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REINSTATING JOHN NASH'S PICTURESQUE VISION AT REGENT'S PARK, LONDON

Regent's Park is among the most inventive and delightfully picturesque planned urban developments in London. Hailed during the course of its creation in the early nineteenth century as the 'boast and pride of the metropolis', the park and its environs remain among the city's most desirable residential quarters: John Nash's bold and original master plan is just as relevant today as it was when it was first laid out. Over the park's history, however, the increasing fragmentation of its management has always risked having a detrimental effect on its fabric, and threatened to diminish the importance of the historic estate by accentuating its parts rather than reinforcing the composition as a whole. This paper sets out how the Crown Estate Paving Commission (CEPC – statutory custodian of park's roads, footways and gardens), The Royal Parks, The Crown Estate and other stakeholders are planning to reverse some of this fragmentation, and to reinvigorate Nash's original picturesque vision.

Regent's Park in London is a highly unusual place: a planned urban enclave in which buildings and landscape were conceived as interdependent elements in a single entity, with neither taking precedence. The buildings were designed to benefit from their landscape setting, while the park was designed to benefit from the palace-like buildings around it. It is, as Sir John Summerson called it, 'a total work of architectural and landscape art'.¹ In approaching urban space in this way, John Nash was dramatically innovative; in his vision of how the park would be experienced by visitors and residents, he was extraordinarily subtle and inventive.

The park was created as a direct result of the Crown Estate's grand strategy for the redevelopment of the fields and pastures of its five hundred-acre London estate on what was formerly known as Marylebone Park (Figure 1). It is, however, much more than a mere park: it was conceived as the crowning glory of a vast and ambitious urban development scheme that saw the formation of Trafalgar Square, Waterloo Place, Portland Place and Regent's Street – the latter a *via triumphalis*, leading from Charing Cross northwards, and culminating in a new summer palace (which was never built) for the Prince Regent located in the heart of the park.

The idea to redevelop the Crown land had its origins in the mid-1780s, and was galvanized by the necessity to maximize revenue at a time of royal extravagance and unprecedented wartime expenditure. The officials behind this initiative were the Scottish civil servants John Fordyce and Sylvester Douglas, Lord Glenbervie, and it was their aim to adopt the most advantageous and eligible method of redeveloping the park into what was described in *The Universal Magazine* in May 1813 as a 'handsome, elegant and commodious addition to the Metropolis of the Empire'. 'Open Space, free air and the scenery of Nature' would be, as the historian Ann Saunders puts it, fundamental to the



Figure 1. Scaled 'Plan of the Regent's Park Division'; from Charles Mayhew, *Plans of all the Ground, Houses and other Buildings within the Jurisdiction of the Commissioners for Paving the Regent's Park, Regent's Street, Whitehall, &c. from an actual survey made in the years 1834 and 1835* (1834–35). Regent's Park was initially conceived along the lines of a colossal London square where the central area was circumscribed by a public right of way and enclosed by railings. Access to the 'open part of the Park' was restricted to rate-paying key-holders, and controlled by a series of gates. The park was only wholly open to the public in the early 1840s. Courtesy: Crown Estate Paving Commission (CEPC)

development as 'allurements or motives for the wealthy part of the Public to establish themselves there'.²

The architect, developer and master scenographer John Nash ultimately masterminded this transformation, and his highly personalized and idiosyncratic picturesque vision has left its mark on London's West End. Nash had a remarkable ability to compose and group buildings for their scenic effect, and to conceive and carry out large urban planning enterprises. Few English architects have displayed greater imagination and panache in the playful integration of landscape and architecture, while at the same time satisfying a desire for comfort, individual expression and conformity to the *genius loci*.

Nash's schemes followed closely the aims of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, and embraced, in the words of the topographer James Elmes writing in 1828: 'those beauties of landscape gardening, which his friend, the late Humphrey [*sic*] Repton, so successfully introduced'.³ The architect also exploited the potential of what Sir John Soane referred to as the 'Principles of modern Decorative Landscape Gardening' to improve civic architecture and planning.⁴ The practical usefulness of the theory of the picturesque lay, for Nash, partly in his concern with a particular problem posed by the planning of Regent's Park: the problem of how to assimilate domesticity and individual idiosyncrasy within a framework of public magnificence. The role of palatial buildings as private dwellings, Nash assumed, would necessarily determine, to some extent, the options and strategies of design available to the planner. In emphasizing and exploring the

relationship between public and private, Nash developed a series of simple principles that can be seen as establishing a specific concept of the 'metropolitan picturesque' (Figure 2).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARK

The provision of roads and public footpaths was central to the park's layout and success. The most important of these was the Ring or Outer Drive, now known as the Outer Circle. Staked out and planted to Nash's plans between 1811 and 1812, the two-mile-long 'fine broad gravel road' was among the park's first features.⁵ It was the mediating physical link between the central open space and the encompassing terraces and their ornamental gardens. The author of *A Picturesque Guide to the Regent's Park* (1829) draws attention to the role of the drive and picks out particular designed views to be enjoyed from it: 'through the whole place there is a winding road which commands at every turn some fresh features of an extensive country prospect'.⁶ The road was closed at ten in the evening, except to residents, but during the day it formed a public promenade. In Reptonian terms it led the viewer, whether in a carriage, on horseback or on foot, through an unfolding sequence of designed landscape scenes or pictures. As nineteenth-century imagery makes clear, the pedestrians and traffic on the circuit drive were both consumers of and also constituents in the picturesque scenery. For instance, an anonymous engraving of Cumberland Terrace of 1837 illustrates what William Gilpin referred to as the picturesque quality of disorder as accentuated by contrasting order:



Figure 2. One of two prints after sketches by Miss Rogers from c.1835 that supplies early panoramic views over Regent's Park. The Outer Circle – visible in the middle ground – was laid out between 1811 and 1812 and was in John Nash's view fundamental to establishing unity between landscape and architecture. Courtesy: Private Collection, London

the disarray in the Outer Circle caused by a carriage accident contrasts sharply with the detached grandeur of the palatial building in the background, which is insulated from the road by railings and dense hedges.

The Outer Circle formed the basis for what Terrence Templeton described in 1836 as the ‘circular tour of observation’ of the park.⁷ The road was flanked on either side by a broad footway lit with gas lamps, and planted with trees placed singly or in clumps or groups, which complemented and distinguished the palatial terraces and framed views to and from the interior of the park. As Nash remarked in 1832, his aim was to create ‘so many distinct pictures’ so that perambulators ‘will see a succession of views distinct from each other’.⁸

The road layout was designed to satisfy the residents’ wish for privacy and the public’s desire for public amenity: resident leaseholders enjoyed the benefits of enclosed private communal gardens and magnificent aerial views from the upper windows of their houses; the visiting public were, on the other hand, restricted to street-level views from the public rights of way, but these were nevertheless carefully designed so that a walk or drive took the visitor through a series of framed views or living pictures. Joseph Farington remarked as early as 1814 that the ‘public walks’ attracted on fine days ‘multitudes of respectably dressed people, men with their wives and families’.⁹

It should be noted that Nash originally conceived of the park as having the same access arrangements established for London squares during the preceding century. As one observer noted in 1841, during the campaign to open up the area in front of York Terrace and Hanover Terrace:

that portion was, by understanding or contract with the proprietors of the houses of those terraces, to be made available to the inhabitants only, as if it were in front of houses in a square for the walks of the inmates.¹⁰

Public access was in fact among the most contentious issues surrounding the new park. It was the park’s pre-history as a public open space – the former royal hunting ground of Marylebone Park which by the eighteenth century had become a place of popular resort on the doorstep of the city – that made lack of public access to the new park a continual source of complaint throughout the first half of the nineteenth century; complaints which only ceased once access to the whole had been achieved in the early 1840s. The estate was always regarded as a public amenity.¹¹

Templeton’s recommended public tour of the park was clockwise, commencing at the ‘sort of grand vestibule’ of Park Square and Park Crescent, sweeping westward past ranges of palatial terraces and villas on a gradual gradient towards the northern point of the circular drive (Figures 3 and 4). Here the park was completely shut in by an impenetrable screen of young wood with occasional openings to the south giving views over the park and the metropolis beyond. One then descended gently along the eastern edge of the park, passing the Zoological Gardens and a succession of villas and embowered terraces to wind up at Park Square.¹² Richard Morris’s thirteen-foot-long panorama of 1831 provides a fascinating record of this popular ‘circular tour’, which the topographer James Elmes dubbed in the same year ‘one of the best examples of taste in landscape gardening and picturesque architecture in Europe’.¹³

PLANNED MANAGEMENT OF THE PARK

Given the importance attached to the park’s new roads, and their role in marketing the estate for potential development, it is not surprising that from 1813 the government took steps to ensure their long-term management by establishing the basis for what



Figure 3. Looking north from Portland Place to Regent's Park and Primrose Hill. Park Crescent and Park Square funnelled the countryside into the town and formed a capacious entrance to the park. Courtesy: Private Collection, London



Figure 4. Richard Morris, 'Panoramic View Round The Regent's Park.' (1831) (detail). The highly unusual design of the Outer Circle and its attendant terraces, lighting and planting guaranteed the success of the new park, which by the 1830s was the subject of numerous amiable epistles praising the richness of its sylvan scenery which harmonized most happily with the 'palace-like splendour' of the encompassing terraces. Courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum, No. 1880.1113.4692

was to become known as the Crown Estate Paving Commission (CEPC).¹⁴ Subsequent acts of Parliament have extended their remit, but the CEPC's principal responsibilities have been, and remain to this day, to maintain many of the park's roads, footways and gardens.¹⁵ This little known but important custodian of Nash's 'total work' is a surprising legacy of Regency London – it is, furthermore, apolitical, independent and run by local volunteers, and entirely self-funding, getting no government money or local authority grants. With its long-term core-funding and wide remit, the CEPC has been in a position to establish and maintain consistent, high-quality design.¹⁶ It thus plays a key role in the stewardship of Nash's legacy, and its unobtrusive management

and maintenance has for almost two centuries preserved for London the unique look and feel of the Regent's Park Estate, protecting this key part of the urban heritage for future generations; the organization's work continues to demonstrate that Nash's master plan was both a bold and an original concept, and just as relevant today as it was when it was first laid out.

It is perhaps natural that the importance of the CEPC's role is now somewhat overlooked. It is one of a range of stakeholders involved in managing and caring for the estate. The Royal Parks has responsibility for the parkland, and the lease-holders and the Crown Estate Commissioners are responsible for the houses; other stakeholders, such as the London Borough of Camden, the City of Westminster and English Heritage, also play a significant role in determining how the area works and appears. Sadly, this fragmentation of responsibility risks diminishing the importance of the estate by accentuating its parts rather than reinforcing the composition as a whole, with the consequential, although unintentional, loss of heritage value.

For instance, the importance of the Outer Circle and its historic relationship with the terraces, their ornamental gardens and the broader landscape has been gradually but significantly eroded. Since the late 1940s, trees have been planted along the margins of the Outer Circle and within the park that have compromised or occluded important historic views (cf. Figures 5 and 6). Now many of the terraces that once formed the richly ornamented architectural backdrop to the park are almost invisible from both the road and the interior.

Increased through-traffic has also had a detrimental impact on the park's character. While this can in part be blamed on changes in traffic and traffic management beyond the boundary of the park, it is also the result of an absence of strategic planning, which has allowed the road to become a busy through-route. No less harmful is The Royal Park's unfortunate, if understandable, decision to screen the interior of the park from the road with miles of hawthorn hedging. Nash's picturesque drive no longer functions as it



Figure 5. Cumberland Terrace, like many other palatial terraces, was designed to form a highly picturesque and conspicuous backdrop to Regent's Park. Richard Morris's 'Panoramic View Round The Regent's Park.' (1831) (Figure 4) shows the terrace and its gardens soon after it was completed. Courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum, No. 1880.1113.4692



Figure 6. Cumberland Terrace is now almost invisible from the Outer Circle and the interior of the park, and is therefore disconnected from the landscape it was intended to ornament.

Photo: author, 2013

was intended to: there is no correspondence between the essential and complementary components of his masterpiece of picturesque planning.

THE FUTURE OF REGENT'S PARK

Concerted efforts are now, however, being made to reverse this decline, and to revivify Nash's original composition. After what has been a considerable period of neglect and underinvestment the CEPC, The Crown Estate, The Royal Parks and other stakeholders are poised to collaborate more closely and on a strategic level to improve the park in a measured and comprehensive manner. That the CEPC is able to do so is largely because the rates it levies on leaseholders to maintain the estate have been bolstered by the continued rise in property values, which have in turn precipitated the renewal and refurbishment of the Regent's Park properties and their surrounding streets. The CEPC has, for instance, been working to restore to the park its lost historic features such as gates, railings and street furniture; and has recently collaborated with The Royal Parks in compiling the 'Regent's Park and Primrose Hill, Tree and View Management Strategy' (2013) to guide future planting and tree distribution throughout the Regent's Park Estate.

The CEPC has also begun to assess and improve the private ornamental terrace gardens around the Outer Circle with a view to reinforcing the original and delicate balance of Nash's picturesque vision. For Nash the communal gardens of the surrounding terraces were fundamental to their integration with the central parkland (Figure 7). His insistence on communal gardens, rather than individual plots, was aimed at securing the illusion of a single palatial building, and ensuring a coherent landscape frame in which to view it. Nash's correspondence returns repeatedly to a defence of these communal planted areas: for the architect, it was this communal planting that made a feature of the terraces in views across and from the park (Figure 8).¹⁷

The planting of the periphery of the park, and along the outside of the Outer Circle in particular, was designed with a view to increasing the effect of architectural sublimity of

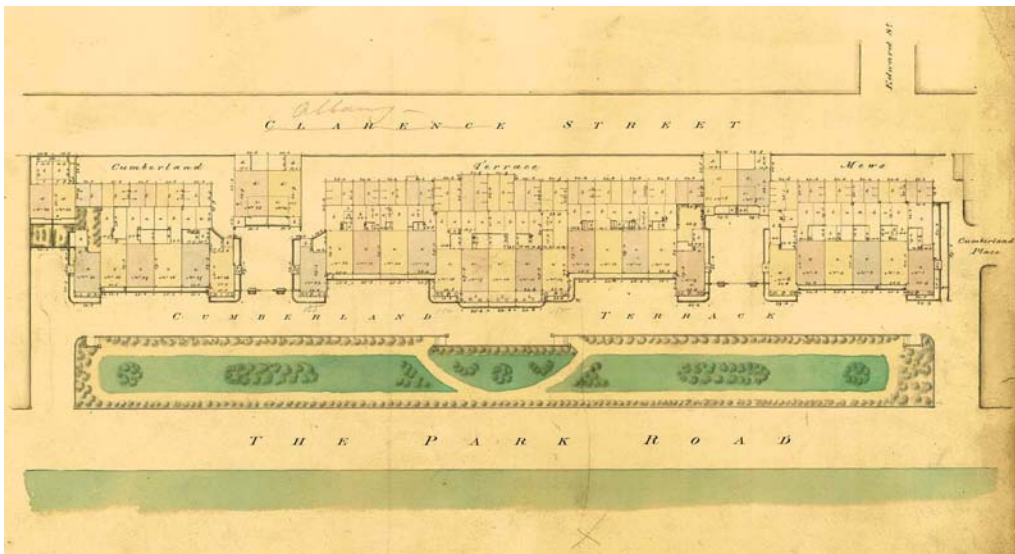


Figure 7. Charles Mayhew's plan of 1834–35 of the communal gardens at Cumberland Terrace shows how the rectangular ground was intended to insulate the houses from the road. Until the advent of the Second World War, the terrace, which was elevated on a low terrace above the park, enjoyed expansive and uninterrupted views over the interior of the park and Primrose Hill to the north-west. Courtesy: Crown Estate Paving Commission (CEPC)

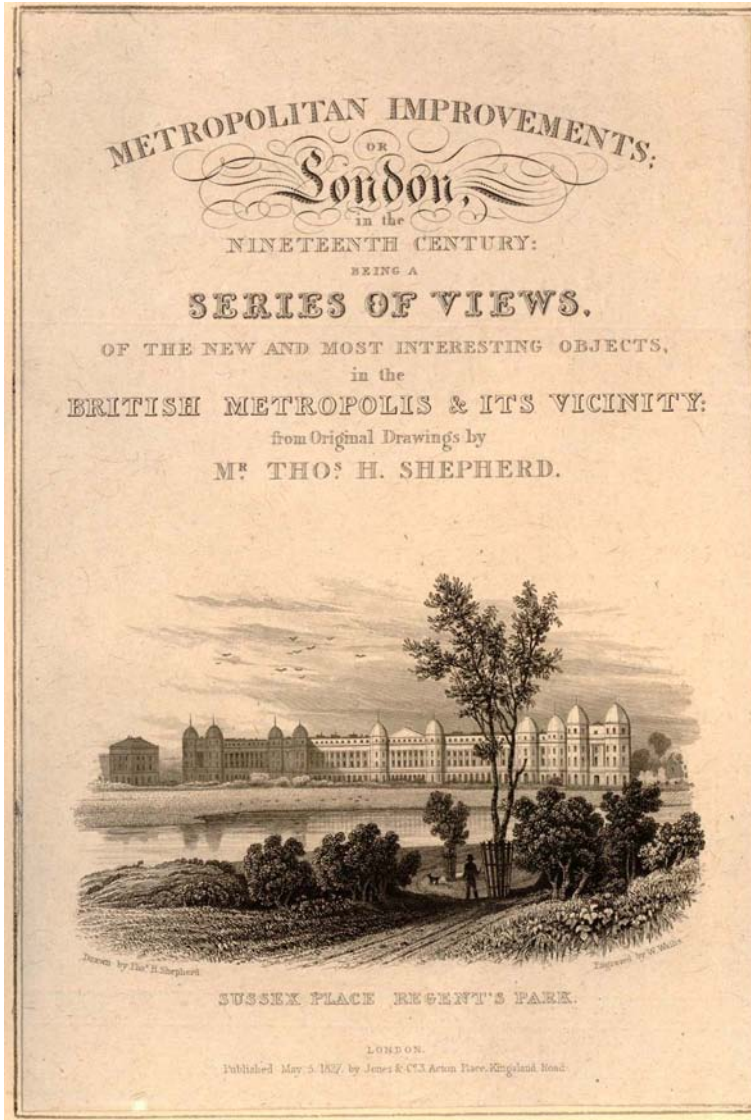


Figure 8. It was remarked in *A Picturesque Guide to the Regent's Park* (1829) that the landscape painter would enjoy the 'assemblage of picturesque outlines in grouping Sussex Place with its adjacent scenery and accessories'; from Thomas Shepherd, *View to Sussex Place from the Park* (1827). Courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum, No.1880.1113.6001

the terraces by supplying the quality that Uvedale Price, in his *Essays on the Picturesque* (1810), termed the 'grandeur of intricacy'.¹⁸ There were, moreover, in Nash's view, to be 'no divisions in the gardens of the houses to denote individuality but the whole should appear as one entire building'. The communal gardens of the terraces were therefore generally laid out with uniform hedges abutting the Outer Circle, concealing the private gardens from the road and providing privacy for the residents of the terraces. To this end Nash endorsed William Mason's principle that the '*Picturesque Point* [of view] is always [...] low in all prospects'; the spectator was intended to feel a sense of being enveloped, or absorbed, by the landscape, and the gardens were perceived as extensions of the park scenery into which the palace facades were also submerged and absorbed.¹⁹ This landscape treatment indulged the contemporary fashion for the prominence of a

'natural foreground in preference to distant scenery': the foreground being, as Gilpin put it, the 'basis and foundation of the whole picture'.²⁰

The CEPC has already got the ball rolling. It has begun to develop schematic proposals for the refurbishment of a handful of communal gardens including Cumberland and Chester Terraces, and Park Crescent and Park Square. These have been informed by archival and archaeological research, and will be refined in consultation with the local authorities and stakeholders, and a variety of other interested parties. These efforts complement a continuing programme of repairs and planned maintenance, which aim to restore the estate's historic fabric. Considerable efforts have also been made to bring about closer strategic collaborations with authorities beyond the pale of the estate whose activities impact upon the park, including The Royal Parks, English Heritage and Transport for London. The CEPC has recently commissioned two documents that provide complementary advice on the management of the gardens and landscape.²¹ The purpose of the reports is to inform a new strategic approach to the work of the CEPC based on a detailed understanding of the importance and outstanding architectural and historical significance of the park, and to encourage a more integrated approach to its future management by all interested parties.

If these are welcomed by others, they will go some way to restoring Regent's Park to a condition that reflects more thoughtfully Nash's original picturesque vision, and to ensuring that this urban oasis – described in the early nineteenth century as an immense, complex and 'tasteful exhibition of picturesque gardening' – retains its rightful place as the 'boast and pride of the metropolis' and one of the world's greatest urban landscapes.²²

REFERENCES

¹ John Summerson, 'The beginnings of Regent's Park', *Architectural History*, 20 (1977), pp. 56–62 (p. 61).

² 'Plan of the Projected Improvements connected with Mary-le-Bone Park, &c. [From the First Report of the Commissioners of his Majesty's Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues]', *The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, 19 (1813), pp. 364–9 (pp. 364, 368); Ann Saunders, *Regent's Park, A Study of the Development of the Area from 1086 to the Present Day*, 2nd edn (London: Bedford College, 1981), p. 69.

³ James Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements; or London in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Jones & Co., 1828), p. 11.

⁴ John Soane, *Lecture X* (read 9 March 1815); repr. in David Watkin, *Sir John Soane: Enlightenment Thought and the Royal Academy Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 627–8.

⁵ *Court Magazine and la Belle Assemblée*, 7 (1836), p. 117.

⁶ *A Picturesque Guide to the Regent's Park* (London: John Limbird, 1829), p. 5, quoting from a description in *The Literary Pocket Book* (1823). The word 'winding' gives the impression of a more romantic irregularity than the road possesses.

⁷ *Court Magazine and la Belle Assemblée*, p. 117. James Elmes had earlier conducted his readers around the park in *Metropolitan Improvements*.

⁸ Undated letter from John Nash; The

National Archive (TNA), CRES 2 742.

⁹ Joseph Farington, *The Farington Diary*, 8 vols (London: Hutchinson, 1922?–28), VII, p. 279 (entry of 18 September 1814).

¹⁰ *The Observer* (15 April 1841).

¹¹ It is notable that when proposals for the estate's redevelopment were invited by the Crown Estate Commissioners in the late eighteenth century, John White, surveyor to the Portland estate, picked up on this heritage as a place of public recreation: 'When I have considered the advantages which the inhabitants of the metropolis derive from their free access to the Parks and Kensington Gardens, I could not but admire the wisdom and liberality of the age when they were so appropriated; and the reflection has induced me to hope that two years hence, when the lease of Mary-le-Bone Park expires, the officers of the Crown will be inclined to a similar appropriation of that beautiful and convenient portion of public property'; *Some Account of the Proposed Improvements of the Western part of London, by the formation of the Regent's Park, the New Street ... Illustrated by plans [by J. White and others] and accompanied by critical observations* (London, 1814), appx I.

¹² *Court Magazine and la Belle Assemblée*, pp. 117–20.

¹³ James Elmes, *A Topographical Dictionary of London and Its Environs ...* (London: Whittaker, Treacher & Arnot, 1831), p. 352.

¹⁴ The setting up of the CEPC reflects the importance that the Crown placed on ensuring

a coherent management for Regent's Park and the whole of the Regent's Street corridor from Carlton House to the top of the park.

¹⁵ During the park's design and construction phases, responsibility for the layout and construction of the landscape and its buildings had lain with the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, by whom Nash was employed. However, in 1824, with the development complete, responsibility for the maintenance of the roads and sewers on the Crown Estate was transferred to the CEPC, rather than to the parish as was customary. The CEPC was one of a number of authorities that were established in Westminster from the second half of the eighteenth century with a view to ensuring uniformity in the production of the built environment, and to improving urban paving and lighting in particular. Its remit was similar to that set out in the Westminster Paving Act 1762. Whereas the Westminster Paving Commission declined in influence in the late eighteenth century as its powers were devolved to the vestries, the CEPC appears to have flourished; its remit, moreover, was broader in scope, and the extent of its authority was considerably greater than the Paving Commissioners. Under the 1824 act, the CEPC was 'appointed for paving, lighting, watching, cleansing and regulating the Streets, Squares, Roads etc in Regent's Park and for enclosing the centres of the squares and terraces and embellishing, planting, ornamenting, maintaining and supporting the same'.

¹⁶ The CEPC manages eleven miles of pavements, twenty-nine garden enclosures comprising seventeen acres of gardens, and five sets of park gates which are opened and closed daily. It has fewer than twenty full-time staff, and its eleven commissioners are drawn from park residents and businesses.

¹⁷ Undated letter from John Nash; TNA, CRES 2 771, 2 742.

¹⁸ Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful: and, On the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape*, 3 vols (London: printed for J. Mawman, 1810), II, p. 200. Price defined the 'grandeur of intricacy' as the grandeur arising from variability and irregularity – like a 'forest scene' where 'trees of different shapes and sizes cross each other in numberless directions; while other parts of the wood, are mysteriously seen between their trunks and branches' (pp. 200–1).

¹⁹ William Mason (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Gray, with Memoirs of His Life and Writings* (London: J. F. Dove, 1827), p. 294 n.

²⁰ William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape; With a Poem on Landscape Painting*, 3rd edn (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1808), p. 127.

²¹ Philip Davies, *Regent's Park: Streetscape, A Special Precinct*; David Lambert and Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, *A Total Work of Architectural and Landscape Art: A Vision for The Regent's Park*. Davies's report sets out guidance for the detailed management of the public realm and for addressing current threats and challenges in line with best practice, in particular, traffic management. *Vision for The Regent's Park*, on the other hand, outlines the historic development of the estate and its landscape, and proposes courses of action to recover some of its original, highly unusual and pioneering qualities.

²² A Wanderer, 'Notes of a Traveller in England, 1823 and 1824', *The Episcopal Watchman*, 1 (1828), p. 380; *A Visit to Uncle William in Town; or, a Description of the Most Remarkable Buildings and Curiosities in the British Metropolis* (London: printed for J. Harris, 1818), p. 74.