

# 18th Century

## Building of the Crescent

*Notice: Tuesday last the foundation stone was laid of the first house of the intended new building above the Circus, called the Crescent* **Bath Chronicle 21 May 1767.**

John Wood the Younger's acknowledged masterpiece is an example of eighteenth century speculative building. The two Woods, father and son, constructed houses purpose built for accommodating families who came to Bath for the 'season'. Local investors, such as Dr. William Oliver, physician to Bath's Royal Mineral Water Hospital, let out their properties without actually living there themselves.

There was, however, a darker side to Bath's architectural history. John Wood the Elder's first patron was the Duke of Chandos, a man heavily involved in the Royal Africa Company which transported enslaved Africans to the Caribbean. The Woods' developments were partly funded by several other investors who had made money through the slave trade.

## Living in the Crescent

*'the exquisite Crescent which to all the excellence of architecture that adorns the Circus, adds all the delights of nature that beautify the parades'* **Fanny Burney, 1780.**

Bath's 18th century development in response to its growing popularity as a spa and society destination was one of the most important and influential pieces of eighteenth century design and town planning in Europe. It exemplified the main themes of the 18th century neoclassical city; the monumentalisation of ordinary houses, the integration of landscape and town, and the interlinking of urban spaces, to create an appropriate picturesque setting and facilities for the cure takers and social visitors.

The Royal Crescent in particular provided its residents with a view reminiscent of a country estate while having all the amenities of the town on its doorstep. 18th century images emphasise this landscape setting, including the ha-ha and the grazing of livestock.

It soon became the most fashionable address in Bath. The Duke and Duchess of York stayed in the Crescent during their visits to the City. Other famous 18th century residents included society hostess Elizabeth Montagu. She held her bluestocking 'salons' at No.16, the beautiful Elizabeth Linley who famously eloped from No.11 with author Richard Sheridan and Alicia MacCartney, a social climber and notorious manipulator who was particularly disliked by No.1 Royal Crescent's first resident Henry Sandford.

It also provided a fashionable place to walk instead of the Parades of the increasingly crowded Lower Town. Jane Austen frequently walked in the Crescent after the service at Bath Abbey.

*'As soon as divine service was over..... they hastened away to the Crescent, to breath the fresh air of better company.'* **Northanger Abbey by Jane Austen, 1817.**



**Completion of the Royal Crescent, Bath** Thomas Malton the Younger, 1769  
Watercolour

This clearly depicts spectators looking on as masons continue their work in front of the sweep of the already complete, but not yet occupied building.

*Courtesy of The Victoria Art Gallery, Bath & North East Somerset Council*

# 19th Century

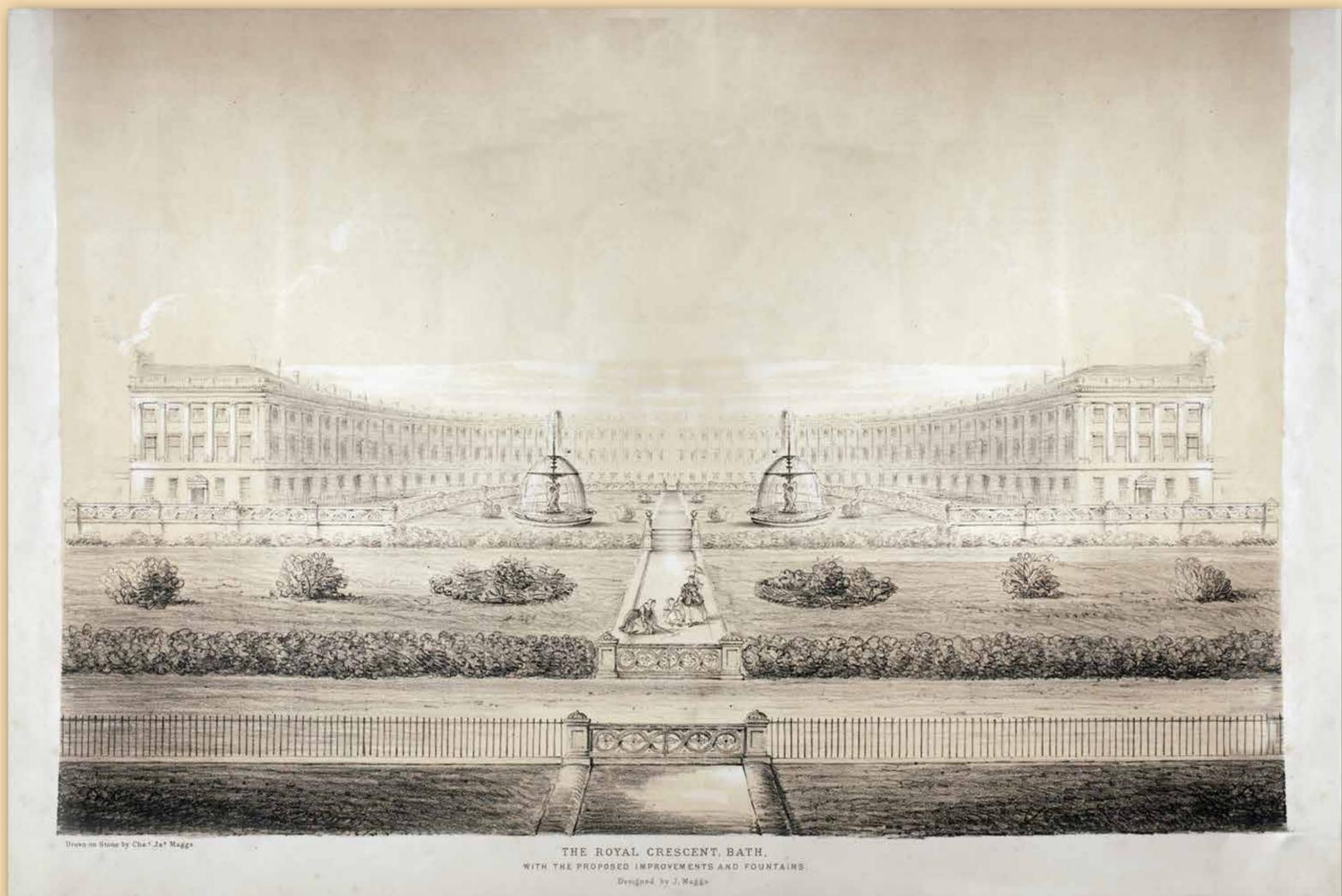
*'The place looks to me like a cemetery, which the dead have succeeded in rising and taking'* **Charles Dickens in a letter about Bath, 1869.**

The Crescent remained a focus for wealthy residents into the early 19th century despite the decline of the City as a fashionable Spa and the expansion of industry within the city.

Images of this time show many changes including the development of Royal Victoria Park in 1830 which considerably changed the view from the Crescent, windows being lengthened and new gas lighting.

There also would have been many servants living in the Crescent. Views show nurse maids taking the children onto the Crescent lawn to meet other nursemaids.

As well as the famous residents like electoral reformer Francis Burdett and jurist and explorer Thomas Falconer there were famous fictional ones like Mr Pickwick and his friends from **Charles Dickens' Pickwick Papers (1837)** who were fortunate when *'a favourable opportunity offered for their securing, on moderate terms, the upper portion of a house in the Royal Crescent.'*



**The Royal Crescent, Bath with the proposed improvements and fountains c.1850**  
Designed and drawn on stone by J. Maggs. Tinted lithograph.

*Courtesy of Bath in Time*

# 20th Century

*'The sky was bright red with the mass of fires all over Bath. I was distressed because my favourite doll had been left in the cupboard in the bedroom.'* **Seven year old resident of No.18, Royal Crescent during the Bath Blitz.**

Bath and the Crescent felt the impact of war, as did the rest of the country. In 1918 hundreds of Bathonians gathered together on the Crescent Lawn to celebrate the end of the First World War, drawn to the City's most memorable open space.

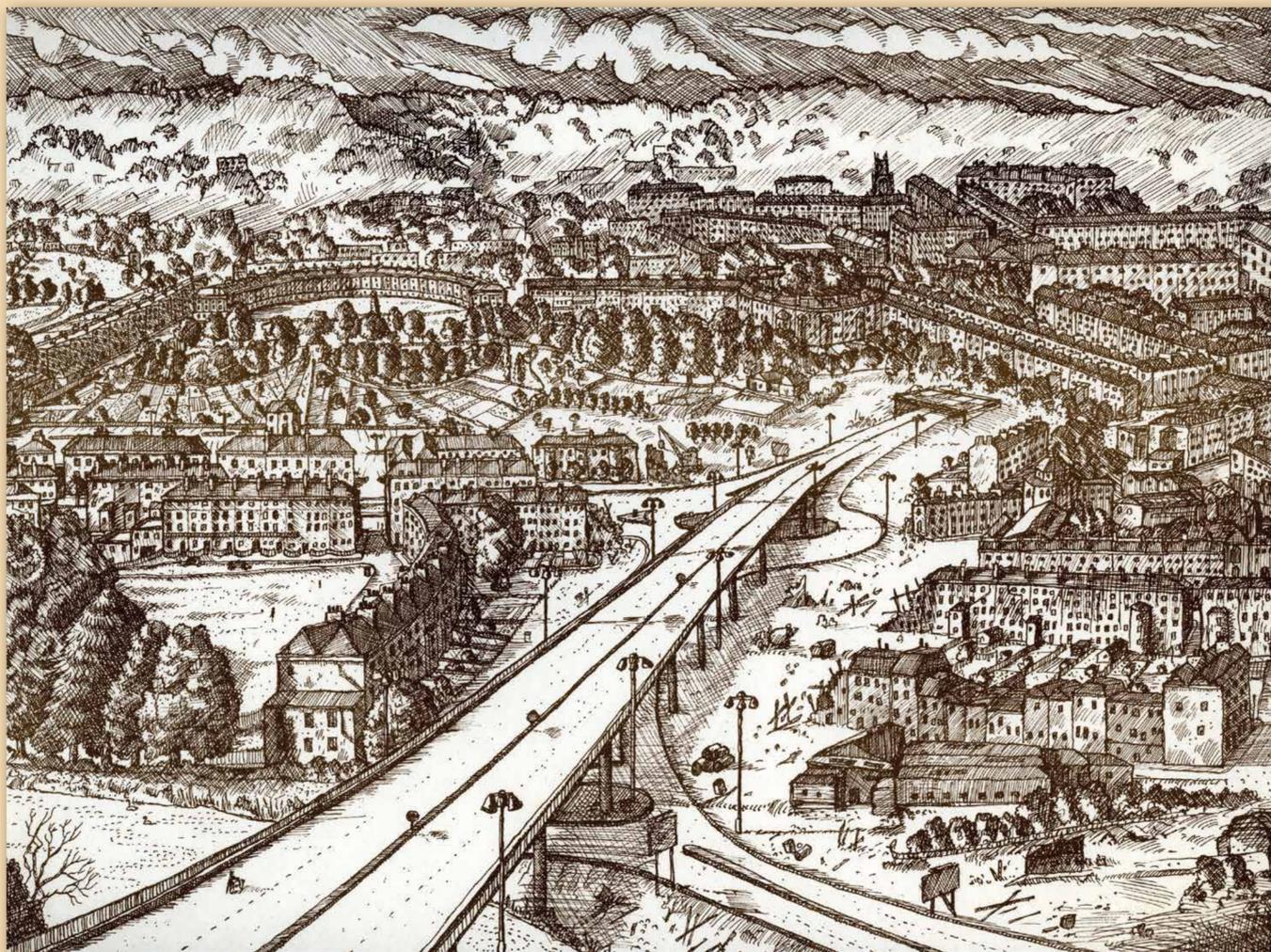
In 1942 during World War II Bomber Command attacked the German ports of Lubeck, and Rostock, both historic cities with many beautiful buildings. In retaliation the Germans bombed a number of historic English towns, including Bath.

In one week-end on the 25 and 26 April 1942 German aircraft bombed Bath in three raids, devastating the city and killing over 400 people. During the Sunday attack Nos 2 and 17 Royal Crescent were gutted by incendiaries. The City had not been considered high risk so was unprotected by anti-aircraft fire.

The damaged houses in the Royal Crescent were later sympathetically restored by the architect Hugh Roberts of Brock Street, but for many years a number of the houses showed the signs of the ravages of war.

There were post war threats too; the Abercrombie Plan (1945) proposed using the Crescent as a centre for local government, thankfully never realised, and the notorious period known as the 'Sack of Bath' in the 1970's saw the destruction of many of Bath's Georgian buildings before campaigners such as Sir John Betjamen, Lord Snowdon and Adam Fergusson, as well as Bath Preservation Trust, turned the tide.

The Crescent was also a popular setting for films and events. Film productions including the **The Elusive Pimpernel (1950)**, filmed at No 2 the Crescent, the black comedy **The Wrong Box (1965)** and an adaptation of **Henry Fielding's Joseph Andrews (1977)** starring Peter Firth. It provided a spectacular backdrop for concerts, including The Three Tenors, Luciano Pavarotti, Jose Carreras and Placido Domingo in 2003. The opening night of the Bath Festival was particularly magical with residents lighting a candle in every window.



## **The exit to the Buchanan Tunnel by Ben Blathwayt. c.1966**

The artist by visualising the proposed plan skilfully drew everyone's attention to the worryingly vague methods for dispersing the traffic routed under Gay Street and exiting where the Charlotte Street car park resides. New King Street and St. Anne's Place would have been obliterated.

*Courtesy of Bath in Time*

# 21st Century

On 22 May 2012 the Olympic Torch was carried proudly along the Crescent as part of its celebratory tour of Britain. More recent films and TV productions include **The Duchess (2008)**, starring Keira Knightley and **Jane Austen's Persuasion (2007)** for ITV.

Today the Royal Crescent and its lawn is still a favourite venue for walkers and local residents, just as it was in the 18th century. Families, dog walkers, people picnicking and, increasingly, young people gather to chat and relax on the grass. Visitors from around the world continue to enjoy, admire and respond to the beauty of the architecture and its setting.

For 250 years the Royal Crescent has been a source of aesthetic inspiration to artists, including to the contemporary artists featured here all representing it in their unique styles.



**Royal Crescent Bathed in the Spring Sun**, Adebhanji Alade, oil on canvas, 2014

'Just standing in front of this amazing piece of architecture was simply mind blowing. I couldn't wait to sketch it and paint it afterwards, it's such an incredible structure!'