

CHELTENHAM'S BANDSTANDS

by Mick Kippin

INTRODUCTION

Cheltenham has just two surviving bandstands, one in Pittville Park and the other in Montpellier Gardens. Both have suffered from the ravages of time, but happily they have now been restored to something very close to their original glory, thanks to the Cheltenham Civic Society (for Montpellier) and the Cheltenham branch of the Royal Air Force Association (Pittville). There have at various times in the Town's long history been possibly as many as ten bandstands at various locations, with an eleventh that did not get passed the planning stage. Despite there having been so many bandstands in the Town, we could never boast of more than five at any one time.

Early bandstands, in general, can be traced back to the latter half of the 18th century and were greatly influenced by oriental architecture, such as the Chinese Pagoda, which was erected in Montpellier Gardens specifically for the use of the Montpellier Spa band. As early as 1786 the band at Royal Old Wells had the use of a small wooden balcony, which could be classed as a bandstand of sorts, but *Browne's Historic and Local Cheltenham Guide* of c.1805 suggests that the band had in all probability outgrown this small balcony area by this date and that visitors to the wells were, 'entertained with a musical band who play in a temporary box erected for the purpose in the courtyard opposite the front of the pump room'. This temporary box is also mentioned in Ruff's guide of 1806.

In 1849 the proprietors of Royal Old Wells built a new pump room and the *Cheltenham Looker-On* reported, '...the same band as last year...is to perform every morning and evening in the rustic orchestra erected for their use on the lawn in front of the pump room.' This was the same site as the earlier 'temporary' box, which in all probability had now become more permanent.



The Chinese Pagoda in Montpellier Gardens
(Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum)

MONTPELLIER GARDENS

Henry Thompson opened the first Montpellier Spa in 1809; this was a long plain building with wooden pillars and a veranda. A mall balcony was placed over the centre, almost certainly for a group of musicians. The whole of this area was redeveloped in about 1817 when the original pump room was replaced with the more substantial Long Room. A print in Griffith's *Historical description of Cheltenham* of 1826 shows another possible bandstand. This was on the northern side of the new Long Room at the top of the Spa walk. It too was demolished in the rebuilding of 1825 when the great copper dome of the Rotunda was added. For many years afterwards the Montpellier band played either by the Chinese pagoda or just inside the north colonnade close to where the earlier bandstand had been. The present Montpellier bandstand was erected and first used in September 1864, which makes it the oldest bandstand in the British Isles that is still in use. There are two that are older; Birkenhead Park (1847) and Clapham Common (1861), but neither of these are used today. There is some evidence to suggest that Pearson Thompson may have planned to erect a bandstand in Montpellier Gardens as early as 1841; this was the year in which he purchased some granite stonework that had been used in the construction of the Eglinton Tournament in Scotland. The 1884 Ordnance



Details from the 1884 OS map
(Cheltenham Reference Library)

Survey map of the Montpellier area clearly shows the bandstand's octagonal shape. The Coalbrookdale Company of Ironbridge made the wrought iron work and the pattern can be seen in their catalogue.

To add to the public entertainment in Montpellier Gardens, the Borough Council decided to erect an open-air stage close to the bandstand. This was called the 'Proscenium' which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is that part of a theatre between the scenery and the orchestra, i.e. the stage. Three tenders were submitted for the work:

Messrs. Collins & Godfrey	£337 10s. 0d.
Messrs. Billings & Co	£325
Mr Joseph Yates	£322

Not surprisingly, Mr Yates was awarded the contract to build the Proscenium and the work was carried out during July 1900. The Mayor officially opened the Proscenium on 19 June with an inaugural concert, which attracted an audience of 2500 and takings of over £22. The Council approved the addition of an awning between the Proscenium and the bandstand in June 1905, providing the total cost did not exceed £20. Further alterations were made in 1909 and 1910. The audience had dual-purpose seating with reversible backrests that could serve for bandstand audiences in the opposite direction. The stage was enlarged in 1913 and then in January 1916 the awning was apparently worn out and the Council discussed replacing the Proscenium with a more permanent building, but this idea was never followed up. The Proscenium was in regular use up until at least 1937; the beginning of the end for it came in March of that year when the Cheltenham Chamber of Commerce wrote to the Borough Council suggesting the removal of the Proscenium and its pavilion to



The bandstand and Proscenium (with awning) in Montpellier Gardens, c.1920

Sandford Park and suggested that the site at Montpellier be used as a sports centre. The Council however, rejected these suggestions.

Cheltenham Borough Council put the job of repainting the Montpellier Bandstand out to tender in 1902. Three offers were made, for £20 10s. 0d., £26 10s. 0d. and £48. A Mr. J M Smith was awarded the contract for his £20 10s. 0d. The next recorded instance of the

bandstand getting a new coat of paint was in May 1925, although the floor had been repaired in 1912, when it had been considered unsafe. The base of the bandstand is quite deep and roomy and in Edwardian times the Cheltenham Archers who shot in the gardens used it as a store. During WWII it was home for the winch of a barrage balloon.

The ravages of time along with bouts of vandalism did a lot of damage to the bandstand, forcing the Council into a decision on its future. In May 1993 the Borough Council's planning committee considered several options. One plan was to move the whole structure down the road into Imperial Gardens. However, this was considered impractical, as it was unlikely that the bandstand would survive the move.¹ A later, and much publicised plan was to turn it into a restaurant! This idea met with strong opposition, particularly from the Cheltenham Civic Society, who fortuitously stepped in and offered to organise its restoration. After a considerable amount of work, the late Sir Charles Irving M.P. officially reopened the bandstand on 20 August 1994.

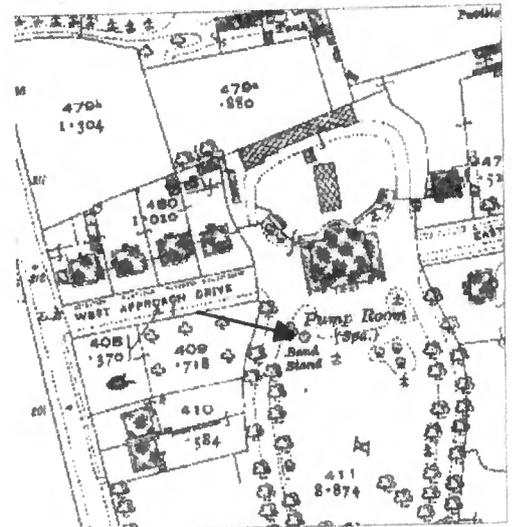
PITTVILLE PARK

Cheltenham's other surviving bandstand is on the other side of town in Pittville Park. It is not contemporary with the Pump Room, which was first opened to the public in 1830, but was built in 1900. A temporary

bandstand had been erected in the Marle Hill Annexe at Pittville as early as June 1895, but was later moved into what became known as the Agg-Gardner Recreation Ground. This recreation ground was officially opened on 20 June 1888, when the Town Band played on the 'temporary' bandstand. This site was to become a regular venue for local bands. In August 1898 the bandstand was improved with the addition of a sailcloth covering and backing supplied by Messrs. Newth of Gloucester for £1 17s. 6d.

In March 1900 the Borough Council's Town Improvement committee instructed its entertainment sub-committee to produce a report and recommendations for the provision of a permanent bandstand for Pittville Park. In April the Borough Surveyor submitted plans for two designs, one circular and the other rectangular. They were both approved and tenders were invited from local builders for their construction. By the end of June only one tender had been submitted, by Messrs. Collins & Godfrey for £317, with an additional £60 if they were to have oak shingle roofs instead of tiles.

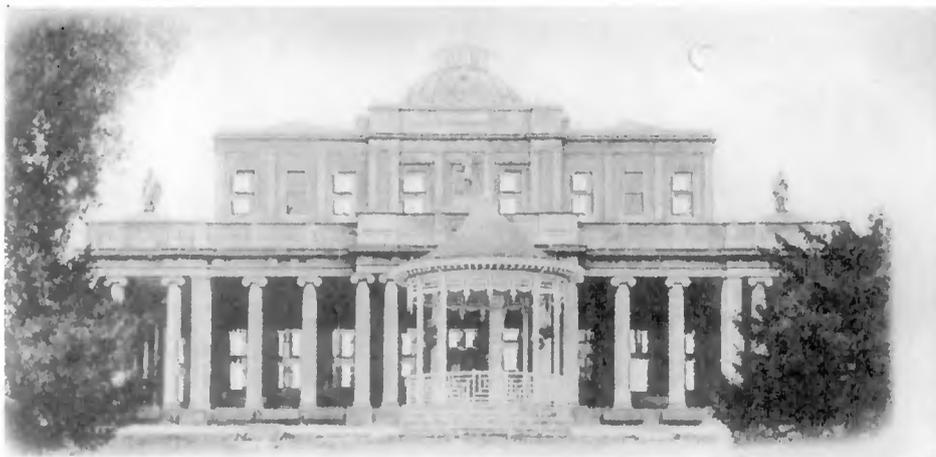
Until about 1900 a narrow path, the last remnants of a once broad Promenade, ran straight up the gardens from the lake to the front of the Pump Room and the circular bandstand was erected at the end of this path. However, in 1901 this path was grassed over to give the wide lawn that is there today and in 1901 Collins & Godfrey were paid a further £25 to move the bandstand off to one side of the Pump Room where it has remained. The construction of the circular bandstand in front of the Pump Room was, in fact, contrary to the Council's original intentions, which had placed the rectangular version in this position and the circular one the other side of the Evesham Road by the boating lake. So it was the rectangular bandstand that stood by the boating lake. Sadly, this bandstand, like so many others became a target for vandals. The floor was considered



The Pittville bandstand on the 1923 OS map

unsafe and repaired in 1912 at the same time as that of the Montpellier bandstand.

Throughout 1915 there was considerable discussion by the Borough Council regarding public concerts at both Montpellier and at the Winter Gardens. The Borough Surveyor was instructed to look at the feasibility of moving the 'temporary' bandstand from the Agg-Gardner Recreation Ground to the Winter Gardens. He considered that this would cost about £150, but he felt that despite being classed as



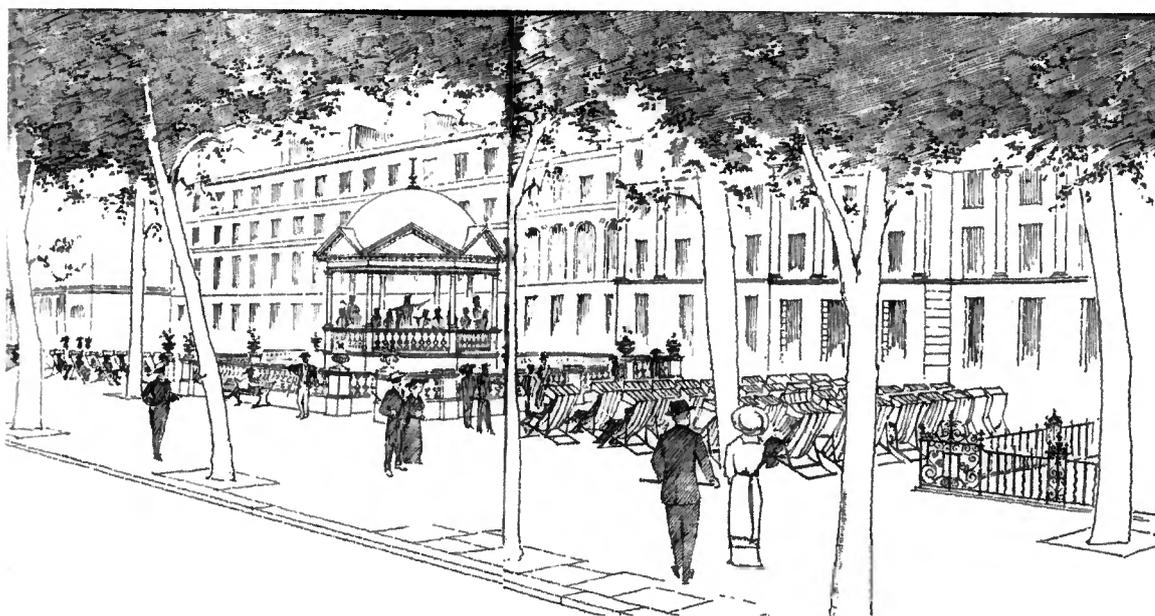
Pittville bandstand in its original position directly in front of the Pump Room, c.1900

a 'portable' bandstand, it would probably suffer from the move. The idea of moving this bandstand across town was discussed on several occasions during 1918 and 1919, but was never actually carried out.

It is probable that this bandstand was demolished at about this time and a more permanent building erected for use as a pavilion and changing room for sports taking place on the recreation ground. Although the 1923 Ordnance Survey map of the area still shows a bandstand at this spot, local residents have no recollection of there being one there, although it is possible that the balcony of the pavilion could have been used for musicians.

At a meeting of the Council's Parks & Recreation committee on 6 November 1957, the Park Superintendent submitted a report about the vandalism that was damaging the bandstand by the boating lake. The committee discussed the possibility of turning it into a refreshment kiosk. However, by January of the following year no applications for tenancy of the bandstand had been received and a decision as to its future was put off until the next meeting. In fact, no further discussion seems to have taken place and the bandstand was probably demolished sometime in 1958/59.

OTHER BANDSTANDS: The Promenade, Imperial Gardens and Naunton Park

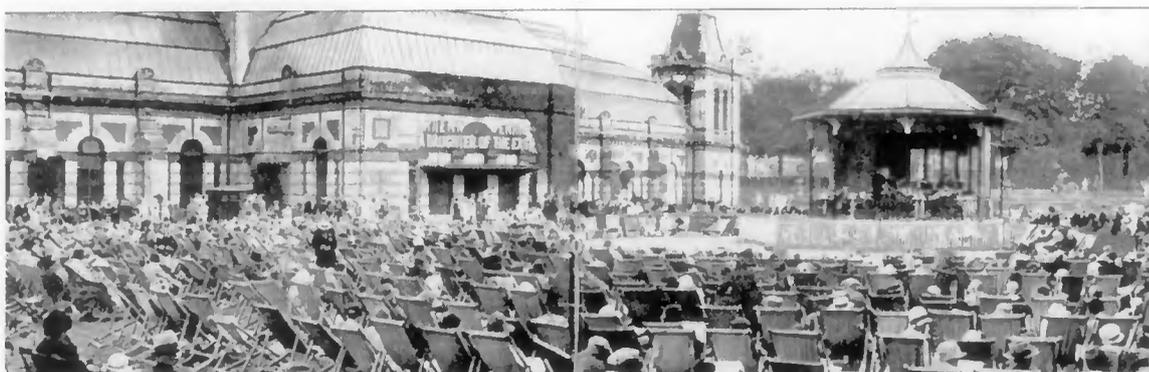


Artist's impression of a possible bandstand in the Promenade (The Cheltenham Looker-On, 8 February 1913)

As early as 1887 there had been plans to erect a bandstand on the narrow strip of garden in The Promenade, but objections from residents put the plan on ice for several years. These obstacles seem to have been, at least, partially overcome by September 1894, when a temporary bandstand was erected in front of what is now the

Municipal Offices.² The Council was still trying to persuade one last resident to allow a permanent bandstand to be built as late as June 1902! The idea of a permanent bandstand for the Promenade was still under discussion in 1920, despite considerable indecision amongst Council members on this occasion. Two plans were under

consideration – one for a bandstand and the other for a War Memorial. In December 1919 the Hennibique had offered to erect a ferro-concrete bandstand for about £600. However, with the Great War still strong in people's



An audience enjoying a band concert in Imperial gardens, c.1920

minds, the plan for the War Memorial was considered more fitting and won the day.

In January 1920 it was suggested to the Council that a permanent bandstand would be better sited in the grounds of the Winter Gardens and not in The Promenade. The Council agreed and a quote was obtained from Walter MacFarlane & Co. of Glasgow for one of their Type 249 bandstands at a cost of £625; but the overall cost, including laying out the ground and lighting was estimated to be £3383, which the Council considered excessive and instructed the Borough Surveyor to look at the figures again. His revised total came to £2048 1s. 0d., which was approved and work on the area began at the end of March 1920. The new bandstand was officially opened on 3 May of that year, the opening ceremony being marred by a Mr Whitworth heckling the Mayor and other speakers saying that the Council had erected the bandstand without authority from the Ministry of Health; he made no reference as to why he felt the Ministry of Health's approval was needed! In any case they would have been aware of the project, as the Council



The Imperial Gardens' bandstand on Bognor Regis seafront, 2000

had earlier applied for a loan of £2000 from the Ministry toward the cost of the bandstand. Sadly this bandstand was sold in 1948 to Bognor Regis Council in Sussex for just £175, it now stands on Bognor Regis sea front having undergone extensive renovation. The glass panels, which were a part of this bandstand when it was in Cheltenham have not been replaced - no doubt today's vandalism would preclude the use of such a large amount of glass in such an exposed position, although bandsmen would, no doubt, welcome some shelter from the sea breezes!



The Naunton Park football team, 1905-6, with the thatched bandstand in the background

put in the foundations and prepare the ground for this structure. The bandstand stood, not surprisingly, in the middle of a line of trees known as St.Clair-Ford Avenue.³ This bandstand was unusual in that it had a thatched roof; in 1903 £12 was paid for material for rethatching. Thatched bandstands are quite rare and there are probably only one or two surviving examples in Great Britain. Naunton Park became a regular venue for local bands until December 1925 when the Parks & Recreation Grounds committee recommended that the bandstand be removed due to its deteriorating condition. Mrs E. St.Clair-Donald, Captain St.Clair-Ford's granddaughter was informed of the Council's decision.

In April 1896 the Council's Town Improvement Committee received a letter informing them that Mrs St.Clair-Ford was offering to pay for a bandstand to be erected in Naunton Park as had been contemplated by her late husband Captain St.Clair-Ford. The Borough surveyor was instructed to



The Royal Viennese Band in Cheltenham, c.1880-90?

The most recent attempt to erect a new bandstand in Cheltenham was in September 1929 when the Borough Surveyor was instructed to prepare plans and estimates for a bandstand in Sandford Park. It would appear that this idea was never followed up fully, although a platform of some sort was erected for band concerts in the Park, since there is reference to it being moved into the Winter Gardens in April 1932.

Finally something of a puzzle! The photograph below is *The Royal*

Viennese Band apparently taken in Cheltenham. The building in the background is almost certainly the Winter Gardens, but this is not the bandstand already discussed, which stood in Imperial Gardens between 1920 and 1948. The bandsmen's uniforms clearly predate this period and the design of the bandstand is totally different from the one erected in 1920.

Bands of seemingly foreign origin were extremely popular at seaside resorts and Spas during the late 19th century. There were the Blue Viennese, White Viennese, Blue, White and Scarlet Hungarian, Kossuth Hungarian ad infinitum! The Blue Hungarian played in Cheltenham during the summer of 1890 and the White Viennese also visited at some date, but I can find no definitive proof of a Royal Viennese band playing in the town.

Cheltenham Borough Council frequently made use of *temporary* bandstands in some parts of the Town, and it is probable that this bandstand was just such a *temporary* structure erected for the summer season in Imperial Gardens during the late 1880's or 1890's. The wooden framework and wooden railings do not give the appearance of any durability.

Notes:

¹ This was proved later during the restoration. As the work progressed it became quite clear how fragile the whole structure was.

² On the spot where the War Memorial is now situated.

³ It is probable that the trees were planted after the bandstand had been put up.

Sources:

Cheltenham Borough Council Minutes from 1891,

A wide selection of Guidebooks of Cheltenham,

The Cheltenham Examiner, various dates

The Cheltenham Looker-On, various dates

The Cheltenham Chronicle & Gloucestershire Graphic, various dates.

Kenneth Young, *Music's Great Days in the Spas and Watering Places*, Macmillan, London, 1968