

VIRTUAL VAUXHALL GARDENS

The Art & History Team

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INTRODUCTION

In the mid-eighteenth century an entrepreneur, Jonathan Tyers, transformed an area on the south bank of the Thames into one of London’s premier attractions: a garden with sculpture, music, paintings and architectural wonders where visitors could relax and socialize away from the stink of the City.

We have much information describing Vauxhall’s garden of delights – the visual, the literary and the musical. Using digital technology it is possible to synthesize these various sources and create a Virtual Vauxhall that unites the senses of sight, sound, touch, taste and, yes, even smell.

Many images survive of Tyers’s Vauxhall Gardens. These capture the well-ordered informality of groups conversing and individuals listening as the band plays.



Vauxhall Gardens shewing the Grand Walk at the entrance of the Garden, published by Robert Sayer (1750–55) © Trustees of the British Museum

Until the University of Leicester project, no painting, print or written description has been able to convey the full 360° physical reality of Vauxhall Gardens. In 1984 Lucy Askew created a fine 3-D model to help visualize Tyers’s Vauxhall for the V&A Rococo exhibition. To explore the prospect of creating a digital model of the entire Vauxhall site, David Coke approached Andrew Hugill, a specialist in music and Professor of Creative Computing. With his colleagues at the University of Leicester Andrew has brought together a team to test how a Virtual Vauxhall might be made. The Rotunda, an indoor space, was chosen as a pilot project, with 1752 as the year for the recreation.



Model of Vauxhall Gardens by Lucy Askew, created for the V & A exhibition Rococo, Art and Design in Hogarth’s England (1984) © Lucy Askew, Victoria & Albert Museum

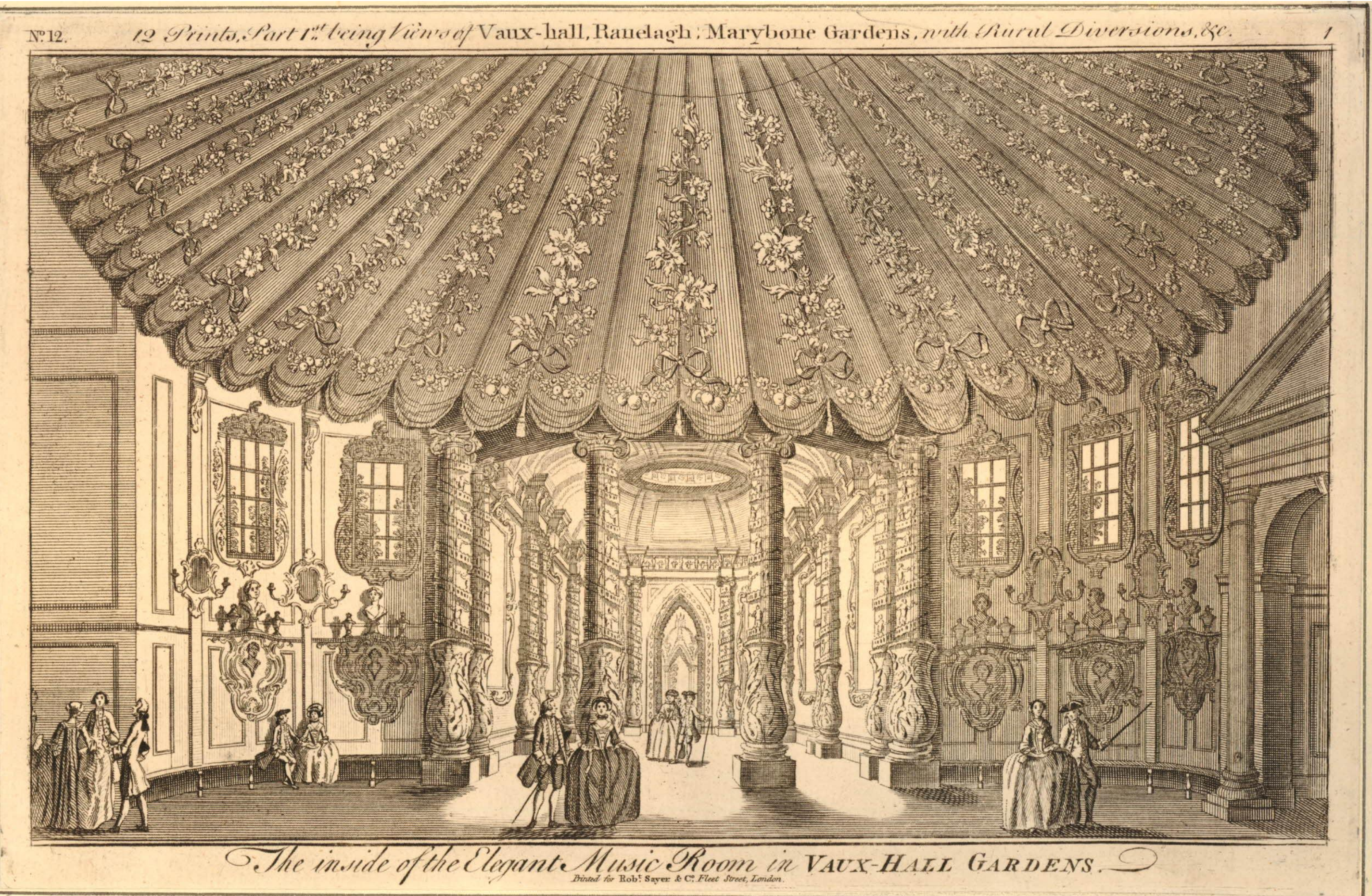
HISTORY

By the 1750s, Jonathan Tyers’s acquisition of Vauxhall’s old Spring Gardens had transformed a dodgy tavern on the south bank of the Thames into a reformed model of civilized entertainment and relaxation, an embodiment of Tyers’s civilizing purpose. At an affordable one shilling (equivalent to a labourer’s daily wage), the entrance fee permitted a broad spectrum of London’s population to sample the gardens’ delights. A spirit of egalitarianism was further encouraged by a particular prohibition: while servants might be allowed, they were not admitted if ‘in livery’ – visible servitude undermined the gardens’ ethos.

Visitors with deep pockets could order *al fresco* food and drink to consume in open-sided ‘supper-boxes’. Each box was backed with a piece of modern art by artists such as William Hogarth and Francis Hayman, depicting pastoral scenes, naval victories and other patriotic subjects that would raise the spirits.

Meanwhile, beyond the central bandstand, tree-lined walks led visitors further off into the gardens’ shadier corners where the occasional sculpture of a famous poet appeared in the shrubbery. For a brief season only, a bed of roses murmured with music (rising from players confined within a hidden subterranean chamber). As daylight faded, the Dark Walk and intersecting avenues were magically illumined with lanterns offering greater (if not total) safety from unwanted suitors of both sexes.

But there was a problem: the London weather. Low skies might deter prospective visitors and looming showers drive out those already there. So, in 1748, Tyers added his Rotunda, a temple-like building, where musicians and audiences might take shelter in the event of ‘weather’. Befitting its purpose as well as its appearance the Rotunda was dubbed ‘The Umbrella’ – the very contraption that was but recently gaining popularity among a few eccentric London pedestrians.



The Inside of the Elegant Music Room in Vaux-Hall Gardens (The Rotunda), published by Robert Sayer (1750–55) © Trustees of the British Museum

THE VIRTUAL REALITY MODEL

Our VR model shows Vauxhall in 1752, after major rebuilding work and the construction of the Rotunda. To recreate the experience of Vauxhall, our researchers analysed a wide range of mid eighteenth-century sources, ranging from letters and diaries, to satires, novels and promotional pamphlets. Many of these had been gathered by David Coke over years of research. From this wealth of material, the University of Leicester team can now present a re-creation for all the senses of Vauxhall’s Rotunda.

For established scholars of the eighteenth century, as well as passing visitors with no prior notions of Georgian London, in the Virtual Rotunda we offer the unique experience of ‘being there’. In so doing it is hoped that new perceptions of Vauxhall may emerge. We want to capture the sense of novelty and excitement of Vauxhall Gardens, a major attraction in a city that was then the largest and most dynamic in the western world.

Having achieved the Rotunda, we may now look forward to a recreation of the entire Vauxhall Gardens.