



ST JAMES'S PARK IMPROVED;
THE MAJESTIC PLANS of JOHN GWYNN
and THOMAS WRIGHT
By Eileen Harris

Buckingham House - the great *rus in urb* built around 1705 for John Sheffield, first Duke of Buckingham, by Captain William Winde - was bought by George III in 1762 as a dower house for Queen Charlotte. Though it was enlarged and modernised inside and out mainly by Sir William Chambers between 1762 and 1774, it was not intended to be a royal palace. The projected site for that - originally chosen by George II - was Richmond Gardens. Four different palace schemes were presented to George III by Chambers in 1762, 1764, 1769 and 1775, but none was carried out. Capability Brown's plan for Richmond Gardens, made in December 1764, and Chambers' design of 1768 for the Royal Observatory are all that was executed.¹

While building a new royal palace may not have been a matter of urgency to George III, there were others like the architect John Gwynn who set great store by the display of public magnificence and taste both as an expression of national pride and as a means of encouraging respect and patronage for British artists.² To Gwynn, the deformed old palace of St James's was not only 'ill-becoming the state and grandeur of the most powerful monarch in the universe' and a blot on the 'great and opulent city' of London, but also an 'object of

reproach to the kingdom in general'.³ Nor did the refurbished Buckingham House (known as the Queen's House or Queen's Palace) satisfy expectations of a first-rate royal palace in an appropriate garden setting. It did, however, serve to focus attention on the problems and elicit solutions. Gwynn's book, *London and Westminster Improved* published in 1766, contains two radical proposals both illustrated in his plan of 'Hyde-park, with the City and Liberties of Westminster' (fig. 1). The first and most extravagant was for a square palace in the centre of an amalgamation of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, raised on a gently sloping circular platform or terrace twenty feet high. In this elevated position and with the park surrounded not by high brick walls but rather by iron rails or a ha-ha, the palace could be seen from a distance by the excluded populace and also commanded extensive views itself. Kensington Palace was to be demolished and there were to be four main tree-lined avenues linked to major roads running north, south, east and west, and four lesser diagonal paths off a central ring with four trapezoidal canals between them. Everything was straight and regular.⁴

The alternative was St James's, which in Gwynn's opinion was 'far inferior', not being so spacious (fig. 2).⁵ To remedy this Gwynn proposed to demolish all the houses on both sides of St James's Street (including the newly completed Spencer House) and erect a large rectangular palace with three inner courts, extending the whole length of the street and overlooking Green Park. As at Hyde Park, the

1. John Harris, *Sir William Chambers* (London 1970), p. 245; H.M. Colvin, ed. *The history of the King's Works* (London 1976) v, p. 225.
2. Eileen Harris, *British architectural books and writers 1556-1785* (London 1990), pp. 214-17.

3. J. Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved* (London 1766), p. 10.

4. Gwynn, pp. 76-7, pl. 1.

5. Gwynn, p. 86.

ground was to be raised twenty feet to form a terrace from which 'his Majesty might occasionally review his troops in the Green-Park, or at particular times be seen by his subjects without inconvenience...'. Again, there were to be no brick walls, only iron rails enclosing the combined parks.

A palace in this position could not only have a hanging garden on the banks of the terrace, but also 'sufficient garden-room (without being overlook'd) which St James's very much wants'. Exactly what kind of garden Gwynn envisaged is not specified.

St James's Park, which was laid out in 1660 for Charles II,⁶ was to be barred from the disorderly masses and restored to a park of consequence, a 'theatre where beauty and nobility might be rendered conspicuous and familiarized to the publick...' looking in through the rails.⁷ Nor were any building encroachments to be allowed here. Buckingham House, made redundant by the new palace, was to be demolished, the Wilderness on the south-east side of the park cleared away, the whole ground raised, and the seventeenth-century long canal replaced by a long straight avenue with two cross walks aligned on those in Green Park - all geared for the parade of people of quality. The formality of Gwynn's plans for Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens, Green Park and St James's is in full accord with his preference for a grid plan for London, but it was utterly archaic in the mid-1760s, the age of Capability Brown.

Brown, who was appointed gardener to St James's in 1765, also made a design for the park, transforming the canal into a serpentine water that included an enlargement of Duck Island (also known as *Dutch Island* from the summer house built there by William III), originally in the Decoy in the Wilderness.⁸ The question of a new royal palace was not Brown's concern, nor were the surroundings of St James's Park. His design for the park was

obviously connected with his job, and probably predates Gwynn's book.

The *Plan of a Royal Palace and Garden for St James's Park* designed in 1766 by the amateur astronomer, architect and garden designer, Thomas Wright of Durham, is another matter (fig. 3).⁹ This was undoubtedly made as an alternative to Gwynn's proposal and incorporated some of his suggestions. It was accompanied by a plan and elevation of the royal palace itself, a vast building extending 900 feet in all;¹⁰ plans for *Royal Stables*,¹¹ *Royal Baths under King's Pavilion*,¹² a *Playhouse or Royal Theatre* more or less where Admiralty Arch is now,¹³ and a *Royal Museum* directly opposite the Horse Guards, with a central block set back between the Banqueting House and a matching wing.¹⁴ A similar scheme for replicating the Banqueting House as part of a great government office building with a colonnaded court open to the Thames was suggested by Gwynn (fig. 1).¹⁵

Wright's scheme retained Buckingham House as a 'Palace for the Prince of Wales' and placed the new royal palace in front of it. His quadrangular plan with four pavilions linked by quadrants is comparable to James Paine's design for Kedleston, so too are his elevations.¹⁶ The two pavilions facing St James's Park (the King's on the north and the Queen's on the south, both with baths underneath) were exactly aligned on the two splayed, tree-lined avenues that were part of the original seventeenth-century layout. In this position the royal palace with its outstretched arms (and *ipso facto* the King) could be seen to embrace all facets of civilised life in Britain: religion, government, culture, finance, and defence in Westminster Abbey and St Paul's in the distance, the Houses of Parliament, the new museum and theatre, the Treasury, the Horse Guards and the Admiralty.

9. The Royal Library, Windsor. 17625 c. See E. Harris, ed. *T. Wright, Arbours and Grottes* (London 1979), and E. Harris, 'A Flair For The Grandiose, The architecture of Thomas Wright - II', *Country Life*, 2 September 1971, p. 550.

10. The Royal Library, Windsor. 17625 A & B.

11. Avery Library, Columbia University New York. Thomas Wright album, f. 28 b. This corresponds to the King's Stables lettered M on the plan of the garden.

12. T. Wright album, f. 28 c. This corresponds to the King's Pavilion and Baths marked K on the garden plan.

13. Victoria and Albert Museum. Thomas Wright album, f. 41. There is a variant sketch plan in the Avery album, f. 28 v a.

14. Victoria and Albert Museum album, f. 22 and Avery f. 28 v b.

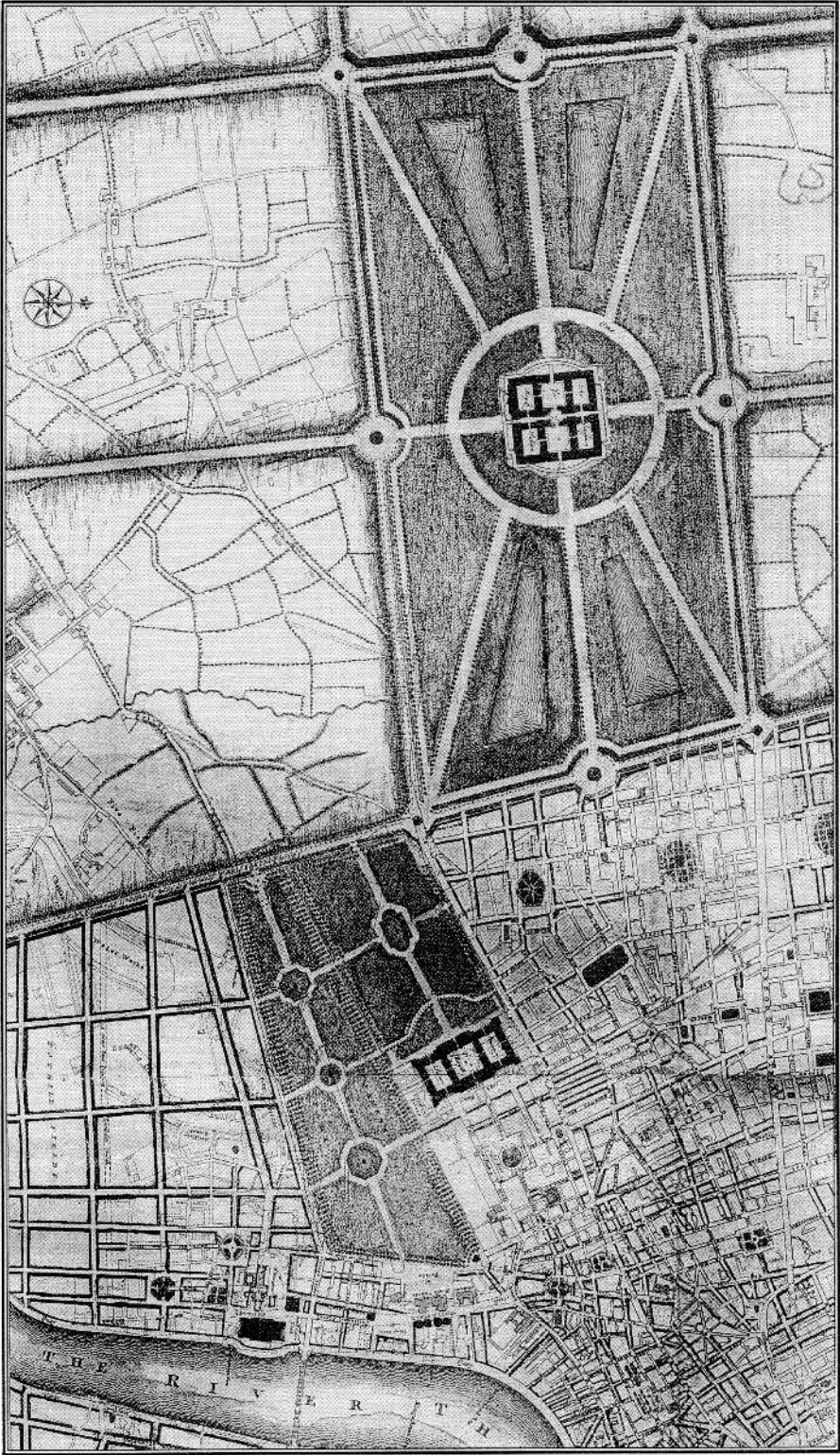
15. Gwynn, p. 89.

16. This would suggest that Paine's designs were known to him before they were published in 1783.

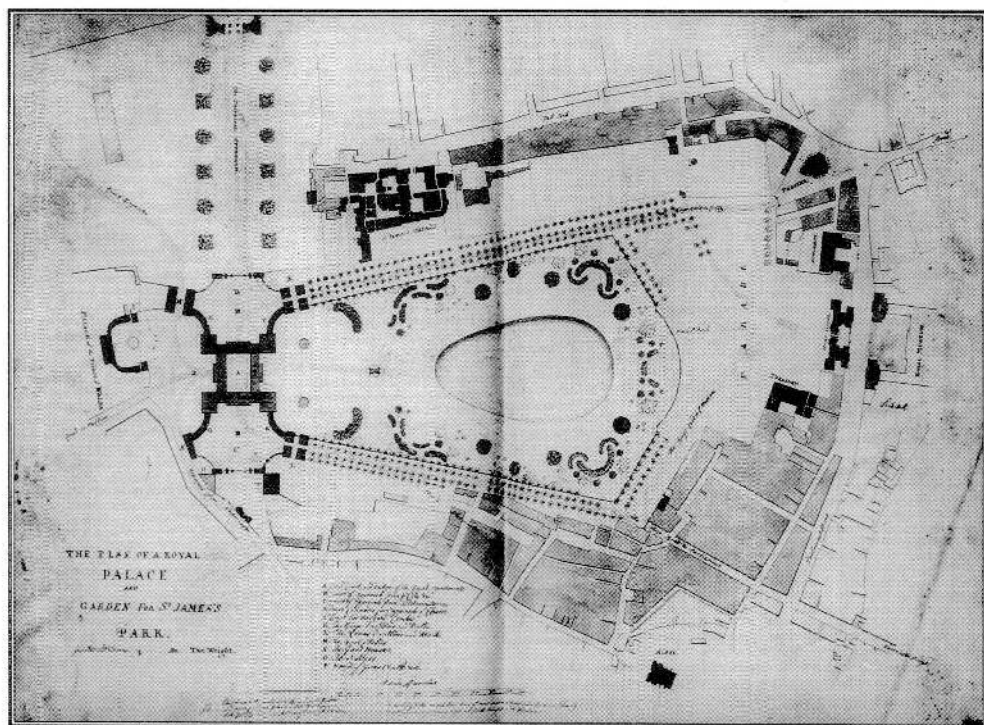
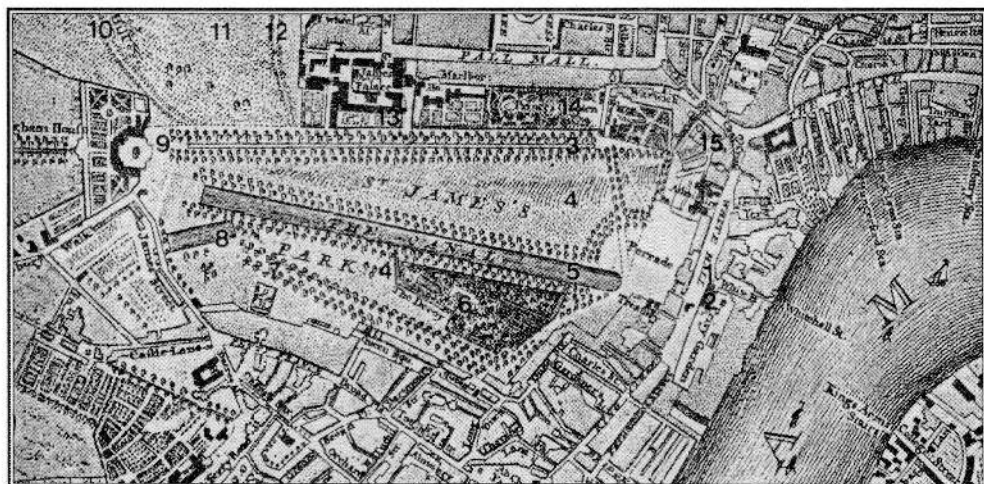
6. For the history of St James's Park see D. Green, *Gardener to Queen Anne: Henry Wise (1653-1738) and the Formal Garden* (London 1956), pp. 86-93; Peter Willis, *Charles Bridgeman and the English landscape garden* (London 1977), pp. 99-100; and S. Lang, 'St James's Park, The Rise and Threatened Decline of a Model Landscape', *Architectural Review* (London 1951) CXI, pp. 293-8.

7. Gwynn, pp. 88.

8. Dorothy Stroud, *Capability Brown* (London 1975), p. 122, pl. 54a. Brown's design, which is in The Royal Library, Windsor, is undated. For a description of the development of Duck Island see Tim Knox, 'An Historical Account of the Bird Keeper's Lodge in St James's Park', *The London Gardener*, vol. 1 (1995), pp. 11-17.



1. Plan of 'Hyde-park, with the City and Liberties of Westminster', from John Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved*, 1766. (PRIVATE COLLECTION)



2. Detail from John Rocque's *An Exact Survey of the City of London Westminster...and the Country Near Ten Miles Round*, 1746. (PRIVATE COLLECTION)
3. *Plan of a Royal Palace and Garden for St James's Park*, by Thomas Wright, 1766. (THE ROYAL COLLECTION, BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION OF HM THE QUEEN)

St James's Park was to be the palace garden and as such would be inaccessible to the inferior ranks of people and training recruits whom Gwynn held responsible for bringing the sacred spot to a state of near ruin.¹⁷ The garden was to be enclosed, as Gwynn suggested, with iron palisades which allowed the public a view of their royal family. However, the boundary did not take in the whole of the tree-lined avenues. Two shady walks, each consisting of three lines of trees, were 'purposely' left out for the benefit of the populace in summer when the Royal Family was not in town.¹⁸ Duck Island conveniently came within the garden enclosure and was transformed into a large central pond appropriately shaped like a duck's egg, which replaced the long canal.

The surrounding garden was laid out with different configurations of segmental shrubberies rather like niches containing seats, interspersed with circular thickets and flower beds, and trees in triangular groups of three. Facing the palace were two curved shrubberies reflecting the quadrant links and forming a kind of sheltered forecourt to the main part of the garden. A similar spatial arrangement was planned for Badminton.¹⁹

Unlike Gwynn's garden plans which were devised for parade and extensive outward views, Wright's were largely inward looking and concerned more with the privacy of the Royal Family and their pleasure than with the curious public. This is not to say that Wright was totally uninterested in the prospects to be enjoyed from the palace and garden. It was almost certainly for the sake of the view of St Paul's (noted on his plan) that most of the existing trees were removed from the far end of the garden abutting on Horse Guards Parade and replaced by low, segmental flower beds.

Duck's Pond was the focus of the two sides of the garden, where there were two types of curved shrubberies: one with additional segments closing each end and round shrubs or clumps behind, the other partially closed by two arcs in front. Though the plan is symmetrical, it is much less formal, more fluid and varied than both the original 1660s layout and Gwynn's proposal.

However, the mannerism of the internal arrangement is unusual for 1766 and more like a Victorian garden. The highly finished character of Wright's *Plan of a Royal Palace and Garden for St James's Park*, compared with his sketchy designs for the individual buildings, strongly suggests that it was presented to George III. It is unlikely, however, that he seriously expected anything to come of his proposals. They were the spontaneous inventions of his eternally creative mind.

THE PUBLIC GARDENS of BLOOMSBURY

By Tim Crane

In a journal entry of February 1941, Virginia Woolf contemplates her fellow diners in a Brighton tea-room. In the lavatory, she overhears the conversation of 'common little tarts ... powdering and painting themselves'. Later, watching a 'fat, smart woman' eating cakes, she asks plaintively, 'where does the money come to feed these fat white slugs?'

On the ground floor of the Russell Hotel in Russell Square, there is an indifferent brasserie of the sort London does so well. It sells overcooked international food and over-priced international beer to tourists. Across the window runs the uninspiring motto: 'grills, burgers, pastas'. The only thing that redeems this dingy place is its name: 'Virginia Woolf's bar and grill'. The fat slugs wreak an unintended revenge.

The irony of this attempt to cash in on Bloomsbury's famous residents is matched elsewhere in the area. A recent development of flats near Cartwright Gardens contains one bunch of buildings called *Virginia Court* and another called *Woolf Mews*. (*Leonard Court* is also there, but one suspects knowledge of its etymology will not survive.) For those who have little enthusiasm for the Bloomsbury Group, there is some satisfaction to be had in seeing the names of these self-styled aesthetic prophets distributed across burger bars and housing estates.

The lover of Bloomsbury's public gardens, however, might still have reasons for regretting the presence of Virginia's bar and grill and its ilk. Russell Square, the largest of the Bloomsbury squares, and the largest square in

17. Gwynn, p. 88

18. Inscribed on Wright's plan of the gardens in The Royal Library, Windsor. 17625 c

19. E. Harris, ed. *T. Wright*

1. Virginia Woolf, *A Moment's Liberty: The Shorter Diary* edited by Anne Olivier Bell, (London 1990), pp. 302-3