

'A PLACE of GENERAL RESORT': BAGNIGGE WELLS in the EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By Alison F. O'Byrne

In 1757, Thomas Hughes, the tenant of Bagnigge House (situated near what is now 61-63 King's Cross Road in Clerkenwell), grew curious as to why he had problems growing plants in his garden. He asked the opinion of one Dr. John Bevis, who tested the water on the property and discovered a high iron content, rendering it useful as a chalybeate, while water drawn from another well, he found, was a strong purgative. To capitalise on the commercial possibilities of such a find, Hughes opened the house and gardens to the public at least as early as 1759, and in 1760 Dr. Bevis published his findings as *An Experimental Enquiry Concerning the Contents, Qualities, and Medicinal Virtues, of the Two Mineral Waters, Lately Discovered at Bagnigge Wells, near London* (reprinted in 1767). The work set forth for the public the supposed benefits of the water, including 'Directions for Drinking them, and some Account of their Success in obstinate Cases', and it was available for perusal at the Wells themselves.¹

To accommodate his visitors, Hughes transformed the grounds, adding a domed pavilion called the Temple, which served as a pump room; formal gardens for promenading; arbours for tea-drinking; and three 'rustic bridges' across the Fleet. (fig. 14) The grounds also included a separate space designated 'for such of the company as chuse to smook, drink cyder, ale, &c', thus catering to less fashionable tastes and forms of consumption while banishing them to the periphery of the gardens.² In addition, the Long Room provided an interior space for tea-drinking, promenading and concerts.³

Bagnigge Wells was one of a number of tea-gardens and 'spas' catering especially to the middling sorts in London, who had money to spend and wanted to be seen to spend it in a 'genteel' manner. Indeed, the term 'genteel', often invoked in descriptions of various forms of entertainment in London, reveals much about the kinds of men and women the gardens attracted. While genteel was synonymous with polite and elegant, it was also a term often used to signify the aspirations of the London 'cit' [i.e. citizen] and his family in a period during which their wealth, often exceeding that of the nobility and gentry, was deemed threatening to the social order. In the 1760s and 1770s in particular, the cit, his wife and their daughters were satirized in poems, essays, and songs for trying (often awkwardly and unsuccessfully) to partake in fashionable forms of entertainment, dress and consumption. In poems, prints and descriptions, Bagnigge Wells was represented as a place that the typical cit and his family (overweight and expensively – but not necessarily elegantly – dressed) visited in order to be seen indulging in 'genteel' leisure activities. (fig. 15)

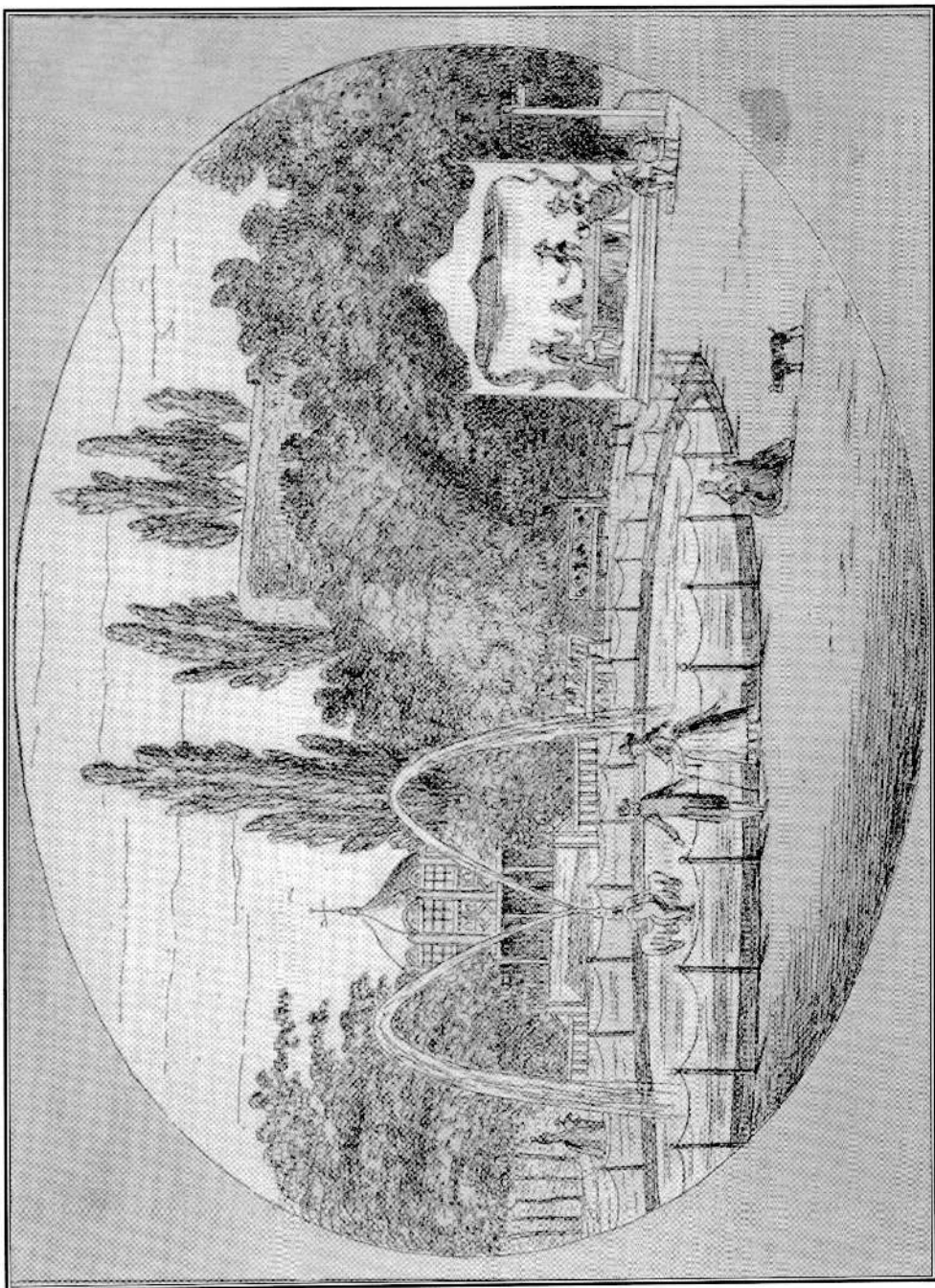
While places like Vauxhall and The Mall undoubtedly drew a wide range of people, spas and tea gardens were aimed at a decidedly middling-class of visitor. Their associations with more 'fashionable' forms of entertainment, including tea drinking, trips out of London and spas, and their low costs of admission, drew prostitutes alongside a range of merchants, shopkeepers, journeymen, professionals, and their families. Bagnigge Wells was undoubtedly at the higher end of this class of entertainment, although its entrance fee – three pence, or half a guinea for a season ticket (April through November) – was far from restrictive. Similar resorts, such as Sadler's Wells and Bermondsey Spa, featured much more 'popular' forms of entertainment, the former providing a range of theatrical and acrobatic performances, the latter known for its paintings, executed 'in a very high stile', of scenes which included a butcher's shop, a market seller dozing, and a watchman.⁴ Spas and tea gardens in the London area were especially crowded on Sundays, when tradesmen, journeymen, and apprentices were free from work

1. Dr. John Bevis, *An Experimental Enquiry Concerning the Contents, Qualities, and Medicinal Virtues, of the Two Mineral Waters, Lately Discovered at Bagnigge Wells, near London* (London, 1760), title page.

2. *A Sunday Ramble; or, Modern Sabbath-Day Journeys; in and about the Cities of London and Westminster* (London, 1774), p. 23.

3. For a description of Bagnigge Wells in the second half of the eighteenth century, see William B. Boulton, *Amusements of Old London* 2 vols. (London: John C. Nimmo, 1901), I: pp. 50-55; Septimus Sunderland, M.D., *Old London's Spas, Baths, and Wells* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Bales, Sons, and Danielson, Ltd. [1916]), pp. 79-81; Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert, *The London Encyclopaedia* (Hammondsworth: Macmillan, 1983), p. 32; and Warwick Wroth's classic study, *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1896).

4. *The London Guide, Describing the Public and Private Buildings of London, Westminster, and Southwark* (London, [1782?]), p. 13.



14. *Bagnigge Well*, etching after a drawing by J. Merigot, 1780
(COURTESY GUILDHALL LIBRARY: CORPORATION OF LONDON
RECORDS OFFICE)



15. *Mr Deputy Dump'ing and Family enjoying a Summer Afternoon*, lithograph printed for Carington Bowles, c.1780
(COURTESY GUILDHALL LIBRARY: CORPORATION OF LONDON RECORDS OFFICE)

and eager for entertainment, especially that which involved leaving the City. Authors and artists drew on the interests of an aspirational middling sort, eager to see itself represented in poems and prints as partaking in 'genteel' forms of leisure, in a small number of publications that presented the wells at the height of their popularity. These representations uphold a sense of the wells as both fashionable and promiscuous, drawing together cits, journeymen, fashionable invalids, pleasure seekers and prostitutes.

As John Brewer has noted, many cultural sites of the eighteenth century served as places of performance for those attending. Theatre and exhibition audiences, for example, did not passively enjoy the spectacle on display, but actively participated in the broader spectacle of performance, in which social display and self-presentation played an important part.⁵ In London's promenades and pleasure gardens in particular, seeing and being seen formed one of the chief entertainments on offer, especially in those places which allowed for the broad social mixing. As ideas about 'polite' behaviour and deportment became increasingly accessible through a range of inexpensive publications, promenades and pleasure gardens provided spaces in which men and women of the middling sorts could test their claims to polite, fashionable society, taking in the latest fashions and learning where to improve their behaviour and deportment. The mixing of social types across class boundaries offered writers and artists an opportunity to satirize ideas about polite taste and forms of entertainment and consumption, as well as to mock those social types who sought to 'ape' their betters.

Bagnigge Wells provided writers and artists with a unique opportunity, given its range of entertainments catering to a diverse audience. The supposed medicinal benefits of the waters drew invalids, who visited the Wells in the morning to drink the waters and have breakfast, while in the afternoons and evenings men and women flocked to the gardens for its promenades, tea and concerts. Indeed, Bagnigge Wells brought together dif-

ferent, distinct forms of entertainment into one space: part spa, part pleasure ground, part tea garden and part promenade, all of which benefited from its proximity to London. Barbara Benedict has shown how eighteenth-century spa towns such as Bath and Tunbridge were able to maintain a certain air of exclusivity that was lost on a spa like Islington-Wells precisely because of its proximity to London.⁶ Similarly, Bagnigge Wells, situated conveniently for a day trip from London, did not depend on an extensive period of leisure time nor, as was necessary with more exclusive spa towns, on money for accommodation and for being seen consuming the right forms of leisure. Bevis, at the start of his treatise on the waters at Bagnigge Wells, emphasised that they were located only 'a little way out of London...according easy access...for coaches from all parts [...and...] no less convenient for such as prefer walking exercise'.⁷ Once there, visitors could partake in scaled-down versions of fashionable forms of entertainment.

From the time of its opening, satirical presentations focused on the less than polite aspects of Bagnigge Wells. A poem by William Woty, *Bagnigge-Wells*, focuses on the Wells' association with grotesque bodily functions resulting from taking the water:

Of these the one will purge the human frame
... and thro' posterior channel
Precipitate its way, or meeting there
With violent repulse, come tumbling up
In horrible cascade⁸

The poet continues, drawing contrasts between debased forms of entertainment and the site's original landscape with its rebirth as a spa: according to *The London Guide* the site of Bagnigge Wells was once 'one of the most disagreeable swamps in the neighbourhood of London', now converted from 'a Bog to a Paradise'. Woty makes much of the Wells' situation on the banks of the notoriously-polluted Fleet River, 'degraded oft / With term of Ditch', while describing the Temple as providing a 'view / To Cloacina', goddess of London's sewers in John Gay's *Trivia*; or, *the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716).

6. Barbara Benedict, 'Consumptive Communities: Commodifying Nature in Spa Society' in *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 36:3 (1995), pp. 203-219.

7. Bevis, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

8. William Woty, 'Bagnigge-Wells' in *The Shrubs of Parnassus. Consisting of a Variety of Poetical Essays, Moral and Comic* (London, 1760), pp. 107-11.

5. John Brewer, 'The Most Polite Age and the Most Vicious: Attitudes Towards Culture as Commodity, 1660-1800' in *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. John Brewer and Ann Bermingham (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 341-61.

In addition to its situation on a bog with views of the polluted, sewer-like Fleet, the Wells retain 'the faint remains / Of Land *Hockleian*'. Hockley-in-the-Hole had been located a short distance from this new space of 'genteel' entertainment, whose violent entertainments – including bull and bear baiting – had drawn apprentices and London's rougher sorts from the Elizabethan era through the mid-eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the Wells attracted customers including: 'th' Attorney looking grave, / And Rake from Bacchanalian rout...the Cit...and Man of Gout / With leg of size enormous'.

The mixture of types amongst the company at the Wells is central to descriptions of the scene, while contemporary accounts, such as that produced in *The London Guide*, boast the popularity of Bagnigge Wells, claiming, for example, that 'the company resorting to the tea-rooms and gardens are more numerous than at any other public place of the kind'.⁹ Another satirical poem describing the scene, *Bagnigge-Wells: A Poem in which are Pourtrayed the Characters of the Most Eminent Filles-de-Joyes* (1779), begins with a description of the mixed group gathered at the Wells on a Sunday:

THY arbours, BAGNIGGE,
and the gay alcove,
Where the frail Nymphs in am'rous
dalliance rove;
Where prentic'd Youths enjoy their
Sunday feast,
And City Matrons boast their Sabbath rest;
Where unfledg'd Templars first as fops parade,
And new-made Ensigns sport their
first cockade;
Sing, Muse, conversant in various Styles,
Which deck St. James's, or adorn St. Giles...¹⁰

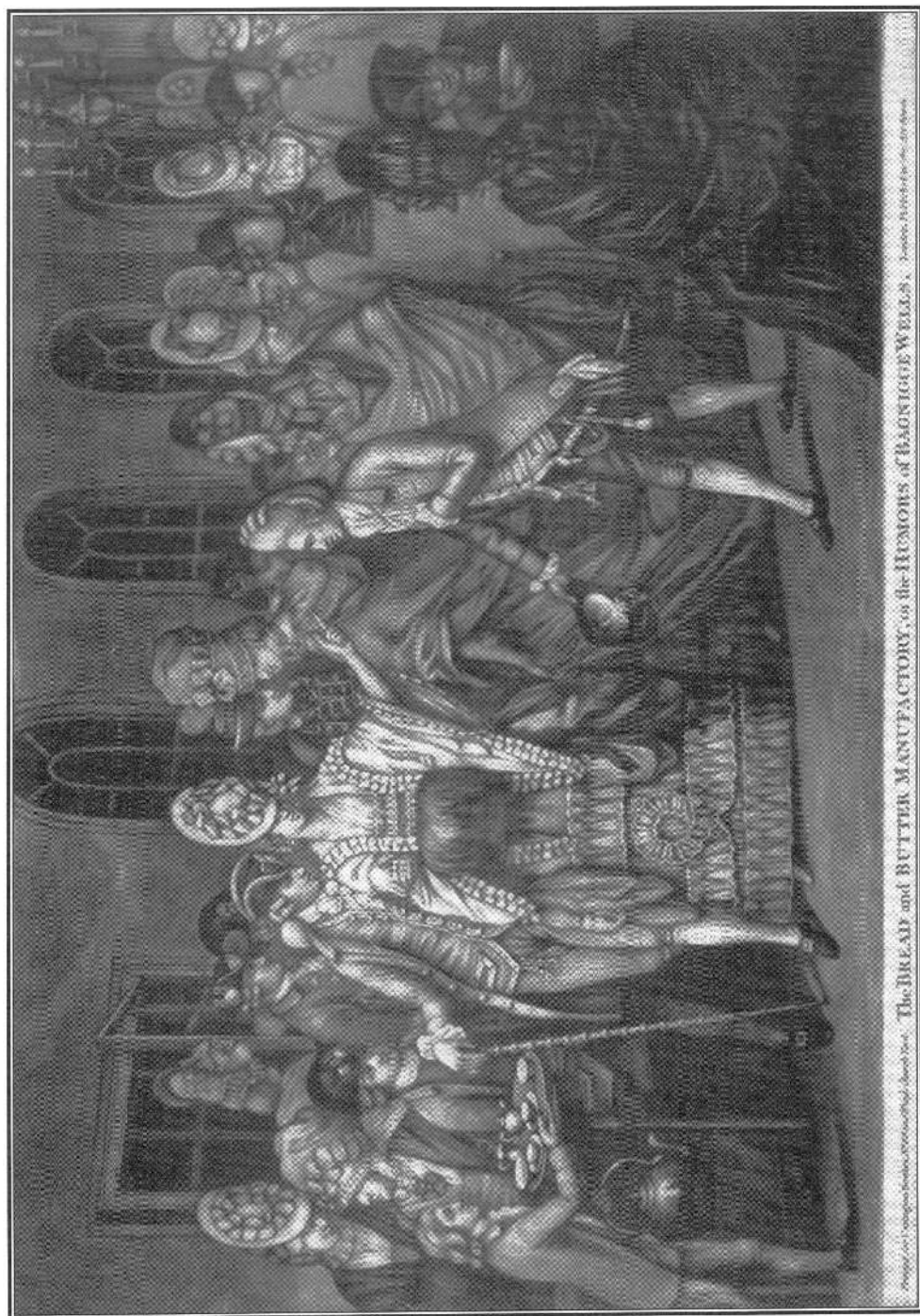
St. James's, home of the court, and St. Giles, a notorious rookery, are brought together at the Wells, as prostitutes ('nymphs'), apprentices, Cits' wives, and foppish lawyers congregate for leisure. Indeed, the mixing of various types, and the fashionable gossiping that would take place at such a resort is echoed throughout the poem in an extensive series of footnotes, in which a range of characters, including an author, a pickpocket, moralists and a milliner, offer up details of the various prostitutes and intrigues to which the author alludes. The

main focus of the poem, however, as the title suggests, is the history of the various prostitutes known there. The poem is presented as 'humble if corrective', designed to teach 'the dangers of a modish life' to the 'city maid [and] o'er-gay wife'. In detailing the histories of the prostitutes who frequent the Wells, the author suggests the gap between appearance and reality, specifically between the supposed health benefits of the spa and the moral degeneration and promiscuous activities taking place there – leading, according to the poet, to an outbreak of venereal disease.

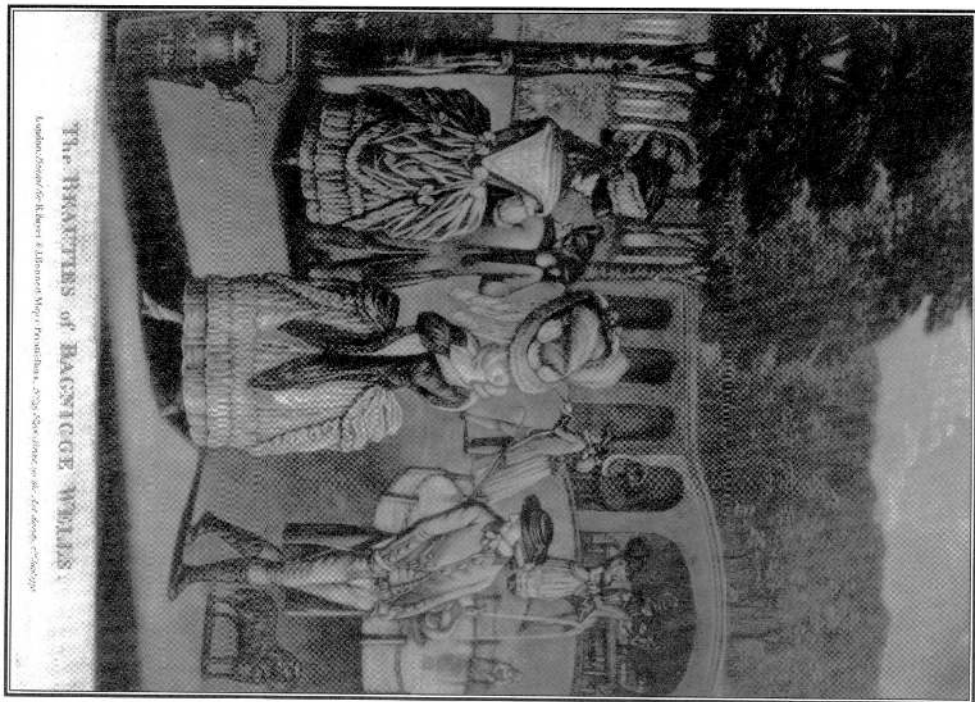
Bagnigge House, where Bagnigge Wells was established, was reputed to be the country home of Nell Gwynn, mistress of Charles II, and was where she often entertained him. The presentation of prostitutes in the Wells often drew on this association, while the proprietors themselves traded on the connection, displaying a bust of Gwynn in the gardens, at once suggestive of the promiscuous women and men who frequented the Wells and the social aspirations that brought many of them there. Scenes from Bagnigge Wells in the 1770s and 1780s were often evocative, if not explicit, about the sexual coupling that took place in secluded groves and 'private gardens'. In 'The Bread and Butter Manufactory, or the Humours of Bagnigge Wells' (*fig. 16*), an ostentatiously dressed woman just to the left of centre is the object of attention for the crowd around her: to her left, a young man stares at her chest, while another approaches her on the right, bowing. Just behind her, two women seem to be staring, perhaps passing a comment on her appearance or behaviour. In 'A Bagnigge Wells Scene, or No Resisting Temptation', (*fig. 17*) a young woman stands idly by a rose bush, plucking flowers, while another, passing behind her, looks on somewhat disapprovingly. The 'temptation' that keeps the lady waiting is a meeting with a lover, the plucking of the roses a euphemism for the sexual deflowering that will result from the assignation. In both scenes, fashionably dressed men and women appear alongside women who might be prostitutes, or themselves indulge in behaviour that might be deemed inappropriate. 'The Beauties of Bagnigge Wells', on the other hand, presents a number of well-dressed prostitutes parading in the gardens with customers. (*fig. 18*)

9. *The London Guide*, op. cit., p. 11.

10. *Bagnigge-Wells: A Poem in which are pourtrayed the characters of the most eminent filles-de-joye*. (London, 1779), pp. 1-2.



16. *The Bread and Butter Manufactory, or the Humors of Bagnigge Wells*, lithograph printed for Carington Bowles, 1780
(COURTESY GUILDHALL LIBRARY; CORPORATION OF LONDON RECORDS OFFICE)



17. *A Bagnigge Wells Scene, or No Resisting Temptation*, lithograph printed for Carington Bowles, 1780
(GUILDHALL LIBRARY: CORPORATION OF LONDON RECORDS OFFICE)

18. *The Beauties of Bagnigge Wells*, lithograph printed for R. Sayer & J. Bennett, 1778
(COURTESY HENRY E. HUNTINGTON LIBRARY AND ART GALLERY)

The Wells as site of sexual transgression was also a feature of *A Sunday Ramble; or, Modern Sabbath Day Journey* (1774) and its various forms and editions. Drawing on a literary sub-genre in which a newcomer to London and a reliable guide surveyed scenes of high and low life, either in the early hours of the morning or, as in this case, on a Sunday, the narrative claims to reveal 'the Follies of the present Age'. After offering a general description of the Wells, including its 'genteel seats for the company' and the presence of 'several genteel females', the guide then offers the countryman a description of the several characters they pass as a means to illustrate the supposed range of people who visit Bagnigge Wells. In addition to a young Etonian who takes the waters as cure for his love-induced melancholy, the pair discuss an effeminate homosexual mixing with the company and a young woman who cuckolded an old cit. The last, at first described as the most 'exquisite beauty' of the group of 'genteel females', illustrates the extent to which appearances in these places of reputed social mixing could be deceiving. The guide reveals that she was actually the 'menial servant' of the old gentleman before tricking him (by claiming that she was pregnant and threatening her father's anger) into marrying her. As the newcomer and his guide depart, they are approached by 'two ladies of easy virtue' whose invitations they decline in pursuit of their plan to ramble about London.¹² The frontispiece to a later edition featured a couple engaged in an intrigue at Bagnigge Wells. As a waiter stumbles and falls, overturned dishes, a reference to sexual promiscuity, scatter nearby. The caption warns, 'as ye through the Garden rove, / Beware, fond Youths, the Darts of Love'.

While literary representations of Bagnigge Wells suggest it was a place of extensive social mixing, the types of publication which often made these claims – guidebooks aimed at a lower middle-class readership and pseudo-guidebooks aimed at both those who have never been to London and those eager to see familiar places represented – suggest a different story. While these descriptions often include figures like the Etonian or young lawyer, they never include truly fashionable

types. Instead, Bagnigge Wells is presented as full of men and women eager to *display* leisure and consumption on a Sunday, their one day free from work, at a modest cost. By 1786, John Trusler, in *The London Adviser and Guide*, included Bagnigge Wells under the description of 'tea-gardens in the out-skirts of the town, where the common people resort in crowds', noting it was in particular 'much resorted to by women of the town'.¹³ The gardens' shift from fashionable site of entertainment to resort of the lower sorts was not unique: in towns and cities across Britain, the decline of 'polite' public space in the late eighteenth century resulted from the increasing number of tradesmen and middling sorts who could afford to participate in such entertainments.¹⁴ By the early nineteenth century, the Wells had fallen out of fashion as they became increasingly frequented by the 'lower sorts', in no small part due to the development of the surrounding area. By the time of its closure in the mid-nineteenth century, Bagnigge Wells was no longer a picturesque retreat from London but in the centre of a swiftly growing metropolitan area, and a popular place of entertainment for London's street-sellers.

THE METROPOLITAN PUBLIC GARDENS ASSOCIATION

By Joyce Bellamy

The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA) was established in 1882 to publicise and remedy the perceived deficiencies in public open space provision in the inner city areas of London, particularly the East and South Bank areas. Whereas the mid-nineteenth century had seen the creation by central government intervention of major new parks utilising marginal land on the north-east, south and south-west extremities of the built-up area (Victoria, Kennington and Battersea Parks opened respectively in 1845, 1852 and 1858), (figs. 19 & 20) and the Metropolitan Board of Works similarly had created two more peripheral parks in the north (Finsbury Park) and the south-east

12. *A Sunday Ramble; or, Modern Sabbath-Day Journey*, in and about the Cities of London and Westminster (London, [1774]), pp. 23–31.

13. John Trusler, *The London Adviser and Guide* (London, 1786), p. 164.
14. Peter Borsay, 'The Rise, Fall, and Rise of Polite Urban Space, 1700–2000'. Presented at the University of York's Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies' Lecture Series, *Eighteenth-Century York: Culture, Space, Society*, 18th October 2001.