



PLANNING FOR PEACE

**REDESIGNING BATH DURING
THE FIRST WORLD WAR**



MUSEUM
OF BATH
ARCHITECTURE

PLANNING FOR PEACE

In 1915, Bath City Council commissioned architect Robert Atkinson (1883-1952) to work on proposals for redeveloping the city. The project was to include revitalising the public baths alongside the creation of a new concert hall and hotel. The fact that Britain was at war in Europe did little to deter the City Council from their ambition to reaffirm Bath's reputation as a world famous spa.

What Atkinson created was a vision for Bath on a scale not seen since the 18th century. His designs proposed demolishing the core of the city and replacing it with new architecture that would be grand in scale and monumental in style.

Presented to the Council in January 1916, Atkinson's drawings project a city of leisure and entertainment, a city of prosperity and strength. The designs depict a place where pleasurable pursuits would tempt visitors to leave their troubles behind. However, as 1916 progressed, the reality of war had to be faced. Atkinson's scheme for redeveloping Bath was put aside and although briefly revived in 1919, the city lacked both the funds and the support to ever see it realised.

The 1916 Bath Improvement Scheme can be seen as both a plan for progress looking forward to a time of peace and propaganda promoting an architectural identity of strength and resilience in a time of war.

Bath City Council had been considering plans to build a new bathing establishment to offer hot water treatments since 1913 and they had selected the area south of the Abbey as their preferred site. By 1915 the advantages of such a development were recognised as the use of spa waters in England was rising in popularity because the conflict in Europe threatened the closure of many continental spas.

In March 1915 Robert Atkinson was commissioned to draw up plans for the project and he made several visits to Bath walking the streets and making notes about existing buildings. His research continued at the British Museum viewing historic maps and engravings of Bath. By December 1915 a series of large watercolours to illustrate the proposed designs were undertaken by Atkinson, assisted by his colleague George Alexander. These were presented with a report to Bath City Council in January 1916.

Atkinson proposed a new civic centre at the heart of Bath built around a large piazza called The Forum. To the east of The Forum a new hotel facing onto Orange Grove and the river was to be built; to the west an enlarged Roman Baths complex and a new Bathing Establishment and to the south a monumental new concert hall. All these new developments required extensive demolition of existing historic buildings. While Atkinson, a keen historian, lamented the need for such destruction he deemed it necessary in order to create a clear link between the east and west sides of the city.



Bath Improvement Scheme: The Forum looking North
Robert Atkinson, 1915, Bath Record Office.

Robert Atkinson intended The Forum to be the 'focal point of life' in the city, where people could meet, promenade and enjoy outdoor entertainments. He borrowed the idea from John Wood the Elder's vision for a Royal Forum in 18th century Bath.

At the northern end of The Forum there was to be a screen wall designed to echo a Roman triumphal arch. Below the screen can be seen a bandstand with fountains at its base. With its sunken level, the northern end of The Forum was intended to be used as an open air theatre or auditorium.



Preliminary design by Atkinson for the north of the Forum with a triumphal arch referring to the monuments created by the Roman empire to mark military victories. RIBA Collections.

Flanking the northern end of The Forum are two colonnades, based on the 1791 Pump Room colonnade by Thomas Baldwin. As well as housing shops, the colonnades were to have formed covered routes into the buildings surrounding The Forum, the Roman Baths on the left and the new hotel on the right.



Bath Improvement Scheme: The Forum looking South
Robert Atkinson, 1915, Bath Record Office.

The southern end of The Forum was where the new concert hall was to be located, with a large portico based on that of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, but with detailing, Atkinson notes, more similar to the work of John Wood and his son in Bath. The design is monumental in scale and appearance aimed at associating the strength of modern Bath to that of classical antiquity.

Internally the concert hall was designed to accommodate several thousand people and be suitable for operas on a grand scale. Other parts of the building were to be used by the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution. Atkinson also proposed creating a local museum where fragments of demolished buildings could be displayed, a precursor to the present day Museum of Bath Architecture.

Sketch by Atkinson of the interior of the concert hall, RIBA Collections.

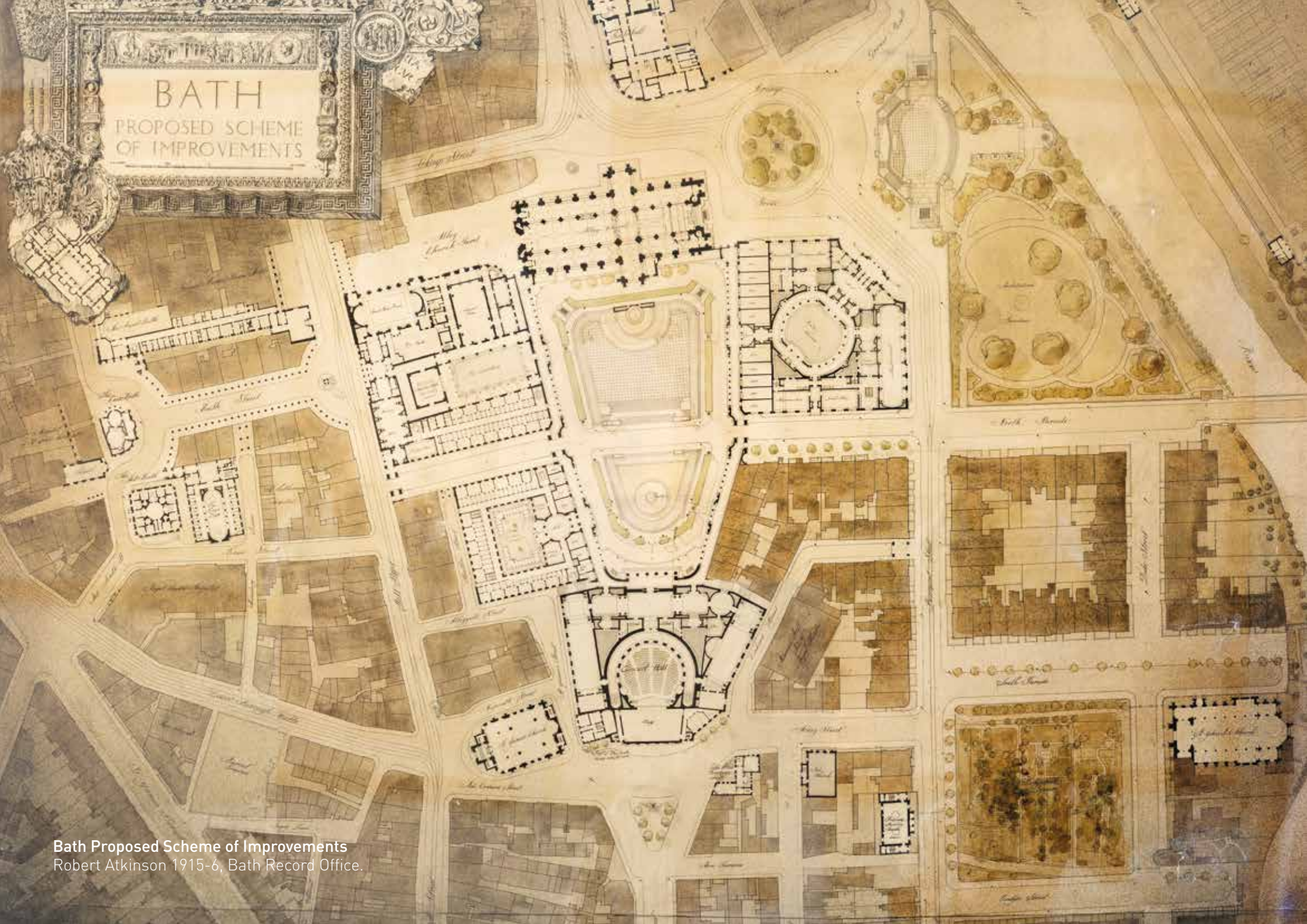
To the west of the concert hall was to be the new Bathing Establishment, on the far right of which can be seen the triumphal arch form being used again to bridge the central road and connecting the two halves of The Forum.



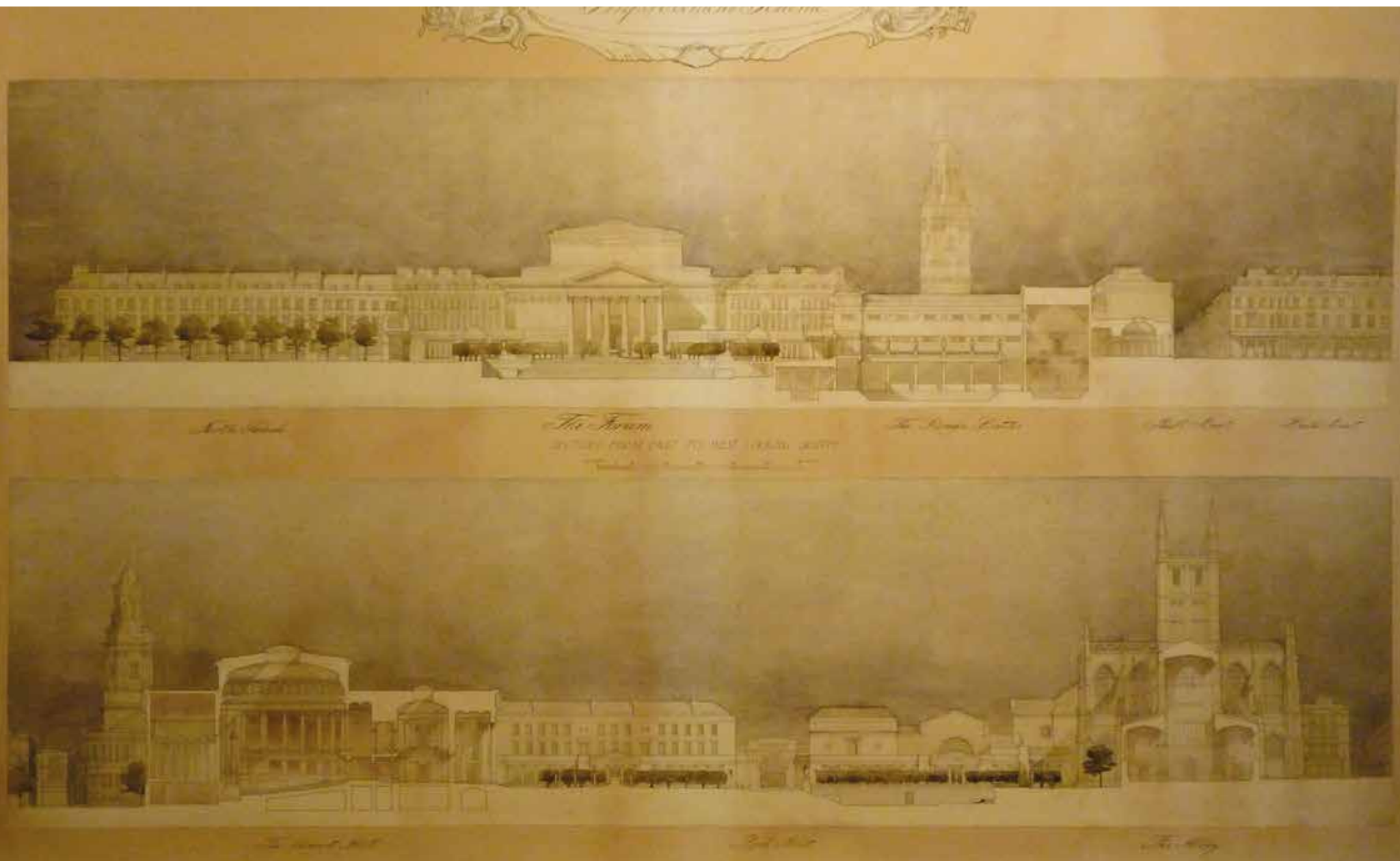
Sketch by Atkinson looking along the central road of the Forum, RIBA Collections.



Sketch by Atkinson of the south front of the concert hall with a statue in front, as seen looking up from South Gate Street, RIBA Collections.



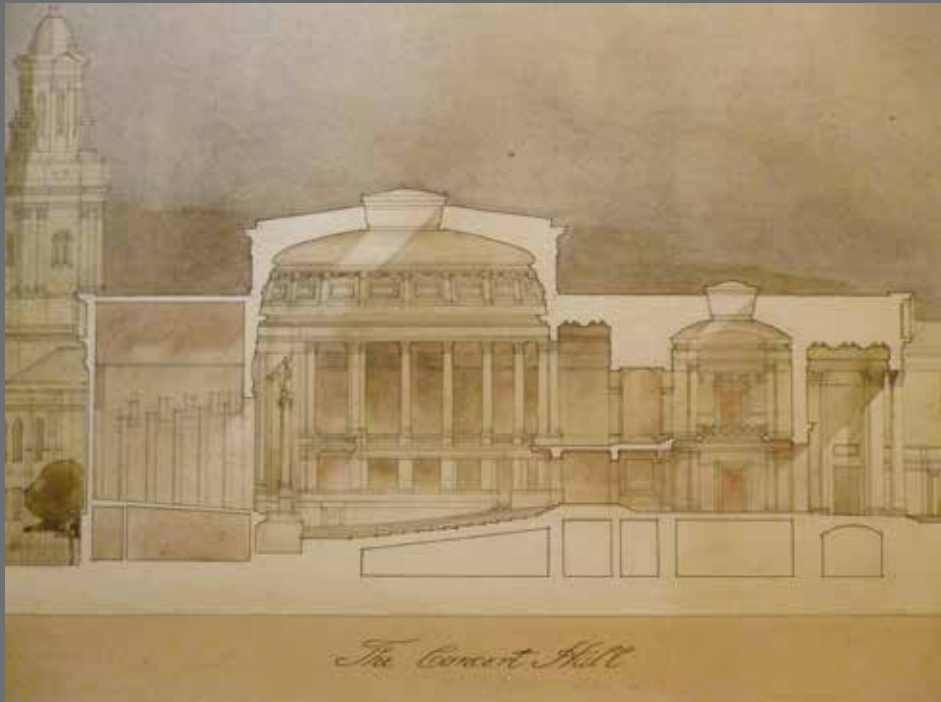
Bath Proposed Scheme of Improvements
Robert Atkinson 1915-6, Bath Record Office.



Sections for the Proposed Improvement Scheme
Robert Atkinson, 1915-6, Bath Record Office.

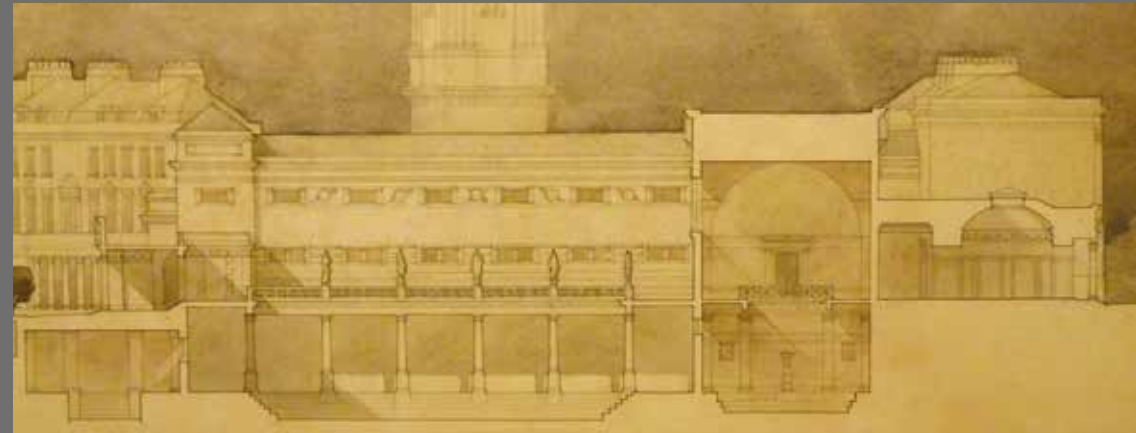
Atkinson's research on the 18th century city and his understanding of the plans for Bath by architects John Wood and his son, Thomas Baldwin and Robert Adam ensured that he was highly aware of the need for vistas as part of town planning in the city. The section drawings for his proposed development offer an insight into such views, placing the development within the wider city context.

The section through the concert hall is particularly revealing as it offers a glimpse of the proposed interior, with two columns mounted by statues standing on either side of the stage.



Detail of Section showing interior of concert hall.

Atkinson proposed several alterations to the Roman Baths complex including the removal of the 1887-9 York Street extension to the Baths by C. E. Davis, replacing it with new buildings more respectful to Baldwin's original Pump Room. He also proposed the reconstruction of the Roman Circular Bath as a double height space with a gallery at the upper level.



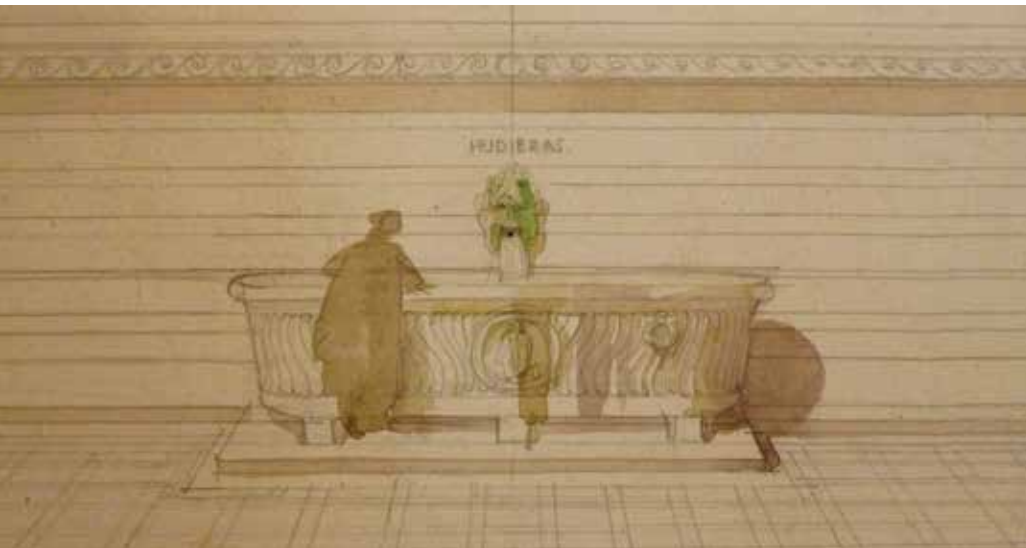
Detail of section through Circular Bath.



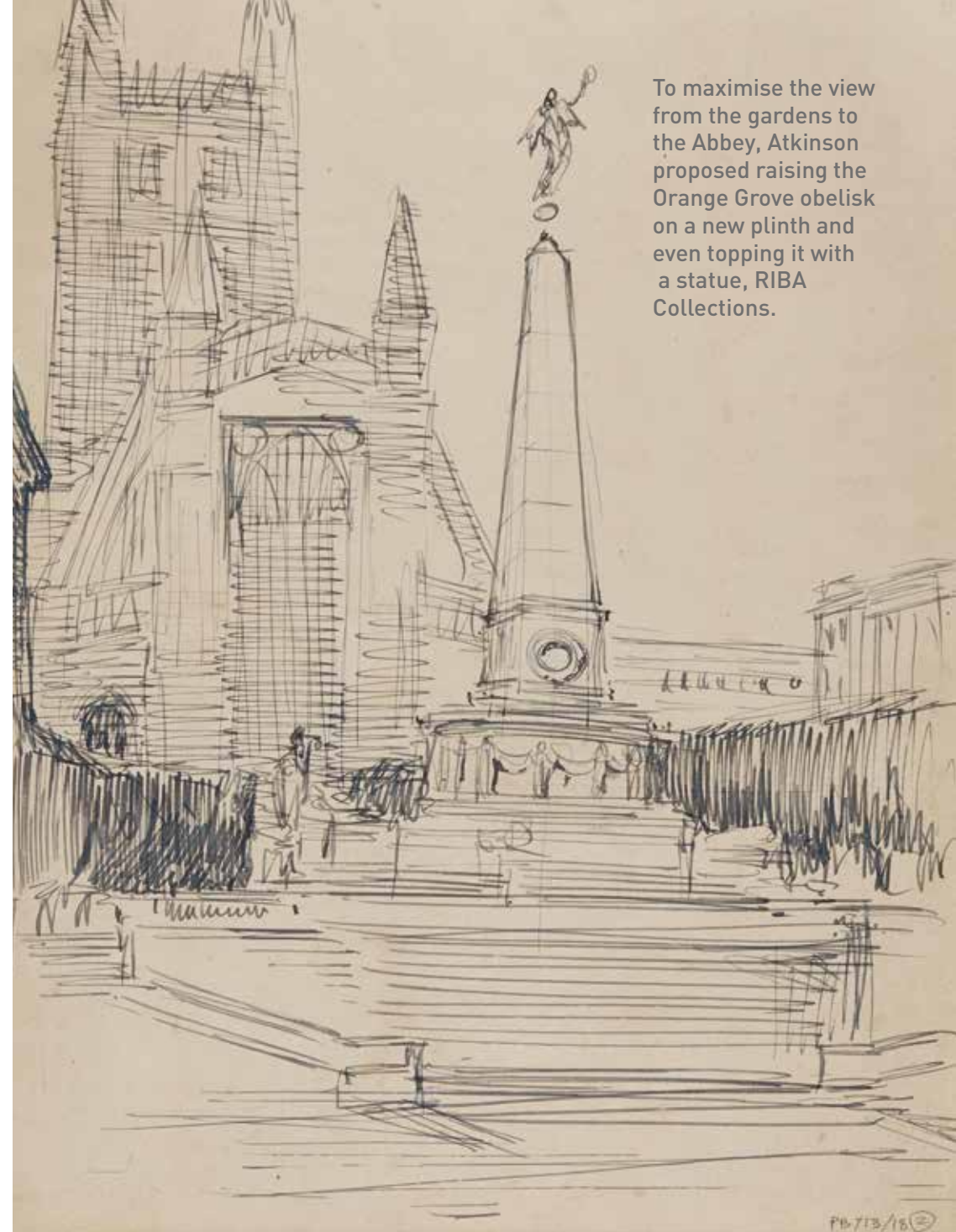
Bath Improvement Scheme: Orange Grove and Gardens
Robert Atkinson, 1915, Bath Record Office.

By late 1915 the problem of increasing traffic was emerging in Bath and Atkinson realised the importance of ensuring that the road from the railway station could reach Orange Grove. In order for that to be achieved the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution building on Terrace Walk would have had to be demolished and the road widened.

Atkinson proposed a new staircase into the gardens facing the river with water fountains leading to a paved avenue flanked by busts on plinths. The fountains were dedicated to characters from myth and fiction including Hudibras, the hero of a mock poem from the English Civil War and Bladud, the mythical founder of ancient Bath.



The most striking elements of Atkinson's design for Orange Grove are the two large monoliths, or pylons, flanking the steps into the gardens. These were to be war memorials, commemorating the Great War.



To maximise the view from the gardens to the Abbey, Atkinson proposed raising the Orange Grove obelisk on a new plinth and even topping it with a statue, RIBA Collections.



Atkinsons proposed war memorials were pre-empting the end of the war and predicting that peace was imminent. They reflect and perhaps intentionally project the message that the war would soon be over and that life in the pleasure resort of Bath would continue unchanged. Their monumental classicism is a language of architecture designed to convey strength and stability, essential when attempting to show the power and resilience of a city, and a country, at war. The classical cenotaph form of these monuments would soon become a familiar design for war memorials throughout the first half of the 20th century.



Discussions about the Bath Improvement Scheme continued, but by the beginning of the Battle of Somme in July 1916, all talk of such development had ended. The reality of the war overshadowed any attempts to either show endurance or boost morale through images of future plans for the city. In 1932-3 the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution building was demolished and the road widened, making it the only part of Atkinson's 1916 Bath Improvement Scheme to ever be realised.

Further information

Bath Record Office: 7 watercolour designs for the 1916 Bath Improvement Scheme by Robert Atkinson, printed report to Bath City Council and associated press cuttings.

RIBA Drawings Collection: Robert Atkinson, 1916 Bath Improvement Scheme, Preliminary sketches PB713/18 (1-27) and three sketch books SKB3/1-3.

Robert Atkinson 1883-1952, Paul Spencer-Longhurst, ed., exhibition catalogue, Architectural Association and the Barber Institute of Fine Arts Birmingham, 1989.



Written by Amy Frost to accompany the exhibition

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