

JOSEPH PITT AND PITTVILLE

by R.K. Howes

Cheltenham has been described by David Verey in The Buildings of England: Gloucestershire as "a planned town, a garden city, which was something completely new in England." The planning was accomplished not by any public authority, but by speculators who bought estates and developed them. One of these was Joseph Pitt. His career has been described in other books. The documents studied in this essay illustrate how the planned appearance of Cheltenham was achieved. These documents are only a few from a large collection.

Joseph Pitt was a successful lawyer in Cirencester. He became M.P. for the rotten borough of Cricklade in 1812. His interest in Cheltenham began about 1800. At this time Cheltenham was growing rapidly as a spa town following the visit of King George III in 1788.

Pitt bought plots of freehold and copyhold land amounting to about 30 acres. His most important purchase was the inappropriate rectory, which he bought from the Earl of Essex. This gave him the right to the great and small tithes and about 85 acres of glebe land. He had to pay procurations to the bishop and arch-deacon of Gloucester, and to pay for repairs to the parish church. From the Earl of Essex he also bought about 25 acres of land.

In 1801, on the petition of Pitt and others, an Inclosure Act was passed for Cheltenham. The award of allotments was made in 1806. Pitt received about 250 acres in 25 allotments, a great part of it being in lieu of tithes. One of the largest allotments for tithes was in the Marsh and Wyman's Brook Field. Next to it in Whadden Field was a large allotment for glebe land. This was the area where Pitt was to develop Pittville, named after himself.

Pittville however did not take shape till some years after the inclosure award. Pitt's first development was the Royal Crescent. It was the earliest of Cheltenham's Georgian terraces, and was described in 1834 by Henry Davies in A Stranger's Guide to Cheltenham as "for many years almost the only place of fashionable residence". The land on which it was built, Church Meadow, was one of the allotments to Pitt in lieu of his glebe land. Pitt employed a distinguished architect to draw up plans for it, Charles Harcourt Masters, who had designed what is now called the Holburne Museum in Bath. Arrangements were made with builders in 1805, and a letter of 1807 notes that the roofs of the houses were almost on.

Pitt's procedure was first to have plans made by an architect, and then to sell building lots to a number of builders. These were all small men, described as a mason, a bricklayer, a plasterer or simply as builders. None of them was wealthy, and Pitt lent them the purchase money on the mortgage of the building plot. For example Morris Hale bought a plot for £126, which he

was to pay with interest over 12 years. The builders contracted to adhere to the architect's plans; as regards the pavements, rails and road at the front, they were to abide by the decision of the majority of the proprietors. One of these small builders, William Hands, a plasterer, got into difficulties in repaying his loan. He owned some other houses, which he mortgaged to Pitt. After a few years he was obliged to sell some of these. The last reference to Hands was when he and his wife were evicted by Pitt from The Lower George in the High Street in 1832. Hands was evidently illiterate, for he signed documents by making a mark.

Building in Pittville seems to have started about 1825. In that year the foundation stone of the pump room was laid, the architect being John Forbes. About 100 acres of building lots were bought by the more speculating inhabitants - as Henry Davies calls them. The financial crisis of 1825 halted development, and of 600 houses intended only 100 were built. However, Pitt pressed ahead with the pump room, which was opened in 1830, and in the following years many more houses were built.

Plots of land at Pittville were sold either to builders or to people wishing to build their own house. Pitt kept the planning of the estate under his own control. He occasionally employed an architect, whose task it was to see that all houses conformed to the general design. At first it was Forbes, then someone called Stokes, and in 1835 Henry Spering Merrett was appointed. Merrett was to be paid by a commission of 5% on building plots or houses which he sold. A later contract gave him a salary of £75 a year, together with a commission of 2½%. The second contract set out the architect's obligations. He was "to use his best exertions and Interest in the Sale of Land"; to make surveys and plans; "to make all designs for Rows of Buildings", and to see that they were built "in accordance to the design and general Stipulations"; and to see to all designs for villas, taking care "that they be such as will in no way affect the General good appearance of the Estate". The original contract had required Merrett to submit all new designs and improvements either to Pitt himself or to his agent J.G. Strachan. A rough draft of the original contract had also a clause stipulating a minimum cost for houses, but the amount was not filled in.

The documents concerning Merrett have been preserved because he soon fell into dispute with Pitt. Strachan became ill and died in 1836, and Merrett wished to take his place. Pitt said that he was felt to be unfit for the post. When another man was appointed, Merrett became angry and discharged himself from the post of architect. Afterwards he claimed that Pitt owed him money; the case went to court, and Pitt appears to have won.

The affairs of Cheltenham had been since 1786 regulated by a body of improvement commissioners. In 1839 they endeavoured to extend their powers to Pittville and the other new estates. Pitt and the proprietors of houses in Pittville objected. They said that the Improvement Bill proposed to provide only lighting, and yet to charge the whole rate for lighting, paving and watching. They complained further that the effect of the Bill would be to make the pleasure grounds, drives and walks of Pittville public. These had hitherto been open only to the owners of houses in Pittville, who paid a ground rent for the privilege, and to those

who paid an annual subscription. In a statement on behalf of the proprietors Pitt claimed to have spent £40,000 on the development of Pittville. The Bill was defeated in the House of Commons.

Pitt died in or just before 1843. Some of his property in Cheltenham was sold in order to pay his creditors, one of whom was his son Joseph Pitt. The particulars of sale show how far the development of Pittville had advanced. Most of the property was building land and not houses. Some of the land - in the area marked out to be Clarence Square, for example - was still under crops, and purchasers had to pay the tenants the value of the crops. All houses built had to be in accordance with the general plan of Pittville. Houses in Wellington Square were to have the same appearance as Wellesley House (now Wellesley Court Hotel). On the south west side of Clarence Square there were to be no more than five houses, of an appearance to be approved by the owner of Pittville Pump Room (at the time Joseph Pitt the younger); they were to have a facade of ashlar or of brick covered with Parker's or Roman cement. A minimum value for the new houses was also stipulated. In Evesham Road it was to be not less than £700; between Pittville lake and the pump room (where no houses seem in fact to have been built) it was to be not less than £800.

Where houses were for sale they were described; for example, Wellesley House had a water closet on the ground floor, but no bathroom. Purchasers of building plots or houses would enjoy "the privileges of Pittville", that is the right to use the drives, walks and pleasure gardens, for which they were to pay an annual contribution to the owner of Pittville Pump Room. The contribution from the owner of Wellesley House was £1. 15. Od., and from those of plots in Evesham Road £3. 10. Od.

By 1843 Pittville had become one of the most attractive parts of Cheltenham. The fourth edition of Davies's Guide speaks of the excellent houses in Pittville Lawn, including several detached houses all different from each other, and says that they were "occupied by families of ample, independent fortune". John Goding, in his History of Cheltenham, about 1853, is full of praise for Pitt. He says that Pitt's Inclosure Act had produced effects never contemplated: the most valuable property had been erected, including 505 houses on glebe land. He estimated the cost of laying out Pittville Spa and Gardens at half a million sterling.

Sources

Printed Henry Davies, A Stranger's Guide through Cheltenham, 2nd edition 1834, 4th edition 1843.

A New Guide to Cheltenham, published by John Lee, about 1840.

John Goding, History of Cheltenham about 1853.

Documents Gloucestershire Record Office D 1388:

abstract of Pitt's title to Pittville; accounts in the case of Pitt and Hands; correspondence in the case of Pitt v. Merrett; documents relating to the Cheltenham Improvement Bill, 1839; particulars of sale in the case of Pitt v. Pitt, 1843.

Gloucestershire Record Office D444/Z1: inclosure award for Cheltenham, 1806.