

Pleasure Gardens

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Pleasure gardens arrived in England in great numbers following the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, and especially after the plague of 1665/6 and the Great Fire of London. They appear first in the metropolis and then around the country. Taking a stroll became fashionable, especially for those from the upper spheres of society. Yet London was still a city of dirty overcrowded alleys, open sewerage, and rarely had dedicated sidewalks and did not lend itself to strolling. Pleasure gardens were established to counteract this and became the place to be seen. Featuring many attractions, music, art, entertainers, light refreshments, and even fireworks, they became places for romantic trysts (and were also rife with prostitution). The most famous were the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, and then the Ranelagh Gardens, although others were also popular.



A General Prospect of Vaux Hall Gardens. 1751. Samuel Wale. Painting was also engraved and printed in various eighteenth-century publications. Public Domain

Prior to the Restoration the Spring Gardens and bowling green at Charing Cross which dated from the days of Charles I were still attractive to many Londoners, though many other gardens were destroyed during the Civil Wars. At the Restoration, landowners were inspired by Versailles, Hampton Court, Longleat, and Chatsworth to display status through exotic plants and ostentatiously designed gardens.

The first post-Restoration pleasure gardens date from 1661 when the New Spring Gardens were opened on the Lambeth side of the Thames. In John Evelyn's diary on 2 July 1661, he

records it as ‘a prettily contrived plantation’.¹ In Samuel Pepys’ diary from 29 May 1662, he moves between the Old Spring Gardens and the new one,

To the Old Spring Garden, and there walked long, and the wenches gathered pinks. Here we staid, and seeing that we could not have anything to eat, but very dear, and with long stay, we went forth again without any notice taken of us, and so we might have done if we had had anything. Thence to the New one, where I never was before, which much exceeds the other; and here we also walked, and the boy crept through the hedge and gathered abundance of roses, and, after a long walk, passed out of doors as we did in the other place, and here we had cakes and powdered beef and ale, and so home again by water with much pleasure.²



First opened in 1746, Ranelagh Gardens in Chelsea boasted acres of formal gardens and tree-lined promenades. [Public Domain](#)

The New Spring Gardens became known as Fox Hall, or Faulkes Hall and eventually Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens in 1729 when it was taken over by the entrepreneur Jonathan Tyers who began charging one shilling for entrance. Ranelagh Gardens in Chelsea was established in 1742 (where the Chelsea Flower Show now is) and offered real competition to the Vauxhall Gardens, charging two shillings and sixpence. By the mid-eighteenth century, there were at least sixty pleasure gardens in the London area and many in large towns, especially spa towns.

¹ [Project Gutenberg's The Diary of John Evelyn](#), 348.

² S. Pepys, *Diary* '[Thursday 29 May 1662](#)'

There were roughly three types of pleasure gardens. Bowling greens at pubs and tea gardens, those with gravelled walks and bowling greens, and huge gardens such as Vauxhall and Ranelagh. The seventeenth-century fashion for rustic idyll had quickly given way to Rococo splendour and would evolve into a place of gaudy family fun.

Pleasure gardens were laid out as formal gardens with waterways, exotic plants, trees, and shrubberies. In the evenings, oil lamps were used to illuminate the most spectacular of these garden designs. There were buildings for performances and eating but also where visitors could see the latest art and admire the beautiful architecture. Ranelagh had a pavilion in the Chinese style, and Vauxhall would display paintings by William Hogarth and Frances Hayman in its eateries, effectively becoming public art galleries. Music was performed in the pavilions. George Frideric Handel performed much of his music at Vauxhall. Mozart played there when he was nine years old. Other notable people whom we know to have frequented these gardens include Horace Walpole and Charles Dickens, who visited Vauxhall in 1836.

Slowly, pleasure gardens diminished in popularity. Ranelagh closed in 1803. From the 1840s railway tracks ran close to the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens and nearby gasometers filled the skyline. The gardens finally closed in 1859. There is now a park on the site. For almost two centuries, the pleasure garden played host to decadence, beauty, fashion, music, art, and romance. A type of fairyland place that is too often forgotten.

References and Resources:

Much of the information for this post is taken from the small but incredibly informative book by Sarah Jane Downing, *The English Pleasure Garden 1660-1860* (2009).

Stephen Bending, [‘Pleasure in Pleasure Gardens’](#)

Danielle Thom, [‘Welcome to the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens’](#)

[Project Gutenberg's *The Diary of John Evelyn*](#)

S. Pepys, *Diary* [‘Thursday 29 May 1662’](#)