

HINGES in a FLOWERBED, MONTPELLIER GARDENS
E side, N of William IV statue.



I recently received an enquiry about some large hinges noticed in the flowerbed that runs along the NE side of Montpellier Gardens, below the King William IV statue. I took my camera to investigate, hoping that the hinges may have something to do with a long-lost Montpellier Gardens saline well. This 100ft-deep well had existed to supply spa water to the salts manufactory in the Bath Road, now the Playhouse. In L Richardson's geological report of 1933 the well was described as owned by the Corporation, but 'not in use'. A report commissioned by the Corporation in 1944 gave the approximate position of the well as being near Montpellier Spa Road, but 'no details available'.



About 30 or 40ft to the north of the William IV statue, I found a set of four rusted iron hinges in the flower bed. Between the two front hinges, alongside the path, there is a run of bull-nosed engineering bricks between concrete corner pieces. The distance between these front hinges is approximately 7ft 9"; they had clearly been attached to substantial wooden doors at one time. The rear hinges to these doors exist at the back of the flowerbed amongst the leaf litter. It appears that the wooden doors have either rotted away or been removed, and the chamber beneath filled with earth for planting as part of the flower bed.



The set-up of this wooden hatch did not suggest any link to a saline well, as it is so unlike other existing spa remains. It seemed more reminiscent of a coal hatch, although there was no building on the other side of the wall that was likely to accept coal deliveries. The location of the hatch is just outside the NW corner of the former garden belonging to No.2 Montpellier Parade, beside the boundary wall pillar between Nos.1 and 2 Montpellier Parade.



The 1855-57 Cheltenham Old Town Survey reveals that there was once a large conservatory in the garden of No.2 Montpellier Parade. The floor plan of this hothouse was almost as big as that of the house itself, and a boiler house is indicated at the W end, beside the location of the hinges. This confirms that the wooden doors were for coal deliveries, needed by a fairly substantial boiler to heat a conservatory of that size.



(red asterisk indicates location of hinges.)

At the time of the Old Town Survey, No.2 Montpellier Parade was home to Sir Alexander Ramsay, 3rd baronet, who lived at this address from c.1852 until his death in 1875. Sir Alexander Ramsay was heavily involved the life of the town; as a Conservative he was actively involved in politics, was on the Cheltenham College board of directors, where his sons were educated, took command of the Cheltenham Volunteer Rifles, became a local magistrate and JP, helped establish the Cotswolds Foxhounds, and was one of the founding directors of the Montpellier Gardens Company in 1861. The principal aim of this last scheme was to lay out and maintain the Montpellier Gardens as a place for public amusement and recreation.

Sir Alexander Ramsay's interests in gardening were reflected in his support of the Cheltenham Horticultural Society; he often took the chair at the annual meetings and regularly exhibited at horticultural shows in the district, presenting the produce of his garden and large conservatory. His prize-winning plants included gloxinias, Cape heaths, German asters, exotic orchids, lilliums, tomatoes, and a *lapageria rosea*, or Chilean Bellflower, shown in 1858 as the first to be exhibited in Cheltenham. However, Sir A Ramsay was particularly proud of his ferns and mosses, both British and foreign, for which he won the most acclaim, usually beating the commercial nurserymen of Cheltenham in this category. Lady Ramsay also won prizes at the horticultural shows for her entries, such as 'a dish of cut roses'.

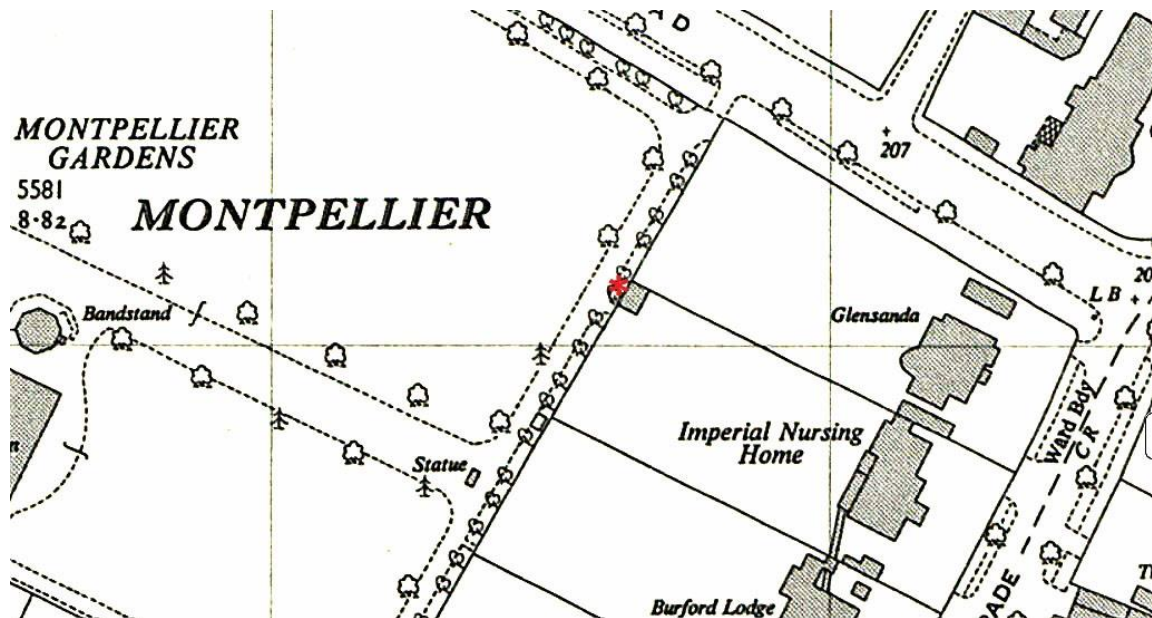
And the man who did all the actual work, including taking the coal deliveries? That was William Coulston, described by the *Cheltenham Chronicle* as 'Sir Alexander Ramsay's excellent gardener'. A native of Leigh, near Cheltenham, Mr Coulston lived in Rowanfield, where no doubt he was able to attend his own garden. He sometimes entered horticultural shows on his own account, and in 1870, at the Tewkesbury Regatta, the *Cheltenham Chronicle* noted his first ever entry of a display of arranged vases of flowers – 'he gave the whole of his competitors the go-bye, taking the First prize for three of the most beautifully arranged vases we have ever seen'. The class was entitled 'Three Vases of Cut Flowers, for the dinner table, displaying the greatest taste and arrangement'.

No.2 Montpellier Parade became the Imperial Nursing Home from 1908 and the hothouse remained in use well into the 20th century, as can be seen in the photograph below; it survived until at least the Second World War.



This 1928 aerial photograph shows the large conservatory, right of centre, abutting Montpellier Gardens.

By 1965 only the boiler-house remained in the garden behind the Imperial Nursing Home, the glass having been long since removed from the conservatory. By 2021 the gardens of Nos.1 and 2 Montpellier Parade had been built over as Glensanda Court. Only the hinges of the coal hatch remain in the flowerbed to remind us of the former existence of the hothouse.



By 1965 only the boiler house is shown remaining in the garden of the Imperial Nursing Home, No.2 Montpellier Parade. (red asterisk indicates location of hinges.)

[Maps courtesy of Know Your Place; aerial photograph courtesy of Britain from Above.]