas Baldwin, and the building dates of the Baldwin development run from 1788 to 1820. Later building is by Pinch. In Laura Place. We are here dealing with a very sophisticated, indeed kinky, architecture where one does not expect, or get, a big door under a pediment.



16, 17, 18

Robert Adam's architecture, which earlier than this, took-off from those man wall paintings of airy pavilions, bird perches made apparently of painted boxwood. The architecture of Laura Place is similarly dematerialized. See how the detailing over the swags Number 1 has chipped-off like boxwood **16**.

Now cross to the corner of Johnstone Street and Laura Place. An external angle of 240° **17, 18**.

Those six-inch kick-outs at the ends sides facing the square are very clever indeed; without them the corners would melt away—for light too in Bath is usually soft and grey.

Notice how the sill courses, profiled like brass, tinkle into the edges of the asters just above the base and then high up. No English Palladian would have slept easy again if he had allowed himself to let that happen. Note also the railings of a fancier taste **19**.



19, 20



21, 22

This fancier taste is evident all the way down Great Pulteney Street, in fanlights, in ironwork **20**. The façades of Great Pulteney Street really are virtuoso stuff. Who would risk that goal post composition **21** by splitting the end pilaster? Seeing it first close-to, confused by later down pipes, I really thought it was a setting-out error (such as one gets in cathedrals). But it is intentional, it even works. Further along the street less risks are taken but it is still very professional somehow well-cut **22**.

We are now closer to that axis-terminating hotel (now where *were* bedrooms?) in Sydney Gardens.

You will notice on the map that the shape of the piece of land bounded by two arms of Sydney Place, Beckford Road, and Sydney Road is elongated hexagon. But this piece of land—Sydney Gardens—is both very big and all over the place as regards levels and it could never have been experienced as a geometric closure, even had it been completed. Only two blocks of Sydney Place are complete, on



23, 24, 25

the left and right as one exits from Great Pulteney Street. The block to the right upsweeps of mouldings at the party-wall lines **23**. Here in a Pinch building my interest in Bathwick begins to revive, for Sydney Place (south side) goes uphill and we see a feature which we will be looking at again and again in these Walks—the sweeping of the suites of horizontal mouldings of the flat façades over the change of height on the party-wall lines. In my head I date all these sweeps at between 1820 and 1840—they become Dobson-like in dourness—and he is post-railways.

Look how cleverly the pavement slides past the doorsteps, how the half-round top to the area coping stone clicks in with

the down-swinging quarter circle on the base moulding by the door **24**. See how, at the top, the roof proper disappears and the successive down-swings of the top parapet run along the skyline **25**. *This is architecture.*

Now cross into the Gardens proper. Through them slices the railway in a gradually deepening cutting. The path at one point is level with the wide and beautiful permanent way of the old broad gauge of the Great Western Railway. Stop here and think about that other *certainty* we are about to experience, the certainty of the time of the canals and the railways, for a few stages further we will cross the Kennet and Avon Canal. The Canal must have been navvied when the last crescents were building. It is to

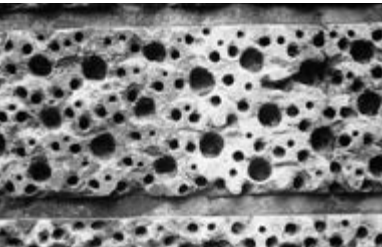
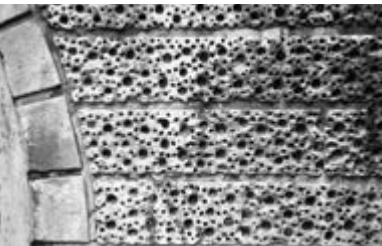


26

Bath what the aqueducts are to Rome. Now it is in disuse, with broken locks and a countrified air. The next half hour's walking along the towing path is one the most moving parts of any of the Walks.

The footpath over the first bridge on the right in Sydney Gardens soon crosses the canal, and we see the world we are about to enter **26**. The care that has been taken, the love that has been lavished on this canal now in neglect is almost painful to think about.

The Walk now goes as quickly as possible—drawn like Orpheus into this other world. Pass the tennis courts and leave the gardens, turn left and cross



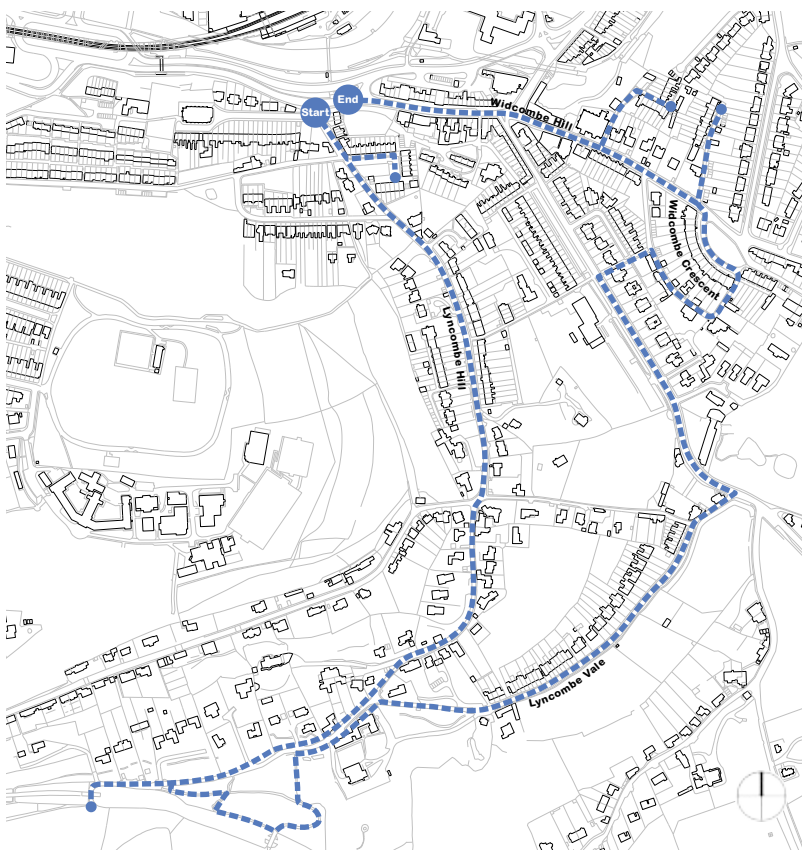
27, 28, 29

the main road—Beckford Road—where it bridges the canal. Walk towards the towing-path through the untidy opening offered, then almost immediately turn right around to enter that other world, down a long tunnel (under Beckford Road) emerging into the green light. Looking back, another swag similar to the one we first saw **27**, more beautiful stones **28, 29**. Here the canal passes without fuss right under a house. Formal front, workmanlike back, both houses and bridge. The towing path crosses over the canal close under the house behind a solid plain masonry round-topped parapet **30**. This house, I am told, used to be the canal office, and bills of lading and messages were passed up through an opening in the tunnel vault into the basement room above. Certainly a blackened hole in the roof of the tunnel is still there.

Now walk the whole quiet way back into the city following the canal along; past the backs of ordinary houses, by abandoned locks, allotments, gardens and fields **31, 32**. In the houses a quiet persistence of rules and expertise, right down to cottages (Regent Terrace, **33**), and as late as the railways (Railway Place cut-lettering, **34**).



30, 31, 32, 33, 34



Walk 2

Start walking up Lyncombe Hill. The first opening of the hill to the left is Southcot Place. An open-cornered 'L' facing south uphill **35**. An amazingly successful 'natural' enclosure with the simplest of formal devices—the corner house being rounded brings one in; the open-corner stops one from feeling trapped. And at the end of the 'L' a garden door with two flat niches. The end houses number only five in all—clearly just houses. No sweep-up of mouldings here, but the top cornice lapped to the width of the party-wall behind **36**.

Notice the false double-hung sashes **37** on the long side—they cross the party-wall line, presumably to equalize the window spacing.

On up the hill to the end of Augusta Place **38**. Here the party wall width is left between the cornices (less drop than in Southcot Place). Behind Augusta Place quiet gardens and allotments with a marvellous view down the river and over to Camden Crescent high up on the opposite bank.

Afterwards walk as quickly as you can up the hill and pause at the junction with Rosemount Lane. From now on the walk is



36, 37 ,38



35

real *rus in urbe* for behind the present walls and hedges are the mounds and terracing of previous occupancy now in transition. We are entering Lyncombe Vale Road—the cart-age engineered way goes down a hill through high walls **39, 40**. That to the right has Roman-sized stones **41**.



39, 40, 41

At the bottom, deep in the Vale, Lyncombe House **42, 43**. House-shell inhabited by school-girls, their singing hanging in the damp air. The road, now track, passes through a green watery trough and emerges in the now heavily suburbanized vale.



42, 43

Keep your eyes down. The track peters out under an arch of a disused railway in a steep field, terraced and bumpy. What can have once been here?

Return, via the same track, to the footpath in the woods. Follow the footpath around along the old railway and, after the bridge, cut through the woods until the path starts to run obliquely downhill. The school lies somewhere below, the same sounds still hang in the air.

Drop down to the track and follow the spring from its source until it disappears into a grating **44, 45**.

Follow the road called Lyncombe Vale. Open fields rise to the right; a wall at the bottom, then the spring reappears—now in a made channel (very foreign)—then footpath, then road. The road drops gradually away leaving the footpath and spring running high above the road. Amazing.

The spring disappears again, the road joins Prior Park Road. We follow down: the spring now running behind the wall on our left in the allotments we were looking over from Augusta Place finally becomes made-channel again, part of the architecture of Prior Park Buildings (1820, 400 ft long) **46**. Here we take the opportunity to take a cross-track and cut up Widcombe Crescent which lies above, its back towards us. Inescapably we also face the problem of backs generally.

The Bath architecture that tourists come to look at is fronts and ends. The backs are a mess.

In view of what has been said earlier about the depth of penetration of the rules of taste, this needs some explaining; for as far as the backs of grand houses are concerned not only does there seem to be no underlying architectonic scheme, but they are also badly built. This is not due to later alterations and additions as I first assumed—the *original* backs are both badly organized and badly built.

Only in one place in the whole of these Walks do we find the remains of an architecturally organized, competently built back—that of [Nelson Place West](#) ([Walk 3](#)). (See '[Speculation](#)' p. 18)



44, 45, 46



47, 48

The back we are now standing below—the back of Widcombe Crescent belongs to houses of an intermediate category between grand and humble; they are not unduly lower in standard than the front of Widcombe Terrace which stands beside them **47**. Climbing up to the point where the two meet we find that Widcombe Crescent and Widcombe Terrace ([by Harcourt Masters, 1805. Pevsner p.125](#)) are extraordinarily nice **48**.

Widcombe Terrace faces south west, the ground falling away before it, making possible the 'raised pavement or "access-deck"' spoken of earlier. Under this paved 'access-deck' one passes from the houses into the gardens **49**.

Only six houses long, quite unassuming, this terrace is original, civilized, and beautiful. From the end of its pavement, after a suitable hesitation of steps and an iron arch, one is slid across the road onto the pavement of the Crescent **50**.

Widcombe Crescent is just as original in another way, and just as good. Paired doors with the centre window or window group over them false (it is over the party-wall line). Bizarre really, but gentle and unassuming **51, 52**.

On the way back into Bath down Widcombe Hill look at Cambridge Terrace **53** and Hatfield Buildings **54**, both stylistically outside the focus of these Walks, but both very liveable.

Cambridge Terrace, only ten houses long (190ft), Hatfield Building an open-cornered 'L' only 11 houses in all (210ft aggregate length)—the other way round from Southcot Place looking steeply down from their fronts into the valley.



50, 51, 52, 53, 54



49

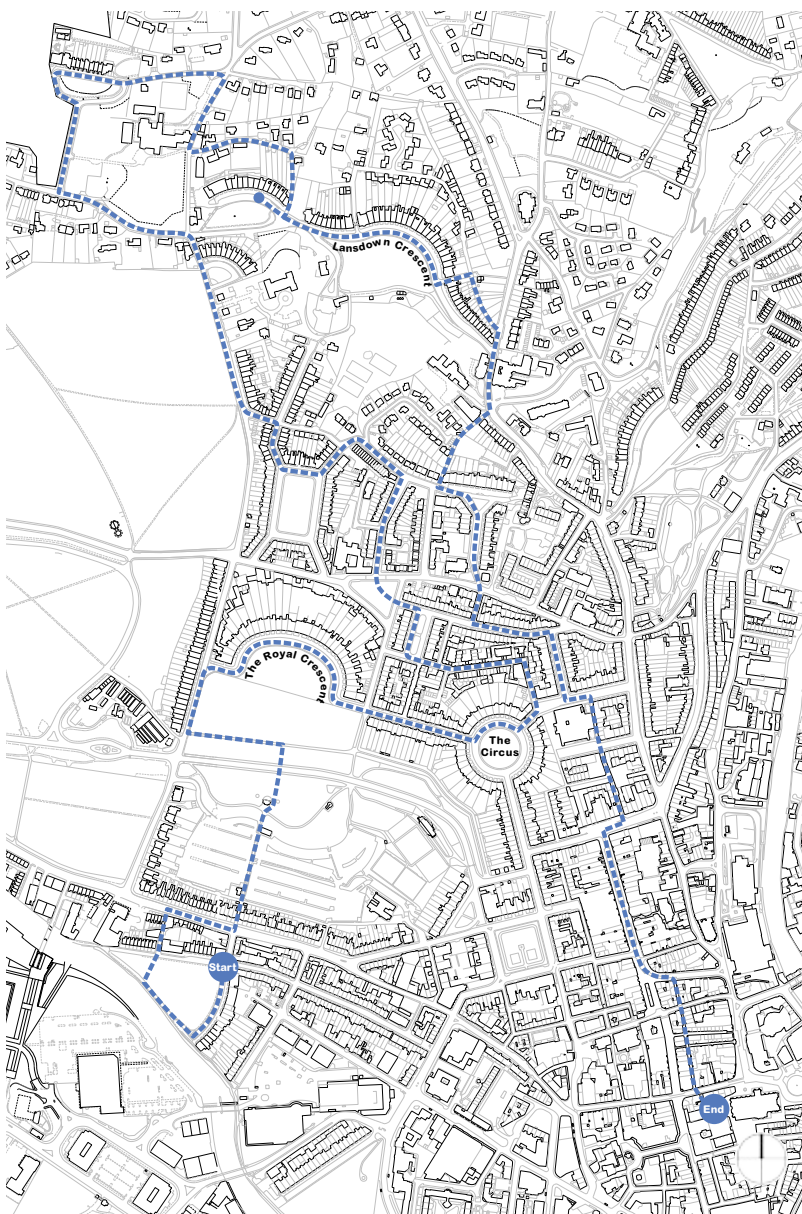
[Walk 1](#)

[Walk 2](#)

[Walk 3](#)

[Walk 4](#)

[Walk 5](#)



Walk 3

Start walking in Nile Street **55**, look left at the back discussed during Walk 2. Back better than front on this occasion. Originally no windows in the projecting towers, large-stone ashlar walls with simple string courses, once upright and military in its regularity all along **56**. (Does it remind one of those Roman multi-storey tenements? Is this why one likes it so?)

At the end of Nile Street enter the main space lying in front of Norfolk Crescent (1810. [Pevsner, p. 120](#)) **57**. In this case the word 'space' seems justified, for the flat grassed area between the buildings

and the river is somehow abstract and unconnected—public open-space, not the garden of the houses. But it is difficult to judge whether this effect is just a consequence of minimum maintenance gardening.

The architecture's thinness has been made mean, by past neglect.

At the entrance corner, a round kiosk **58**, oddly not shown on the Ordnance Map. Somehow touching. The houses of Norfolk Crescent face slightly north of west; their open space is effectively open for a thousand feet along the river to get the late afternoon sun.

Leave the Norfolk Crescent space through the snicket between Nelson Place West and Nelson Villas, cross the Bristol Road and cut up through the carpark (once allotment gardens) into Crescent Gardens. Keep to the right of the bandstand and the first glimpse of Royal Crescent will be in front of you.

Royal Crescent is the undoubted masterpiece of Bath. The Circus is a slightly lesser one. All others, including Queen Square are somehow journeymen compared to these.



55



56

I am now of course talking about the ultimate architectural values—of the highest level of intensity, of completeness of statement. In Bath these two have it, in spite of what has been said about those backs; and maybe one other (in [Walk 4](#)). This set of values is superimposed on those we have been using so far. If we were in an ancient Rome, as complete as Bath, the need for assessment by these values would similarly only rarely be felt.



57, 58

Royal Crescent, (1767-74 by John Wood the Younger. [Pevsner, p. 130](#)) stunningly regular, unmistakably a collection of separate houses, is self-assured and complete in a way that makes Versailles appear arriviste **59**. The comparison with a palace is inevitable, but by no means contradicts the view stated in the sentence above—it does not look like a palace. (For the opposite view see [Pevsner, p.130](#).) At the centre of the Crescent two of the columns are paired, the space between the actual centre pair being the same as everywhere else so that the 'centre' is barely stated. The pause is picked up at the ends with a similarly spaced group of three that takes one round the corner (a 'pair' on each flank, the corner column being common to both 'pairs'). Each end house having its entrance round the corner on the forward face in a wider central bay, and then the paired column repeated to close the rear corner **60**. That is all. Otherwise all uniform.

Or so it seems... but in fact the regularity of the order masters without effort (the irregularities—that some houses are bigger than others, that they are not symmetrically arranged, and that there are minor variations of window size and level from house to house. (Of modern housing collectives only [Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation at Marseilles](#) carries off as successful a master-ordering.)

Royal Crescent's completeness is not only a matter of organization and composition, it is complete as a made object: railings, coal-holes, road, gutters, kerbs, paving—certainly not all original, for there is obvious later ironwork and trim; but walking along the pavement, crossing to the railings over the road one walks in a 'live-shell of a previous culture' **61, 62**.

The built form holds the land in front so that it becomes the houses' ground. This is quite extraordinary, for the ground falls away, definitely if gently, and is separated only by a low ha-ha from an even larger open space. This larger ground extending in front of Marlborough Buildings (1790,



60

built perhaps by Baldwin. [Pevsner, p. 130](#)) still held with the help of the Buildings in the field of force of the Crescent. The whole ground forms a *plain*—the independent and necessary contra-form to the Crescent. To understand what this 'independence' might mean, compare these buildings and the space about them with those at Nancy or at the Louvre.

About the Crescent as a building it is difficult not to say too much. Look at that firmly stated order, the volutes and the shafts projecting just far enough for our grey light. Notice the fine plain wall set back between the columns and forward on the base. The windows in both simply cut out.



61

Now trudge off overwhelmed down cluttered and homely Brock Street **63** towards the Circus (1754-58 by John Wood the Elder. [Pevsner, p. 129](#)), now swishly occupied. (Rich gynaecologists? Bath after all is Rome in England). Bath's pelvis through which now grow five giant plane trees, **64, 65**, but imagine it empty, paved wall to wall. Clattery, frightening. An architectural schema without pretence: three storeys and attic—three orders and parapet, uniform all round: doors show the house unit (three bays): order/wall/window recession handling as in Royal Crescent **66, 67**.

Leave the Circus through Bennett Street, turn first left and follow the mews around. Then up Catherine Place across the open space to Northampton Street where one looks up a hill so steep that no amount of mason's expertise can make the door-steps reasonable **68**. Except for this steepness, one thinks, a typical street of small houses, neatly organized, well made: but it is out of parallel by nearly 5°, opening out towards the top. The steepness quite disguises this, looking both up and down.

We now stalk dull St. James's Square (1790's by John Palmer. [Pevsner, p. 131](#)). Enter through Great Bedford Street; this



59



62

way we get what it has to offer, the effect of diagonal entry into a square falling steeply on its long axis. Go across the north side of the square and leave, turning left off Park Street, into Cavendish Road. A long slow climb follows, up the side of High Common. Here we are outside the shell—Cavendish Crescent (1817- 30 by Pinch. [Pevsner, p. 131](#)) a half grown claw, Sion Hill Place (1818-20 by Pinch.



63, 64, 65, 66, 67



68

[Pevsner, p. 131](#)) a disconnected leg from another crustacean than ours. Then turn back towards the outside of our shell, for its encrusted carapace lies below—the apparently continuous back of Somerset Place / Lansdown Place West / Lansdown Crescent / Lansdown Place East.

Re-enter through Winifred's Lane. Somerset Place (c. 1790 by John Everleigh. [Pevsner, p. 131](#)) is feebly but prettily styled **69**. Note the centre, solid on the grandfather clock pediment, with a niche above the paired centre doors (the house plans are 'handed' about the centre of the crescent—this is common to all Bath crescents). This paired central door is very neat—two ordinary doors brought together give a 'big door' to justify the pediment without any pretence. The flat surface of this crescent is very suited to the later sliding louvred shutters it now displays **70**.

Now walk along the main crescent (Lansdown Crescent, built 1789-92 by Palmer. [Pevsner, p. 132](#)). Very quiet up here, sheep graze its ground. See how the shape holds the ground with the discreetest of well-sewn architecture **71**.

Afterwards take a short space-walk, exiting through Upper Lansdown Mews and take a close look at that 'encrusted carapace'—the back of the Crescent. Then down the hill, through the Shrubbery into Portland Place (of all places), the triangular 'square-on-a slope' spoken of in the introduction. The rest of the Walk is literal shop walk through rows and passages back to the Abbey Church Yard.



69, 70, 71

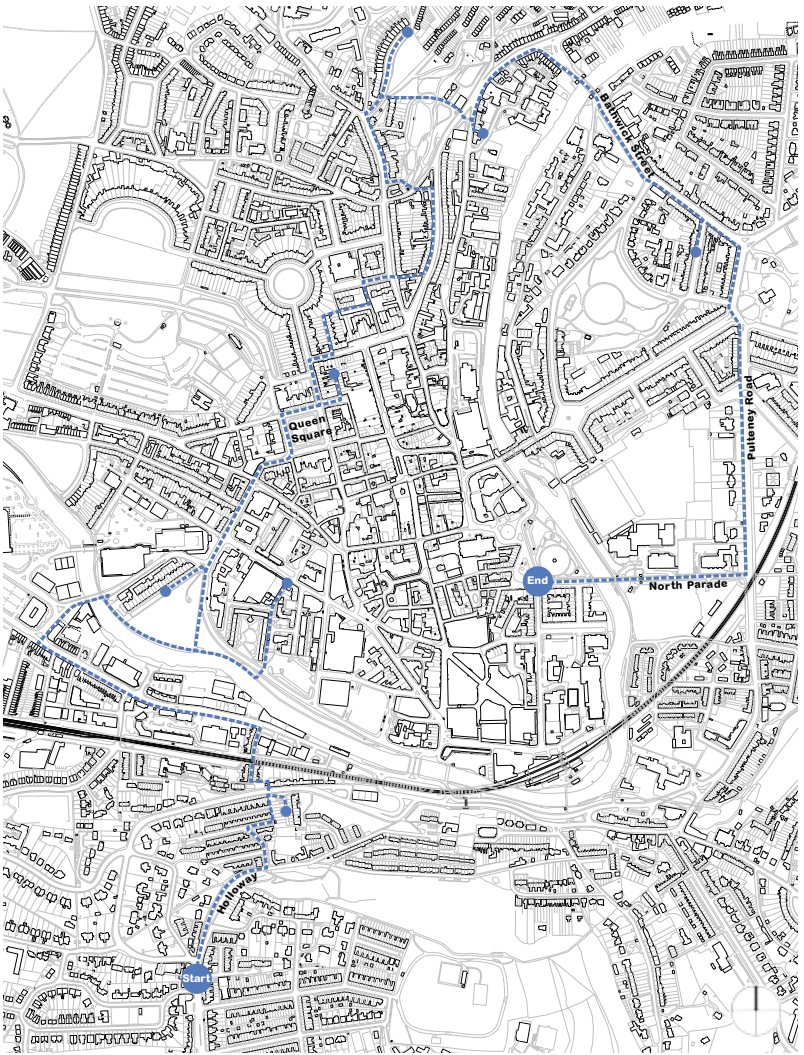
[Walk 1](#)

[Walk 2](#)

[Walk 3](#)

[Walk 4](#)

[Walk 5](#)



Walk 4

Take the bus up the Wells Road and get off at the top of Beechen Cliff by the shops. Walk down Holloway—the Fosseway—the old Roman road leading to the bridgehead into Bath. This hillside feels like the oldest in proletarian Bath. Quiet now. Just before St Mary Magdalene's tiny block Gothicky house and mad church turn left at Magdalen Road; turn right at the bottom, [up steps/down steps—check route] and lying ahead one of the most amazing events of Bath—St Mary's Buildings **72**. Nine houses of outstanding sophistication and fearing their demolition, the place that produced in me the original compulsion to record these Walks in 1966—somehow symbolically un-named on the map, and on the ground. A one-sided street of houses of the middle sort with a simultaneous-built back, and with a simply stunning front.

Here the up-sweeps reach their apogee **73, 74, 75**. There are about four feet between the levels of adjacent houses. The up-sweeps make it look as if the hill



72

has been built specially to give just that amount, so perfectly are the size of the projections and the arcs handled.

See how the triglyphs in the cornice are centred over the windows and over the solid wall panels between **76**. The space between the windows has been equalized, disregarding the fact of separate houses and differing levels. The arc of the main cornice starts after the triglyph over the window and ends on the centre line of the party wall.

The door and the window at ground level are in their 'natural' positions, and clearly mark the separate house units in spite of the equalizing of the windows over. On the string-course the arc starts in line with the edge of the window above nearest the party wall and ends in line with the nearest edge of the door below; past the party wall **77**.

These doors and windows are to my eye just four inches too close to the string-course—a kind of clinching error that makes one certain that we have here a throwaway masterpiece: especially *compelling** for my generation of Europeans, with their built-in distrust of the monumental, and especially *interesting* because these houses are of a size and volume very close to the common middle-class house of today.

Notice that the house gardens appear to be on the opposite side of the steep access road (un-made up—I like that too). Or are these gardens the unbuilt-on plots of an abandoned speculation? For certainly these are the last houses; we are on the outside of our shell with the perfect side on the outside this time, not the usual encrusted back.

*I use this very literary word with reluctance, but I had great difficulty in not bringing you straight to these houses in Walk 1.



73, 74, 75, 76, 77

Now cross the Wells Road and go down the steps and under the railway down Oak Street; small houses with the simplest of cornice and string-course **78**. Notice the very neat transition from the parapet to the exposed flank of the party-wall, above roof level, and then to chimney; the simple language still sustained on the mouldings of the chimneys themselves. A fine example of the penetration of the ethos of consistency and restraint right through to artifice level.



78

Turn left. The next objective is Green Park on the other side of the river. This involves us for the first time in a walk in a car-slot, amongst the blown newspapers of the Lower Bristol Road. Then across the Avon over Midland Bridge, from which can be seen Norfolk Buildings—the east side completing block of the Norfolk Crescent group we looked at in Walk 3 **79**.

From the bridge go down the steps onto the towing path and follow around keeping the bulk of the Green Park terrace in the corner of your eye. Walk along by the iron fence; at mid-point pause to examine what now lies straight ahead **80**. Green Park sits on a raised terrace which carries the road as well as the pavement—to an overall width of 40ft (30ft carriage way, 10ft pavement). Under the whole width, storage and rough work areas for the houses which have ways out onto the open space in which we are standing.

The drop from the terrace to the open space seems too much, and the open space too vast for it to feel integral with the houses (it may have seemed so when the terrace on the east side was there). The clear extent of the open space including the river is more than the length of the still existing terrace—500ft pretty exactly on the map. At the end away from the river (by some oddity of land acquisition, or



79, 80

right-of-way presumably) the terrace is terminated at a sharpish angle (an internal angle of 67°). The forward corner has been splayed-off, the mouldings terminated in part, and the parapet carried-up as a roof-concealing gable **81**. The detail of the architecture has the smell of Bathwick—high central windows as a compositional element (remember Laura Place?). Pevsner attributes West Green Park Buildings to Palmer continued by Pinch, from the years 1799-1808. It looks more Pinch than Palmer to me.



81

Now walk along Seymour and Charles Streets and up Chapel Row. Here suddenly we are in Queen Square. Its obelisk lies before us **82**. Enjoy it, for round the corner Queen Square (begun 1729 and completed in 1736. [Pevsner, p. 121](#)) itself is heavy handed and literal **83**.



82, 83

On reflection this heaviness *is* perhaps corporeally enjoyable, as the similar well-made heaviness of Victorian Palazzo architecture often is **84**, but it is not intellectually enjoyable, its formal schema makes no real organizational sense. The square does not feel like houses at all, and this is not because of the rebuild on the south side; it is in the error of use of the classical vocabulary. Poor Wood! How he would hate to hear us say this, that one should feel about him as he felt about Vanbrugh: 'From hence it may be perceived that Posts, like those of a Timber Cottage, Ornamented so as to take the Name of Order, must still represent the Trunks of Trees; and therefore the Shafts of them should not be divided into Parts to resemble any other Thing whatsoever; thick Cheeses, piled upon one another, especially; which one would imagine the late Sir John Vanbrugh to have imitated in the Columns of many Buildings Designed by him...' (Wood '[Dissertation...](#)' p.16).

What is here by Wood the Elder in Queen Square makes the great leap forward of his son in Royal Crescent even more astounding.

Go along the whole length of the north side of the square and cross to Old King Street and right into the alley called Barton Buildings, into the sort of narrow paved way we will be going along for much of the next part of the Walk.



84

The houses of Barton Buildings have up-sweeps in a bare and warehousey way **85**. Some of the buildings are warehouses now, but there is also something about the architecture and about the crammed-in location which makes the use seem appropriate—at least stylistically (practically, the access is ridiculous).

Now back out to Gay Street and up onto the raised pavement of George Street and from there into Miles's Buildings **86** a one sided paved way, width almost exactly as Barton Buildings, but more open seeming, in spite of the towering backs of Gay Street and the Circus, and very complete as a built-thing.



85

Turn right at the top and the left up St. Andrew's Terrace, right onto Alfred Street, and cross Lansdown Road to go down Hay Hill, emerging onto another raised pavement at a point at one end of the curved section of the longer-than-500-feet-without-an-end-or-decisive-change Paragon. (1769-71, by Atwood. [Pevsner, p.134](#).)



86

The curved section is in fact more-or-less exactly 500ft long, but the curve is so shallow that it just drifts into the straight. This is not a crescent but a section of a conventional two sided street—although this is hardly an adequate description of what it feels like at present—a built-chasm with a raised walk above a torrent of traffic. Press bravely through, eyes down past the gothicky chapel, and on up the snicket by the converted Walcot School building onto Guinea Lane. At the top turn right and up the hill to Camden Crescent. (1788, by John Everleigh. [Pevsner, p. 132](#).)

Camden Crescent attempts something extraordinary. What this is, is most easily explained by examining fragment. Stand

opposite and look at the string-course under the pilasters **87**. It tracks across the façade, rising as it goes. The tops of the bases of the pilasters are true horizontal, but their bottom mouldings are wedge-shape to take up the variation caused by the rising string-course; there are wedge-shaped strips of wall below the sills and wedge-shaped stones in the top course of the base proper to bring the window heads and sills level.



87

Having been shown this, one can trace for oneself how the whole extraordinary complicated manoeuvre has been handled so as to allow the pavement, the string-course under the pilasters, and the cornice to run up towards the central pediment—which has a central column, presumably to 'point' the symbolic apex **88, 89**.

See how the windows leap up groups of three. Yet one is scarcely aware of what is happening. It is possible to pass this building many times, as I did, without noticing anything special, only experiencing a feeling of disquiet. This must be partly because non-completion makes it seem actually insecure—lurching over in a way a crescent on the flat could never be.



88,89

But see how perfectly the doorsteps clip onto the pavement; there you have the measure of masons' expertise that was brought to bear on this extraordinary building.

After this the rest of the Walk is bound to be somewhat of an anti-climax, especially since the return trip is mostly along long straight streets and roads; but these distances allow to consider by comparison the measure of what we are just leaving. For here we leave the shell proper for the Bathwick encrustation.

The ground falls steeply from the front of Camden Crescent, too steeply for it to be its ground, indeed so steep that it

is nobody's ground, like a cliff. We leave, down Hedgemead Pleasure Ground and cross down to Walcot Street. Make way to Walcot Gate and the park around the Walcot Burial Chapel to spy out the land and rest before our return.

Back up Walcot Street then cross the Avon over Cleveland Bridge and follow Bathwick Street along into Sydney Place. Down the main axis of Great Pulteney Street is 1700ft, and to the railway bridge crossing over Pulteney Road is a similar distance. We walk the latter. It is too long for walking. The proper speed for this road and its events is 15-25 miles per hour—an electric carriage road. Turn right at the railway bridge; from here to the end of North Parade is 1500ft. Again much too long for walking. The only incident, the view up to Camden Crescent as we cross the river.

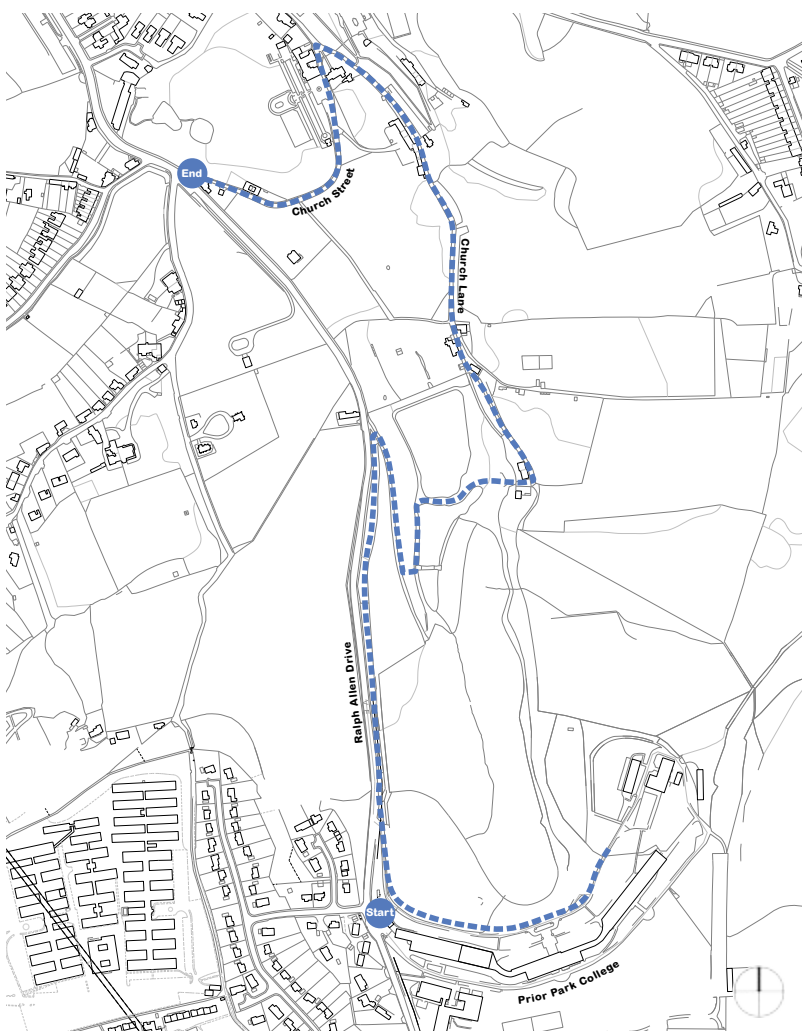
At North Parade Road's end we are back inside the shell and back to 1740 in North Parade, where we began the first of these Walks what seems like weeks ago.

Sidestep to Walk 4

But we are not finished yet for there remains Widcombe still 'within the walls'—for the steep wooded escarpment up to Ralph Allen Drive on the west, the vast wall of Prior Park to the south, and the woods on the rising ground to the east, are a real perimeter to a limb of space entered through Church Lane round the back of Widcombe Church—an organic extension of the Bath shell, not an encrustation.

Continue to:

- [Walk 1](#) [Walk 2](#) [Walk 3](#)
[Walk 4](#) [Walk 5](#)



Walk 5

N. B. This is an illegal walk except by Prior Permission (Ho-Ho). [No longer illegal, now National Trust Prior Park Gardens] Take the bus or walk up the hill (on the line of the Bath freestone horse tramway*) to Prior Park Gardens [National Trust admission charge or free to National Trust members]. Walk up the garden onto path below the mansion house. The combe lies before you **90**.

We have been over-exposed to this view, to this urn, for this famous landscape contains the classic components of the picturesque tradition apparent limitlessness of park (here even the terraced slopes of misty Bath itself seem contrived for the 'far ground' of the composition), controlled informal enclosure by belt planting, a 'natural' lake with its bridge, a village orné (in this case the tower of a real old church is the centre of the composition), a decorative farm-but knowing all this cannot dull its actual impact, for it really is a masterpiece of garden design.

Walk down through the gardens onto the lakeside walk. The bridge is just as one imagines.



90

The house is high above us now scrupulously obeying the laws of perspective. We cross the dam (it only needs the single line of trees to hide the middle-ground) out through the lower gate into Church Lane and down and around Church Street past the live props of that famous landscape at the bottom of the combe-the church, the shallow-roofed Italianesque farm and out buildings **91**-finally arriving at the bus stop at the bottom of Ralph Allen Drive. From here we return to Bath.



91

* 'Until 1727 boats could get up the Avon only as far as Hanham Mills, but in that year, with the assistance of six locks, it was made navigable as far as Bath which by that time was becoming a valuable market for a wide range of commodities, and not least for coal.

'There was also an important traffic west wards. The Bath stone quarries were able to produce more than was needed for the rapidly growing city on their doorstep, and once river transport was available they could supply customers in Bristol and even further afield. To make the first stage of this easier, two horse railways were built during the 1720s to bring stone down from the quarries to quays on the river.' (Hudson, p. 42.)

Addendum

Outside the shell below Claverton Wood (on the Warminster Road about six miles from Bath) is an aqueduct carrying in very grand style the Kennet and Avon over the Avon **92**. The cornice overhang is immense **93**, the order eccentric—one



92, 93
guttae block to each triglyph **94**,—the pilasters on the abutments curve outwards **95, 96**, and every stone carries an un-erased mason's locating mark (one is visible on the cornice photograph) **93**.
The waterway itself with its simple building, crane, and quay, is calm and beautiful.



94, 95, 96

The lesson of Bath in brief:

Firstly

Bath demonstrates above all that it is perfectly possible to build a memorable, beautiful, and cohesive community structure of *fragments*.

Some have to be absolute, many have to be consistent and fully realized in a built-way. But given this, much can be indifferently designed and slipshodly built without a loss of control. Indeed it may even be a source of that sense of *control*—the nowhere places are grey zones for the psyche. We seem to need them.

Secondly

The use of the same materials controlled by substantially the same technology obviously helps.

Thirdly

The art of town-planning, as we can see so clearly here, is to establish the measure and interval of events not to pre-determine form.

That this is observable so clearly in Bath can perhaps be attributed to the (probably unconscious) transfer of the theory of the Picturesque—which is all optical remember, but handles time interval and growth, evocation and the tactile characteristics of materials—from garden design to town design.

Fourthly

Those fragments which seem most liveable...
have one open side;
have plenty of pavement;
measure at most 500ft;
have their own 'garden' and have also a sense of being connected to other open-spaces and ultimately to the country;
achieve a collective form without sacrificing the separate identity of the individual house and without unjustified group-form rhetoric;
do not abuse the meaning of the metaphors of classical architecture.

Finally

Bath shows there must be a man.
Ralph Allen was to Bath what Juscelino Kubitchek was to Brazilia. Without either, there would have been neither. Wood the Elder was Allen's architect, as Niemeyer was Kubitchek's. That the notion of a 'regular idea of architecture' was already accepted, that craftsmen were already trained in the taste and that Roman virtues (and syntax) were universally admired, was the necessary base. But it was Allen's essentially worldly, commercial will that saw that if one could sell taste to the nobility and the gentry, sooner rather than later, it would be wanted by all.

Speculation

During the Walks you have probably already observed that small houses (less than three storeys, in small terraces less than 200ft long), have the same sort of architecture composition, the same standard of building back and front and sides where there are such. The grander streets are back and sides only.

This is probably because the small houses were artisan financed, and artisan designed and built all at one go, under a single responsibility.

Bigger houses were developer or architect-speculator financed, with the architect responsible for the fronts and ends. But the backs were probably neither the architects' responsibility nor the responsibility of the artisans who built the fronts (and who therefore would know the rules of the building), and these passed into the hands of artisans under the direct control of the occupiers of each house. The traditions of the trades, the wide dissemination of the rules of taste, should have held the backs together with the fronts, but it did not.

Persuasion

'Everybody has their taste in noises as well as in other matters; and sounds are quite innoxious, or most distressing, by their sort rather than their quantity. When Lady Russell, not long afterwards, was entering Bath on a wet afternoon, and driving through the long course of streets from the Old Bridge to Camden-place amidst the dash of other carriages, the heavy rumble of the carts and drays, the bawling of newsmen, muffin-men and milk-men, and the ceaseless clink of pattens, she made no complaint. No, these were noises which belonged to the winter pleasures; her spirits rose under their influence; and, like Mrs Musgrove, she was feeling, though not saying, that, after being long in the country, nothing could be so good for her as a little quiet cheerfulness. 'Anne did not share these feelings. She persisted in a very determined, though very silent, disinclination for Bath: caught in the first dim view of the extensive buildings, smoking in rain, without any wish of seeing them better; felt their progress through the streets to be, however disagreeable, yet too rapid; for who would be glad to see her when she arrived? And looked back, with fond regret, to the bustles of Uppercross and the seclusion of Kellynch.'

From 'Persuasion'. (Jane Austen. Macdonald 1961. Pages 144-45).



(Top) The Circus looking towards Gay Street, and (below) Queen Square from the north-west corner. (plates 51 and 68 from the 'Georgian Buildings of Bath from 1700 to 1830' by Walter Ison.)

Dissuasion

'Yet it was to Bath that Beckford, the moment Fonthill was disposed of (1822), removed his remaining possessions and his not inconsiderable household. The city was at the time in the nadir of its fortunes. Memories of Beau Nash and the cosmopolitan set, of Ralph Allen and the intelligentsia who congregated at Prior Park were faint indeed. Dr. Waagen on a visit about this time saw only one decrepit old lady drawn through the sad streets in a three-wheeled chair. The residents were mostly elderly gentry and retired professional men and their wives, eking out a shallow existence. It was probably on this very account that Beckford decided to take up residence in a social backwater where he was unlikely to meet with competition and rebuffs.'

From William Beckford: James Lees-Milne: Compton Russell Ltd., Tisbury, 1976.

Sidestep to Bath

It was always Ba_th as opposed to Ba(r)th.

Throughout our childhood there were standard day trips – to Brighton, Bath or Cambridge. There were also the yearly 'Round Britain Whizzes'. These were weeklong affairs, up north to visit my father's parents at 12 Zetland Road, Stockton on Tees. Plus, the foreign 'holidays' that were, for us children anyway, woefully short of beaches and with a super abundance of ruins.

All these trips were planned long in advance by my mother who kept box files stuffed with snipped articles, maps and scraps annotated in pencil with the lists of places that had to be visited. She was the trip planner, deciding on the destinations and setting the pace and I now realise rather surprisingly that my father rarely referred to either a map or guide on any of these journeys.

In sharp contrast to the many architectural texts that my parents wrote, where the drafts were passed back and forth over a period of years, Walks Within Walls was, I believe, a very personal undertaking for my father. During the period it was being prepared he would announce over dinner that tomorrow he was off to work on his 'Walks', going for the day by train and, it seemed to me, always in rather inclement weather. This may have been conscious - a light mist and the thin winter light will do much to amplify your experience of a place but especially where topography is involved.

So now that we have a new edition of the booklet he so cherished let's join Peter Denham Smithson in bumbling about the pavements of Regency Bath. And as you read the text I ask you to imagine him 'umming' and 'ahh-ing' aloud to himself as he uncovers the sheer genius of those who sculpted Bath.

Simon Smithson
September 2017

Books referred to in footnotes or in the text:

[Hudson. Industrial Archaeology of Southern England by Kenneth Hudson. David and Charles: Dawlish MacDonald: London 1965](#) (the only general book for industrial dating, but it is badly organized and, one senses, not worked over enough for the seriousness of the subject. The material is marvellous.)

[Pevsner. North Somerset and Bristol by Nikolaus Pevsner. The Buildings of England Series. Penguin books. 1958.](#)

[Smith. Bath by R. A. L. Smith. Batsford, 1944.](#)

[Walter Ison. The Georgian buildings of Bath from 1700 to 1830. Faber & Faber, 1948.](#)

Images courtesy of Smithson family collection

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Image of composite map from 1st edition, based upon the Ordnance Survey Map created by Peter Smithson with the sanction of the Controller of the HM Stationary Office Crown Copyright reserved in 1971. It includes the location of all of Peters' photographs.



These Walks were originally taken in September 1966, and their first publication was in the October 1969 issue of Architectural Design. Since then Bath has been subject to the pressures of an ever increasing prosperity. Inevitably this has caused changes - changes which I feared might so impinge on the moods of the walks as to make them seem mere exercises. To guard against this, in the Autumn of 1979 all five Walks were taken by a young architect who faithfully followed the original text and noted the places where changes had taken place. Subsequently, I re-walked the whole line of Walk 1, and was relieved to find in myself an echo of my original sense of discovery and wonder: re-assured, I checked all the points of change that she had identified. As a result, Walk 3 and 4 both now start in different places, and all Walks have small deviations of the line and a few changes of text and photographs from the original.

Bath's thinning blood is being leached away by a creeping timidity, but her bones are a marvel.

Peter Smithson, December 9th, 1979

Why is it that Peter Smithson's 'Walks within the Walls', originally published over 50 years ago, still speaks to us? Today we are bombarded with digital images, facts and opinions to such an extent that it can sometimes be difficult to find an expert voice to guide us. Peter's walks provide such a guide; they encourage us to slow down, think and look, as he did in 1966, when he was terrified that much of the fragile substance of Bath could be lost to the bulldozer. They read like a one-sided conversation, setting a mood that is both reflective and informative. Walk on your own, take time, linger in the snickets and back alleys as well as in the Circus and the Royal Crescent. Consider, with Peter, the subtlety of the fugitive sunlight on the Bath stone, the width of a pavement, the detail of the iron railing. But most of all, find an "echo of the original sense of discovery and wonder" that Peter experienced and shares so eloquently with us.

Vicky Smith, September 28th, 2017