

Pleasure ... and shame: Reputation and Respectability in Sydney Gardens, Bath, 1820–30

Steve Poole

Let our citizens remember that if they desire their wives and daughters to *enjoy* the description of entertainment to be found at public gardens, much of their safety and tranquillity depends on the character of the man who conducts them.¹

This timely piece of advice, delivered through the liberal columns of Keene's *Bath Journal*, thirty years after the city's Sydney Gardens Vauxhall first opened its doors, prompts some reflections upon the nature and value of a respectable gentleman's reputation in late Georgian England. Conceived as the centrepiece of a geometrically designed New Town on the Bathwick estate in 1795, Sydney Gardens was the heart and hub of Bath's last great Utopian expansion. Its fashionable picturesque layout signalled modernity to its formal and somewhat tired progenitor at Spring Gardens and gentility to a rustic and more recent competitor a boat ride away along the Avon at Grosvenor Buildings.

By the end of its first decade, the Gardens boasted an impressive maze, swings (including one designed by the celebrated inventor and musical instrument maker, John Joseph Merlin), supper boxes, a pavilion, a dancing room and an encircling equestrian ride.

Moreover, the intended social audience was indicated quite clearly in the pricing structure. While visitors to Spring Gardens could take any number of morning walks in a year for a season ticket price of 3s., taking the air in Sydney Gardens cost 6d. per visit or 2s. 6d. per month and Gala evenings were double the Spring Gardens' price. And while the new Gardens were building a reputation along these elite lines, Spring Gardens responded with a new Coffee Room as 'an agreeable resort for respectable tradesmen'. In 1799, unable to compete further, Spring Gardens finally closed its doors.² By the 1820s, however, Sydney Gardens was facing challenges of its own.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Bath's own reputation as an exclusive spa faced competition from newer rivals like Leamington and Cheltenham, and from new seaside resorts like Brighton. 'The Parades are no longer what they were in the days of Sheridan', noted the author of *A Peep at*

Bath in 1826: 'They are still inhabited by gentility, but comparatively deserted by fashionables ... Many are of the opinion that its fashionable fame is declining ... I suppose the late pecuniary embarrassments have ruined the dissipated and taught prudence to the lavish'.³ As visitor numbers steadily declined from their eighteenth century heyday, and the demographic shifted in favour of the respectable middling class, frivolous hedonism gave way in turn to a new mood of moral seriousness. Now more than ever perhaps, the Gardens' reputation as 'a pleasing retreat to be universally resorted to' by middle-class visitors was worth consolidating, but there were competing audiences from within the city to consider as well.⁴ A growing number of working- and lower-middle-class Bathonians now had disposable income in their pockets and a desire to spend it, but picturesque strolls and operatic recitals were not necessarily the best way to capture their attention. Attracting a regular number of paying visitors to both daylight promenades and spectacular but expensive evening Galas required business acumen and considerable investment from Garden proprietors whose ability to pay rent to the Trustees was wholly dependent on the generation of profit. However, pandering to broader tastes with more sensational forms of entertainment risked damaging the Gardens' time-honoured reputation for polite gentility at

the very time that sober public opinion was increasing its guard against vulgarity.

This balancing act was a tricky one, as the owners of London's Vauxhall Gardens were also beginning to recognise. Changes at Vauxhall attracted a degree of public criticism as soon as the founding Tyers family relinquished their grip in 1821 and the new owners, Thomas Bish and Frederick Gye, began transforming the interiors and multiplying entertainments. Many of Vauxhall's more economically unproductive green spaces were systematically stripped of trees and shrubbery to make way for more platforms, brightly painted new theatres and other attractions, so that by the time the novelist Edmund Yates visited it some ten or fifteen years later, 'it was a very ghastly place; of actual garden there was no sign'.⁵ Although previous proprietors had experimented often enough with rope dancers, fireworks and balloon flights, the more sensational entertainments only dominated at Vauxhall after Bish and Gye took over the lease and added for the first time the sort of variety acts more often seen in theatres. These entertainments attracted a less exclusive clientele who, as a correspondent of *The Times* put it, brought Vauxhall to a 'state of degradation and vice ... to the chaste and simple singing of its orchestra have succeeded theatrical amusements, fireworks and dancing'.⁶

Changes of a similar kind began at Bath, if with relative caution, under the proprietorship of George Farnham between 1817 and 1824. Indications of changing public taste were, after all, easily read and difficult to ignore.

Extravagant Diorama and Panorama exhibitions were regularly mounted in rented halls at Bath during the 1820s, for example, and certainly competed for audience. In 1824, hundreds queued at 2s. a head to see a representation of Bonaparte's funeral (painted on 16,000 square feet of canvas), and accompanied by a full band of music. Despite the cost, the popularity of this diorama secured it a run at the Masonic Hall in York Street for several weeks.⁷

Bath's premier public park had a more exacting reputation to protect than Vauxhall, however, and Farnham would also have been aware that profligate spending in the Gardens came with no guarantee of success. Not only had the first proprietor of the place fallen into bankruptcy in 1813,⁸ but also an ambitious pyrotechnic entertainment with animated figures and flying chariots had fallen flat that same year after sabotage 'by some malicious person unknown', causing Farnham's predecessor considerable financial loss.⁹

Farnham's modernising innovations were largely successful, but relatively modest. His most notable introduction was a popular slack rope dancer, Il Diavolo, in 1820: a man celebrated for 'leaping through a balloon twenty feet from the stage and twenty feet from the rope, blowing a trumpet the whole

time and the rope in full swing'.¹⁰ Farnham also redesigned the orchestra and brought in a Russian Mountain (an early roller coaster), some low-brow comic singers and a comedian who performed 'imitations of Bath and London actors', thereby, noted the *Bath Chronicle*, 'uniting the amusements of Vauxhall with those of the Theatres'.¹¹ But visitor numbers failed to outstrip Farnham's expenses and in the summer of 1824 he resigned the lease amid criticism that in his enthusiasm for innovation, he had neglected the traditional walks and carriage ride.

Farnham's successor was a former governor of the County Gaol at Ilchester, William Bridle. Rising from relatively poor and lowly origins as a mate on the Thames hulks, Bridle earned an enviable reputation for efficient management and penal reform at Ilchester, making significant and pioneering changes to prison discipline, improving the diet and introducing a regime of compulsory work for inmates. With an annual salary of £500, twice the size of any of the governors who followed him, and the additional benefit of one-eighth of the earnings of his prisoners, he was also very well rewarded. 'Matchless in goodness, bountiful to all', ran a contemporary doggerel tribute, 'Thousands of captives oft your hand has cheered/ You are at once respected, loved and feared'.¹² On paper, Bridle was a sound choice for Bath; he was a firm and

respectable hand with a proven record as an ambitious moderniser. As proprietor of the Gardens, he would 'adopt every improvement that would increase their attraction ... in the same liberal style as the Royal Gardens at Vauxhall'.¹³ Existing attractions would be freshly painted, the ride reinstated and macadamised, paths cleared, shrubberies and flower beds replanted and a number of new amusements introduced, including an aviary, a hermit's cottage and a Cosmorama (later superseded by a much larger Diorama). These improvements were trumpeted not only in bravura newspaper advertisements, but also in a further innovation, the Gardens' first illustrated guidebook.¹⁴

Regardless of cost, Bridle promised, 'future Galas will be attended with artists of the first eminence'. The first Gala, decorated with 15,000 new lamps, extra flags, banners and transparencies, featured a crowd-pleasing balloon ascent by the pioneer aeronaut James Graham, a repeat performance from Il Diavolo, the official opening of the Cosmorama, and a debut from Monsieur Clyne, 'the

celebrated French Hercules.’ In coming months, Bridle added Fantocinni puppets, Tyrolean stilt waltzing, the infant prodigy, ‘Madame Flora St Lue’, Scaramouche Montifiore, the Little Spaniard ‘who stands unequalled as a posturing buffoon’ and whose act required him to crawl in and out of the rungs of an upright ladder surrounded by exploding fireworks and, in 1826, Xavier Chabert, who would ‘enter a hot oven and remain there during the cooking of certain pieces of meat’, before emerging unscathed to eat the meat and wash it down with a spoonful of phosphorous, oxalic acid, boiling oil and molten lead.¹⁵

What makes Bridle noteworthy is not so much his engagement of performers of this kind for, admittedly, he was not the first proprietor to do so, but the scale of his ambition, the sensationalism of his design and his willingness to invest. ‘The entertainments of the evening were varied’, reported the *Gazette*, ‘introduced in rapid succession, so as to prevent any ennui or listlessness among the delighted company’.¹⁶ Initial returns were good; 3,000 paying customers trooped through the turnstiles for his first Gala in July and 5,000 for his second a month later.

Maintaining regular order at vast crowd events like these was vital, but who better to take charge of that, than a former prison governor? ‘The excellent

arrangements for preserving the delightful promenades from the intrusion of improper company reflect the highest credit upon the Renter', observed the *Chronicle*, signalling Bridle's intention of screening the Gardens from pickpockets and prostitutes.¹⁷ From now on, it declared, 'Honour and respectability only will find admission to the Promenades'. Unwelcome incursions from the lower orders were theoretically discouraged by the entry charges, but the exterior railings were low and gate-crashers difficult to exclude. Bridle therefore raised the perimeter walls to a height of seven feet, to 'deter the ingress of the lawless and depraved', and successfully lobbied the Bathwick police office to increase the watch on Gala nights, both in and outside the Gardens.¹⁸ Evidence for an increase in prosecutions for Garden-related offences is fragmentary, but Bathwick's constables certainly mingled with the crowds on Gala nights and exercised zero tolerance against petty thieves. Convictions were successfully secured for thefts of beer glasses in 1826 for example, and twice again in 1828, when 'it was discovered that several persons had broken into the gardens without paying the admission price'. For the more serious offence of stealing canaries from Bridle's new aviary, a well-known local thief, Joseph Madden, was gaoled for eight months.¹⁹ Whether connected or not to these initiatives, visitor numbers to

the walks and ride, particularly amongst the 'fashionable and select', appeared to be on the rise.²⁰

Unsurprisingly perhaps, a few months after taking up the lease, Bridle was honoured with a public dinner for his efforts by 'many gentlemen of the first commercial consequence in the city'.²¹ This won wide approval from the *Chronicle*, the *Gazette* and the *Herald*, but drew quite a different response from Keene's *Bath Journal*, a paper clearly unimpressed either by Bridle's record or with his suitability for the job.

'A dinner to celebrate the virtues of a discarded jailor!!!' it railed:

Monstrous mummary!... What! Is it because Wm Bridle has thought proper to become the proprietor of Sydney Gardens and thrust himself upon the public as the conductor of a place of public entertainment that we are to break down the barrier that distinguishes virtue from vice — to give up our sense of moral obligation, our feelings and our fixed convictions? ... If our public amusements are to be of real and lasting service to the city, let them be conducted by men of unimpeached reputation.

It was an extraordinary outburst and it cannot have been pleasant reading for the aspirant proprietor.

Are we to be told that because Wm Bridle has added a few more lamps than usual to illumine the Gardens, and hired the Diavillo, we are to consider him raised to the rank of respectable individuals and cower in the senseless clamour of his pot companions? Let our citizens remember that if they desire their wives and daughters to *enjoy* the description of entertainment to be found at public gardens, much of their safety and tranquillity depends on the character of the man who conducts them.

Some readers of the paper were in full agreement. 'I am convinced, if we wish for the prosperity of Bath', wrote one, 'our public amusements must be conducted by those who are a credit to their country and not by those who have disgraced it'. Another reasoned:

Had the present renter of Sydney Gardens been less obtrusive ... he might have passed without further notice, but to become a caterer to our public amusements, and that too in the elegant city of Bath; he has poked himself under our very noses ... In becoming the conductor of that tasteful and pleasant resort, Sydney Gardens, he has evinced a daring disregard to public opinion.²²

The cause of this unexpected controversy was not Bridle's intrusion of low-brow amusements upon elite public space, but an aspect of his professional reputation as a prison governor which he might have hoped would not follow

him to Bath. At Ilchester in 1820, he had been required to accept as a prisoner the renowned radical orator, Henry Hunt. Hunt had been sentenced to two-and-a-half years in gaol for unlawful assembly and inciting discontent following his arrest during the 'Peterloo' Manchester reform meeting of 16 August 1819.

At the time of his arrest and trial, no English radical enjoyed a higher public profile than Hunt and it was, perhaps, Bridle's misfortune to have his growing reputation as a firm and reforming governor tested against the determination of his notorious prisoner to maintain his status as a gentleman of influence while in gaol.²³ Since he had been convicted of a misdemeanour, Hunt was initially accommodated in the debtors' wing, where he enjoyed the privileges of free association with family, friends and servants customarily granted to non-felons. These arrangements were suddenly countermanded in May 1820 by the county magistrates, ostensibly on the orders of the High Sheriff, who placed Hunt in solitary confinement and tightly restricted familial visits. Hunt fought back in print, demanding the status afforded to his co-defendants, Johnson, Bamford and Healey in Lincoln Castle: 'exempt from solitary confinement and enabled to enjoy, as they do, the society of their friends at all reasonable hours'.²⁴ It was Hunt's misfortune to be sent to Ilchester just as the county bench, intent on putting an end to the abuses of promiscuous and

undisciplined mixing in the gaol, was modernising its regulation. When his representations failed, he turned his ire upon Bridle.

Hunt produced a litany of accusations against the governor, alleging embezzlement, gambling, drinking, unsanitary cell conditions and, most damagingly, a number of physical assaults upon vulnerable prisoners. Bridle protested but with a dossier of affidavits in hand. Hunt's legal team persuaded parliament to stage an enquiry into 'the abuses of Ilchester Bastille'. None of the charges were clearly substantiated, but Bridle's conduct became a subject for public debate and the effect was sufficiently damaging in the local arena for the Sheriff to intervene and force him out of his job. Hunt then closed in for the kill with a King's Bench prosecution against Bridle at Wells Assize on a long list of charges of malpractice, and won a conviction over the governor's alleged maltreatment of a prisoner. To unemployment and disgrace, Bridle could now add a £50 fine to his misfortunes, while Hunt trumpeted his victory in two luridly detailed books.²⁵

Bridle's position could hardly be worse. The professional credit he had acquired as a moderniser at Ilchester had brought him a far greater degree of

social capital than his lowly origins would have led him to expect. Unlike Hunt, he had no influential friends to help him recover his self-respect and no experience in manipulating public opinion through the print media.

‘Unvarnished and unlettered’²⁶ though he recognised himself to be, Bridle determined to restore his fortunes and clear his name. Most of the Bath newspapers, whose hostility to Hunt is unsurprising, were sympathetic to him. The editor of the *Gazette*, regarded by Hunt as the gaoler’s ‘pot companion and brother gambler’, even found rooms for Bridle at Bath and may have used his influence to help him gain a position at the Gardens. Meanwhile, the *Journal*’s animosity during the enquiry and afterwards earned it applause from Hunt as ‘the only independent impartial newspaper in this county’ — and a writ from Bridle for libel. Bridle also launched a series of threats against the county magistrates with a declaration that, ‘The trodden viper will sing, my lords and gentlemen’.²⁷

The *Journal* announced its intention never to advertise or report Sydney Gardens Galas while Bridle remained in control of them, or to sell tickets, but within a year fell into line with the rest of the city’s papers and, albeit without mentioning his name, grudgingly backed his improvements. Nevertheless the incident will have reminded Bridle of the fragility of his social position at Bath and confirmed the belief that salvaging his reputation would depend upon his

continued efforts to modernise and regulate the Gardens. 'Fearless of expense', declared Bridle as the dust settled on the *Journal* affair, 'the proprietor will continue the embellishment of his gardens ... until for beauty and effect they stand in the world unrivalled.'²⁸ A year after its unveiling then, he expanded and upgraded the Cosmorama and established an additional charge for entry to it.²⁹ Galas were increased in number from two to four so that a potentially lucrative tie-in could be established with the popular lower-class entertainments of Bath Races and Lansdown Fair. With entry charges of 2s. 6d. and audiences 2,000–3,000 strong, Gala evenings offered an excellent return on capital expenditure, but still left much to chance. As the *Chronicle* put it, 'Mr B must have incurred an immense expense in getting up so magnificent a Gala as that intended to take place on Thursday night and it will require a very numerous attendance to cover his extensive outlay, to say nothing of remuneration for his own trouble and exertion'.³⁰

And there were some rumblings of discontent beginning to surface among Bridle's regular customers about the mounting costs of entry. 'I consider myself not very tenderly used by the conductor of that establishment', complained one in 1827. 'I am too poor and have too large a family to allow of my paying additionally to a sort of minor gala announced two or three times in

the compass of a few days'. Bridle should beware of 'getting too much on his high horse with his friends' and not 'curb their inclinations for an evening lounge by saddling them with an overcharge'.³¹

Ultimately, Bridle found it quite impossible to recoup the cost of annual reinvestment and the outlay gradually took its toll. To make matters worse, in 1829 the Corporation substantially increased the tax payable on the hotel and tap, pitching him into yet another ill-tempered and counter-productive dispute at law, this time with the City licensing authority. He clung on until 1832 when, £4,000 in debt and his expenses exceeding his precarious income, he relinquished the lease and declared himself bankrupt.³²

In a crowning irony, Bridle now found himself back at Ilchester Gaol, though not as a vindicated and restored governor, but as an incarcerated debtor.³³ In 1838 he emerged from prison to run once again as a candidate for the governorship, appealing personally for support to some of the county's most influential landowners, and publishing a pamphlet *Address to the Aristocracy*, doggedly outlining once again the case for reinstatement and accusing county magistrates of orchestrating a campaign against him. Predictably, he was not selected, and his application to the quarter session for financial reimbursement was rejected.³⁴ Unable to secure relief from any of his former friends and supporters, and 'in the lowest degree of poverty', Bridle entered

Bath workhouse in January 1839. 'Among all the instances of reverses of fortune,' noted the *Gazette*, 'there may be some more remarkable, but few more deserving our sympathy'.³⁵ However deserving his plight was considered in the press, Bridle left Bath for good a year or so later. He removed to London and devoted his remaining energies to lobbying parliament with a series of desperate petitions.³⁶ In 1843, 'evidently in a state of the utmost destitution', and now able to walk only with the aid of a stick, Bridle hobbled through the front door of the Home Office and smashed a fanlight. Asked by examining magistrates why he had done such a thing, he declared that it was to get himself arrested and imprisoned so that he would have a roof over his head for the night.³⁷ In 1847, his old enemy, the *Bath Journal*, stepped forward to establish a relief fund 'toward rescuing him from starvation',³⁸ and he finally disappeared from public record in 1851, with a parting flurry of letters on the customary theme, this time to Francis Dickinson, MP and High Sheriff.³⁹

Bridle's misfortunes offer a useful commentary on the nature and value of a good reputation in early nineteenth-century England. Having worked his way up to Ilchester by 'the nature and power of my recommendations', he was understandably proud both of his achievements and the rewards of recognition.⁴⁰ Yet the fragility of a hard-earned professional reputation became obvious as soon as he found himself pitted against the influential gentlemanly

radicalism, experience and acumen of a man like Hunt. Although he salvaged a degree of public credit by turning his utilitarian talents to the management of a pleasure garden, the price he paid was a high one and ultimately unsustainable for a man with no real capital to fall back upon. If losing the Gardens, his second great enterprise, was inevitable despite eight years of investment, the tenacity with which he pursued the recovery of his lost reputation for the next twenty years, regardless of poverty and social isolation, was remarkable.

‘Perhaps no man ever held a situation of trust with more satisfaction to the public or more honour to himself than did Mr Bridle his office at Ilchester’, reflected a local paper in 1838. He had run both Gaol and Gardens ‘with the spirit of order, unwearied zeal and enterprise’, but that, in itself, was not quite enough.⁴¹

¹ *Bath Journal*, 26 July 1824.

² For Spring Gardens prices, *Bath Chronicle*, 27 March 1795, 20 August 1795, 15 June 1797; for Sydney Gardens, *Bath Chronicle*, 23 February 1797, 1 June 1797.

³ ‘A Peep at Bath’, *Public inspector, Literary Magazine and Review*, 1827, p.294-5.

⁴ *Bath Herald*, 10 May 1800.

⁵ David Coke and Alan Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens: A History* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London), p.251.

⁶ Coke and Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens*, p.314.

⁷ *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette*, 29 June 1824.

⁸ *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette*, 31 August 1813.

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- ⁹ *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette*, 9 June 1813.
- ¹⁰ *The Lady's Magazine*, 1825, p.755; *Bath Chronicle* 22 June 1825.
- ¹¹ *Bath Chronicle* 10 Aug 1820
- ¹² *Report From the Committee of Aldermen Appointed to Inspect Several Gaols in England* (London, 1816), p.89; 'Acrostic to Mr Bridle', *The Weekly Entertainer*, 20 September 1819, p.726.
- ¹³ *Bath Chronicle*, 24 June 1824.
- ¹⁴ *Sydney Gardens Vauxhall, Bath, Syllabus or Descriptive Representation...* (Bath, 1825). For another contemporary description of the Gardens, see *The Historical New Bath Guide* (Bath 1823), pp.161-2.
- ¹⁵ *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 7 August 1824; *Bath Chronicle*, 8 July 1824, 12 Oct 1826.
- ¹⁶ *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette*, 10, 17 Aug 1824
- ¹⁷ *Bath Chronicle*, 12 & 19 Aug 1824
- ¹⁸ *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette*, 20 July 1824; *Bath Chronicle*, 30 June 1825; 15 June 1826; *Syllabus or Descriptive Representation*.
- ¹⁹ *Bath Chronicle*, 20 July 1826, 24 July 1828.
- ²⁰ *Bath Chronicle*, 7 April 1825
- ²¹ *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette*, 3 Aug 1824
- ²² *Bath Journal*, 26 July 1824
- ²³ On Hunt's motivation in combatting Bridle, see also Margot C. Finn, 'Henry Hunt's "Peep into a Prison": the Radical Discontinuities of Imprisonment for Debt', in G. Burgess and M. Festenstein, eds., *English Radicalism 1550-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.190-217.
- ²⁴ Henry Hunt, *To the Radical Reformers, Male and Female, of England, Ireland and Scotland*, 21 October 1820, 16 January 1821.
- ²⁵ Henry Hunt, *A Peep Into a Prison or Inside Ilchester Bastille* (London 1821); Henry Hunt, *Investigation at Ilchester Gaol in the County of Somerset into the Conduct of William Bridle...* (London, 1821). The Ilchester controversy is explored in greater detail in John Belchem, 'Orator' Hunt: *Henry Hunt and English Working Class Radicalism* (1985; Breviary Stuff edition, 2012), pp.101-11.
- ²⁶ William Bridle, *A Narrative of the Rise and Progress of the Improvements Effected in His Majesty's Gaol at Ilchester* (London 1822), Preface.
- ²⁷ Hunt, *To the Radical Reformers*, 24 December 1821; Bridle, *Narrative*; *Bath Journal* 26 July 1824.
- ²⁸ *Bath Journal*, 19 July 1824, 13 June 1825; *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette* 22 June 1824; *Bath Chronicle*, 7 July 1825.
- ²⁹ *Bath Chronicle*, 5 January 1826
- ³⁰ *Bath Chronicle*, 8 September 1831
- ³¹ *Bath Chronicle*, 19 July 1827
- ³² *The Times*, 25 Dec 1832, 1 Jan 1833; *Taunton Courier*, 3 October 1838; *Bath Chronicle*, 25 February 1847.
- ³³ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 6 November 1834.
- ³⁴ Bridle to Sir Peregrine Palmer Acland, DD\AH/63/9, Somerset Heritage Centre; *William Bridle's Letter to the Very Noble and Most Mighty Aristocracy of England* (1836); *Taunton Courier*, 29 March 1837, 3 October 1838.
- ³⁵ *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette*, 28 January 1839.
- ³⁶ One was presented in the summer of 1842, for instance; *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 26 July 1842.
- ³⁷ *Taunton Courier*, 20 September 1843.
- ³⁸ *Bath Chronicle*, 25 February 1847.
- ³⁹ Bridle to Francis Henry Dickinson, DD\DN/650, Somerset Heritage Centre.
- ⁴⁰ Bridle, *Narrative of the Rise and Progress*, chapter one.
- ⁴¹ *Taunton Courier*, 12 October 1838.