What were Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens like?

As London became more built up in the 17th and 18th centuries, Londoners began to need open spaces to relax in. Pleasure gardens were built at the edge of the city and were privately run. The most famous were Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens.

The people who went to the gardens were the highest in society, including members of the royal family. They went to be entertained and to escape from the noise and pollution of the city. There were also pickpockets and prostitutes, who frequented the gardens and gave them a truly mixed atmosphere.

What was special about visiting the Vauxhall Gardens?

Vauxhall Gardens opened to visitors in 1661 under the name ‘New Spring Gardens’. Before Westminster Bridge was built, it could only be reached by sailing up the Thames.

Visiting Vauxhall Gardens was an excellent opportunity to show off the latest fashions, such as the pelisse shown above. A pelisse, or pelisse-coat, was worn by women over their other clothes. They could be made in everything from the lightest silk to heavy fur.

As well as providing an opportunity to parade the latest styles, Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens provided ‘fresh air’. Breathing fresh air and taking gentle exercise were thought to help keep people well and at this time health was a concern for all classes. Many gardens had natural spring water believed to be good for people’s health. People could combine this health trip with meeting up with friends and family, seeing the most well-known figures of the day or maybe even a meeting with a secret admirer.
What could people do and see at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens?

This playbill advertises the programme of entertainments at Vauxhall Gardens for the week beginning Monday 19 August 1850. By the middle of the 19th century, when this bill was produced, pleasure gardens had existed for around 200 years. Advertising a changing programme of events was important for making sure people still visited.

Londoners in the 19th century would have been used to seeing bills like this on London’s streets. As the printing industry developed, it became easier for venues like the pleasure gardens to create bold and eye-catching bills.

Pleasure gardens competed for visitors, vying with each other to offer evermore exciting entertainments. As you can see from the bill, Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens offered a wide variety of entertainment including:

- lion-tamers
- trampoline clowns
- fortune tellers
- ventriloquists
- troupes of acrobats
- monkeys
- dogs
- jugglers
- horses who danced to a waltz
- fire walkers.

Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens covered an area of 12 acres. That’s about eight football pitches!

Were pleasure gardens safe?

Despite their appearance, not everything was perfect in the gardens. Not long after they were first opened, there were visitors to the gardens who caused trouble.

This picture shows a watchman doing his round. In the background you can see two burglars.

Women had to be careful of ‘overly-friendly’ men and watchmen were employed to try to stop the pickpockets. Samuel Pepys wrote in 1667 that there were ‘...young gallants misbehaving, breaching supper boxes uninvited and insulting the ladies’.

A Watchman Making the Rounds, painting by Thomas Rowlandson, about 1795–1800
How did the Pleasure Gardens change?

When Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens opened, like most gardens, entry was free, but exclusive. Guests needed an invitation and good social connections to get in.

This changed in 1728 when Mr Jonathan Tyers took over the Gardens. Tyers saw a business opportunity in reducing their exclusivity, and instead, attracting greater numbers of people. He started to charge an entrance fee but kept this deliberately low, to encourage a broader clientele.

This ticket is a silver season ticket. It allowed repeat entry to the Pleasure Gardens throughout the season. Not everyone could afford to purchase a season ticket and become regular visitors. For many, visiting pleasure gardens was a great treat to be enjoyed on special occasions.

Mr Tyers also introduced entertainment that made Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens famous. He built pavilions, lodges, groves, grottos, lawns, temples and cascades and an elegant music room, ‘The Rotunda’.

Fountains of water suddenly showered unsuspecting visitors with jets of water to amuse dry onlookers! A remarkable marble statue of the composer Handel was made for the Gardens in 1738. The statue astonished passers-by because it showed Handel in his dressing-gown and slippers, without his wig. Only his closest friends would have seen him like this in real life.

In 1850, a hot-air balloon was sent up into the sky above the Gardens. Instead of a basket, a horse was secured underneath the balloon with the balloonist on its back.

Silver season ticket for Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, 1737–1760
What happened to Vauxhall Gardens?

This poster advertises Vauxhall Gardens closing night, on Monday 26 July 1859. It was dubbed the ‘Last Night For Ever’.

People sang, horses performed in The Rotunda and finally, after some dancing, visitors watched a firework display entitled ‘Farewell for Ever’.

The Gardens closed because people were visiting them less and less. Other gardens, such as Cremorome, had become more fashionable than Vauxhall. Once the railways were built Londoners were also able to travel further to enjoy the fresh air of the countryside and seaside.

See also
www.vauxhallgardens.com
This website gives a brief history of the Vauxhall Gardens, images and resources relating to them.

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London’s objects, both on display and in store. Go to
www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections

Visit the Museum
In the Expanding City: 1666–1850s gallery at the Museum of London, you can visit the beautifully recreated late-18th century pleasure gardens.

Further resources for teachers/tutors
Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:
www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank.