

2012/0687 CA – Princess Promenade, Torquay
Impact on the Significance of the Proposal on the Heritage Asset

Princess Gardens and Royal Terrace Gardens were designated as a Registered Historic Park and Garden on 30 March 2001, and assigned to grade II. On 16 November 2001 English Heritage informed Torbay Council that, following representations, the boundary of the HPR was revised on 16 October to exclude the North Quay and Old Fish Quay.

The *Historic Development* section given in the formal register description summarises the initial land reclamation of 1892 with creation of the seawall west of the North Quay and the opening of the Princess Gardens themselves in June 1894 (when the original admission fee of 2d proved very unpopular and was soon withdrawn). The pavilion followed in 1911 and the war memorial in 1920. However the formal description states: “ ... while the gardens were extended to the south of Princess Parade c.1930. Further land west of the Princess Gardens reclaimed as part of a coastal defence scheme of c.1928 was also laid out as a promenade with a group of sunken garden enclosures.” Later in the *Gardens and Pleasure Grounds* section it is asserted that: “The sunken garden formed part of the scheme of coastal protection and improvement conceived by Major Garrett before the First World War and implemented in the late 1920s”. These statements are conflation of the actual chronology and in error regarding the original intention, leading some commentators to assign to the current sunken garden a significance – that of the original designer – that it does not warrant.

The mistake has come about because the fountain, which was the central feature of the early gardens was gifted to Torbay Borough Council in 1893 on the condition that a suitable ‘basin’ was provided for it (Ellis 1930, 380). The basin itself is set such that its top edge is level with the footpath of the circumambulatory way that encloses the oval in which the fountain sits. The garden within this oval lies slightly lower than the footpath: depressed rather than sunken. The oval garden and fountain are evident on the early photographs c.1900-1910 (eg. Ellis 1930, 387, plate 262; better examples in Torquay Museum collection) and on the Second Edition OS County Series surveyed 1904, published 1906 (see OS 1904).

Further while land west of Princess Pier was reclaimed in the late 1920s, and flowerbeds formed within this area of the western promenade, these are not sunken gardens, nor, more importantly, do they lie within the boundaries of the registered HPR. This is evident on Third Edition OS County Series surveyed 1933, published 1934, where the western reclamation is clearly visible, but within Princess Gardens the only change is the addition of a landing stage close to the 1911 pavilion; and the war memorial west of the oval-shaped fountain garden, closely aligned on its long e-w axis. Mid-1930s aerial photographs in the Torquay Museum collection show this with a through promenade, level between Princess Pier and Fish Quay and beyond to the west (see OS 1933).¹

In the late 1930s further reclamation on the Princess Gardens’ frontage was coupled with coastal protection works; the frontage was extended by c.25m across its whole length between Princess Pier and North Quay. Additionally an apron of semi-oval shape, was created centrally extending beyond the new frontage line into the harbour for a further c.27m, the extent of its short radius perpendicular to the frontage. This work was undertaken by P W Ladmore who became Major Garrett’s successor in the mid-1930s. Thus at its completion in 1938 the gardens occupied the same reclaimed footprint that they do today, Major Garrett had retired, and there was no sunken garden of ‘original’, or even subsidiary, design in existence. Post-war

¹ Also on images on the newly released www.britainfromabove.org.uk qv. image/epw023717 dated 1928.

photographs show this to be the high point of Princess Gardens' layout: a wide uninterrupted promenade running the length of the gardens, a spacious apron of c.1800m² jutting into the harbour, with uninterrupted seaward views (see Princess Gardens post-1944). This is further clearly shown on the OS 1952 1:1250 National Survey (see OS 1952) On the Torbay 2007 Blue Sky aerial photographs the line of 1938 reclamation can clearly be seen, most obviously where the north edge of the south east flower-bed marks the former line (see AP 2007).

The imposition of the sunken garden and the double-decker platform at the water's edge, almost certainly post-dates P W Ladmore's period as Borough Surveyor and Engineer - he was in-post 1957 but gone by 1959 (Kelly's Directory of Torquay 1957 and 1959). The structure is in place on the OS National Grid survey revised in February 1967 and issued in 1971 (See OS 1967). The period of the middle sixties would accord well with its open concrete structure. Its deleterious impact has been threefold: the excavation of the sunken garden (to form the so-called banjo) has broken the continuity of the promenade at the water's edge; the excavated area of c.2,500m² is physically cut off and separated from the sea views anticipated (qv. below) and exacerbated by the hard-landscaping - the formality of the large garden flower bed militating against the informal recreation of the promenade; and the raised platform has been designed in such away that subsequent modifications to the lower platform have resulted in there being a barrier at the level of the sunken garden rather than the easy access and sight lines as envisaged.

The two-storied observation block is not unknown elsewhere; at Weymouth, a seaside town though with a very different sort of topography, there are a number instructive parallels in development. Alexandra Gardens, created from reclaimed land, became public gardens in 1867 (though much smaller), with a bandstand added in 1891 (altered 1913, replaced 1924) and shelters in 1904. In 1908 a pavilion was built (destroyed 1954, replaced 1960); a pattern not dissimilar to Torquay's. In 1939 the two-storied Pier Bandstand on the north side of the esplanade was opened on the edge of the promenade with a deck extending out to sea between high- and low-water marks. This was demolished in 1986 leaving only the two-storey entrance block to the pier, where it still hovers over the water's edge as a prominent feature of the esplanade (EH 2008). No attempt was ever made to alter the promenade behind to accommodate any sunken feature.

Torquay by contrast only half-heartedly constructed a two-storey feature; by sinking the lower storey the upper observation deck is barely 2m above the promenade's general level. The lower deck set at the level of the sunken garden to allow through views was soon all but closed off from it. Either wave action or wind turbulence soon made the garden uncomfortable and the arc of the oval was sealed off between the cast concrete pillars of the upper deck by a secondary wall of crazy-paving and perspex windows, with narrow entries at either end. In consequence the sunken garden feels remote from the sea with diminished seaward views, and the lower deck isolated with no access from the garden as the entries have been closed off by steel railings. (see Photos 1 & 2).

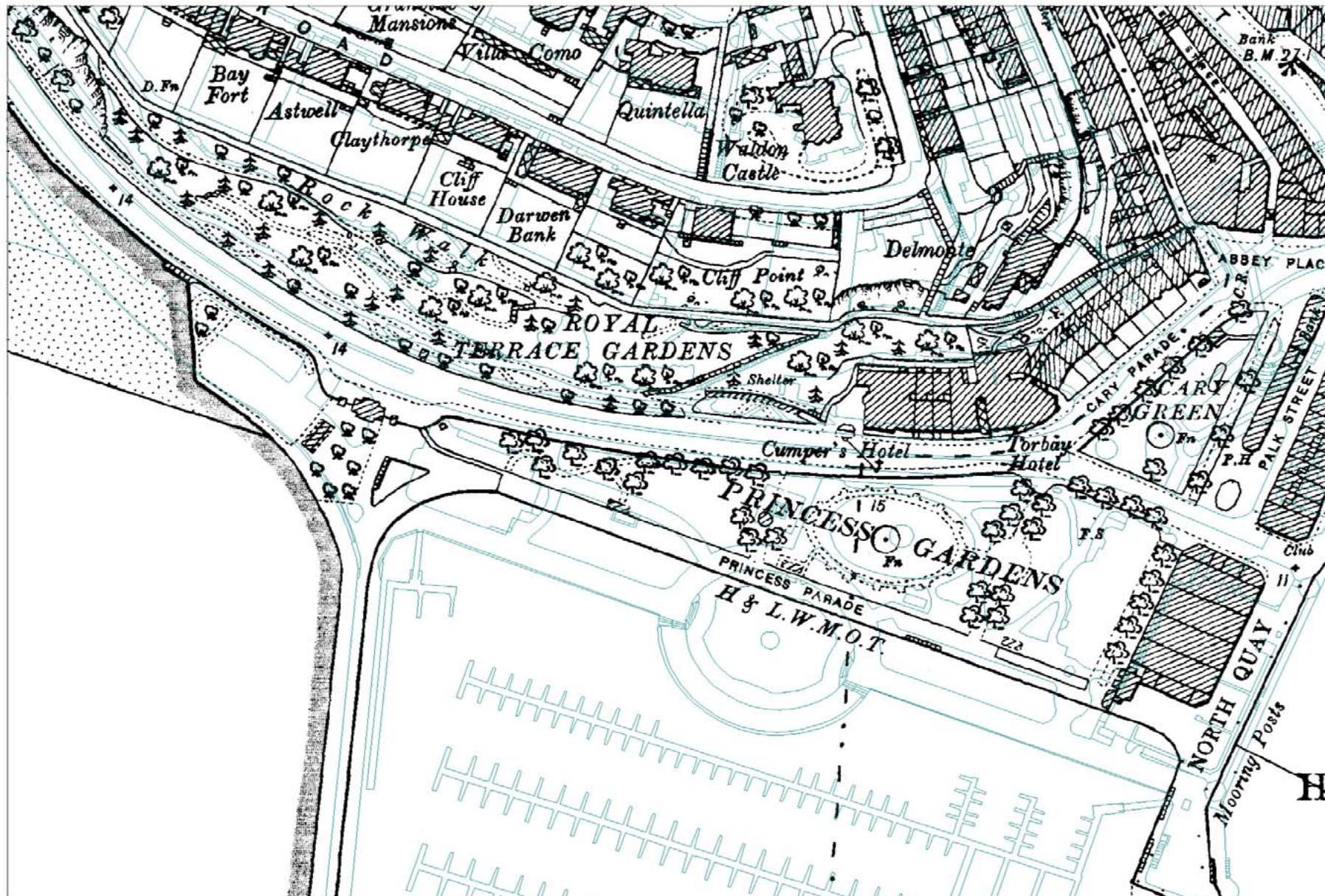
The removal of the upper and lower decks, the supporting pillars, and the replacement of the crazy-paved secondary wall by a low parapet will do much to ameliorate the current arrangement as the sunken garden will now have real seaward views and its remoteness removed, although its presence is still detrimental to the promenade as a whole. The scheme is a necessary amelioration and does nothing to impede the future filling in of the sunken garden and a re-achievement of a much more unified landscaping.

Ellis *An Historical Survey of Torquay* 1930 (Ellis 1930)

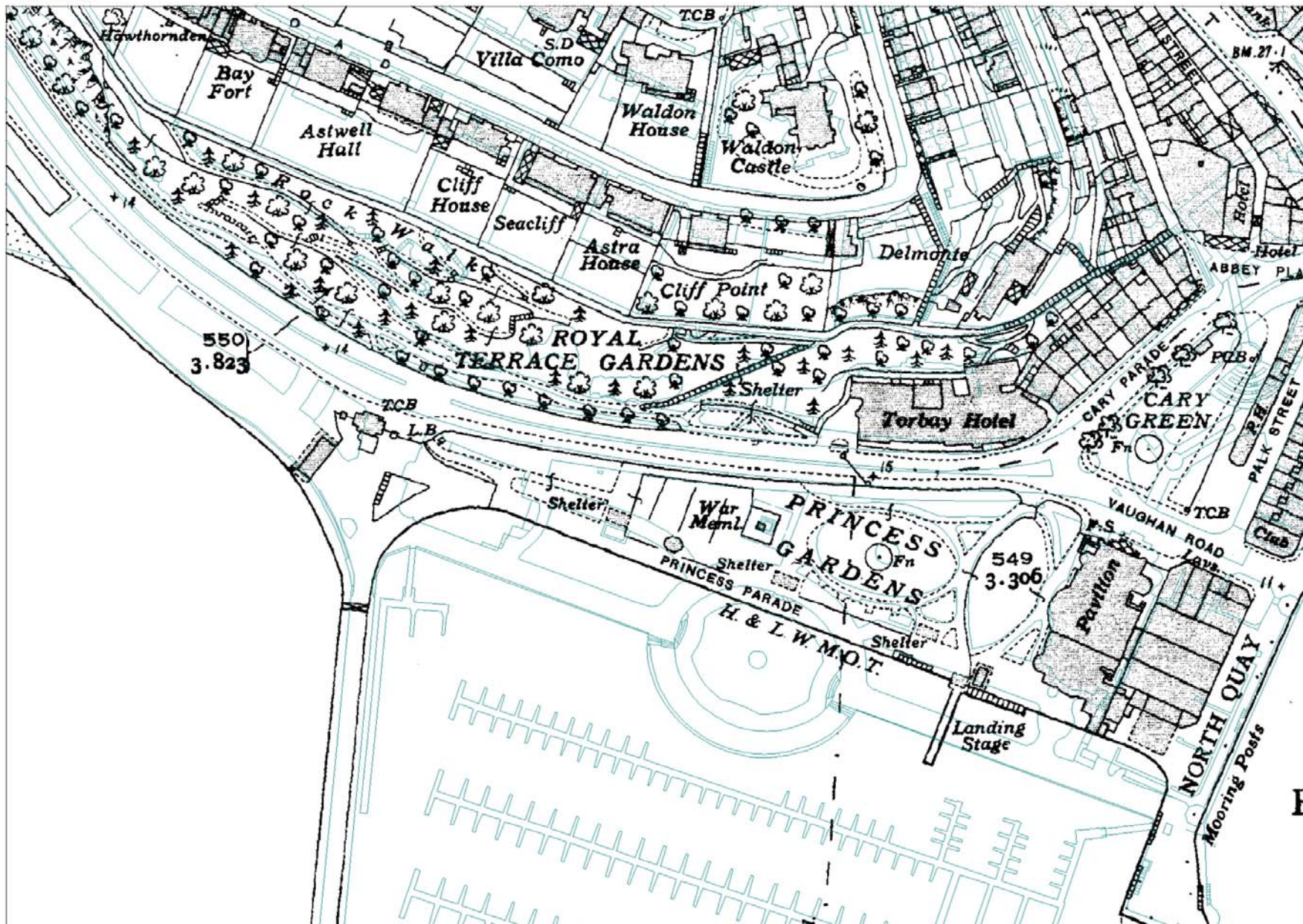
Brodie, Ellis, Stuart & Winter *Weymouth's Seaside Heritage* (English Heritage 2008)

Hal Bishop, Senior Historic Environment Officer, Torbay Council. July 2012

OS 1904

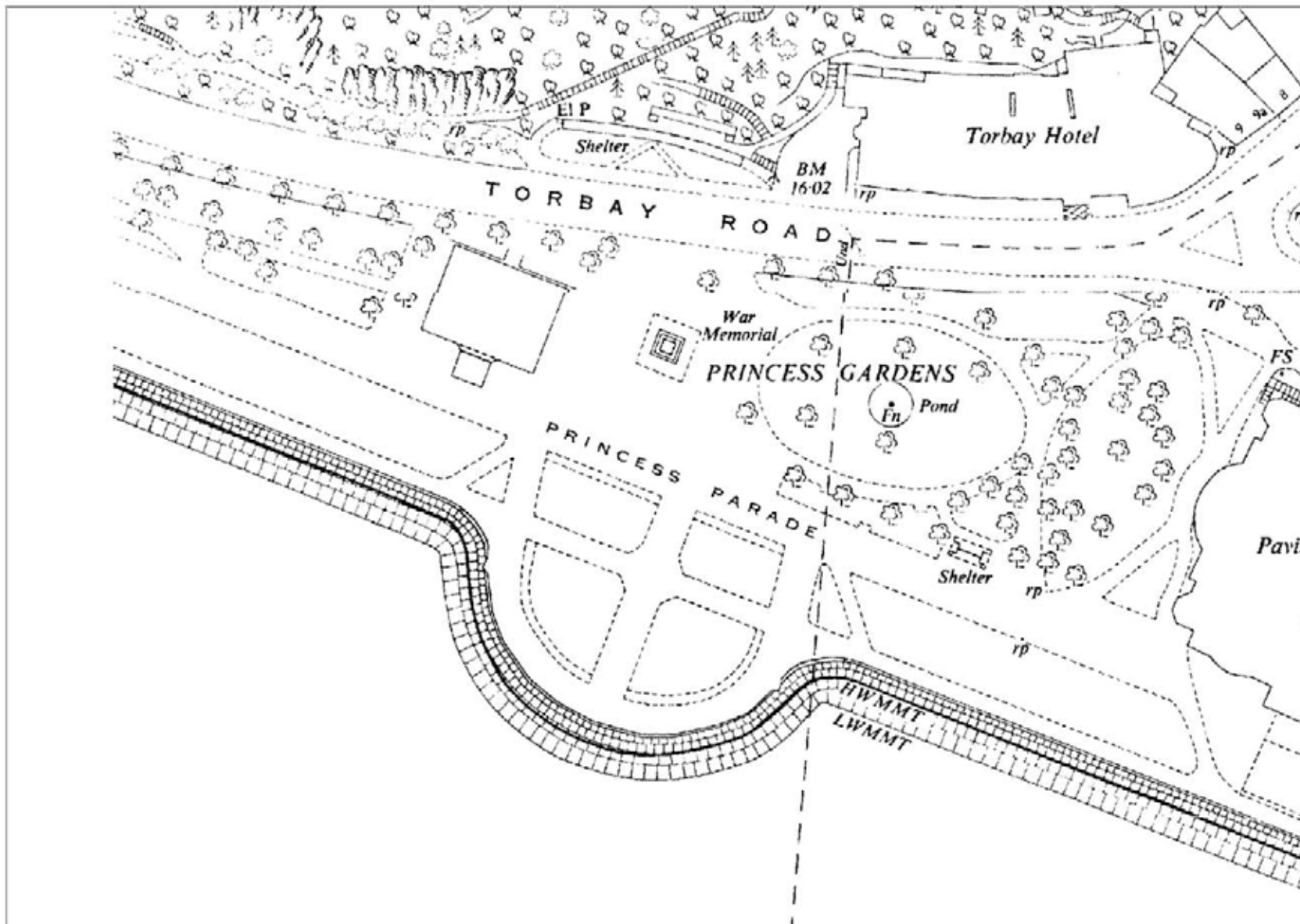


OS 1933





Aerial Photograph post-1944 (early 1950s)





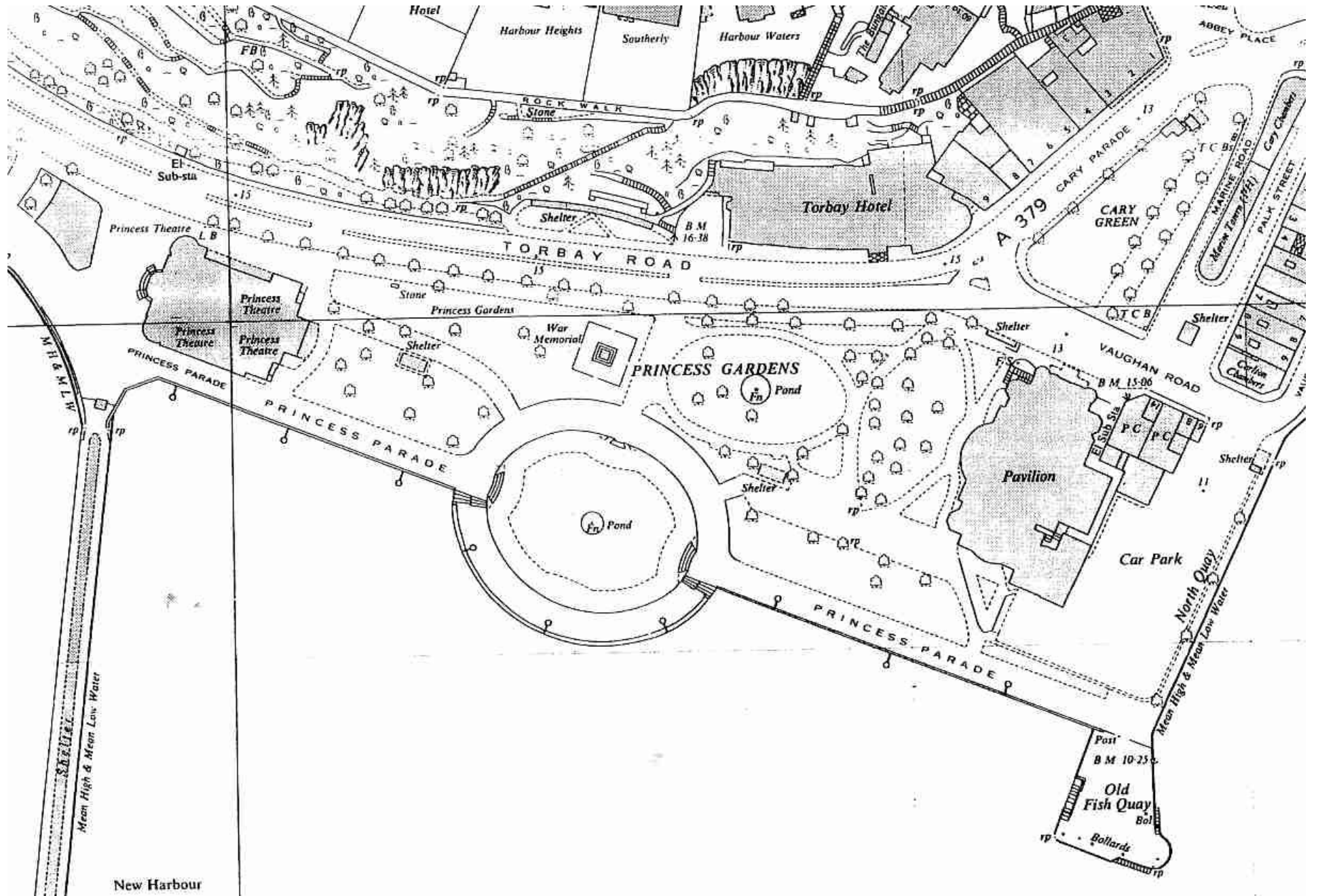




Photo 1 July 2012



Photo 2 July 2012

Photo 2 July 2012