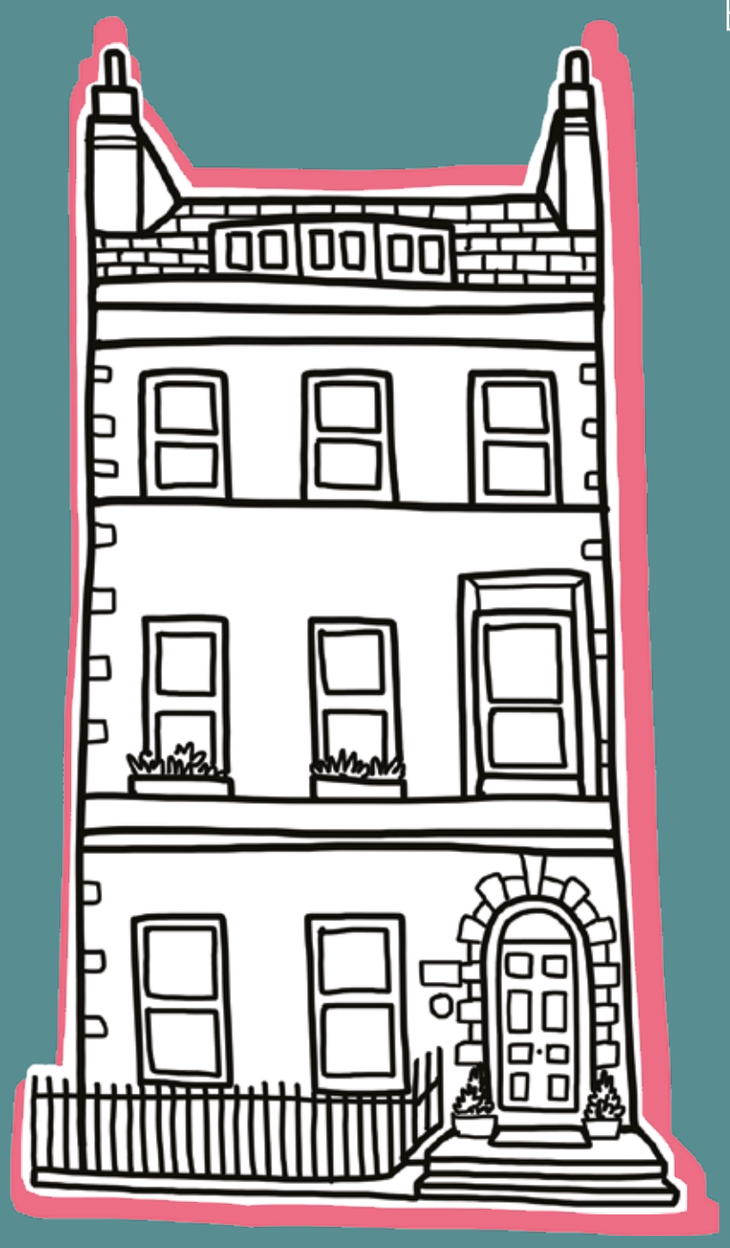
Jane Austen in Sydney Gardens

Entrance to Sydney Gardens (Sidney Tap) by Jean-Claude Nattes 1805



Follow the trail to find out about Jane Austen's life around Sydney Gardens.

Diana White & the Sydney Gardens Project.

SYDNEY GARDENS BATH

Map and illustrations by Bea Baranowska

Forester Road

Beckford Road / A36

To Cleveland Pools

A36

Warminster and Salisbury

Bathwick Street

Walcot and M4

Main entrance

Entrance

Sydney Road

Sutton Street

The Holburne Museum

Entrance

Entrance

City center

Great Pulteney Street

Widcombe

Sydney Place

Entrance

Sydney Road

Great Western Railway

Kennet and Avon Canal

1. Outside No 4 Sydney Place
2. The Holburne (Sydney Hotel)
3. The central path
4. The Loggia
5. Where the Labyrinth was found
6. The canal bridges
7. The long stone seat

A. Public loos

B. Temple of Minerva

C. Georgian Reservoir (pre-dates the park)

Private properties

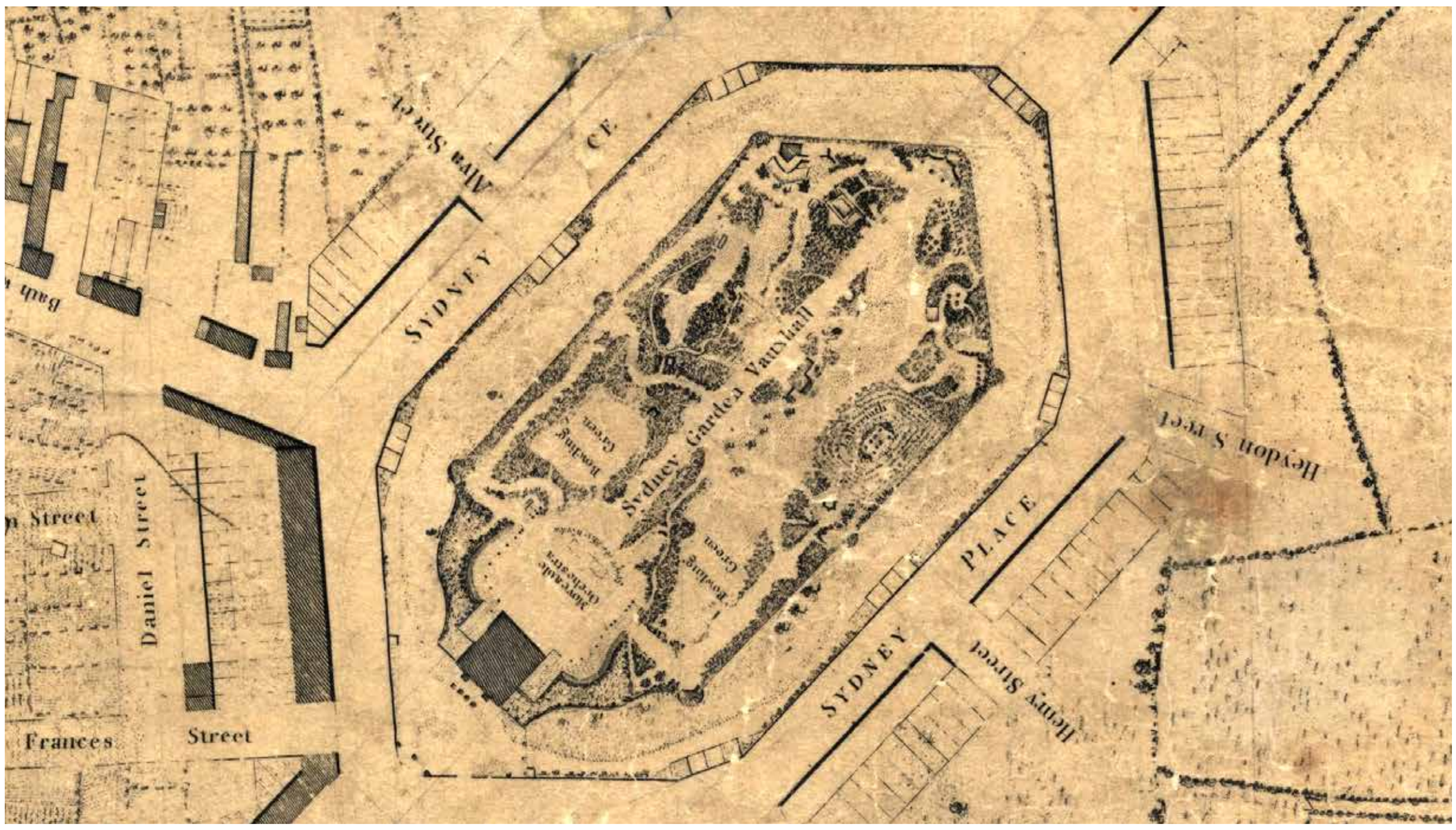
Areas of park under construction

1 Outside No 4 Sydney Place

You are standing outside one of the most photographed houses in this country, the home of **Jane Austen and her family who lived here from October 1801 to the summer of 1804**. No 4 Sydney Place is a Palladian styled house designed by Thomas Baldwin, a young architect who was involved in building some of Great Pulteney Street. The Austens chose this as their home partly because it was away from the busy city centre, so was quieter with fresher air. We worry about pollution today but there was just as much pollution in 1801 as everyone had coal fires, the only way to heat your home and to cook. Very importantly, as Mr Austen wasn't a wealthy man, the house was affordable as it was the end part of a lease and some decorating was included in the rent.

We see the house today as an example of Grade One Georgian architecture, part of a city that's famous for its classical buildings, but in 1801 this was simply a very respectable modern house. Because Jane was taller than the average woman of the period and was something of a snob, she appreciated gracious living which included houses with large, elegant rooms.

Her father might be poor, but he had relations who were very wealthy and her maternal grandmother was the sister of the duke of Chandos.



Harcourt Master Plan 1794

The room on the ground floor was the parlour where Mrs Austen, Cassandra and Jane would have sat in the morning, writing letters, receiving callers and sewing. Perhaps Jane was reading aloud from the latest novel as her mother and sister worked; sewing took up a lot of time. The Austen ladies made and altered most of their clothes and two of Jane's brothers were Naval Officers always in need of shirts, made in dozens and half dozens. Jane was proud of her skill with a needle and once boasted in a letter to her sister, that she was the neatest in a family group all sewing shirts.

She might have been writing a story. Jane had been writing since she was twelve years old but was very discreet about it; only her immediate family knew what she was doing when her fingers were stained with ink and they could hear her quill pen scratching away. Behind the drawing room was a slightly smaller room probably used by Mr Austen as his study.

The Basement. These days we convert basements into smart flats, but when the Austens were here, this was where the servants worked, a dark, dank place with the kitchens and scullery. There might also be store rooms for food as without refrigeration food had to be kept where it was cool. To give you an idea of how damp the basement could be, Jane saw a house in Green Park Buildings which she complained about to the agent as the kitchen floor was flooded. There might also be laundry facilities and an outside lavatory in the vaulted area in front of the house which stretches out under the road and today is often turned into another room.

The first floor was the drawing room, the finest room in any home having the best views and the most amount of decorative plaster work. In *Persuasion*, Elizabeth Elliot is particularly proud of the drawing room in the house her father has rented in Camden Crescent. This was where you could hold an informal dance, play the piano to accompany someone singing, or hold Whist parties. Jane's aunt loved card parties, but Jane found them boring; they were small and dull, had nobody interesting to talk to and no jolly gambling games. Jane could be very intolerant. Behind the drawing room was another, slightly smaller, room was used as a bedroom when there were house guests.

The second floor had more bedrooms. Jane and her sister Cassandra slept in the back bedroom, a quiet room overlooking gardens, orchards and fields up to the distant hills. Most of her life Jane shared a room with her sister and their relationship was very close.

In the attics were rooms for servants, the family's as well as those of visitors. The Austens had a manservant and a woman who acted as ladies' maid as well as housekeeper. The cooking might also have been her responsibility, but you could send food out

to be cooked and if you were wealthy, you could hire a cook. In the parsonage, Jane had done some of the cooking, and after her father's death, was in charge of the wine cellar.

NO 4 Sydney Place

Look across from the house and you will see Sydney Gardens called Sydney Gardens Vauxhall after the famous London pleasure grounds. You are looking at The Holburne Museum, but the Austens knew it as the Sydney Hotel. Exotic flowers and plants decorated the public rooms and dances were held in the ballroom on the first floor; there was a reading room with the London newspapers, as well as local ones, like the Bath Chronicle (still being published), and probably The Gentleman's Magazine, and La Belle Assemblée, a publication famous for its fashion plates.

Jane Austen was keen on fashion and kept up with the latest styles. When she arrived in Bath one of the first things she did was order a gown from Mrs Mussel,

a local seamstress, and buy herself a bonnet of chip straw. In a letter to her sister from her uncle and aunt's house in the Paragon where she and her mother were staying in May 1801, she describes the gown and draws pictures of it.

The Sydney Hotel also had a coffee house, very popular with men for discussing politics or the local geology. Bath was famous for its Oolitic limestone and Roman remains scattered around the countryside. There was even a pub underneath the hotel called the Sydney Tap, for the chairmen who carried you down to the hotel in a sedan chair. Throughout the day tea and refreshments were served, and in a letter to her sister Jane mentions that the public breakfasts given there mean they will not 'wholly starve'.

But before you cross over to the gardens, look around. You are seeing a slightly different view from Jane. The lovely houses over to the right of the gardens weren't there, neither was the church as they were all built after Jane had left Bath. What she would have seen were woods and farmland leading up to the hills where streams of spring water would cascade down.

Now look to the left. From the house, Jane could have walked down the lane leading to the little village of Bathwick, where there was a farm for fresh milk and eggs, a few cottages and some villas for the city merchants who, like the Austens, wanted peace and quiet. Down the centre of the street ran a channel of spring water from the hills and the Austen's manservant could have collected clean water there.

"It would be very pleasant to be near Sydney Gardens; we might go into the labyrinth every day".

Jane Austen to Cassandra, Wednesday January 21, 1801

Continue on to The Holburne

2 The Holburne (Sydney Hotel)

Cross the road (please be careful – this is a busy road) and walk along to the central path leading **up to the Holburne.** *If the Holburne is open, you can explore the grounds, the museum and visit the café. If it is closed, please enter Sydney Gardens from the entrance marked from Sydney Place / Sydney Road on the south side, and go in to find the central pathway.* You had to wait for cars to stop before you crossed over and Jane might also have had to wait for carriages and riders to pass which were just as dangerous as today's cars. During victory celebrations in the city, a man was crushed to death under the wheels of a coach, and a close friend of Jane's died in a riding accident. But horses and carriages were the only way to travel long distances, and for ladies were a form of exercise, as it was for Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. Like Hyde Park in London, riding in Sydney Gardens was the place to be seen and was an important part of your stay here.

Walk along to the central path leading up to the Holburne. You have bought a subscription to the gardens that allowed you to visit whenever you wanted, although you would have to pay for special

events. In 1805, when Mr Austen had died and Jane and mother were living alone in the city, the subscription was 7 shillings and 6 pence for the season, with non-subscribers paying 6 pence a visit.

Sydney Gardens
Bath Entry Token

In 1801, one pound, or twenty shillings, was worth about fifty-two pounds today which gives you an idea of how expensive the gardens could be. The Austen ladies were considerably poorer after Mr Austen's death, and Jane had to economize. In a letter from their lodgings in Gay Street, she writes to her sister telling her they have been invited out a great deal which has saved their tea and sugar. Poor Jane, who regarded herself as having a superior position in society, hated the fact people considered them in need of charity.

Sydney Gardens by John Claude Nattes, 1804

As you walk up the path to the Hotel, go slowly, you didn't ever hurry in 1801 if you belonged to the leisured class of ladies and gentlemen; it's important to create an impression of grace and elegance. You also want to ensure you are noticed by acquaintances and friends.

Promenading is part of your daily routine and Sydney Gardens is a perfect place to see and be seen. Even before the Austens left Steventon Jane was talking about the gardens in a letter to her sister, and she makes it clear they would be one of the compensations for leaving her home of twenty-five years.

Now walk through the set of pillars to the right and round to the back of the museum. Stand on the small flight of steps leading up to the gate into the gardens and look back at the new extension where the café is. When Jane was here, there was also an extension to the hotel, and in a tall box forming part of it, an orchestra would play. Most days there would be music to listen to as you walked around, but also there were special concerts. Jane, like most young ladies, played the piano, and she regularly practised so her family could enjoy an impromptu dance. But she wasn't especially musical and she wasn't really keen on concerts. In one of her letters she writes that the gardens were large enough for her to walk round but not hear the music.

"There is to be a grand gala on Tuesday evening in Sydney Gardens, a concert, with illuminations and fireworks. To the latter Elizabeth and I look forward with pleasure, and even the concert will have more than its usual charm for me, as the gardens are large enough for me to get pretty well beyond the reach of its sound".

Jane Austen to Cassandra Sunday, June 2, 1799

To the right and left of the Hotel were supper boxes in a half circle. You could reserve a box for the evening and as you ate, watch the world go by and listen to the music. If there were fireworks or illuminations you had a perfect view of everything.

Continue on to the central path

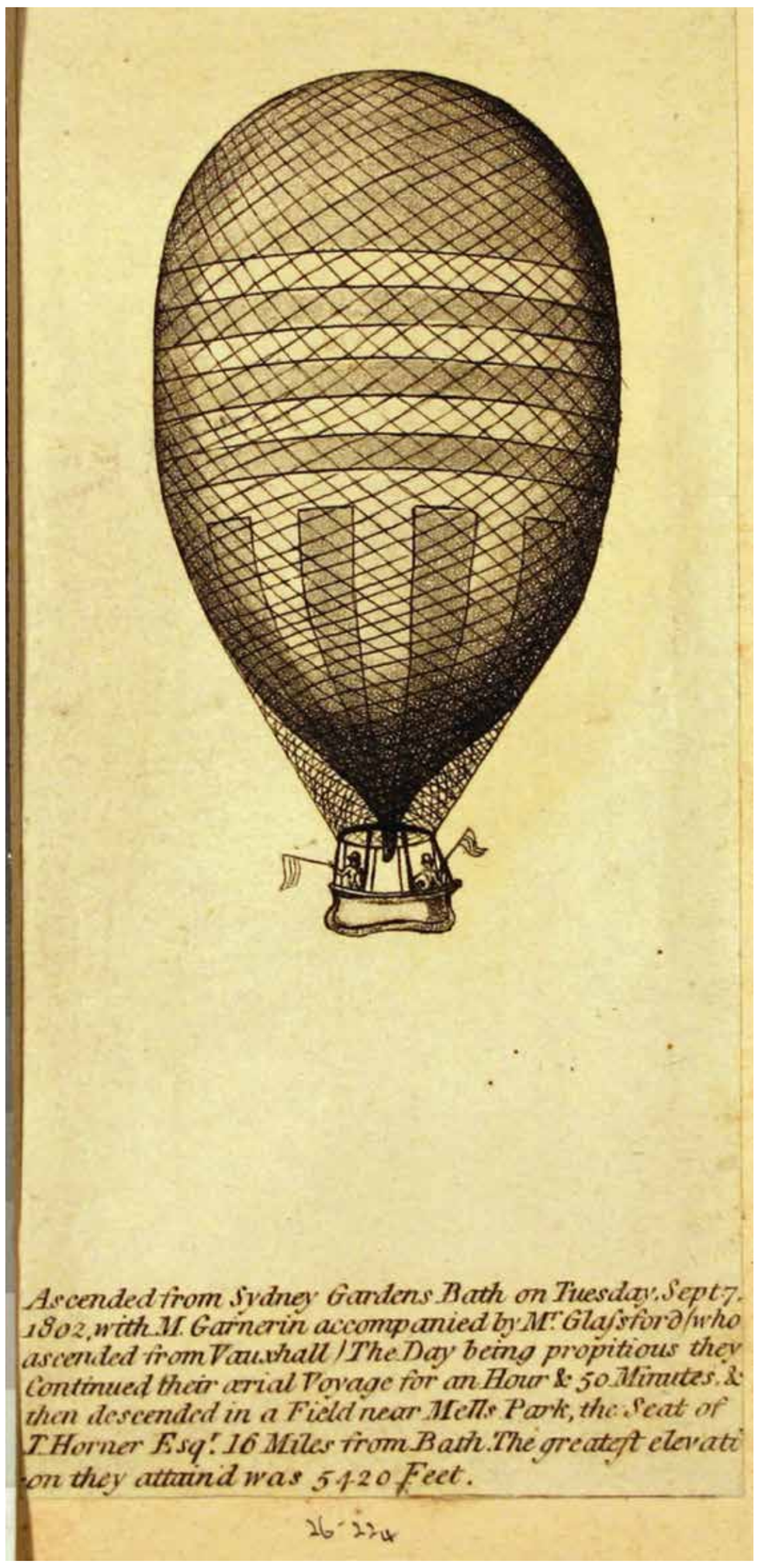
3 The central path

Go up the steps and into the gardens. When Jane was here there was no separation between the hotel and the grounds. Look around you and imagine bowling greens on either side of the grand walk. Ahead of you, up a gentle slope, is the Loggia. If you weren't there for supper, taken around nine o'clock, or sometimes even later, you could stroll up to it, past the bowling greens to sit and drink tea there, or meet friends. Maybe you preferred to wander into one of the many winding paths leading off the grand walk. These walks led to various attractions, like the hermit's cell, the grotto and the old mill. Jane loved walking and often writes to her sister about the walks she has taken. In *Northanger Abbey* her heroine Catherine Morland enjoys walking with the hero and his sister on Beechen cliff, but it was in these gardens, where she could spend several hours by herself, that Jane Austen was happiest. Being on her own allowed her to think about her writing and how she would continue her novel.

Promenade at Sydney Gardens by John Nixon 1801

Writing was the most important thing in Jane's life. Since the age of 12 she'd been scribbling away and her youthful writing was extraordinary for a girl living in the late 1780s. It was filled with young men and women behaving in a way that was either immoral, illegal or fantastical. Especially the girls, who were either blowing up a dungeon, eloping, getting drunk or generally escaping the world where decorum reigned and women were second class citizens. This was the Jane Austen who recognized the subservient role of her sex and deplored it. The woman who knew the fallibility of men and how strong a woman could be if only she were given the chance. Jane Austen was a feminist and passionate about what she wrote, and although she hadn't as yet met with success, her immediate family encouraged her writing, which was unusual for the time. Her father had given her a book in which to write her 'Effusions of Fancy' and even tried to get *Pride and Prejudice* published for her when it was still called *First Impressions*.

Jane had started writing another book while in Sydney Place called *The Watsons*. It's the story of a girl who's been educated to expect an inheritance which would enable her to make a good marriage. But the inheritance doesn't come to her, which forces her to return to her sickly father whose death will mean greater poverty for her and her sisters.



Balloon Sydney Gardens c.1802

As you walk slowly up the path, look to the left. Some of the winding paths you see were where Jane would walk, planning this new book. Sadly, life's chances for women in 1801 depended very much on money. Perhaps it was as she was wandering by herself, she decided the story was too similar to her own situation as an impoverished younger daughter. *The Watsons* was never completed: Jane Austen was a realist and didn't dwell on misery.

Plantings of bushes, trees and flowers made these walks shady and cool on hot summer days and were a feature of grand houses where they were laid out especially for the ladies of the household. In *Northanger Abbey*, Miss Tilney tells Catherine Morland how her mother loved to walk in such a shrubbery.

And in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price finds it pleasant to rest there. And it's in the pretty little shrubbery in *Pride and Prejudice* that Elizabeth Bennet has her set-to with Lady Catherine de Burgh, giving Darcy hope for a change of heart towards him.

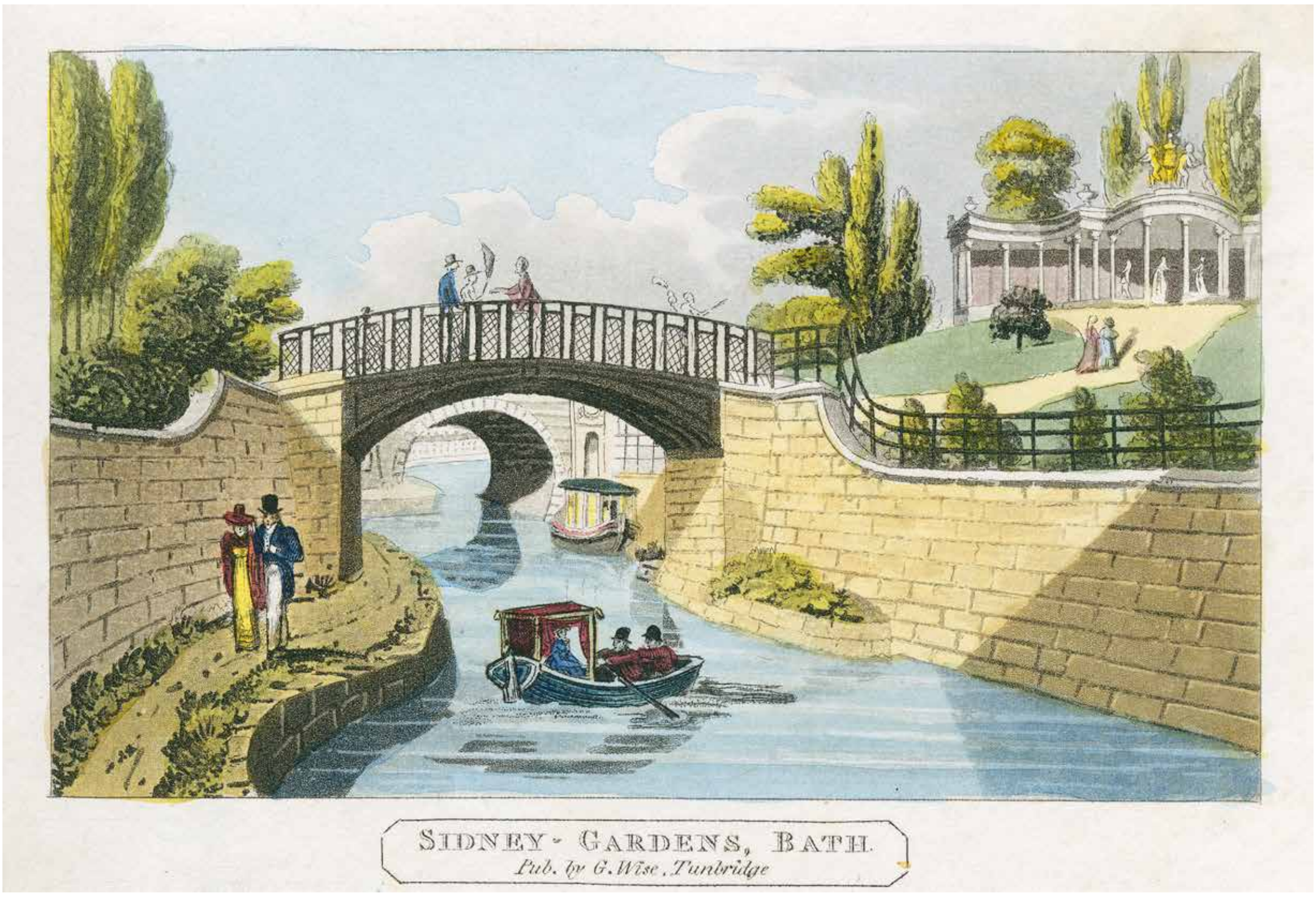
Jane's mother was the gardener in the family, but Jane loved the natural world in which she'd grown up. Her letters to Cassandra are filled with news of their gardens, either in Southampton, when they moved there in 1806, or their garden in Chawton. One of the things that upset her when she left Steventon, was abandoning the garden where work was planned which she wouldn't see.

Continue on to The Loggia

4 The Loggia

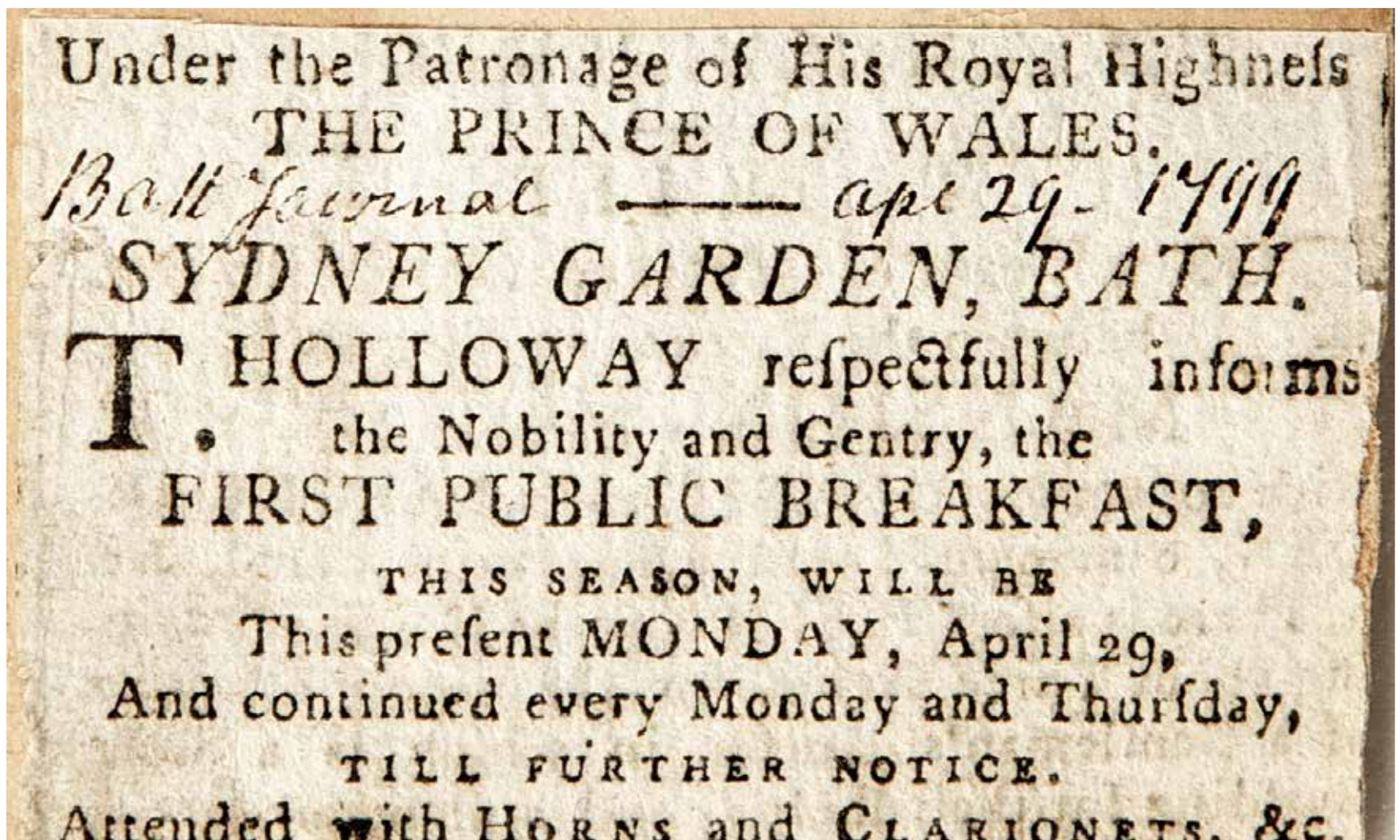
Follow the paths round before returning to the central pathway, and go up over the railway bridge (there was no railway through the gardens until the 1840s) **and over the canal bridge** (the Kennet and Avon Canal) **to the Loggia.**

In 1801 you might have reached one of the special effects for which the gardens were famous. Paintings illuminated from behind would be put up. Trees and bushes would be filled with candles and lanterns giving a fairy tale effect, and some evenings there'd be fireworks. Jane wrote to Cassandra about how beautiful the illuminations and fireworks were, and much better than she had imagined. She might also have enjoyed the swing boats, although it wasn't permitted to go swinging on Sundays when you were supposed to honour the Lord's Day by attending church. Jane and her family would probably have gone to church twice and Mr Austen might have been asked to preach a sermon at one of the subscription chapels or even the Abbey. Visiting clergymen were frequently asked to take part in church services and Mr Austen would certainly have obliged.



Sydney Gardens with Pavilion by G Wise, 1820

When Jane was here, the gardens continued on up towards the road and the hotel. She could have spent several hours roaming the paths, enjoying the exercise and fresh air and, above all, the solitude that allowed her to think. But you can't follow Jane now, you must go back down through the gardens...



Under the Patronage of His Royal Highneſs
THE PRINCE OF WALES.
Bath Journal —— apl 29 - 1799
SYDNEY GARDEN, BATH.
T. HOLLOWAY reſpectfully informs the Nobility and Gentry, the
FIRST PUBLIC BREAKFAST,
THIS SEASON, WILL BE
This preſent MONDAY, April 29,
And continued every Monday and Thurſday,
TILL FURTHER NOTICE.
Attended with HORNS and CLARIONETS, &c.
N. B. The BANQUETING ROOM being completely fitted up, appropriate Muſic for Dancing will attend.—Admiſſion 2s. each.
SUBSCRIPTIONS as USUAL.

Advert for a Public Breakfast in Sydney Gardens 1799

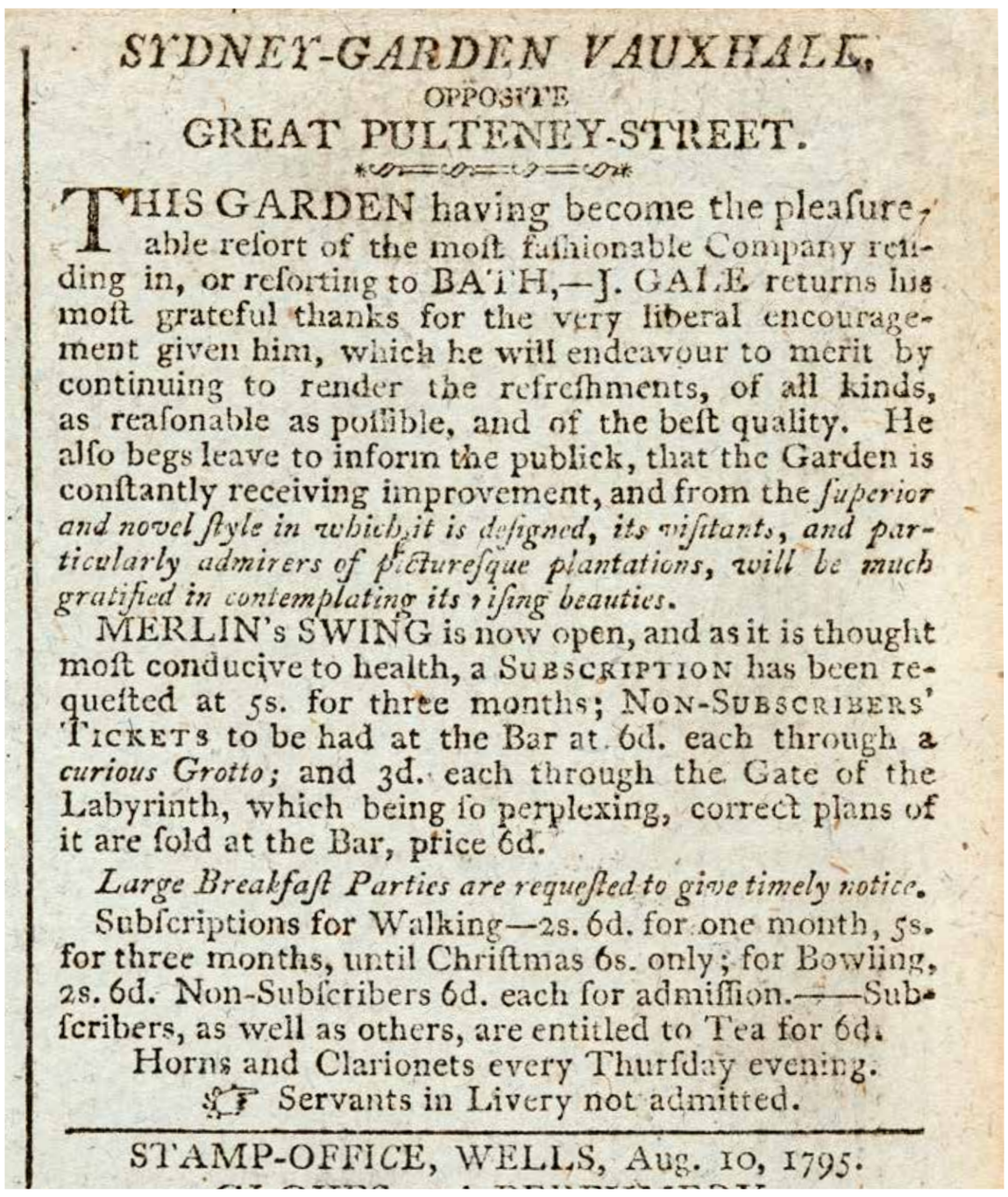
Continue on to The Labyrinth

5 Where the Labyrinth was found

Walk along below the tennis courts towards the other white canal bridge. Ahead of you, just beyond the tennis courts on the left, are the two arched entrances to the Georgian Reservoir that was here before the Pleasure Gardens were created (see C on the map) – the spring water gushes below you. Now cross the canal bridge over to the south side of the gardens to No 5. Jane would have seen more shrubberies and groves as she made her way round to where there was the labyrinth, with a swinging chair at the centre.

Labyrinth or Maze in Sydney Gardens, by Unknown

The The Merlin Swing designed by Mr Merlin, was supposed to induce health, and Jane's weak eyes might have prompted her to try it. But perhaps it was only walking round a very complicated route that appealed to her as it's something she mentions, slightly tongue in cheek, in a letter to her sister before the family left Steventon: one wonders whether she bought the map of the route priced sixpence as a precaution against getting lost. Perhaps she sat in the swinging chair just to see what it was like: even the sceptical can be curious.



SYDNEY-GARDEN VAUXHALL,
OPPOSITE
GREAT PULTENEY-STREET.

THIS GARDEN having become the pleasurable resort of the moſt faſhionable Company reſiding in, or reſorting to BATH,—J. GALE returns his moſt grateful thanks for the very liberal encouragement given him, which he will endeavour to merit by continuing to render the refreſhments, of all kinds, as reaſonable as poſſible, and of the beſt quality. He alſo begs leave to inform the publick, that the Garden is conſtantly receiving improvement, and from the *ſuperior and novel ſtyle in which it is deſigned, its viſitants, and particularly admirers of pictureſque plantations, will be much gratified in contemplating its riſing beauties.*

MERLIN's SWING is now open, and as it is thought moſt conducive to health, a SUBSCRIPTION has been requeſted at 5s. for three months; NON-SUBSCRIBERS' TICKETS to be had at the Bar at 6d. each through a *curious Grotto;* and 3d. each through the Gate of the Labyrinth, which being ſo perplexing, correct plans of it are ſold at the Bar, price 6d.

Large Breakfaſt Parties are requeſted to give timely notice.

Subſcriptions for Walking—2s. 6d. for one month, 5s. for three months, until Chriſtmas 6s. only; for Bowling, 2s. 6d. Non-Subſcribers 6d. each for admiſſion.——Subſcribers, as well as others, are entitled to Tea for 6d.

Horns and Clarionets every Thurſday evening.

☞ Servants in Livery not admitted.

STAMP-OFFICE, WELLS, Aug. 10, 1795.

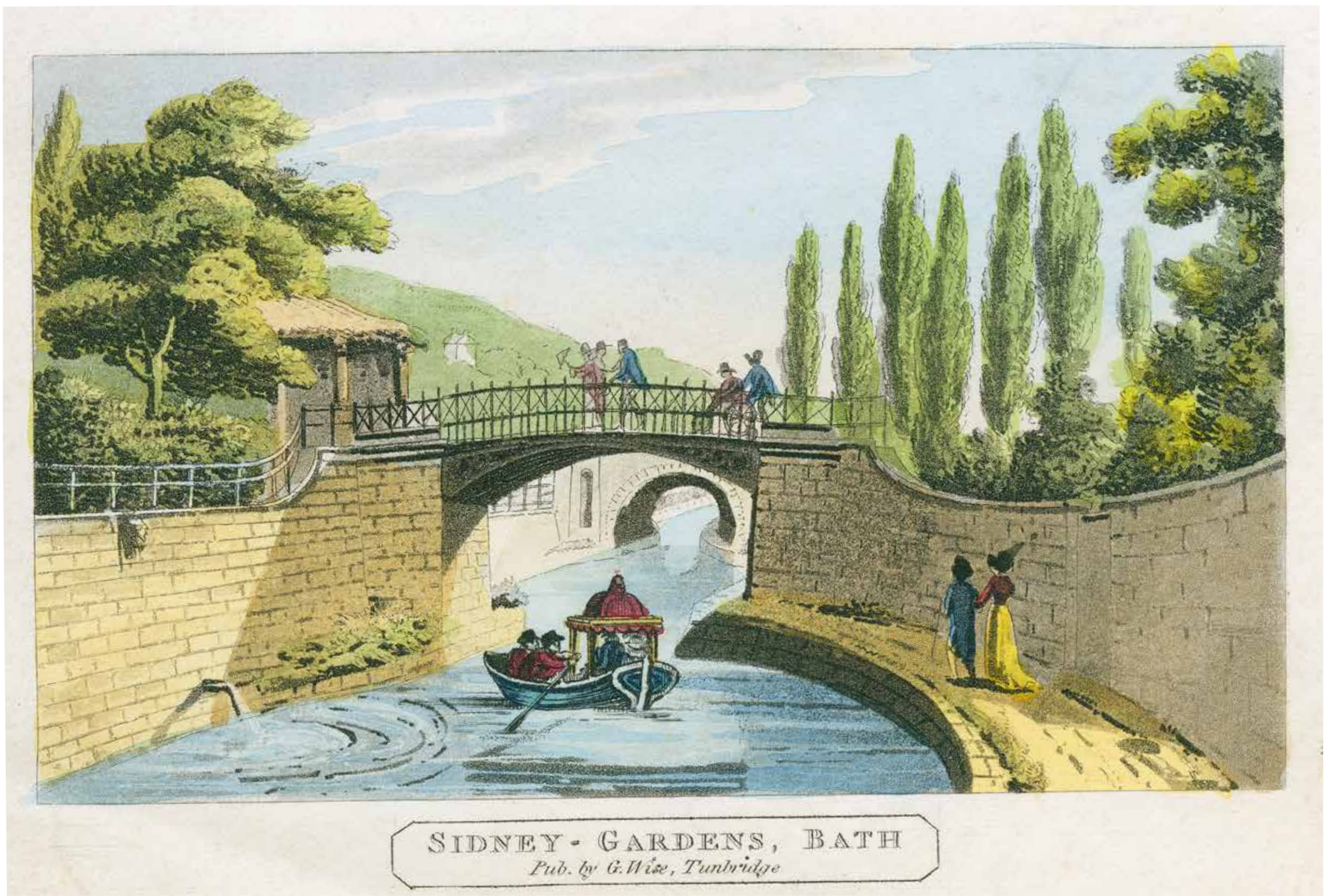
Mr Merlin's swing at Sydney Gardens, Vauxhall opposite Great Pulteney Street, 1795

Continue on to The Canal Bridges

6 The Canal Bridges

Now walk over to the white gate leading down from the gardens to the canal.

Go down the steps and onto the path. Look to the right, then the left and see the little white bridges with their dates. Jane would have known these two little bridges made in Coalbrookdale very well. She would have walked under them many times, either with her uncle or by herself, as the canal was somewhere she liked.



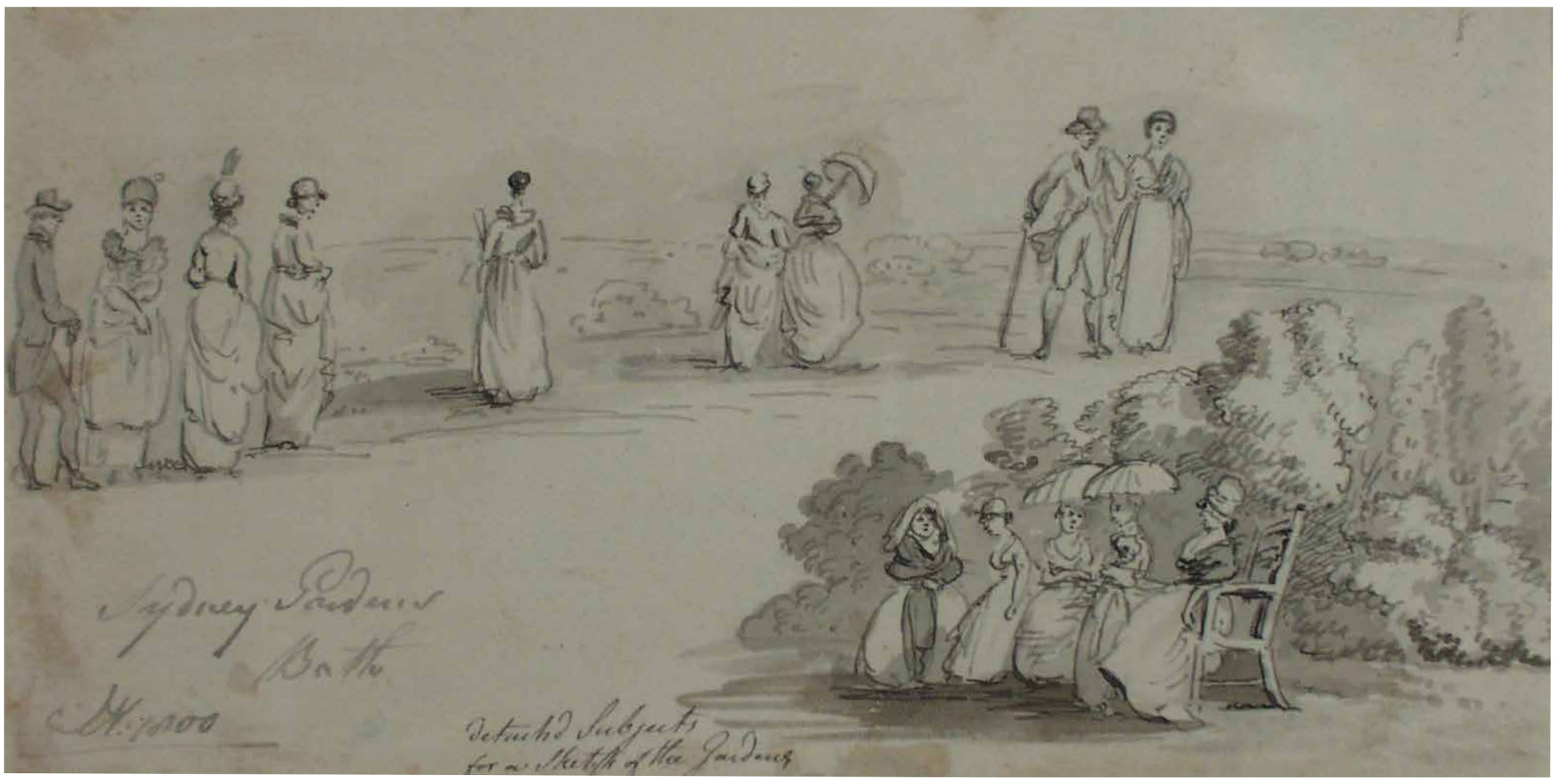
The Bridge Canal Sydney Gardens by Jean-Claude Nattes

It wasn't only the countryside Jane loved, she liked water too, especially the sea, and was a keen swimmer. As she walked along the path, she'd have seen the barges filled with goods going to Reading, where she'd been at school, and then on to London, pulled along the towpath by horses who, as working animals, were generally well cared for. She'd see the bargee children working the locks, the washing strung along the top of the barge, pots and pans being washed as they glided along. There were small sailing craft as water was an important way of moving things around. Household goods could be put on at Bristol for delivery to Bath or one of the villages. And of course, she would have stood watching the water fowl jostling for position; maybe she threw them some stale bread just as we do. On a hot sunny day she could have seen boys bathing. For the poor, the canal was the only opportunity to wash yourself.

Continue on to the long stone seat

7 The long stone seat

Now walk back over the railway bridge and down to the long stone seat by the side of the lower lawn - this is the low curved stone wall that is raised, with the oak tree standing above it. This feature is marked on the maps since the Pleasure Garden opened in 1795.



Detached subjects for a sketch of the gardens, by John Nixon 1800

Like you, Jane could rest on the bench and perhaps read a book instead of thinking about the one she was writing. Fanny Burney was a favourite writer and Cowper a favourite poet.

You can sit here and do the same, or, perhaps, you'll take your tea or coffee in the modern cafê, as there aren't any waiters to bring it to you here as there were for Jane. If you've brought a picnic, you can put down a rug on the lawns, also here when Jane was. You aren't wearing a long muslin gown with petticoats or tight breeches and coat, but you will feel as Jane Austen did, as the trees and plants she saw help you forget a busy, noisy world and you enjoy your picnic in the tranquillity of the gardens she loved.

"Last night we were in Sydney Gardens again, as there was a repetition of the gala which went off so ill on the 4th. We did not go till nine, and then were in very good time for the fireworks, which were really beautiful, and surpassing my expectation; the illuminations, too, were very, pretty. The weather was as favourable as it was otherwise a fortnight ago."

Jane to Cassandra, June 11, 1799 on a visit to Bath

Background context to Jane Austen's life

Jane Austen's world was very different from ours. When she was born on December 16th 1775 the country was ruled by the King and the Establishment, composed exclusively of white men. Society, broadly speaking, could be divided into four classes: the aristocracy, the landed gentry, the genteel and the working class. All Jane Austen's writings illustrate the differences between these classes, many of which were extremely subtle. As the daughter of a Gentleman with wealthy relations and a mother with aristocratic ones, Jane was conscious of being "a lady, with connections," and never let anyone forget this.

Like all girls of good family, Jane was not expected to work as her future would be marriage and children. Women were the chattels of their fathers and husbands with almost no Rights of any kind and, since only in exceptional circumstances could they have and control their own money, they required a husband to support them. However, impoverished women of Jane's class were less likely to marry as love took second place to money which came as a settlement from the woman's family. In Emma, Jane describes the problems penniless women faced in her character of Jane Fairfax.

But it wasn't only women who were subservient. The Establishment ensured their status was protected by laws and customs that discriminated in their favour, making for an exceptionally unequal society. There was no Health & Safety Executive, no NHS, no state retirement pension, no general Suffrage, no work protection laws, no state unemployment benefit. Animals had no protection from cruelty, and children no protection from vice, neither was there much free education for them. Theft was considered a worse crime than murder, imprisonment for debts of only a shilling was common, and just being accused of

a crime was often sufficient to hang you as investigative policing was almost non-existent making justice very arbitrary. As an example of this, Jane's Aunt Leigh Perrot was wilfully accused of stealing a piece of lace and sent for trial as she refused to buy off her accusers. At her trial, she had to rely on people speaking of her good character and witnesses who testified the shopkeeper had tried the same trick on them, as she couldn't speak in her own defence. Had she been found guilty, she would have been transported to a penal colony in Australia.

Money was at the heart of life and how it was obtained hardly considered. The clergyman would demand tythes from his parishioners regardless of whether paying him a quarter of their field of wheat would mean a hungry winter for them. The Magistrate would imprison a poacher even though his family had no means of support without him and would be a charge on the Parish. With this harsh cultural background it's easier to understand why the prevailing opinion of poverty was its necessity as people were needed for menial labour, still the majority's opinion in the middle of the eighteen hundreds. Everything then, as now, depends on education and understanding. We look back at the terrible injustices of life, its cruelties and discrimination when Jane Austen was alive, and we are appalled. But in two hundred years we will also be judged as there is still injustice, discrimination and dreadful suffering.

Although Jane Austen was born at a time when the movement towards ending enslavement had begun, many people saw the transatlantic slave trade as a legitimate means of making money. It wasn't until people like William Wilberforce, Hannah More, Thomas Clarkson and Josiah Wedgewood, all prominent in the Abolition movement, spoke out against the cruelty of enslavement that people became more aware of its horrors. Jane Austen read some of Clarkson's writings and approved of what he wrote,

and her sailor brother, Francis Austen, engaged in work for the East India company, was appalled by conditions in the ships transporting enslaved people to the sugar plantations, and wrote strongly of his disgust at such a barbaric practice. Jane, having probably read poems against the practice of enslavement written by people like Anna Laetitia Barbauld, a Bluestocking of whom Jane would have approved, and William Wordsworth, amongst others, would have agreed with him. However, Jane's uncle and aunt Leigh Perrot living in Bath had a Black servant, and her father was a Trustee for the marriage settlement of a young woman with financial interests in a plantation. She would not embarrass her father and the Leigh Perrots were wealthy and childless, from whom her siblings had expectations; Jane Austen was never going to put at risk her family's finances, being acutely aware of the need for money as her novels demonstrate so her views were kept to herself.

Jane Austen was a product of her upbringing and class, a woman who "didn't dwell on tragedy," or other peoples' problems. But she differed from most of her contemporaries in one essential regard, as she believed in Women's Rights; in 1900 she would undoubtedly have joined the Suffragette movement. However, in Georgian England she had a place in society she needed to maintain, and family she didn't wish to offend, so it was only in her writing she could demonstrate her feelings and thoughts and, even then, she had to do it with a very light touch. Read between the lines of her novels and judge for yourselves how independently she thought and then think how sad she lived such a short time and couldn't express and expand these thoughts and opinions when a fairer society came about, and some of life's injustices were removed.

The ‘Jane Austen in Sydney Gardens Trail’ was written by author and historian Diana White, whose book *Jane Austen, the life and times of the woman behind the books* is published by Folly Books in 2017. The trail was created by the Sydney Gardens Project as part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund & BANES Council park restoration project (2019-2022)

www.bathnes.gov.uk/sydneygardenstrails

Find out more about Sydney Gardens and the Pleasure Gardens in the past:

www.bathnes.gov.uk/sydneygardens

Find out about the Holburne opening times, exhibitions and events:

www.holburne.org

Our thanks to Diana White for giving her time to write this trail.

Our thanks to Bath in Time and Bath Records Office for images.

SYDNEY GARDENS BATH

Bath & North East Somerset Council

Improving People’s Lives

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HERITAGE FUND