The hub of the Circus

A history of the streetscape of the Circus, Bath

Jean Manco
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Summary

The Circus in Bath is composed of three curved terraces of houses, designed by John Wood the Elder. It was begun by him in 1754 and completed in 1768 under the direction of his son John Wood the Younger.

At the hub of the Circus is a circular reservoir, built in 1758 to supply water to the development. Initially it was railed around, but c.1772 the railings were removed and the reservoir covered over. Around 1800 the central area of the Circus was planted to create a garden. It was surrounded by railings with split shafts and beyond them a pavement, created from setts. The pavement was asphalted in c.1890, but laid with pennant paving in 1987. The railings were removed during the second world war.

The carriageway was originally surfaced with rectangular setts. The setts were removed in 1924, when the Circus was resurfaced with tarmac.

John Wood the Younger specified a pavement ten feet wide and one foot high of pennant stone. The pavement was originally edged at intervals with stone bollards, interspersed with mounting blocks, but both had been removed by 1782.

In front of each house is a railed basement area. The railings were initially simple in style. A top rail held straight, spiked bars set into a moulded stone plinth. Most of the existing railings are of that pattern and presumed to be original, with three phases of modifications, the first two linked to the Circus lighting and the last a response to loose railings.

The original lighting came from globular oil-lamps on decorative ironwork supports above the railings on either side of the entranceway to each house. Physical evidence suggests that there was a second phase of oil lighting in the late Georgian period, involving a systematic change to the area railings. Supports remain for a system of

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overthrows interspersed with lights above the area railings. The existing overthrow of no. 14 appears to date from this phase, but that of no. 9 appears to have been salvaged from another site. In 1766 five oil-lamps were erected around the perimeter of the reservoir. In 1772 they were replaced by three street lamps on top of the covered reservoir, each facing the end of one of the streets into the Circus.

Oil lighting was superseded in 1819 by gas lighting. Probably by 1825 gaslights had been placed along the outer pavement, four to each segment. Slender, fluted lampposts supported a lantern. When the brighter electric lighting appeared in Bath in 1890, three arc lights were considered sufficient for the Circus. Each was placed on the inner pavement facing one of the incoming streets. These had taller lampposts, with a spherical light suspended from a decorative bracket. They were replaced in 1898 by the present municipal lampposts.

Gas lighting having made the system of overthrows and lamp-irons on area railings redundant, most of them were removed, and in some cases replaced by cast-iron urn finials. The railings of nine houses also have a base rail, presumably added as bars became loose. Four houses had gates added, which were removed during the second world war. It is argued that the base rails and gates mainly belong to one phase in the late 19th century.

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3. The Circus

OS 1999 map ST7465SE.
The map incorrectly shows four trees in the centre of the Circus. There are five.
Chronology of main events

1704 August 24    John Wood was baptised in the Church of St James, Bath.
1707
1725    Wood first planned a circus for Bath.
1727 May 16    Wood returned to live in Bath.
1727 December    The Avon Navigation opened.
1730 April 6    Wood’s plan for a circus in the Abbey Orchard approved.
1730 May    Wood’s plan for a circus in the Abbey Orchard stalled.
1739    Wood leased the Abbey Orchard and began the Parades.
1739    Improvement Act for Bath established a night watch.
1753 December 18    John Wood leased the site of the Circus.
1754 February 7    Foundation stone of the King’s Circus laid.
1754 May 23    John Wood the Elder died.
1755 January 3    John Wood the Younger granted the first building leases for the SW segment of the Circus (nos. 4-10).
1757    Improvement Act for Bath.
1758    Circus reservoir built.
1762 October 2    First lease granted for a plot in the SE segment (no.27).
1764 June 19    First lease granted for a plot in the N segment (no.14).
1765 December 31    John Wood leased the last plot in the SW segment (1 Brock Street).
1766    Improvement Act for Better Paving, Cleansing, Lighting, Watching and Regulating the Streets of Bath.
1766 July 29    John Wood leased the last plot in the N segment (no.19).
1766 August 9    John Wood leased the last plot in the SE segment (Circus House).
1768    The King’s Circus completed and occupied.
1799 June 17    Proposal for Circus inhabitants to enclose the central part of the Circus with an iron railing and plant or grass over the centre.
1801    The Circus garden appears on a map and in a guidebook.
1818 May    Act for lighting with gas Bath, Walcot, Bathwick and Westen.
1819 September 29    Bath Gaslight and Coke Company supplied gas street lighting.
1851    Improvement Act repealing several previous Bath Acts.
1870    Act consolidating Bath Corporation’s control of the city’s water supply.
1873    Bath Corporation acquired the Circus Water Company.
1890 June 24    Electric street lighting provided by the Bath Electric Light Co.
1897 January 7    Bath Corporation took over the provision of electric lighting.
1898    Municipal lampposts with city coat of arms erected.
1919    Electricity Supply Act
1925    Bath Corporation Act.
1942 April 25-26    Baedeker raids on Bath. One bomb exploded in the Circus.
1942/3    Railings removed from around the Circus green.
1958 August    Bath Corporation took over responsibility for the Circus green.
1961 February    Bath Planning and Parks Committees considered felling the Circus trees. Considerable local protest.
1987    Inner pavement restored; railing bases removed and stored.
Introduction

The Circus in Bath, originally known as the King’s Circus, is a unique Georgian achievement in urban planning. The entire structure appears on the statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest. The Circus has 33 houses: 1-30 Circus (Listed Grade I), Circus House (Listed Grade I), and 1 and 36 Brock Street (Listed Grade II). See Appendix 1 for the listed building descriptions. See illustration 3 for the numbering.

Much has been written on the Circus. The startling novelty of its form attracted commentary from the time it was first built. It appears in numerous guidebooks to Bath. Descriptions of it were naturally included in the works on Bath’s Georgian architecture by Green (1904) and Ison (1948). Pevsner’s Buildings of England series described the Circus in Somerset: North and Bristol (1958), now revised and updated by Forsyth’s volume on Bath (2003). General works on British architecture seldom fail to mention it.

Studies of John Wood the Elder and Younger have taken a closer look at the Circus. Summerson offered interesting insights into its antecedents. Brownell took a fresh look at its architectural influences and symbolism and explained its metopes. Mowld and Earnshaw expand on previous authors. Biographies of both Woods appear in Colvin’s Biographical Dictionary of British Architects. So no more than an outline of Wood’s scheme for the Circus will be included here.

This present study was commissioned by Bath and North East Somerset District Council from a brief jointly written by Stephen George for the Council and Nicholas Molyneux for English Heritage. It aims to provide a history of the space in between the façades of the Circus, particularly the lighting provision in the Circus from its initial construction to the present day. The study was carried out in May and June 2004; all unacknowledged photographs were taken by the author.

A history of Bath’s 18th-century street improvements by Fawcett, and the Bath Historical Streetscape Survey completed for Bath and North-East Somerset District Council in 1999 provide much background information.

Although this study has not been guided by David McLaughlin, it has been informed by his wealth of knowledge of Bath’s fabric. Forgotten fragments of conversations with him years ago resurfaced in my mind as I returned to the Circus. I am grateful to Stephen George for ushering the study to publication and aid of all kinds, to Jacqueline Wilkinson for comments, and Kirsten Elliott for her generosity with information on John Wood. Thanks are also due to Colin Johnson and Lucy Powell at the Bath Record Office and Jon Benington and Ruth Moppett at the Victoria Art Gallery for their prompt and pleasant assistance.
John Wood's scheme for the King's Circus

John Wood the Elder had an extraordinary vision for Bath. He was the son of a Bath builder, but saw himself as an architect, not an artisan. Wood drank in the latest architectural ideas while working in London in his teens and early twenties. Passionately embracing Palladianism, he returned to Bath in 1727 afire to transform his native city.

His head bursting with ideas, Wood had sent for a plan of Bath while working in Yorkshire in 1725. In his leisure hours he devised a grandiose scheme. It would include a grand circus for the exhibition of sports, together with a royal forum and imperial gymnasion. The young man's imagination was feeding on the grandeur of Imperial Rome. To give his ambitions full scope, he needed a greenfield site close to the city. He prepared alternative designs, one for land in Walcot, the other for land in Bathwick. On his return to London he presented his plans to the two landowners: Robert Gay on 21 December 1725 and the Earl of Essex on 31 March 1726.10

Wood was to have no success with the Earl, who sold the Manor of Bathwick to William Pulteney in 1726.11 Nor did Wood's plan come to fruition on the Barton Farm area of Walcot. Instead he developed Queen Square there from 1728.12

Undeterred Wood shifted his vision of a circus to the Abbey Orchard. This land between the eastern city wall and the river was owned by the Duke of Kingston, who had leased it together with the bowling green south of the Abbey Church to the London apothecary Humphrey Thayer. When Wood returned to Bath in 1727 he plunged immediately into work for Thayer, giving first priority to the design of an assembly house on the bowling green. When Thayer personally opened the new assembly rooms on 6 April 1730, Wood presented him with a plan for a circus.13
He envisaged this circus with aligned streets providing a through vista, continued with a bridge over the Avon, linking the circus with the countryside. It was not to be. Although the plan was approved by Thayer, it was frustrated by other parties.\textsuperscript{14} It seems that the guardians of the young Duke of Kingston approved the plan,\textsuperscript{15} but a bridge would have required the co-operation of William Pulteney, the new owner of Bathwick. Perhaps he did not, or could not, oblige.

Wood continued to press the proposal on Thayer until the latter’s death in 1737. But when Wood leased the Abbey Orchard himself in 1739, he switched his sights from a circus to a forum. Eying the tempting swathe of meadow within the curve of the Avon, he envisioned spacious streets around a huge plaza.\textsuperscript{16} The Parades were the only part of this proposal to be built. They took advantage of the river view as a circus would not have done. Still Wood had not quite given up his circus. The plan of the Parades in his Essay (Illustration 7) shows St James’s Triangle (now Parade Gardens) laid out with three paths leading to a central circular space.\textsuperscript{17} Here Wood displayed his predilection for pure geometry. The pattern of paths was regular.

That symmetrical plan reappeared in Wood’s ultimate scheme for the King’s Circus. It was to be the crowning achievement of his life.

So what drove his persistent yearning for a circus? An obvious inspiration was the Colosseum. Its tiers of Doric, Ionic and Corinthian columns were echoed by Wood. As Smollett said, the Circus “looks like Vespasian’s amphitheatre turned inside out.”\textsuperscript{18} Presumably Wood had an amphitheatre in mind originally “for the exhibition of sports” and he described the final design as theatrical (Appendix 3). But he was also fascinated by prehistoric stone circles. The acorns atop the Circus parapets may be his tribute to the druids, whom he credited with these ancient wonders.\textsuperscript{19}
John Wood's scheme for the King's Circus

A circle of houses was not an entirely novel idea. Jules Hardouin Mansart designed the Place des Victoires (1684–6) in Paris to circle around a statue of Louis XIV in victorious pose.²⁰ Was the Circus a patriotic riposte? George II led his army to victory against the French at the battle of Dettingen in 1743, and Wood proposed as the centrepiece of the King's Circus “a superb equestrian statue of his Sacred Majesty King George.” (Appendix 3). This may be sheer coincidence though. Royal statues had been seen as suitable centrepieces of English squares ever since the King's Square (now Soho Square) was built in London c.1681 around a statue of Charles II. Queen Square in Bristol was given an equestrian statue of William II in 1742.²¹

Above all the Circus makes an impact through its plan. If we mentally draw lines between its three points of ingress, we see a triangle within a circle. The combination of triangle and circle is explicit in Wood’s planned layout of the Parade Gardens. For Freemasons it symbolised the Trinity in Eternity. Wood himself wrote that the circle represented “the Great Caropy of Heaven” and saw an equilateral triangle as the most perfect other shape and a symbol of divinity.²² For Wood perhaps the most fundamental appeal of the Circus was simple, satisfying geometry.
Building the King’s Circus

Wood had returned to the development of the Barton Farm lands. Gay Street (named Barton Street initially) was to provide the link between Queen Square and the Circus. Wood had outlived both Robert Gay and his son Thomas, so the landowners by this time were Robert’s daughter Margaret and her husband Thomas Garrard (Appendix 2). On 18 December 1753 John Wood gained from Thomas and Margaret the nine-acre site on which the Circus would be built. In return the Garrards were to receive back enough of the developed plots to yield them a ground rent of £163.23

The foundation stone of the King’s Circus was laid with great fanfare on 7 February 1754. It seems that Wood had sent out the 18th-century equivalent of press releases. A letter from Bath to the Whitehall Evening Post rejoiced in the “New Buildings going to be erected on the North Side of the Town, after the Designs, and under the Directions, of that celebrated and eminent Architect and Antiquarian, John Wood, Esq.” (Appendix 3). Doubtless Wood had more in mind than mere self-aggrandisement. He needed to attract investors. Ever since the development of Queen Square, Wood’s policy was to acquire land, create overall designs and then sub-let individual building plots. As the developer he was responsible for preparing the ground and providing basic services - water and drainage. The lessees would do the rest.

Wood was still levelling the ground for the Circus on 23 March. He had not done as much for Queen Square. But for the Circus he was aiming at perfection. “This resolution will be attended with a great expense of stone work, but I think it will render the Circus compleat, without exception.”24 He was never to see the result. John Wood died on 23 May,25 leaving his son John to carry on the work.

At first there was good progress. The first six building leases for Gay Street and the Circus were granted on 3 January 1755. Among the lessees were the eminent politician William Pitt and his cousin Lady Lucy Stanhope, who took adjoining plots (Appendix 4). On 18 November Lady Stanhope moved into her new-built house - the first in the Circus to be inhabited. Pitt’s house was reported to be almost fit for his reception and he arrived in Bath around Christmas time.26

On 12 June 1756 Wood was happy to assure Thomas Garrard “of the buildings of the Circus going on with great spirit.”27 As with his father’s previous developments, the building stone was the easily-worked Bath Stone, supplied by Ralph Allen’s quarries on Combe Down.28 The south-
Building the King’s Circus

11. Fan print of the Circus by G. Speren
Shows the complete south-western segment, but the upper windows of 1 Brock Street are missing.
The date is indistinct. It has been read as June 1757, but Speren shows the tilled reservoir which was
built in 1758. The date may be June 1759. Victoria Art Gallery, Bath and North East Somerset Council.

western segment was up by the time of Speren’s etching (Illustration 11), though 1 Brock Street
has an unfinished look.

Then there was a hiatus. Speren shows piles of building blocks and capitals strewn around, but
no sign of workmen. In 1759 Mrs Lybbe Powys felt that Bath was “infinitely improved by the
building of the Circus, and the noble street by which tis approached from the Square. They
seem to fear the former’s ever being finished, its progress is so extremely slow. Nine houses only
are yet erected.” A distant view of Bath by Thomas Robins shows the same state of affairs
(Illustration 12).

In 1762 Pope’s guidebook was still describing the Circus as only one-third “actually finished and
inhabited.” But things were about to change. The Bath Journal reported on 17 May that more
ground had been taken for additional houses in the Circus “and it is now imagined that elegant
Pile of Buildings will be forwarded with all Speed.” On 2 October 1762 the first lease was
granted for the south-eastern segment (Appendix 4). What caused the delay? John Wood the
Younger went through agonies over the water supply for the Circus. He had to negotiate with
Sir Thomas Garrard for a plentiful source of spring water while enduring endless interference
from plumber and rival developer Thomas Atwood, who was eager to be involved in the
contract to supply water. However the issue was resolved by 1758. Wood needed more land to
complete the Circus. The original nine-acre site was not quite large enough (Illustration 10). But
the most likely culprit was high interest rates; a pause in Bath’s building boom from 1759 to 1761 coincided with high yields on consols.¹¹

Gradually momentum built up again. Another three plots in the Circus were taken in 1763, ten in 1764 and seven in 1765. The last three were leased in the summer of 1766 (Appendix 4) and by June 1768 all the Circus houses were finished and occupied.¹²

The most desirable houses were those on the north side, with their sunny south-facing fronts. William Pitt, by then Earl of Chatham and in his second term as Prime Minister, moved from his double-sized house in the south-western segment to one almost as large at no.11, while the spacious central house at no.14 was taken by John, 4th Duke of Bedford.¹³ The close proximity was convenient in October 1766 as Chatham and Bedford pounced between each other’s houses in a round of political bargaining.¹⁴ For men such as these the Circus provided a second or third home. They were seasonal visitors, part of the ebb and flow of the haute monde between London, country estates and Bath. Permanent residents included those who catered to the seasonal flow, such as the artist Thomas Gainsborough at no. 17 and his sister Mary Gibbon, who became the chief lodging-house keeper in the Circus, running three houses there.¹⁵ Less than a third of the Circus houses were built by the nobility and gentry for their own use. The majority were erected by builders or investors for later sale or rent. Andrew Sproule was a major investor in the development, while John Wood the Younger’s brother-in-law Henry Colthurst built no.24 (Appendix 4). Wood’s tour de force was admired from the start. Even with just one segment up, Mrs Lybbe Powys felt that “those that are completed give one an idea of the elegance of the whole, they being in a magnificent taste in the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian orders.”¹⁶ Smollett used the character of his querulous valetudinarian Matthew Bramble to lament its inconveniences and sneer at the “affected ornaments of the architrave”, but his was a minority view.⁶ Arthur Young felt that “the most criticising eye must allow that the Circus is truly beautiful, and ornamented to that just degree of elegance which ... lies between profusion and simplicity.”¹⁷

¹² Sketch of Bath by Thomas Robins c.1759
Photograph by the Corotauld Institute of Art.
Local authorities

The Circus was built by private enterprise on private land at a time when local authority powers and responsibilities were far more limited than they are now. The Circus lay in a part of the parish of Walcot which was included in the Liberties of Bath, under the charter granted to Bath in 1590 by Queen Elizabeth. Nevertheless in 1768 Bath Corporation had no direct control over its lighting, street surfaces, drainage, water supply or policing.

Bath's first Improvement Act in 1707 made each householder responsible for the public space outside his or her property. Householders had to pitch and pave the street as far as the gutter down the centre of the carriageway, and light it at night with lanterns outside their houses through the darkest six months of the year. Defaulters could be fined. This reliance on householders had been standard urban practice in England throughout the Middle Ages. Yet the Act contained the beginnings of local authority lighting. The Mayor was empowered to levy a parish rate for lighting. Householders could pay the rate and be provided with street lamps.

When the Bath Improvement Act of 1739 established a night watch, it was put under the control of each parish and a further local Act of 1757 put the onus on Bath parishes to employ surveyors, scavengers and a lighting contractor, paid out of parish rates. However this devolution onto the parishes was reversed by another local Act in 1766, which created a body of Commissioners for Pitching, Paving, Cleansing, Lighting, Watching and Regulating the Streets, Lances, etc. within the City of Bath and Liberties thereof. Four of the twenty Commissioners were to be nominated by the Corporation and four each by the four parishes of Bath. The Commissioners fought to retain a degree of control over street lighting even after the change to gas lighting, supplied by the Bath Gaslight and Coke Company. A role for the Commissioners was written into the Act passed in 1818 for lighting with gas Bath, Walcot, Bathwick and Weston.

Victorian legislation gradually consolidated local public services into a uniform system. The Municipal Incorporation Act of 1835 transformed historic corporations such as Bath's into elected bodies, which by the end of the century were dealing with almost every aspect of local government. The Act immediately took the night watch out of the hands of the Commissioners. It obliged boroughs to organise police forces under the supervision of watch committees. The City of Bath Act of 1851 repealed the Act of 1766 and similar Acts for Walcot and Bathwick, and consolidated the powers therein. The City of Bath Act Committee took over street maintenance from the Commissioners.

The Improvement Act of 1766 had already empowered the Corporation to supply water to the city and liberties, with certain interesting exceptions. An Act of 1870 strengthened the Corporation's position. John Wood the Younger had raised the alarm about Corporate take-over in 1758.

The Bill now depending in the houses is to enable the Corporation of Bath to supply the City with Water, in this bill they pray for an exclusive power, which if carried into a Law will quite defeat whatever scheme has been formed for supplying the Circus. Lord Bath has taken up the Cudgels and we are now using all our endeavours to prevent the passing of the Bill.
Lord Bath was William Pulteney, owner of Bathwick manor, with its wealth of springs, and of some of the land over which the pipe for the Circus would pass.\textsuperscript{9} His lobbying was successful; the Circus Water Works was excluded from the Act of 1766.\textsuperscript{11} But the Act of 1870 closed the loopholes and allowed the Council to purchase the Circus Water Works in 1873.\textsuperscript{12}

The Public Health Act of 1872 created urban and rural sanitary authorities, which took over the responsibilities of local commissions such as The City of Bath Act Committee. The Bath Urban Sanitary Authority was essentially another arm of the Council, despite being a separate body with its own minutes. The Electric Lighting Committee formed in 1888 reported to the Bath U.S.A. The Local Government Act of 1894 transferred the powers of urban and rural sanitary authorities to newly created urban and rural district councils.
The space enclosed by the façades

Reservoir

Speren’s view of the Circus (Illustration 11) shows a circular feature surrounded by railings. This was the reservoir which Wood the Younger built for the water supply he had such trouble obtaining. In 1756 he was planning in the centre of the Circus a basin of about 40 feet in diameter. The final agreement for the water supply in February 1758 provided for:

A reservoir in the Circus not to contain less than 1800 hogsheads and to be lined with ashlar and surrounded with iron pallasadoes [sic] as Mr Wood shall direct as to distance. A key to be left in case of fire to turn the water into all or any of the houses. A foundation in the middle of the centre to put a statue on, in case it should be approved of, as Mr Wood shall direct.

By June 1758 work was proceeding on “A circular reservoir... in the center [sic] of the Circus, sixty feet diameter and seven deep, in order to supply the adjacent buildings with water.”

The reservoir was initially open to the sky. Samuel Derrick deplored this state of affairs in 1762. “The basin [sic], in the middle of the Circus, is mean and ought to be covered over.” But nothing was done for a decade. The reservoir appears on the map of Bath in 1771 by Frederick and Taylor. But by the end of the following year the reservoir had been arched over, for on 17 December 1772 the Commissioners ordered that three lamps should be fixed in the middle of the Circus, one on “the corner of the basin” opposite Gay Street, one opposite Bennett Street and one opposite Brock Street. Those are the three street lights that appear on the central raised island in the Cozens etching (Illustration 13). Cozens also shows what is presumably a stone cover giving access to the reservoir.

The hut shown by Cozens above the reservoir has been interpreted as a pump house, with handle visible. However the “handle” is actually one of the three-footed iron lamp-stands. The water would have been delivered by pipes from the reservoir to the houses at basement level.

14. Detail from map of Bath by W. Frederick and W. Taylor [1771]
Bath Record Office.

13. Etching of the Circus 1773 by John Robert Cozens
Victoria Art Gallery, Bath and North East Somerset Council.
Watchman’s box

The hut is more plausibly interpreted as a watchman’s box. A view of Grand Parade in 1777 by Thomas Malton shows a similar one. Both appear to be the common wooden type, shown in Cruikshank’s sketch. Note the practical arrangement of half-door and upper flap which would provide shelter without impeding the watchman’s view.

16. Detail of the etching of the Circus by Cozens 1773
Victoria Art Gallery, Bath and North East Somerset Council.

17. Watch box in Norfolk Crescent, Bath

18. Detail from an aquatint after David Cox of Lansdown Crescent 1820
Victoria Art Gallery, Bath and North East Somerset Council.
Stone watch boxes were rarer. But perhaps the Circus residents felt that a wooden hut was a blot on the Palladian landscape, for the view of the Circus by Bonner shows an octagonal stone box with windows, which would be an elegant and practical way to keep watch on the whole Circus.

There are occasional references to stone boxes in the early 19th-century Commissioners’ Minutes. A circular one survives in Norfolk Crescent (Illustration 17). A square one appears in Georgian prints of Lansdown Crescent (Illustration 18). But no order to erect a stone box in the Circus has been found. If the Commissioners did not order it, then the residents presumably did. In 1814 the Commissioners agreed to contribute part of the cost of a stone box to replace a wooden one in Green Park Place, if the residents would pay the rest.62

Road surface

Cozens (Illustration 13) shows the standard street surface of the time – rectangular setts, probably of blue lias limestone, the local stone of choice.63 This was known as pitching. In his building leases John Wood the Younger required each lessee to pitch the street from the front of his house to the centre of the Circus, but he did not specify any particular material. Even after building, each householder was responsible for keeping the street and pavement in front of his house in repair.64

It seems that the inhabitants of the Circus were conscientious in this matter, for only one of them fell foul of the Commissioners in the 18th century. On 18 February 1789 Mr Neagle at 1 Circus was ordered to pitch and pave. He did not rush to comply and on 3 December that year the Commissioners urged that the pitching before Mr Neagle’s in the Circus and Gay Street should be done as soon as possible.65 In the 1840s there were several more general orders for repairs to pitching and paving in the Circus.66
Before that though the Commissioners tackled a problem that John Wood the Elder created with his beautifully level Circus. The sharp angle at which it met Gay Street is visible in Speren’s view (Illustration 11) and that of Storer in 1818. Evidently the Commissioners first considered the matter in 1831, though the only clue to their deliberations is the cryptic “order that the pitching of the Circus at the top of Gay St do remain at the height it is now for the present.”

But in 1843 the Commissioners grasped the nettle. They ordered excavation in front of nos. 1, 2 and part of 3; the work also involved nos. 28, 29, and 30. The corner paving on the west side had to be relaid and the Commissioners ordered 12 inch ‘bordering’ (kerb stones) to be laid around the corner for about 20 feet. The gentle slope of the Circus towards Gay Street after the work can be seen in illustration 21.

Traffic pounding the limestone sets made for a surface sludge that was unpleasant for pedestrians. So paved crossings began to appear in Bath following the Improvement Act of 1766 and were commonplace by the middle of the 19th century. Paved crossings at the Circus ends of Bennett Street (Illustration 23), Brock Street (Illustration 22) and Gay Street (Illustration 21) can be seen in photographs dating from the 1890s to 1911. When were they made? There is no mention of a paved crossing in the work done in 1843. Nor did the Commissioners order any crossing for the Circus at any time. So they were probably the work of the City of Bath Act Committee which took over from the Commissioners in 1851.

The Committee resolved in 1860 to replace a third of the sets with a macadam surface, but retracted in the face of protests from residents, who regarded it as “an interference with the architectural amenities of the Circus.” Instead pennant sets were used for repairs. However the sets finally disappeared under Bath City Council. On 25 January 1924 the Surveying Committee decided that the Circus sets should be replaced with “tarred macadam.”
22. Photograph of the junction between Brock Street and the Circus c.1910
Bath Library.

23. Photograph of the junction between Bennett Street and the Circus c.1900
Monehaw Green.
Bath Library.
Pavement

John Wood the Younger specified in his building leases for the Circus a pavement ten feet wide made of the “best sort of stone of the pennant kind.” The width was extraordinary, but the material was not.

The opening of the Avon Navigation in 1727 had made available hard-wearing pennant sandstone from the quarries at Hanham, which lay beside the Avon east of Bristol. John Wood the Elder specified pennant stone for paving the Parades c.1740. The effect was much admired by a visiting clergyman in 1766, who noted that the Parades were “all paved with large broad flat stones; so it is as easy walking there, as in a floored room.” Pennant became the standard paving stone for the burst of Georgian pavement creation in Bath. Its use was specified by the Commissioners for Pitching, Paving, etc. in several orders for pavements from 1768-81.

Before the 18th century raised pavements were largely unknown in English cities. Footways could be provided by simply erecting a line of wooden or stone posts (bollards) along the street to protect pedestrians from wheeled traffic. Even after the advent of paving for walkways, they were not necessarily raised above the street level. The raised kerb appears more regularly from the mid-18th century. A kerb would be reasonably effective in preventing carriages from mounting the pavement and gradually bollards were dispensed with.

We see the transition in the work of the Woods. The pavements in Queen Square were initially protected by bollards (Illustration 26). Cozens (Illustration 13) shows that there were bollards in the Circus, even though Wood the Younger had dictated that the pavements should be a foot above the pitching. The bollards were evidently of stone, presumably Bath Stone.

Ison supposed that the bollards in the Circus were tethering posts. They might have served that secondary purpose there, since they were interspersed with mounting blocks, but the two did not necessarily go together. Thomas Robins shows mounting blocks in Queen Square c.1760. They were not placed near the bollards, but beside the balustraded dwarf wall which originally surrounded its central garden (Illustration 26). Both bollards and mounting blocks had disappeared from the Circus by the time of Malton’s view in 1784 (Illustration 32).
26. Sketch of Queen Square looking west c.1760 by Thomas Robins
*Photograph by the Courtauld Institute of Art.*

27. Pennant stone coal-hole cover outside 10 Duke Street, Bath

28. Francis Frith photograph no. 38367, showing the northern segment of the Circus in 1896
A deed of the newly-built 12 Circus in 1765 refers to "the vaults ... under the pavement or footway before the whole front of the messuage." Such vaults were used to store coal and equipped with a hole in the street or pavement for coal deliveries.

In the Circus the square coal-holes are set along the edge of the pavement. Originally these would presumably have had pennant stone covers, like the ones surviving in Duke Street, part of John Wood the Elder's Parades development.

The present covers are metal in a variety of patterns. It seems that they are Victorian, for the two in front of 10 Circus and 1 Brock Street can be glimpsed in a Frith photograph of 1896 (Illustration 28) and that in front of no.7 appears in a photograph of c.1900 (Illustration 29).
There are iron gratings instead outside no. 12 Circus and 36 Brock Street.
Area railings

In his building leases for Gay Street and the Circus John Wood the Younger specified that lessees should surround basement areas with a stone plinth one foot four inches high above the pavement, and one foot thick at the bottom, worked with a proper base moulding according to his directions. On this plinth the lessee should place a neat light iron rail and “palasadoes” (spiked bars). The result can be seen in the views by Cozens (Illustration 13) and Malton (Illustration 32). Straight bars with spiked finials are set directly into a stone base and held together by a rail at the top.

Wrought-iron railings of this type survive today in Gay Street (Illustration 33). But around the Circus there was a change in the railings sometime after Malton’s detailed view of 1784 (Illustration 44). The new feature was doubled pairs of bars, set in a square of iron around a central shaft (Illustration 34). The original plinth was not wide enough for them, so each has its own projecting stone base. These bar clusters can be seen today in a regular pattern around the Circus. They are on either side of almost all of the entranceways and also set between entranceways. They clearly belong to a common scheme. We can see its purpose at nos. 9 and 14, where the shafts support overthrows (Illustrations 47, 48 and 50). The clusters must have been part of a new lighting system. It is surprising to see an entire development change its railing system in a uniform way. It argues a high degree of cooperation among the residents, and between the residents and the lighting contractor.

Once the shafts of these clusters became redundant, presumably with the advent of gas lighting in 1819, evidently each householder chose his own way of dealing with them. Some were cut down and topped with a cast-iron urn finial (Illustrations 69 and 70). Most were removed (Illustration 36). That left a hole, which has in some cases been filled in (Illustration 66).
or used to bolt on a decorative urn (Illustrations 35, 67 and 68). The cast-iron urns are of several designs, but urns finials in general are typical of the late Georgian period. It seems that the removal of the shafts left a weakness, for we see makeshift strengthening of some squares (Illustrations 63 to 65).

Stone plinths can suffer from erosion or cracking, which may leave bars loose at the base. If the plinth is simply replaced, the trouble might arise again. A more permanent solution would be to add a second rail at the base of the bars, which can rest on iron balls sitting on a new plinth. The existing railings of nos. 2 to 6 and 10, 13 and 29 are of this pattern. The railings of no. 23 also have a base rail, which is supported by shafts set into the plinth. However it was on balls before World War II, as shown by a Bath City Council photograph c.1935 (Illustration 38). The addition of base rails presumably took place in the Victorian period. A photograph of the 1890s shows railings with ball bases around the areas of nos. 2-6 (Illustration 39).

Most of the houses with presumed original railings have plinths moulded to a smooth semi-circular cross-section at the top. This would be the moulding specified by Wood. It also appears in Gay Street and the Parades. Whereas the plinth of no. 4 – one of those with an added rail – has a shallower curve at the top and a more distinct edge where the curve meets the straight side (Illustration 37). This type of plinth is presumed to be a Victorian replacement in the main.

However the Circus House has an interesting mixture: the original Georgian plinth to the cast of its front door on Bennett Street, but the Victorian type to the west and around its Circus frontage. The house suffered bomb damage in World War II (Illustration 80). Pre-war photographs seem to show that the plinth was entirely of the Georgian type at that time (Illustration 28). So the present plinth may be a post-war replacement.

39. Photograph of 1-7 Circus in the 1890s
Shows railings on ball bases around the areas of 2-6 and gates to 3, 5 and 7. Bath Library.

38. 23 Circus c.1935
Shows the railing of 23 on balls. Bath Record Office.
Gates

The gates at the top of the area stairs belong to the original railing scheme. But four of the Circus houses had iron gates added later to their main entrances. The stumps of iron hinges remain either side of the entrance-ways of 3, 5, 7 and 10 (Illustrations 75 to 78). No main entrances are shown gated on the OS map surveyed in 1885 (Illustration 79), but a view from the 1890s shows the wrought iron gates of 3, 5 and 7 (Illustration 39). That narrows down the addition of this group of gates to 1886-1900. They all seem to have been of the same pattern, shown more clearly in a Bath Council photograph c.1935 (Illustration 40). That suggests that a group of neighbours had work done at around the same time. Could it be that loose railings led to the arrival of a blacksmith or builder who managed to sell gates as he dealt with the railing problem? If so we can date the base rails to the late 19th century also.

The scroll-work gates of no.10 can be seen in a photograph of the early 1940s (Illustation 41). Being of a different design from those of the 1880-90s, they may have been added later.

The Circus area railings were spared the cull of unnecessary iron railings during World War II. They protected passers-by from falling into the basement areas. But gates were requisitioned along with railings in September 1942 "other than those of artistic or historic merit, or those considered necessary for safety purposes." It seems that the gates of the Circus were not artistic enough to avoid sacrifice to the war effort, for none appear in post-war photographs.