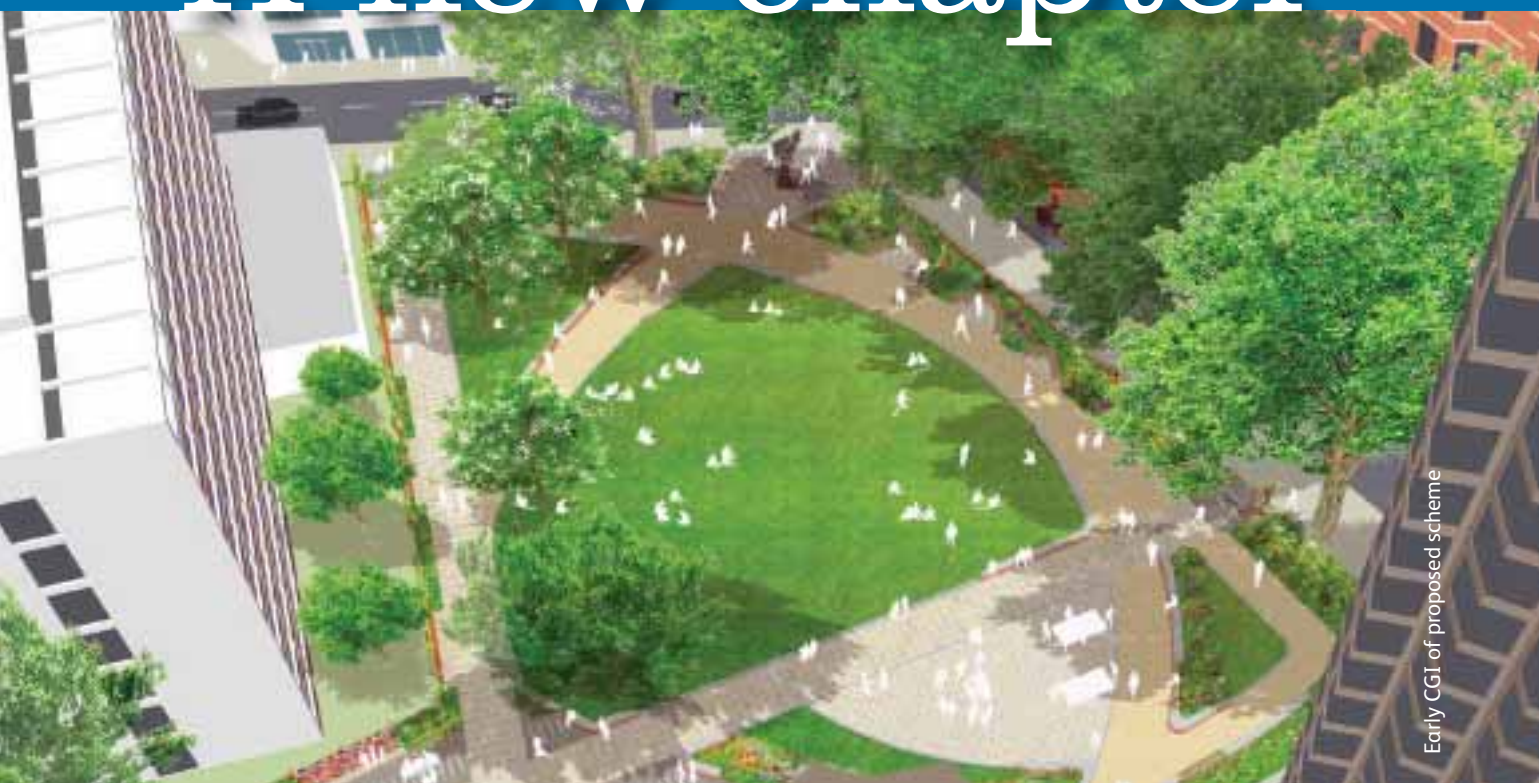


Christchurch Gardens is set for a new chapter. As the final touches are made to its design, we dive into its fascinating past

BY LUCY DOUGLAS

Though its modest size might suggest otherwise, Christchurch Gardens has a history that dates back almost 400 years. The site of the gardens today was once the location of the New Chapel, built in 1631 as a chapel of ease to St Margaret's Church, next to Westminster Abbey. Maps of the area from the 17th and 18th centuries suggest the chapel's surrounding churchyard probably stretched beyond where Victoria Street now runs. It originally served as a burial ground for St Margaret's, and is even reported to be the site of a mass grave of victims of the plague in 1665.

A new chapter



Early CGI of proposed scheme

CAPTAIN THOMAS BLOOD

The churchyard became the burial site of several striking characters. Perhaps its most infamous resident is Captain Thomas Blood, a 17th century conman. Irish-born to a wealthy family, Blood fought in the English Civil War, first for Charles I's Royalists, then switching to the Republicans. He's believed to have made attempts at usurping the Irish government

and kidnapping Irish nobleman the Duke of Ormonde. However, it was his plot to steal the Crown Jewels from the Tower of London for which he is most notorious.

Disguised as a parson, Blood went to the Tower of London and befriended Mr Talbot Edwards, the master of the Jewel House. He made several visits, gradually gaining the trust of Edwards and his wife, before one

day in May 1671, he arrived with several accomplices, overpowered Edwards and stole the jewels. Blood himself reportedly made off with the St Edward's Crown, while his accomplices took the Sovereign's Orb and the Sceptre. However, they were captured before reaching the city gates.

Despite being caught in an act that amounted to treason, Blood was not executed for his attempt on the jewels. On arrest, he was brought before the king and convinced Charles II to spare his life; the king also awarded him an estate in Ireland worth £500 a year.

Blood died in 1680 and was buried at the churchyard at the site of today's Christchurch Gardens. His body was dug up a few days after his burial, reportedly to check he was really dead.

IGNATIUS SANCHO

A rather more honorable character among the gardens' internees was Ignatius Sancho, composer, writer and the first black man to vote in a British election. Born into slavery in around 1729, Sancho spent his early years in Greenwich, working for three sisters. There he met the Duke of Montagu, who recommended that Sancho educate himself and lent him books to read.

Sancho escaped slavery in 1749, running away from the Greenwich house to the Montagus', where he served as the Duchess's butler after the death of the Duke in the same year. Sancho remained in the service of the family until 1774, working as a valet for the next Duke of Montagu.

In the mid-1760s, Sancho wrote to the author Laurence Sterne, encouraging him to support the abolition cause. Sterne's reply was widely published, which propelled Sancho into the public eye and he went on to write editorial letters to newspapers advocating for the abolition of the slave trade, making him one of the few black voices published on the subject at the time.

With the support of the Duke of Montagu, Sancho and his wife opened a grocer's shop on Charles Street in Mayfair. As a financially independent man, he became eligible to vote in the elections in 1774 and 1780. He would continue his prolific letter writing until his death in 1780, and a collection of his letters was posthumously published in 1782.

CAPTAIN THOMAS BLOOD



IGNATIUS SANCHO



CHRIST CHURCH

CHRIST CHURCH

The house of worship that gave the gardens its name was built by architect Ambrose Poynter, who completed Christ Church Broadway in 1844.

On April 17, 1941, during one of the heaviest nights of the Blitz, Christ Church was bombed and its roof and interiors were destroyed. Its remains were left standing as a burned-out shell until 1954, when it was torn down along with the neighbouring vicarage.