

Vauxhall, the Oval and Kennington

THE RUSSIAN HISTORIAN KARAMZIN'S DESCRIPTION OF VAUXHALL GARDENS IN 1790

I am indebted to my colleague Derek Davis for the following extract from a letter from the Russian historian Karamzin.

Greenwich itself is a handsome complex; Elizabeth was born there. - We dined at a coffee-house, took a stroll in the park, boarded a boat, pushed off, alighted on the bank at 10 p.m. and found ourselves in a wonderland!..

Imagine unending avenues, entire woods brightly illuminated with flares; galleries, colonnades, pavilions, alcoves tricked out with murals and busts of famous men; resplendent triumphal arches set in dense greenery, with an orchestra blaring beneath; throngs of people everywhere; banqueting tables everywhere, decorated with flowers and greenery. My dazzled eyes sought out the dark, I entered a narrow covered avenue and was told: "This is *Druids' Delight* ⁽¹⁾!". I went on: I could see, by the light of the moon and distant torches, a desert and scattered hillocks representing a Roman encampment; there were cypresses and cedars growing here. On a knoll sat Milton - in marble - listening to the music; further on there was an obelisk, a Chinese garden; finally the path ran out... I returned to the orchestra.

If you are quick off the mark, you have realised that I am describing to you the famous English Vauxhall, which other countries attempt in vain to imitate. What a capital evening resort, worthy of a clever and wealthy nation!

The orchestra plays mainly favourite popular songs, the singers are actors and actresses off the London stage and the audience keeps throwing them money as a mark of its pleasure.

Suddenly, a bell rang and everyone charged off in one direction; I ran with them, without knowing where or why. Suddenly, a curtain went up and we saw in fiery writing: "Take care of your pockets!" (because London thieves, who frequent Vauxhall, take advantage of this moment). Simultaneously, a transparent backdrop was revealed depicting a rural tableau. "Lovely!" I thought. "But not worth rushing madly for or trampling people underfoot."

London's Vauxhall unites all classes: it is frequented by men of fashion and by flunkeys, by the finest ladies and by women of the street. Some resembled actors, others spectators. I toured all the galleries and inspected all the pictures, which are drawn mostly from Shakespeare or latterday English history. The Great Rotunda, where music is played in bad weather, is decorated from top to bottom with mirrors; wherever you look, you see ten animated portraits of yourself.

After eleven o' clock supper was served in the pavilions and horns began to sound in the grove. Never in my life had I seen such a multitude of people at table - the effect was of some magnificent festival. We chose our pavilion, ordered chicken, anchovies, cheese, butter and a bottle of claret and paid six roubles.

Vauxhall is two miles from London and is open every evening in summer; the entry fee is forty kopecks. - I returned home at dawn, well contented with the entire day.

N M Karamzin, "Letters of a Russian Traveller"

(The letter is dated July 1790 and describes an expedition by Karamzin and two Russians to Greenwich followed by an evening at Vauxhall.)