

CHAPTER 20

Park Crescent

The Park Crescent of today is a post-war replica. A combination of poor original building methods, wartime damage and heavy-handed reconstruction policies has left little or no old fabric from the 'semi-circus' conceived by John Nash and built with much difficulty between about 1812 and 1822. Even that was only half of the full circus Nash had planned. Yet despite those early failures, despite also its present lack of authenticity, Park Crescent remains one of London's most memorable episodes of urban planning (III. 20.1).

The one substantial survival of historic fabric, a large ice-well believed to predate the Park Crescent development, is at the back of the crescent, in Park Crescent Mews West.

The Planning of Regent's Circus

Three colonnaded circuses featured in John Nash's immortal scheme to link Whitehall and Westminster with Marylebone Park by way of what became Regent Street, as first published in 1811. All

DRAFT

The ground in question consisted of Dupper or Harley Field, the southernmost portion of the Crown's Marylebone or Marybone Park Farm and its only portion south of the New Road, and part of Saltpetre Field to its north, some of which had been dug for gravel. Dupper Field was ripe for development. By 1790 it had become bottled in on all but the New Road side by building on the Portland estate; to its south, Harley Street near its south

there had been talk of building this church on the anticipated Crown developments, and a Vestry committee had chosen a site in Dupper Field next to the New Road and on axis with Portland Place as their preference. Nash evidently deprecated that choice, which raised questions as to how the church would relate to Portland Place, the New Road, the houses round the circus and the green space envisaged at its centre, and whether it would be regarded as infringing the Foley House clause. In his second plan of 1812 Nash proposed isolating the church in the centre of the garden and diverting the New Road round the circumference. But he was soon able to derail the whole scheme through cunning and obstructiveness, to the Vestry's dudgeon.³ He was left with the geometrical task of realigning the New Road so that it crossed the circus symmetrically rather than at a slight slant. That took place in due course at Crown expense.

Charles Mayor and his failure, 1812–17

By the end of 1811 the hunt was on for a single builder brave and resourceful enough to take on both the whole of the circus, where Nash envisaged large first-rate houses, and the extension of Harley Street, for which he proposed brick-faced houses on narrower frontages. By March 1812 he had hooked his fish. 'Mr Mayor is willing to adopt the elevation I proposed to him which is to encircle the whole with a collonade of coupled columns surrounded [sic] by a ballustrade', he told his masters at the Woods and Forests. 'I consider this Step with Mayor as most important and I sincerely hope there will be no hitch from the Duke of Portland'.⁴

Charles Mayor had started out as a jobbing carpenter and undertaker. In 1800 he successfully took over the north side of Brunswick Square from James Burton and built other houses near by, including the Pavilion

(perhaps for want of a grander tenant). His subsequent ventures before he embarked on the circus were bitty. Several were in Marylebone, where he built some houses in Gloucester Place, lived at different dates in Welbeck Street and Spanish Place, and had a yard in Somerset Street. When he took on the circus, he had just sold a house in Upper Brook Street, Mayfair, to the economist David Ricardo. More to the point, he and Nash had been collaborating over a house in Foley Gardens south of Portland Place, from which Mayor emerged with the freehold interest. Though Mayor owned a library including such technical books as Rees's *Cyclopaedia*, he was not a man of much sophistication. According to one of his workmen 'he professed to be a Surveyor but I considered him to be a Carpenter'.⁵ He may have been recommended to Nash by Burton or S. P. Cockerell, under whom he had probably worked in Brunswick Square and Upper Brook Street.

By May 1812 Nash and Mayor had worked out a detailed plan and schedule. Together they increased the diameter of the circus to 724ft, giving some houses frontages of up to 100ft (each up to five windows wide) but in consequence making them shallower and cramping the mews spaces behind. The timetable stipulated the first roofings-in and issuing of leases at the southern end to be by August 1814 and the final ones in the northern sector by August 1816. Nash projected Mayor's overall outlay at about £300,000 and urged the Crown authorities to buy the improved ground rents so as to guarantee his liquidity. Mayor got the final go-ahead in July. Soon afterwards Nash was arranging to show his whole plan to the Prince Regent, telling Alexander Milne of the Woods and Forests: 'It will be very impolitic not to pursue this course if we wish HRH to take up the measure con amore and ungracious since HRH has signified his wishes not to gratify him, and particularly so as other public works with which he is not connected are eager to dignify them with HRH[']s name'.⁶

Mayor got going fast enough to ask for his first leases between December 1812 and August 1813. These concerned the southernmost houses

of his involvement has come to light.¹¹ In 1817 the Great Portland Street builder William Richardson, apprised that Mayor's assignees were not going to complete the development themselves, sought terms for both the Harley Street continuation and for finishing the western half of the crescent, where foundations were already partly laid.¹² A bigger, City-based contractor, Henry Peto, then bought the three carcasses on the east side of Portland Place (Nos 92–96), completing them 'in the first style of elegance', and went on to take most of the eastern quadrant, excepting the tip, assigned to Samuel Baxter, and the corner house No. 15. Peto bought the ground rent for this last from a mortgagee, but the house itself was evidently completed by Mayor's assignees, who decided to sell it in 1820. As described in 1823, it was fitted up with stone staircases, 'costly marble chimneypieces', and scagliola pillars in the 42ft-long dining room.¹³ In the early stages Peto was hampered by the collapse of a party wall between two of the Portland Place houses during a storm in March 1818. There had been a bad fire in one of these in 1814, on which Nash blamed the fall. Peto was adamant that the houses had been built with bricks 'mostly of the very worst description and totally unfit for use', and laxly supervised – accusations that have haunted the Nash developments and Park Crescent in particular ever since – and commissioned an independent report to prove it. 'I must beg to be allowed to treat the insinuations of my inattention and that of my clerks with contempt', riposted Nash, adding that Peto ought to have noted the state of the houses when he bought them.¹⁴

On both sides of the crescent, finishing off Mayor's carcasses generally preceded the building of the other houses. The western crescent went up mainly in 1819–20; at the same time Richardson undertook the east side of Upper Harley Street, essentially following the original Nash in 1823, it2 (in 18.2 (he s) 320.09

DRAFT

houses themselves, they were not the monster 100ft mansions Nash had first dreamt of, just (the large corner houses apart) good first-raters with fronts typically of 32ft, backs several feet wider and ample stone staircases. The easternmost of Baxter's houses, Nos 1–3, had fronts of only 22–24ft,

illustrate recent advances. With its lectures and demonstrations, aimed particularly at general practitioners, his museum enjoyed 'a great vogue for a time', before transfer to the Medical Graduates' College and Polyclinic in Chenies Street in 1898,

At the crescent's eastern tip, Nos 1 and 2 were taken down and rebuilt over girders as part of the works attending the building of the Metropolitan Railway in 1861–2. The railway company bought them back in 1889 to improve the ventilation of Great Portland Street Station by means of a large 'blow-hole' in their gardens, but the upshot

sculptor-carver P. G. Bentham to make accurate models of the distinctive Ionic capitals and quoins.²⁶ That was as far as things then went.

After post-war building controls were relaxed, the Crown Estate Commissioners decided in 1957 on a policy of radical rebuilding or rehabilitation for professional offices, as and when leases fell in. First available were the bombed sites at Nos 18–24, where prefabs had been erected, together with Nos 25–29 adjoining and 77–83 Portland Place. Here the developers Basil and Howard Samuel, with the architects Fitzroy Robinson & Partners, devised a big scheme with offices in the front and flats at the back facing Park Crescent Mews West. At Nos 7–12 in the eastern quadrant the father-and-son developers S. B. and Rex Harbour planned on similar lines, with Raglan Squire & Partners, architects. The first idea was to keep the old fronts and structures wherever possible. But preliminary stripping-down in 1959 showed the surviving structures to be so shaky that (despite public reassurances that they would be preserved) the decision was taken to rebuild the houses in their entirety with replica fronts.²⁷

That was formalized in policy in 1962, when Park Crescent became one of three Regent's Park compositions for which the LCC accepted facsimiles throughout. In 1964–5 a second project by the Samuels (through Ponsarn Investments, a subsidiary of Great Portland Estates), again with Fitzroy Robinson, covered 13–14 Park Crescent and 92–96 Portland Place. All these developments involved cramming in extra floors behind the taller storey-heights of the front blocks: some of the mews-facing buildings rose to seven storeys. At 77–81 and 92–96 Portland Place, not strictly part of the crescent, Fitzroy Robinson on behalf of Ponsarn had, with a preliminary nod from the London County Council's town planners, designed 'contemporary elevations ... to provide a complete break with the Nash buildings'. After the LCC's Historic Buildings Division pointed out that these houses too were listed, albeit not stucco-fronted, the Town Planning Co

of Great Portland Street. The dispositions were worked out by Euston's architects John E. M. MacGregor & Partner of Richmond, but at some point a bigger practice, T. P. Bennett & Partners, took over.

DRAFT

'Few people want to sleep in a room overlooking Park Crescent – it is

Regent's Park, but it appears that in elevation at least the Park Crescent lodge more or less copied what had been there before (III. 20.11).³⁸ Both lodges were again reconstructed in facsimile when Marylebone Road was widened in the 1960s. In 1967 two octagonal stuccoed structures appeared on the north side of the garden, concealing vents for Regent's Park Underground Station. These works were undertaken by the Greater London Council's Historic Buildings

DRAFT

Ice well, Park Crescent Mews West

In 1780 Samuel Dash of 17 Upper Harley Street (now 122 Harley Street) sought permission from the Woods and Forests to construct an underground 'arch' in Dupper Field. His was then the northernmost house on the east side of the street, on the Portland estate, and Dupper Field ran along his northern boundary. Dash's arch is presumed to be the large brick-built ice-well uncovered by ground work at Park Crescent Mews West in 1961 but almost immediately thereafter filled with rubble and built over. Partially excavated in 2014, it became a Scheduled Ancient Monument in 2015 and is due (2016) to be cleared and restored as part of the proposed redevelopment of the west half of Park Crescent by PCW Property Holdings.⁴⁴

From its size (30ft in diameter and 42ft deep), it must have been constructed for large-scale commercial use, though nothing has come to light connecting Dash with ice dealing or one of the trades using ice – such as confectionery, pastry-making and fish-selling. Dash, with a country home in Shepherd's Hill, Sussex and a partnership in a distillery, was related to the Wilkite politician John Sawbridge and his sister the historian Catharine Macaulay.

The first explicit references to an ice well here are in the *Morning Post* in March–April 1826, when the Fleet Street pastry cook, confectioner and caterer William Leftwich advertised ice for sale from his well in Park Crescent Mews, six inches thick and 'of superior quality for cleanliness than that usually sold'.⁴⁵ Leftwich had pioneered the large-scale import of ice in 1822, when after a particularly mild winter he shipped 300 tons of it to London from the Norwegian coast. Although he continued to import from Norway and Greenland in later years, in 1825 he advertised to buy ice from anywhere within 40 miles of London, or further if water transport was available, though giving no indication of the location of his wells at that time.⁴⁶ The mews well was soon superseded. In 1828 he offered 'the best and clearest ice in London'

from the mews, stating that it had been collected from the canal in Regent's Park in early 1827. But he had already built 'an immense ice well' at Regent's Park, and in 1829 announced that he had left the mews for this bigger well. He may however have retained the old well for some time, as he continued to take orders from the 'Harley-street Lodge'. But it was not among his properties listed in his 1841 will, which included two wells, one in what is now Jamestown Road, Camden Town, the other at Cumberland Market. Although rediscovered in 1961, the well had hardly disappeared from view, for it was let on a 7-year lease as recently as 1952, when this part of the mews had long been occupied by commercial garages. Still described as an ice well, it was noted as being under the roadway.⁴⁷