

DUDDDESTON'S 'SHADY WALKS AND ARBOURS'

Elaine Mitchell

The eighteenth-century pleasure garden was one of the new urban entertainments available in English towns following the Restoration. Where London led, the provinces followed and Birmingham's Vauxhall Gardens provided a leisure experience on the edge of the rapidly-expanding town.

Pleasure gardens were public spaces but also commercial ventures, charging admission and making a profit on food, drink and *al fresco* entertainments offered within a landscape setting. Part of the new urban infrastructure, some were simple tea gardens whilst others, like London's famous Vauxhall, were more sophisticated – places to see and be seen; to promenade tree-lined walks, dine in supper boxes set amongst the shrubberies; dance amidst the candlelight.

From Manor House to Pleasure Garden

Birmingham developed several pleasure gardens during the eighteenth century and, like most ventures dependent on entrepreneurial skill, some lasted longer than others. Vauxhall Gardens was established during the 1740s on the site of the Holte family's former seat at Duddeston Hall and provided entertainment to visitors for more than a century.

A mature site well-positioned in relation to the town, Duddeston offered a rural location without the need to travel too far. Indeed, polite visitors to Birmingham like Mrs Mary Delany walked to Vauxhall which, in 1749, she found 'very neat and pretty, with a handsome bowling green and seats in several parts of the garden; in one of them we drank tea, ate bread and butter, and Rhenish and sugar.' It has also been suggested that the River Rea carried parties to the Gardens, although this may not have been a transport of delight as most rivers carried a 'rich stew' of trade and domestic waste.

Whilst the river may not have contributed to Vauxhall's sylvan air, the site benefitted from the surrounding landscape of small fields that would have been glimpsed through plantings of elm and horse-chestnut, the elm providing shaded walks and the horse-chestnut ornamental qualities. In 1755 another London visitor, Resta Patching, enjoyed those 'several shady walks and arbours' as well as Vauxhall's 'statues, and a neat orchestra'.

Music, Bowls and Cockfighting

The orchestra was a focal point where musical performances, an



The Gardens captured on the eve of closure. *Vauxhall Gardens, Saltley*, by J. Pedley, 1850.

enduring feature of Vauxhall's entertainments, were staged during summer months. By the late eighteenth century though, as the public mood darkened against the background of the French Revolution and bread riots, polite concerts were overtaken by programmes of patriotic martial music and firework displays.

Like many business ventures, the Gardens catered for a different audience at different times and all was not a gentle game of bowls or a stroll along those shady walks. Vauxhall was also home to cockfighting, an acceptable pursuit for Georgian men.

Vauxhall Gardens closed in 1850, and obliterated by residential streets. But whilst the pleasure gardens of the manufacturing towns have largely disappeared, the echoes of Birmingham's remain in Vauxhall Road, Vauxhall Grove and Vauxhall Business Park. What once were 'shady walks and arbours' are now covered by buildings and roads. ●

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Further Reading

David Coke & Alan Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens, A History* (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2011). Website at www.vauxhallgardens.com.

Penelope Corfield, *Vauxhall and the Invention of Urban Pleasure Gardens* (History & Social Action Publications, 2008)

Sarah-Jane Downing, *The English Pleasure Garden: 1660-1860* (Shire Library, 2009)