



NATHANIEL SMITH'S EARLY VIEWS of DUCK ISLAND COTTAGE, ST JAMES'S PARK

By Tom Stuart-Smith

A pair of watercolour sketches show an afternoon's visit to the *Grand Tea Room* at the Duck Decoy in St James's Park around 1760 and give us unique information about the character and topography of Duck Island at this time.¹ The sketches are attributed to Nathaniel Smith (c.1741-1800), and, in fact, one view shows the artist being ferried over to the island by a certain John Drowley. Smith was a playfellow and sometime assistant to the sculptor Joseph Nollekens. He also worked for L.F. Roubiliac on a number of his monuments in Westminster Abbey.

The first sketch (fig. 1) shows the island seen from the south-west, from Bird Cage Walk, being approached across the canal by two gentlemen in a punt. It is clear from this view and from contemporary topographical surveys that the island was a substantial landmass. Indeed, it extended to about three acres, and by 1760 the terrain had taken on an undulating, naturalistic appearance, quite at odds with what one might expect from the highly regular geometric layout indicated on the survey of c.1735 (reproduced in the first volume of *The London Gardener*²). Twenty-five years later, the planting seems to have been developed so as to complement the topography and the sketch clearly shows a variety of trees, including weeping and pollarded specimens growing along the edges of the canal. A winding path leads from the landing to the Keep House, and then on to the side entrance of the Grand Tea Room.

It is, in fact, a rather humble tea room, being a small tetrastyle Doric temple-front tacked on

to a modest cottage behind. Appropriate, perhaps, for selling knick-knacks and Eccles cakes to passing tourists, but not what one might expect given its portentous name and royal provenance.

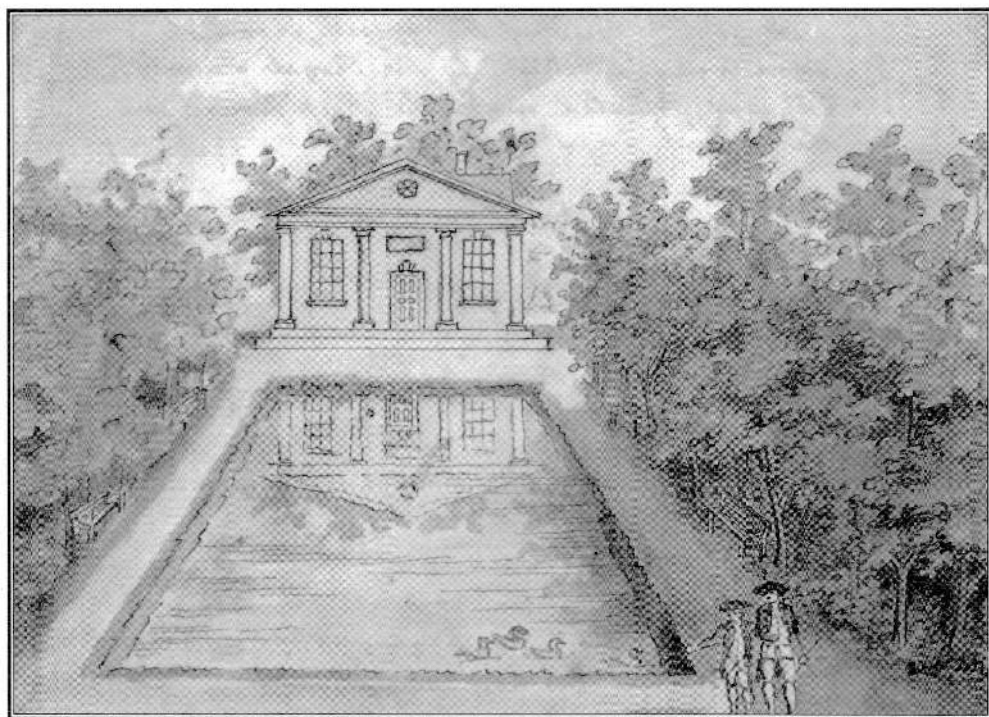
The second view shows the building in a more flattering light (fig. 2) seen directly across an ornamental rectangular pool. The Temple, and indeed its location, has a striking resemblance to Lord Burlington's 'Portico Temple' - or Temple on the Water - on the side of the long canal at Chiswick built in the early 1720s. It is also similar in conception to Colen Campbell's 'Great Room', or Garden House, erected on the small canal at Hall Barn for Edmund Waller in c.1724.

The Grand Tea Room at Duck Island has its origins with Charles II and the Seigneur de Saint Évremond (*frontispiece*), but it's likely that the rather squat façade in Smith's view is a remodelling of the early 1730s - possibly coinciding with the appointment of Stephen Duck as 'Governor of Duck Island'. The temple-front may have been added at the same time as the ornamental pool was recast from its earlier baroque outline to its comparatively humble rectangular shape.

One can see the parallel between the style and subject matter of this second view and some landscape sketches of William Kent. One of the Chatsworth sketches (c.1735-40) illustrates a remarkably similar sylvan scene with a domed temple overlooking a rectangular 'piscina', a simple geometrical composition overlaid with more irregular and varied planting. But while Kent's sketches rarely show an appreciable amount of underbrush below his elegantly high-pruned trees, these vignettes of Duck Island suggest that the vegetation had already reverted to a dense thicket. Until 1771 when the island was recast, it was the only part of St James's Park protected from the depredations of livestock. It must, therefore, have been

1. The sketches, now in a private collection, were discovered by Mr William Drummond in c.1990.

2. T. Knox, 'Duck Island Cottage: an Historical Account', *The London Gardener*, vol.1 (1995), pp.11-17.



1. 'A South West View of the Island in Saint James's Park,
John Drowley ferrying Nathl. Smith over', c.1760.
By Nathaniel Smith (PRIVATE COLLECTION)

2. 'A West View of the Grand Tea Room (sometimes visited by the Royal Family).
It was situated next the Keep house in the Island in St James's Park,' c.1760.
By Nathaniel Smith (PRIVATE COLLECTION)

something of a secluded retreat, with seats sheltered by the shrubby plantations and the paths free from animal droppings. Thomas Fairchild remarked in 1722 that 'the Park at St. James's is of a large Extent, and disposed in handsome Walks of Lime-Trees and Elms, a large regular Canal, a Decoy for Ducks. And altho' it is much oppress'd with the London Smoke, as almost any of our great Squares; yet the wild Fowl, such as Ducks and Geese, are conformable to it, and breed there; and there is an agreeable Beauty in the Whole, which is wanting in many Country Places.'³

The END of the BEGINNING

By Patrick James

It was always going to be too good to last. Sooner or later the lottery dream was bound to turn sour: the pity is that it had to be quite so soon. The sub-human denizens of the Treasury and the Civil Service just couldn't resist it any longer and gradually over the next few years it would appear that the lottery millions will be channelled into Government-led schemes. This should not really come as a surprise. J.M. Keynes once noted in the 1940s 'the Treasury view has prevailed, we have persuaded ourselves that it is positively wicked for the State to spend a half-penny on non-economic purposes'.

For the small and heroic band that crusades to protect, restore and rejuvenate the capital's parks, gardens and open spaces the timing could not be more agonising. Less than three years ago bodies such as the Victorian Society and the Garden History Society were pleased that the public expressed a budding interest in these spaces. At that time many parks were considered by local authorities as at best a nuisance to be tolerated, at worst a profligate waste of land that could be better put to much better use. Suddenly amid great fanfares the *Urban Parks Programme* was launched - a massive grant programme aimed specifically at urban open space. People talked of a three-year programme and more, millions would be set aside for the people's parks paid for by the people. The politicians loved it and the media raved. The *Daily Telegraph* noted 'this is such

a creative and people-friendly initiative that conservationists might find the Urban Parks Programme too revolutionary to praise - places for people that will alter and improve the lives of those who use parks. If the idea of heritage has begun occasionally to seem stuffy and exclusive, this imaginative and worthy use of lottery funds should do an enormous amount to change that impression.'

The first announcements were made in May 1997 and there have been several since. So far more than £80 million has gone to 128 parks across the country. London has fared well, with projects in Russell Square, Gunnersbury Park, cemeteries in Kensal Rise, Highgate and Hampstead, as well as Emslie Horniman Pleasance Park in North Kensington, Well Hall Pleasance in Greenwich and St Pancras Gardens in Camden. As *The Times* said 'in its attempt to pour bounty on popular causes that benefit ordinary people the National Lottery has made a magnificent choice'.

Now just as the cause of the park and other open spaces is beginning to gain momentum that has been so desperately lacking in the past twenty years, we hear that the Heritage Lottery Fund's share of the lottery proceeds is to fall. As this article is being written there is still no guarantee that the Urban Parks Programme will run until the expiry of the Camelot licence in 2001. But if parks and open spaces now fall back to the position they held a few years ago is it fair to lay the blame at the lottery's door? I am not so sure. The lottery cannot be expected to act as fairy godmother to every deserving cause. Its resources, while large, must be put in context. HLF's annual income would fund the bureaucracy of Government for seven hours. No, the lottery's role should be seen more as a catalyst in lifting ideas off the ground and offer capital investment when no one else will. It is for others to maintain the momentum and develop and take forward the ideas. Three years ago an offer of £80 million for urban open spaces (about £10 million of which has gone to London) could not have been contemplated. The lottery should not be viewed as the saviour with a bottomless pocket that will help every historic open space in the country.

For those of us who care passionately about parks and gardens in London I believe that the hard work lies in sustaining and stimulating

3. Thomas Fairchild, *The City Gardener* (London 1722), p.11.