

Cheltenham's Zoo Wars: Proposed Zoological Gardens in Pittville and The Park in the 1830s

STUART MANTON

THE FASHIONABILITY OF THE SPA, with the resultant increase in both visitors and the people serving them, caused a dramatic rise in the recorded population of Cheltenham and unprecedented levels of property speculation in the 1820s and 1830s.

Cheltenham, established on the High Street, grew rapidly to the north and south in the 1820s, in estates such as Pittville, Montpellier and Lansdown. The developers and owners of these estates competed vigorously for further private capital, providing elegant public buildings, gracious tree-lined avenues and prestigious amenities such as parks and gardens to attract wealthy investors. It was into this scene in the autumn of 1836 that two opposing companies fought to establish a zoological garden in the town.

In the British Isles by 1830 the demand for public entertainment, and the requirements of scholarly research, had come together in the founding of the first modern zoos. There were then only two zoological gardens; in Regent's Park (now London Zoo) and at the Surrey Zoological Gardens in Kennington. However, within five years zoos had been established in Dublin, Liverpool and Bristol, and several more were planned.



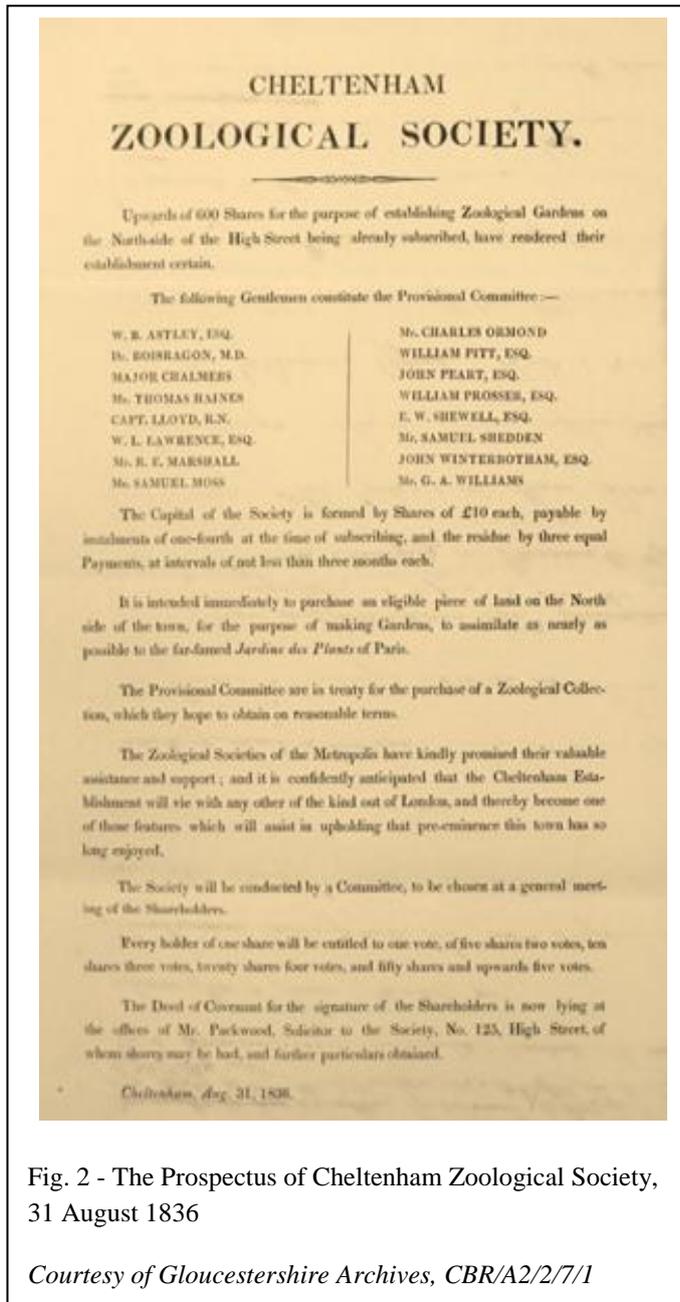
Fig. 1 - The Camel House at Regent's Park in 1835

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Locally, on 2 April 1835, the *Cheltenham Chronicle* announced excitedly that Mr Hale Jessop was to add a Zoological Department to his nursery garden, near St James's Square, and had already acquired a raccoon and some American grey squirrels. The newspaper hoped that the project would be completed soon and was confident that it would be attractive to the public and commercially profitable.

Cheltenham Zoological Society

A little over a year later, on 25 August 1836, the *Cheltenham Journal* carried the dramatic



announcement of a new zoological garden, saying that the pre-eminence of the town as a health resort and its prosperity as a centre of fashionable society was under threat from 'formidable competition'. Since Cheltenham attracted from 15,000 to 20,000 casual visitors 'of rank, fashion and fortune' in the season and, considering the success of similar establishments this scheme, it said, must represent a profitable investment for subscribers. The project was proposed to be funded by the sale of 1,000 shares at £10 each and both the Regent's Park and Surrey Zoological Gardens had promised support. On 31 August the share prospectus, bearing the title *Cheltenham Zoological Society* (Fig. 2), stated that land would be purchased for gardens similar to the famous *Jardins des Plantes* in Paris.

Although ostensibly for the benefit of the whole town, when the announcement was repeated in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* on 1 September 1836 it said that a zoological garden would be created 'on the North side of the High Street of Cheltenham'. Mr William Pitt, Mr Thomas Haines and Captain Lloyd had been appointed to form a committee to find an eligible site, implying that no location had been determined. The *Cheltenham Chronicle* supported the scheme immediately commenting:

'Zoological Gardens - These novel establishments are rising in public estimation, as they well deserve to do'... 'The eagerness with which the scheme has been embraced by the inhabitants of Cheltenham is the best proof of its great value in their eyes, and the best assurance of the success of the undertaking.'

One week later, on 8 September, the Cheltenham Zoological Society was confident that since it had sold more than 600 shares in the project the outcome was certain. The *Chronicle* revealed that a site had been chosen, which it understood to be a field to the east of the Pittville Pump Room, with the advantages of a south sloping aspect and fine dry soil, which was ‘of the highest importance in securing the health of the animals’. Considering that the search was only supposed to have begun one week earlier, this choice was clearly predetermined. The field in question was agricultural land in the parish of Prestbury to the north of Wyman’s Brook, probably acquired by Joseph Pitt in 1831. In the 1930s this became the location for Cakebridge Road and part of the former Pate’s Grammar School for Girls, now occupied by Pittville School, in Albert Road (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 - The Site of the Proposed Zoological Gardens

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The formation of a zoological garden would have been considered an enhancement to Pittville, the private residential estate started in 1824 by Joseph Pitt during a building boom. By 1835 most of the development had been in the southern part, leaving the Pump Room to the north of the lake isolated. New zoological gardens would have stimulated interest, and possibly investment, in this northern area. The initiative to create a zoo here in 1836 corresponded closely with the appointment of one of Pitt’s sons, William Gregson Pitt, to the estate management of Pittville. Formerly the general manager of the Cheltenham Branch of the County of Gloucester Bank, which

absorbed Joseph Pitt’s bank in May 1836, he was the designated treasurer of the Cheltenham Zoological Society and sold its shares through the bank. The honorary secretary, William Prosser junior, was a business associate of John Forbes, the principal architect of Pittville, whilst the solicitor to the Society, John Packwood, dealt in land on the estate.

Competing Interests

Meanwhile in the south of Cheltenham, The Park estate had been laid out in 1833 by the developer Thomas Billings and by 1836 all of the houses had either been sold or let. Billings had been contemplating a zoological garden in the centre of his estate since about 1834 and, with this in mind, had already created a lake and laid out plantations. He had travelled widely in Britain, visiting newly created zoological gardens and researching the best design for his scheme. Having already received the endorsement of several wealthy gentlemen, he found after a temporary absence from Cheltenham that his plans were at risk of being overtaken.

Billings reacted quickly to the news of the proposed Pittville zoo, garnering support for his own cause. The first public response, reported in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* on 8 September 1836, came from a meeting of several 'Gentlemen of Property and Influence', where it was resolved that they agreed with the aim of creating a zoological garden for Cheltenham but regretted that the search for a suitable site had been confined to the north side of town, without considering the existence of a more suitable location. Mr Sherwood, Mr Trye, Mr Monro and Mr Billings were appointed to meet the Cheltenham Zoological Society provisional committee to request a reconsideration of the site.

The *Cheltenham Chronicle*, initially favourable to the Pittville project, on 8 September declared its neutrality in the matter but said that everyone who had already subscribed could have no cause to complain since they had known that the intended location was on the north side of town. It hoped that an amicable understanding between the parties could be reached. The *Cheltenham Journal*, however, expressed frustration that the proponents of the Cheltenham Zoological Society should have peremptorily selected a site on the north side of the High Street, when the project was originally promoted as being of benefit to the whole town, rather than to one narrow commercial interest. It considered that the Society ought to open the search for a site to ensure that the most suitable location was identified, otherwise, the *Journal* warned, '*IT MUST SURELY FAIL*'.

Battle lines drawn

Open hostility broke out in the following week when, on 13 September, the Cheltenham Zoological Society stated that the north side of town was just as good a location for the gardens as any other and that it was not willing to reconsider the decision. It affirmed that it had arranged to purchase a splendid collection of animals and birds and that it had engaged the landscape gardener Richard Forrest to design the gardens without delay.

The 'Gentlemen of Property and Influence' having been rebuffed by the Cheltenham Zoological Society, in a masterstroke announced the creation of the Gloucestershire Zoological, Botanical and Horticultural Society. At the inaugural meeting it was resolved that since the proposed Cheltenham Zoological Society had refused to receive even a suggestion regarding the selection of the site for the gardens, 'though offered for the public good', and as it was too narrowly zoological and limited to only £10,000 share capital, that no suitable union with it could be formed. It stated that for the advancement of science and in the interests of town and county, a 'more liberal and extended establishment' was required.

The Gloucestershire Zoological, Botanical and Horticultural Society had an impressive list of influential supporters. These included the Duke of Beaufort, the Bishop of Gloucester and Craven Berkeley M.P. as patrons, together with a provisional committee of 42 gentlemen. From the outset, it was intent on outflanking the opposition. It resolved to invite the noblemen, the bishop and clergy and the ladies and gentlemen of the county to join the Society; to consult a scientific zoologist and botanist on the best means of achieving its objectives; and secured the co-operation of the Cheltenham Literary and Philosophical Institution and Cheltenham Horticultural Society. On 22 September it advertised in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* for not less than 20 acres of land within one and a quarter miles of Cheltenham's St Mary's Church. Its underlying motivation was somewhat revealed by the share prospectus which stated that, whilst the site had not been fixed, it had an option of taking 20 acres in the centre of The Park estate, which bore great merit. It intended to raise £20,000 in shares of £5 each, double the amount of the Pittville project, but would request more capital if required.

On 29 September the Cheltenham Zoological Society verified its purchase of 16 acres adjoining Pittville, prior to which Richard Forrest had surveyed various sites and reported on their suitability as zoological gardens. It was pleased to state that in his opinion the site purchased was the best of any he had seen. Furthermore, Mr Forrest had produced a design for the proposed garden, which had been adopted, and which would be shown to the public in a few days. The *Cheltenham Journal* reported that the land had cost £5,000.

On the same day, the Gloucestershire Zoological, Botanical and Horticultural Society repeated that although it had not yet settled upon a site, it had an option of taking 20 acres in the middle of The Park estate and had received a report from 'several scientific gentlemen' stating that it was well suited to become a zoological garden. However, in an apparent demonstration of its open-mindedness it would create a sub-committee to search for alternatives.

At a general meeting of the Gloucestershire Zoological, Botanical and Horticultural Society on 3 October, it was reported that its share issue had already been fully subscribed. It had therefore advertised for land in the Cheltenham newspapers, resulting in bids from Thomas Billings of 20 acres in The Park estate and from Mr C. Higgs of 20 acres on a site east of the Old Bath Road, both at £400 per acre. The appointed sub-committee had examined both locations and had no hesitation in recommending The Park site. The Society resolved to negotiate with Mr Billings over the purchase of the land and to set up a public competition for a garden design. On 13 October the Society duly advertised to 'landscape gardeners, being also zoologists and botanists', offering a £50 prize for the best design.

The 'kindly, warm marl' of Pittville

The Cheltenham Zoological Society, at Pittville, resolutely continued to advertise its prospectus throughout October and November. On 24 November 1836 it finally published the report from Richard Forrest in the *Cheltenham Chronicle*, in which he denigrated The Park site chosen by its rivals, stating that it was 'most objectionable'. He claimed that the land had neither the inclination nor the drainage required and that the topsoil was unsuitable for the growth of ornamental trees and shrubs, whilst the subsoil, 'a chilling blue clay', would harm not only the health of tropical animals and birds but even native British species!

Forrest went on to assess two other sites, which he found wanting, before listing the virtues of the Pittville site, saying that it was far preferable to any other he had seen during a three-day stay in Cheltenham. The soil, he wrote, was a mellow hazel loam, overlying 'kindly, warm marl'. The inclination of the site falling from north to south about 40 feet would provide a diversity of environments, whilst the Cotswold Hills to the north and east would provide shelter. The site was bounded by a stream to the south (Wyman's Brook), whilst the air was pure and of free circulation. Furthermore, from the ground Cheltenham could be seen in the middle distance, 'happily nestled among the trees'. He considered the site was one of the most desirable he had ever seen and was certain that the proposed arboretum and zoological garden would be a great success. The *Cheltenham Chronicle* reported that a lithograph of Richard Forrest's beautiful design for the garden was available for public viewing and hoped that nothing would prevent its implementation.

Illustrated plan of the Pittville zoo

A copy of the lithograph survives today in Gloucestershire Archives (D6187) showing the layout of the garden but it is missing important details, such as the title of the work and the key to the numbers on the plan. Happily a pristine copy, reproduced here (Fig. 4), exists in the Royal Collection Trust (RCIN 701435). The plan, entitled 'Cheltenham Zoological Garden,

combining in its arrangement A Botanical Arboretum', shows the existing Pittville Pleasure Grounds to the east of the Evesham Road and bears a copy of a lithograph of the Pittville Pump Room published by Charles Hullmandel. The zoological garden and arboretum occupies the centre of the plan and is annotated with numbers explained in the lower left-hand margin.

The design, delineated by existing field boundaries forming a mostly rectangular outline, consists of three distinct areas. The northern part is symmetrically arranged along a north-south aligned broad walk and contains enclosures for carnivorous animals, reptiles, birds, monkeys and deer. The broad walk continues south past a refreshment room to an area with footpaths in sweeping curves and which would have accommodated zebras, kangaroos, rhinoceros, camels, elephants 'with bath' and a goose pond. The southern part of the design is more naturalistic and is laid out around a lake with two rustic bridges, fed by Wyman's brook, and ponds for pelicans and alligators.

In its combination of formal and relaxed styles, if not in its detailed design, the garden would indeed have resembled the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris, in accordance with the aims of the Society. At 16 acres, it would have been one third larger than the Bristol Zoological Gardens.

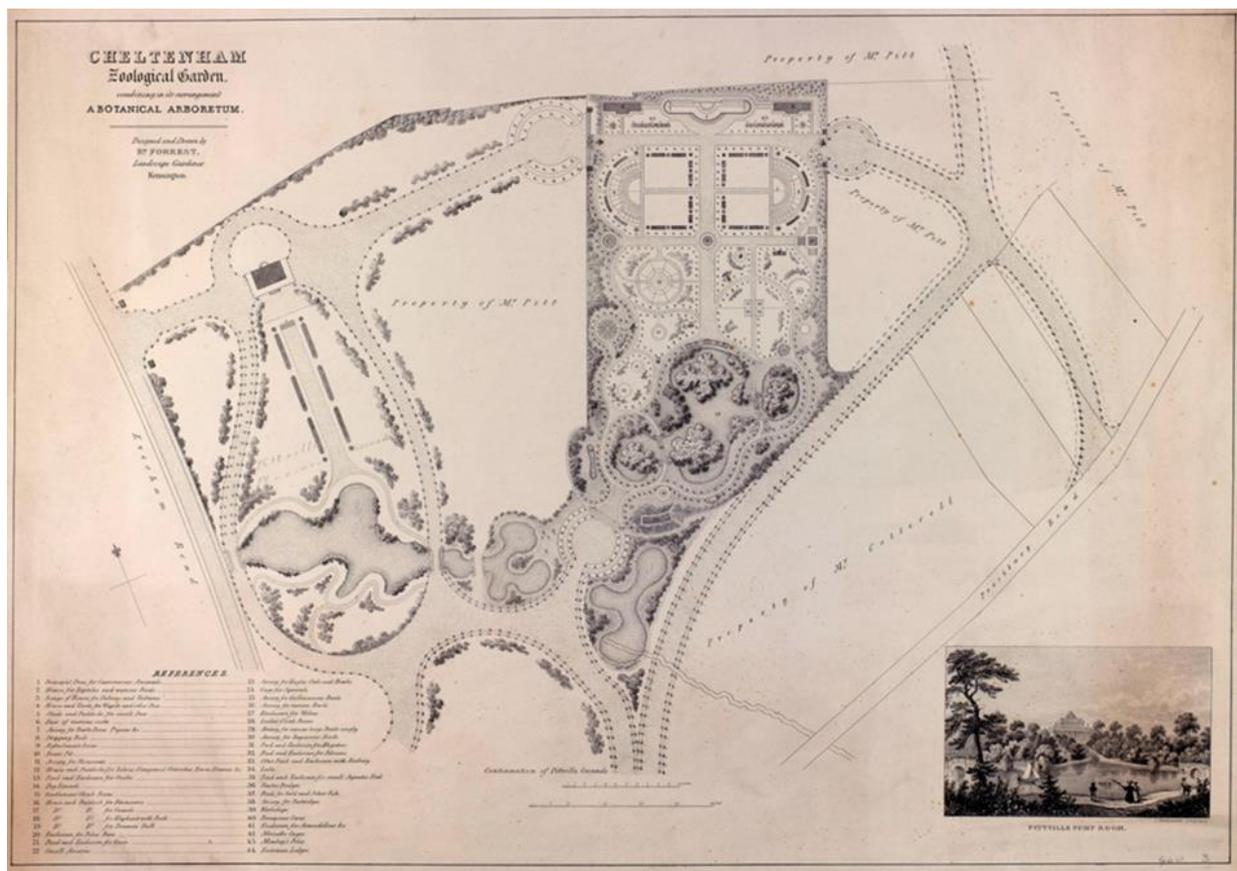


Fig. 4 - Cheltenham Zoological Garden, designed and drawn by Richard Forrest
 Courtesy of Royal Collection Trust / copyright Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2017 (RCIN 701435)

The Park fights back

Two days after Forrest's report was published, Henry Davies, secretary to the Gloucestershire Zoological, Botanical and Horticultural Society, wrote to the editor of the *Cheltenham Chronicle* refuting Forrest's derogatory comments about The Park site. He provided two supporting letters, one from civil engineer and architect Charles Baker and the other from local nurserymen Joseph Evans and Edward Pipe, stating that these would prove to be more reliable than 'mere unsupported assertions of incompetent or prejudiced parties'. Interestingly, these expert opinions were only obtained the same day and no reference was made to the several scientific gentlemen the Society claimed to have consulted. It seems that these consultants were only engaged in reaction to the Forrest report and that the decision to choose The Park site, belonging to Mr Billings, was another foregone conclusion.

Richard Forrest, far from being incompetent, was a highly respected, leading garden designer of his time, with over 25 years' experience. In a long career he worked for the Duke of Northumberland at Sion House, for the Duke of Westminster at Eaton Park and also ran the Kensington Nursery, under royal patronage. In addition, he had already successfully designed the Bristol Zoological Garden, which today is the fifth oldest zoo in the world. He went on to plan the Manchester Zoological Gardens at Broughton Park (1837-42), with an array of animals including polar bears, buffalo, emus, ostriches, camels and kangaroos. *The Gardener's Magazine* for December 1836 (p. 622) said of him, 'as a garden architect we know of no man to be compared with Mr Forrest' and 'Mr Forrest has, also, had more experience in laying out zoological gardens and arboretums than any other artist.'

In the event, the Forrest report may have had minimal effect because by 2 December 1836 the Gloucestershire Zoological, Botanical and Horticultural Society had sold more than 2000 shares and was ready to proceed. It had received a number of design proposals for The Park garden, and had decided to adopt one signed 'Perseverando'. The plans would be lithographed and copies sent to the Pittville Zoological Society and all libraries and public rooms. It later transpired that 'Perseverando' was no less than Mr Thomas Billings!

Collapse of the Pittville scheme

The Cheltenham Zoological Society wavered, announcing a special general meeting of its shareholders on 13 December to consider entering into discussions with its competitors. It proposed that the Cheltenham Zoological Society should confine its activities to creating a purely zoological park, whilst the Gloucestershire Zoological, Botanical and Horticultural Society concerned itself solely with botanical and horticultural matters. It regarded this as being in the best interest of Cheltenham as a whole. The *Cheltenham Chronicle* hoped that this approach would avoid the threatened unpleasant collision between the parties on the north and south sides of the town. The newspaper acknowledged that Cheltenham could not support two zoological societies and hoped that an olive branch would be held out by each of them to avoid both failing.

This was the final public pronouncement of the Cheltenham Zoological Society. It is not recorded whether the two societies met to discuss different roles but the outcome was that the zoological garden at The Park, alone, proceeded. The *Cheltenham Chronicle* of 18 May 1837 declared that the Pittville project was dead and wished the Gloucestershire Zoological, Botanical and Horticultural Society every success in furthering its aims, for the benefit of the town as a whole.

The Park Zoo opens, but only briefly

The foundation stone of the Zoological Gardens at The Park was laid with great fanfare by Henry Norwood Trye, the High Sheriff of the County, to celebrate Princess Victoria's birthday on 24 May 1837. It was hoped that the gardens would open one year later but due to slow progress this eventually had to be postponed until 28 June 1838, the date of Victoria's coronation. In October that year the Gloucestershire Zoological, Botanical and Horticultural Society merged with the Cheltenham Horticultural and Floral Society and the flower and vegetable shows were gradually transferred from The Park to Montpellier Rotunda.

It seems that whilst the zoo project was an ambitious and imaginative scheme, it was largely a dream. Insufficient funds were raised to complete many of the proposed buildings or enclosures and few animals were ever acquired. In August 1840 an anonymous letter to the *Cheltenham Chronicle* from 'A. Subscriber' asked what had become of the immense fund that was raised to form a zoological garden on the south side of town. He wished to know if there was any chance of recovering his capital, or of receiving any interest on the investment. The newspaper concurred and offered to sell him its shares at half the original cost!

Perhaps the pending failure of the Zoological Gardens had the sobering effect of reconciling the north and south of Cheltenham, in the realisation that neither party could hope to succeed alone. This is indicated by the merger of the Pittville Horticultural Association (based at Pittville Pump Room) with the Cheltenham Horticultural and Floral Society (based at Montpellier Spa) in March 1841. The speculative bubble of the early 19th century had burst.

On 18 March 1841 an adjourned general meeting of the Zoological Gardens at The Park was convened at the offices of Mr Billings, when it was decided to proceed against those shareholders who had not paid their dues. It was also decided to call another meeting to consider dissolving the company. On 24 April 1841 the *Cheltenham Looker-On* lamented that the income of the Zoological Gardens had never equalled the cost of keeping them up and that they had received little public support. Later that month the gardens were advertised for sale and the *Cheltenham Chronicle* hoped that a wealthy gentleman would acquire the land to build a mansion, thereby bringing prestige to the town.

The following year the Zoological Gardens were purchased by the architect S. W. Daukes, who had designed the entrance lodge, and the name changed to 'The Park Gardens'. The subscriptions and admission charges were reduced and much of the eastern part of the site was given over to archery, cricket and bowling, with tennis, rackets and fives courts under consideration. By January 1844 Mr Hale Jessop, the nurseryman who had added a zoo to his garden nearly 10 years earlier, had purchased the collection of birds and animals. The end soon followed, with a sale of 'Birds, Beasts and Reptiles', which consisted mostly of stuffed animals in glass cases, together with various cricket, archery and bowls equipment. The Park site was advertised for sale once more in July 1844, when it was considered a delightful development site for detached villas or, perhaps, as a cemetery.

The Zoological Gardens at The Park were never fully realised and could not claim sufficient public support. It is doubtful whether the Cheltenham Zoological Society at Pittville would have fared any better, since it had intended to raise only half the capital and had chosen a relatively remote location, further from the town's first railway station at Lansdown, opened in 1840.

In an attack on the Pittville project the *Cheltenham Journal* of 19 September 1836 had appealed for the greater interests of the whole town to be considered saying, 'There are few towns in the

kingdom [...] the best interests of which have been more prejudicially affected by precipitate decisions upon matters of the utmost importance [...] than those of Cheltenham.’ It gave, as an example, the hasty and inconsiderate adoption of the line of the railway to London via Stroud and Swindon, which it said had proved to be ‘the longest and the worst’ that could have been suggested.

It may seem unfair that the Cheltenham Zoological Society at Pittville was so heavily criticised in 1836 for adopting a partisan approach in selecting a site for its gardens, when its competitors, although purporting to be open-minded, were equally biased. Both of the zoological societies were founded, whether all their members appreciated this, to further the commercial interests of the landowners. It is tempting to attribute the failure of both projects entirely to this lack of cooperation but the truth may simply have been that Cheltenham was over-reaching itself in imagining it could maintain a zoo.

Acknowledgements

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I am indebted to Jill Waller for her research into the members of the provisional committee of the Cheltenham Zoological Society and to Dr Steven Blake, who first discovered the plan of the Cheltenham Zoological Garden at Gloucestershire Archives, and who encouraged me to research and write this article.

Sources

Most of the information for this account is from local newspapers. The *Cheltenham Chronicle*, *Cheltenham Looker-On* and *Cheltenham Mercury*, are available through The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) and the *Cheltenham Journal* at Cheltenham Local Studies Library.

Additional source material came from *The Gardener's Magazine* and from *Pittville 1824-1860, a scene of gorgeous magnificence*, by Steven Blake (Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museums 1988).