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Vauxhall

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Abstract

Vauxhall was one of the major pleasure gardens in London from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century. Its architecture and spatial organization allowed for various types of social interaction, which encouraged different types of sociability. With cultural entertainments such as concerts and exhibitions of paintings, it made polite pleasures a part of sociability. The activities it offered ranged from collective entertainment, such as a music kiosk to be heard by rambblers in the surrounding alleys, to intimate meetings in boxes around the grove for visitors entertaining a small group of their own social circle.

Vauxhall [pleasure garden](#) was one of the public outdoor places of sociability: the ‘pleasure gardens’ would enable visitors, for a fee, to meet acquaintances while rambling in the alleys,

listening to music coming from kiosks, or dining. Its relevance to the history of sociability lies in its combination of social pleasures with cultural entertainments, and in its landscape design meant to favour different types of social interaction. It offered a range of social occasions for the visitors – wandering in the garden to meet occasional acquaintances, dining in an arbour with one's own circle, attending concerts with a larger public. The architectural layout was planned to encourage the blend of such modes of sociability, ranging from open spaces and cultural venues to more intimate structures.

It became one of the major pleasure gardens in London from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century. Soon after the opening, the essayist John Evelyn, in 1661, called it 'the New Spring Garden at Lambeth, a pretty contrived plantation' ('new' by comparison with the now vanished original Spring Garden near the North end of Whitehall). It became known as 'Vauxhall' though it officially took the name only in 1785. This new garden was more distant from central London, in the rural suburb of Lambeth to the South, on the right bank of the Thames which was outside London: it was almost a trip into the country; until 1750, when Westminster Bridge was built, it could only be reached by boat, and crossing by boat remained popular even afterwards, the ride being a social entertainment in itself.

Vauxhall mostly flourished under the management of a former fellmonger named Jonathan Tyers who bought shares in the garden, and was in charge from 1729 to 1767. He made it famous by setting up an outdoor [masquerade](#) in 1732 under the enticing Italian name of 'Ridotto al fresco'; since the event was attended by Frederick, Prince of Wales (George II's son, who died prematurely and never reigned), it added prestige to the garden. From a mere garden of pleasure, it became a place with numerous and varied cultural activities, which made it attractive to different social groups, and it also became a family attraction. The several types of visitors struck the observers of the time: according to a contemporary ballad, 'Each profession, ev'ry trade/ Here enjoy refreshing shade'. The admission fee was a shilling.

It combined the sociability of popular entertainments like the fairground and that of cultural venues such as the concert hall and the picture gallery, putting artistic genres in the public sphere. Vauxhall thus contributed to the idea that polite pleasures defined new forms of sociability. It invited the visitors to play with their public image; one of the attractions was 'the seeing others, and being seen by them' as described in a promotional pamphlet paid for by Tyers (J.Lockman, *A Sketch of the Spring Gardens*, 1752, 13): a game of illusion and social identity.

Such multiple activities implied an original loose and non-static spatial arrangement which allowed the public to go about, with tree-lined parallel walks (the Grand Walk being 900 feet long) and cross-walks (600 foot long). The visit started with 'the grove': a rectangular area near the entrance, with wilder groves beyond; to the left was a Rotunda with mirrors and a chandelier – favouring the self-admiration of the public – , followed by a salon and exiting into the garden by a gothic temple: a spectacular opening to dazzle the public. Further in the garden, Tyers also added a cascade, a Chinese pavilion, and a ruin, to compete with [Ranelagh](#) when it opened; the vistas of the walks would guide the visitors' gazes towards buildings and

statues, a visual pleasure both individual and collective.

The various parts were designed for several types of social entertainment. There were supper boxes in the colonnaded walls around the grove: in each box, closed at the back and open towards the garden, a table and seats for six to eight guests, who would book it when entering, and spend the evening in conversation while being served cold meats and cakes and drinks: the sociability of small groups – but it was claimed that a total of 3000 people could be served. The layout designed by Tyers also provided for more collective entertainment, since in the middle stood a music kiosk, placed high, so that the music could be heard by a larger audience. The lighting of the alleys was also attractive. The garden owed its success to the design which, while using traditional architectural elements from places of cultural entertainment, arranged them so as to favour sociable occasions. The music kiosk being part of the garden walks, visitors would not remain statically to listen, but would enjoy music as part of the experience of walking around to meet various groups of visitors.

Whereas in gardens, the musicians usually played old tunes demanded by the audience, here the musicians performed new music, and it became a place where recent compositions would meet their public, and where the public would be kept informed of new musical trends. To the left, the Rotunda could house concerts; it was made of rooms with attractive decorations, mirrors in the concert room, paintings in the salon, offered to the admiration of the visitors.

The management first developed musical activities in the 1730s as social entertainments. Among the musical pieces concerned with Vauxhall, one should mention ‘Rural Beauty, or Vaux-Hal Garden’, words by Lockman, set by Boyce, in George Bickham Jr *The Musical Entertainer* (1737); it shows how the garden favoured the meetings of ‘belles and beaux’: ‘Garden calls away: [...] Belles & Beaux are all invited, / To partake of varied Sweets’. The book publishes the score together with an engraving showing the music kiosk in the trees (audio recording available under Deconinck-Brossard in ‘Further Reading’ section below). The statue of Handel by Roubiliac (1738, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum) was in full view at the centre of the colonnade, establishing the cultural ambition of the place – statues in public places were usually those of heroic figures, and this was an early example of a statue to a musician – , and its central position made it a common point of admiration for the visitors.

Paintings would be placed in the arbours positioned along the alleys, partly as screens against the wind, but also, as a more individual pleasure, in order to serve as a pretext for visitors passing by in the alleys to stop in the arbours in order to admire the ladies sitting there with the paintings behind their heads, while pretending to be art connoisseurs looking at the paintings beyond the ladies: the situation offered an ‘opportunity of gazing on any pleasing fair-one, without any other pretence than the credit of a fine taste for the piece behind her’.¹

The supper boxes had paintings by Hayman (1739) representing children’s games and rustic activities, and Hogarth made *The Four Times of the Day* (1738) for Vauxhall – Covent Garden market and its visitors for *Morning*, the Huguenot church for *Noon*, the less elegant garden of Sadler’s Well in the suburbs for *Evening*, and the dubious inns of Charing Cross for

Night. Such paintings combining morals and irony poked fun at various social groups, giving visitors a sense of superiority, even though they may well have belonged to the target groups. It was a place of social climbing as much as of real sociability.

It also became a setting for patriotic occasions, creating a new type of bond between members of the public. Maritime scenes were exhibited in 1739 showing the triumphs of Admiral Vernon at Porto Bello; during the Seven Years' War the walls of the salon were hung with paintings celebrating Britannia. In addition to painting, music could be turned to patriotic use, again during the Seven Years' War, when songs written for Vauxhall included 'Cape Breton and Cherburg' (1758) and 'A Song on the Taking of Montreal' (1760). In the early nineteenth century, there were celebrations for Wellington's victories.

New types of increasingly spectacular entertainment were added as they became available, so that the public could keep pace with novelties; this helped Vauxhall to compete with other gardens. A rehearsal of Handel's *Fireworks Music* took place in 1749, with 100 musicians playing to an audience of 12000. Transparency shows took place in 1788, lights in motion in 1791, fireworks in 1798, and the parachute acrobat Garnerin gave a balloon demonstration in 1802. On account of such expenses, the fee was raised to two shillings in 1792.

Novels show that such forms of mixed sociability attracted diverging responses. Opposed views of Vauxhall are given, as expected, by the unsociable disgruntled uncle Matthew Bramble and by his petulant niece Lydia in Smollett's epistolary novel *Humphry Clinker* (1771). Matthew Bramble (29 May) writes that 'Vauxhall is a composition of baubles [...] seemingly contrived to dazzle the eyes and divert the imagination of the vulgar' – a man of an earlier generation, he disapproves of the presence of different social classes including 'the vulgar', which a feature of pleasure gardens. On the contrary, Lydia Melford (31 May) admires 'the place crowded with the gayest company, ranging thro' those blissful shades, or supping in different lodges, on cold collations, enlivened with mirth, freedom, and good humour, and animated by an excellent band of musick', stressing the different versions of social occasions, from walks with the crowds to more intimate suppers in lodges.

In [Fanny Burney](#)'s novel *Evelina* (1778), where the young heroine discovering London is taken to Vauxhall by relatives, she admires the attractive aspects of the garden but feels worried when she is drawn to the disreputable 'dark walks' of the place: here the contrasts are between the more innocent and the less respectable types of sociability.

Rowlandson's famous watercolour of Vauxhall (1784, adapted as a hand-coloured etching and aquatint) shows the range of social circles frequenting the garden, giving a satirical view of them. Literary figures such as Dr Johnson and Boswell are shown dining in their box (left) with Goldsmith (though he had died ten years before: this is a synthetic reconstruction of Vauxhall, not a record of a particular occasion). Mrs Weichsel is singing from a box, and the foreground is populated by members of fashionable society: between Mrs Weichsel's box and the tree in the middle stands the famous Duchess of Devonshire, a celebrated beauty who had great influence on politicians and on their votes, here accompanied by her sister; to the right

is the Prince of Wales (son of George III, future George IV) wearing his Garter star and whispering to his former mistress the actress 'Perdita' Robinson (centre right); the other characters seem to belong to less elevated social spheres.

Vauxhall garden passed out of fashion in the first half of the nineteenth century, and eventually closed in 1859. Little of it is left in the area, though a park named 'Vauxhall' opened there in 2012. In recent decades, the historical Vauxhall has attracted the attention of researchers as studies in spatiality developed in connection with the themes of visuality and sociability (see 'Further Reading').

1. S. Toupee, 'An Evening at Vaux-hall', *The Scots Magazine*, July 1739, p. 363.

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Further Reading

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[The Spectator, No. 383 \(20 May 1712\)](#)

[Amusements Serious and Comical \(1730\)](#)

[Gentleman's Magazine on Spring Gardens \(1732\)](#)

[Vauxhall, 1739](#)