

# The Norman Arch

The 12th century Norman Arch, on the north side of the Abbey Grounds, is the only surviving, visible building from the Augustinian Abbey (part of the original precinct wall runs along Gosditch and Dollar Streets). Originally known as Spital Gate, it was one of two gatehouses to the Abbey and led into one of the Abbey's farms, Spital Gate grange. After the dissolution of the Abbey it remained a working farm as it was suitable for tenancy and so was not demolished. In the 17th century a cottage was built adjoining the Gate and in 1771, with its piggery and pool, was still a working farm. The nearby large tithe barn was demolished in 1829.

The Norman Arch is a favourite subject for artists both amateur and professional. An early drawing was made by the antiquarian William Stukeley in 1721. The most important works are the series of views of the Arch, pond, barn and dovecot made by J C Nattes around 1814. Many images were made (of the view from both sides) later in the 19th century by amateur artists and, apart from the Market Square, the Arch is probably artists' favourite Cirencester scene.

In the 20th century it continued a favourite subject for the now widely available art of photography and it appears in many different guises as a postcard with photographs by some of the leading Cirencester photographers.



Drawing of the Norman Arch by A J P, 1816, no further details are known of the artist. Kindly lent by T. C. Gibbs

# House and Grounds 1774-1870

The fifty years from the 1770s saw major alterations to the house and grounds, reflecting changes in fashion and the creation of a pleasure ground and park on the estate. A new house, 'Abbey House', was built in 1774-76 for Thomas Master, probably designed by the architect William Donn. It was altered in 1818-1825 to keep up with current fashion, with the ground floor bow front extended in Greek Revival style.

The new house was given new surroundings – a more naturalistic landscape in the style of Capability Brown replaced the formal gardens of the earlier house. The house now overlooked a large expanse of rolling lawn used as pasture, which extended to a lake. It is likely that the lake was created around 1800. Flowerbeds and a shrubbery were formed near the house and a kitchen garden with potato house and melon ground was sited adjacent to Spital Gate Lane. Local nurserymen, the Gregorys from 1823, and the Jefferies from 1837, were involved with the development of the gardens.

Between 1823 and 1839 a major planting scheme for trees on the estate was begun, with nearly 150,000 trees planted in the first year. By 1834 240 acres of woodland had been created. A managed cutting regime allowed the growth of an understorey of ash and hazel cut on a regular cycle for the local market while the oaks and other broadleaves grew on as a long-term crop for future generations. Many of the trees planted which included poplar, birch, alder, elm, larch and Scotch fir survive today.

Beyond the house and pleasure ground a park was created at Harebushes which included a folly. This was first mapped in 1837 and consisted of a wooden temple next to a quarry, from which views of the town could be admired. Extensive walks and rides could now be enjoyed from the house through the pleasure ground to the park and the wider estate through the new woodland.

The Abbey landscape was to remain largely unaltered until the early 20th century.



Cirencester Church and Abbey Grounds by Miss Winter, 1825-50. Kindly lent by T. C. Gibbs

# House and Grounds 1870-1965

In the 1870s and '80s the house was brought up to date with the creation of a new service wing and later with the addition of bay windows, Venetian shutters, and sun blinds. A balustrade added shortly after 1908 remains by the present retirement flats.

The gardens continued to flourish, reflecting the Victorians' interest in bedding plants and exotics. When the tenancy of the house was advertised in 1894 it included a mushroom house, 3 heated greenhouses, 2 vineries and carnation and peach houses. Accounts books reveal that six gardeners were employed between 1894-1895. The house was let from 1897 and the tenants, notably the Dugdale family from 1908, particularly developed the gardens. A rockery and water features were added near the house reflecting the Edwardian fashion for alpine planting. Photographs show the kitchen garden, now covered by the housing scheme leading off Dugdale Road. There was also a hedged rose garden (where the bandstand is now) with roses supplied to Mrs Dugdale by Jefferies nursery of Cirencester.



Rose Garden with Roman Capital, probably 1950s



Kitchen Garden, probably 1950s

In 1953 the house was vacated by the tenant. From 1959 onwards various plans were considered including changing the use of the site from agricultural, private pleasure grounds to multi-residential and converting the house into offices. The Corinium Gate development was started in the early 1960s.

The lawned area in front of the house had many functions – pasture, meadow, cricket pitch and an arena for public events. There was a croquet lawn adjacent to the house. Although the grounds weren't open to the public generally they were frequently shown on request and use was given for occasional public events.



Abbey Park, Cirencester

The view here is lovely

Abbey Park, Cirencester, postcard, about 1914

# Activities in the Grounds

The Abbey Grounds were in use as a public space from the middle of the 19th century. Jane Master who had inherited the estate in 1823 is known to have opened the Grounds to the public at least once in 1857. In August 1879 the Wilts and Glos Standard announced that the first annual Dog show or exhibition would be held in the Grounds. When Abbey House was let to tenants in 1897 access to the grounds allowed for camps, carnivals, hunts and shows. These included events such as the Cirencester Church Lads Brigade *Trooping the Colour*, the Cottage Hospital Fete (for the poor sick of the town), a Pastoral Fete of singing and dancing by local children and the Cirencester Carnival and other events.



Cirencester Church Lads Brigade. *Trooping the Colours*, date unknown

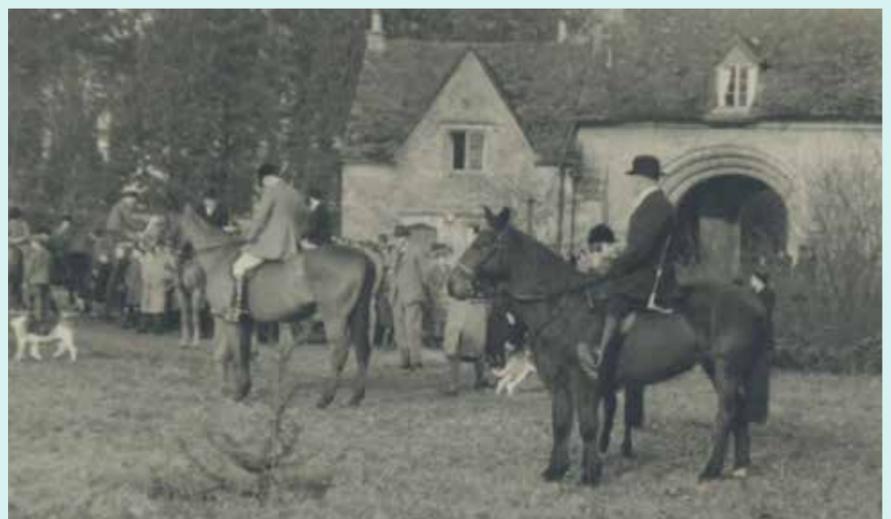


M. Salmel at Cirencester, 1912

The Cottage Hospital Fete held in the Abbey Grounds on 25 July 1912 was a major event. The visit of Henri Salmel the 'Daily Mail airman' flying his Bleriot brought a 'record crowd to the hospital fete, and between three and four thousand people awaited his arrival'. He landed in a field near Grove Lane and went on to give a demonstration in Lord Bathurst's Deer Park.

In 1961 the Grounds hosted a major Arts Council exhibition *Contemporary British Sculpture*, a ground-breaking exhibition of outdoor sculpture that toured to six venues from Edinburgh to Eastbourne, including work by Henry Moore, Lynn Chadwick and Barbara Hepworth.

In recent years the Grounds have hosted many more events including, an annual Love Parks week and since 1913 the Phoenix Festival, a live music event.

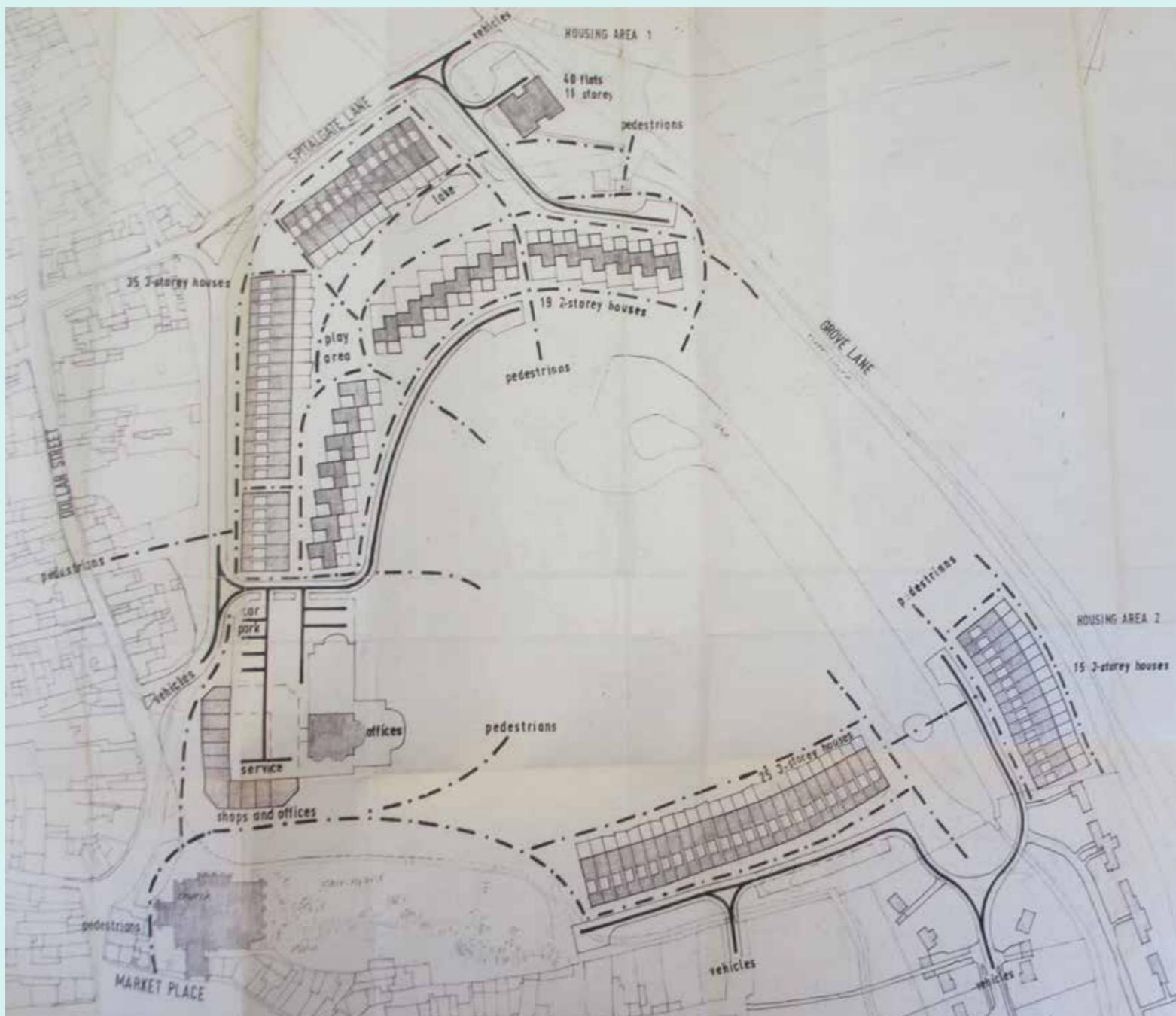


Hunt in the Abbey Grounds, the last hunt in the Grounds was in the 1950s

# The future...

Plans to develop the Abbey Grounds were made in the 1960s. A planning application was made in 1961 to build 174 dwellings (houses and flats) covering the area, including surrounding the lake, and with 15 shops opposite the church on Dollar St. This was declined but an appeal to the Minister suggested that the north-west area might be developed. Further plans were made in 1963 for 1020 habitable rooms in flats and houses the flats including 40 flats in an 11-storey tower block. These also included the conversion of Abbey House. This plan was turned down. The final scheme was begun in 1966, involving the demolition of the historic house and the creation of flats on its site; these were formally handed over in November 1970. The large area of land remaining became a public park in 1965 and the same year the Norman Arch was gifted to the town by the Chester-Master family.

The Abbey Grounds is a much-loved park and continues to have an important role at the heart of the life of the town. Looking ahead it is important to ensure that the park meets the needs of the residents whilst respecting the heritage of the site befitting its designation as a scheduled ancient monument.



Plan for the Abbey Grounds, including tower block, Building Design Partnership, 1963  
(Ref K672.30 courtesy Gloucestershire Archives)