

Genteel Promenading, Fountains and Fireworks: the Development of Torquay's Parks in the Nineteenth Century

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English seaside resorts originated during the Georgian period when members of fashionable society, in search of a cure, began visiting coastal villages with mineral springs as an alternative to inland spa towns such as Bath.¹ Their popularity was further enhanced when the curative powers of the sea were first reported in 1748, after Dr Richard Frewin had encouraged his patients to drink and bathe in seawater.² Early seaside resorts, such as Brighton, followed the practices of the inland spas by providing similar leisure facilities as, for a resort to prosper, it had to attract the highest class of visitors.³ By the late eighteenth century the more prosperous merchants and

manufacturers began to visit the coast and it was from this time that fishing villages without mineral springs, such as Torquay, began to attract visitors in search of the therapeutic potential of its natural setting and climate.⁴ A description of Torquay in 1803 asserts that 'The invalid ... may rest assured of finding the lodgings & accommodations good, for a place yet in an infant state', and that 'its environs are rarely to be surpassed [for] the lover of simple nature, who can dispense with crowded assemblies, gaming tables, and ... luxurious refinements'.⁵

One Georgian leisure activity was the act of promenading - going for a leisurely, sociable walk - this was a social ritual initiated by Charles II who, by opening up the Mall in the royal park of St. James's in order to socialise with members of 'polite society', made it fashionable to stroll along shady walks surrounded by beautiful scenery.⁶ During the eighteenth century town walks proliferated, often as specifically termed Parades or Promenades,⁷ although many early seaside health resorts lacked either a promenade or the alternative of a harbour pier.⁸ In Torquay, prior to 1840 when a new road (now Torbay Road) was cut under the cliff of Waldon Hill in order to reach Torre Abbey meadows from the harbour, a narrow pathway high up on the hillside (now known as Rock Walk) had previously served this purpose. This pathway was described in 1854 as 'formerly a favourite walk, being remarkably sheltered, and affording beautiful peeps of the scenery from among the shrubs'.⁹

Most of Torquay's land was owned by two families, the Carys of Torre Abbey and the Palks, later the Lords Haldon.¹⁰ Development was tightly controlled with both families promoting high-class building on leased plots of land, thereby retaining both influence and ownership.¹¹ It was Sir Lawrence Palk who was responsible for providing the first pleasure ground for public use in Torquay. The 'Public Gardens' in Torwood Street, now known as Torwood Gardens, retain a similar, if slightly reduced form; and, importantly for early seaside health resorts, provided a well-sheltered meeting and promenading ground away from the breezy sea front.¹² The Reverend Swete had previously described the Torwood valley as 'a charming, rich vale [which] wended down the bottom towards the sea, on one side secured from its blasts by the rocky hill'.¹³ The Public Gardens are first mentioned by William White in 1850 and are described as 'comprising about 4 acres of land, lately appropriated by the lord of the manor to [sic] the use of the public, and are tastefully planted and laid out with gravel walks, forming a sheltered promenade'.¹⁴ An 1854 handbook entry describes the gardens as '[occupying] what was once a marshy bottom ... and [is] a favourite summer-even walk of the inhabitants'.¹⁵ However, in the 1850's the term 'Public Gardens' did not necessarily indicate free entry to the public, as many of the earliest urban parks were intended as adjuncts to middle-class housing schemes in order to increase the value of the surrounding houses: an idea that was initiated earlier in the century by John Nash in his plan for Regent's Park.¹⁶ Torquay's



Torquay Public Gardens, 1865
(image available on the internet by kind permission of Terry Leaman)

Public Gardens were leased by Sir Lawrence Palk 'to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood', with annual subscriptions being paid to him through a private committee and used for their upkeep.¹⁷ The Public Gardens were therefore an amenity available

only to the surrounding villas and, as many of these villas were not owner-occupied but built to let for the season,¹⁸ it also gave visiting invalids the opportunity to socialise and take exercise in a well-sheltered environment. The benefit of parks and gardens to general health was officially recognised in 1848 when the Public Health Act permitted their purchase,¹⁹ and by 1853 Torquay's Local Board had taken possession of the Public Gardens for the free benefit of all.²⁰

As Torquay developed, its dependency upon invalids gradually diminished. The arrival of the railway, coinciding with a greater general affluence and more leisure time, encouraged more visitors; and, although development was constrained by the dominant landowners and by the lack of flat land, 'acceptable' leisure facilities gradually increased. In 1867 work commenced on the construction of the outer harbour wall (now known as Haldon pier).²¹ This also served as a promenade pier, allowing those who could afford it to promenade along it at the cost of 1d, 2d for a perambulator and 3d for a bath or sedan chair, whilst on Sundays it was free to all.²² In 1877, after protracted negotiations, the land either side of the Fleet River, where it entered the harbour, was purchased by the Local Board.²³ It was here that Torquay's first seafront garden, Cary Green, was developed. Originally a triangular-shaped green complete with a patriotic display of a Sebastopol gun and a flagpole,²⁴ remnants still exist in a much-altered form, north of the Princess Pavilion.

In October 1887 the Local Board proposed the construction of a new promenade pier from the Torbay Road, together with a new quay wall designed to run between the proposed new pier and the harbour: this would allow the reclamation of three acres of land on which to construct a new garden.²⁵ Agreement was finally reached in July 1889 and plans were approved.²⁶ Royal patronage was secured when Princess Louise, Queen Victoria's daughter, laid the foundation stone for the gardens on May 6th 1890, naming them Princess Gardens in her honour.²⁷ Construction began on the 1,640 feet long quay wall;²⁸ and 'debris', at £3 per load,²⁹ was delivered by barge and off-loaded by a 60 foot steam crane³⁰ to which the barges could 'be warped...at all states of the tide...[to] facilitate and cheapen the work of filling up the space at the back of the quay wall'.³¹ It took 173,000 tons of debris to fill the space³² and the soil for the garden was donated by Mr Carey.³³



Magic lantern slide: newly created Princess Gardens, with Cary Green in the foreground
(by kind permission of Dr. Eric Foxley)

As with many municipal gardens at this time, Princess Garden's typical Victorian garden layout was designed by the borough engineer and surveyor,³⁴ Major Garrett,³⁵ and consisted of sinuous paths, ornamental cast iron furniture, formal bedding and an impressive fountain. The gardens were formally opened at noon on 1st June, 1894.³⁶ Opening hours from Monday to Saturday were 8am until 8pm and entrance charges were 1d, and 2d for bath chairs and perambulators. Their popularity among the better-off residents and visitors is evident from the fact that books of tickets could be purchased ranging from twelve tickets for 10d, to a family of four for a year for £1.³⁷ On Sundays the Gardens would have had a completely different clientele as entrance was free, although they were only open between 2pm and 6pm, presumably to encourage church attendance in the morning. The employment of two police constables on Sunday afternoons would have made sure that behaviour was kept in order,³⁸ and miscreants, such as boys throwing stones, were punished by



Cary Green and Parade (image available on the internet by kind permission of Terry Leaman)

having to appear in front of the committee.³⁹ The gardens were enclosed by a low limestone wall and painted metal railings on the roadside⁴⁰ and a Euonymous hedge and railings on the quay-side.⁴¹ The selection of the design for three cast iron shelters seemed to assume some importance with the final, most expensive, choice costing £265 each, minus woodwork, roof tiles, glazing and erection.⁴² A quantity of cast iron urns were purchased at £3/1/- each, into which were planted cypresses,⁴³ and ten ornamental lamps costing £91 each were also purchased.⁴⁴ The impressive painted cast iron fountain, which acted as the focal point of the garden, can still be seen today. This was a gift from Mr H. Youngs, the owner of the Torbay Hotel which overlooked the Gardens, on condition that the local authority supplied a suitable basin.⁴⁵ The three-tier design chosen by Mr Youngs cost £175⁴⁶ and the cast iron basin rim £47.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly this feature would have enhanced the popularity and prestige of both the hotel and of Torquay, providing guests and other visitors with a memorable feature that would help fulfil the wish articulated by the local authority when they placed a plaque at the eastern end of the Gardens with the motto: 'Prosperity To Our Borough'.⁴⁸ Shortly after opening, swimming matches that took place during the annual regatta were transferred to the Gardens and entrance charges were doubled for the day. During the evening the Gardens were illuminated with five thousand coloured lamps and a firework display.⁴⁹ Expenditure for the two days of the regatta amounted to £40/15/2d, with takings at more than double at £94/18/5d.⁵⁰



Magic lantern slide: Princess Gardens illuminated by coloured lanterns (by kind permission of Dr. Eric Foxley)

During the construction of the Gardens Mr Carey gave to the town the freehold to the steep slopes of Waldon Hill, which is situated adjacent to the Gardens and below the former Rock Walk.

A series of picturesque terraced walkways were cut into the rock face and were embellished with recessed benches, rustic wooden bridges and subtropical planting. Named Royal Terrace Gardens, they became more commonly known as Rock Walk. Using plants donated by horticulturalist Dr Hamilton Ramsay of Duncan House, they were opened on 21st August, 1893, and featured a small ornamental fountain set in a grotto, a gift from C.H. Butland, the son of a local councillor.⁵¹ They were

probably free to use, as no evidence exists to suggest otherwise. At present stabilisation problems with the 1893 plantings on Waldon Cliff has meant that Torbay Council have embarked on a major project to consolidate and totally redesign the area.⁵²



Fountain in Princess Garden with the Rock Walk in the background. (image available on the internet by kind permission of English Heritage)

By 1899 tennis courts and a bowling green had been constructed at the eastern end of Princess Gardens and, in turn, these were replaced by the Torquay Pavilion in 1912.⁵³ Further developments ensued and a war memorial designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield was constructed in the Gardens in 1920, and the Princess Theatre was built at the western end of the Gardens in the late 1950s. This was followed by an extension



to the Garden's promenade, which was built out over the water and included a two-tier semi-circular projecting bastion complete with a circular sunken garden, fountain and flowerbeds. Whilst some areas of the Victorian gardens have been lost to this development, the path pattern and layout of the remaining Grade II listed Gardens remain substantially unchanged.⁵⁴

Rustic bridges in the Rock Walk (image available on the internet by kind permission of English Heritage)

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