

Royal Baths

The Historical Wells of Harrogate

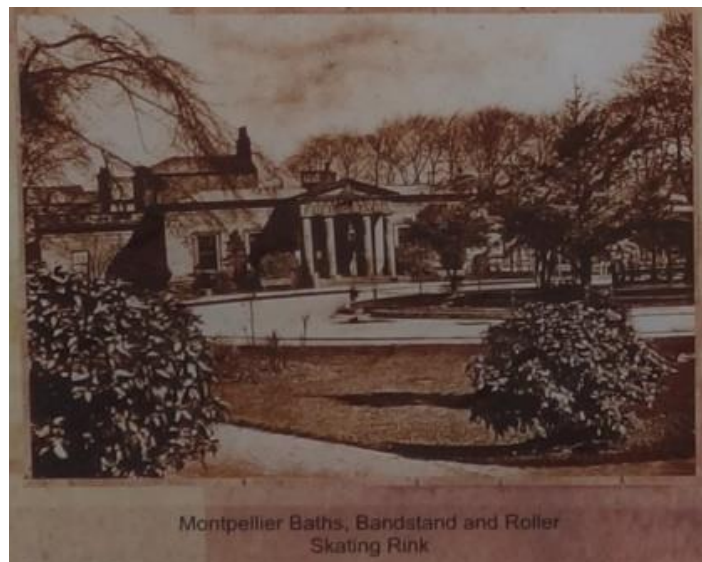
Today's Royal Baths' estate, bounded by Parliament Street, Crescent Road, Montpellier Road and Montpellier Gardens, was held by British Monarchs from 1399 until 1778 as part of the Duchy of Lancaster inheritance. When the Royal Forest was enclosed in 1778, the land passed to the Thackwray family, who owned the neighbouring Crown Hotel, using it for the hotel's garden and horse paddock. The wells were not discovered until c1822, when the Thackwray children, crossing the paddock on their way to school, noticed that indentations from horses' hooves were filling with a curiously iridescent water. Analysis revealed that one water contained sulphur, and was related to the Old Sulphur Well (beneath what is now the Royal Pump Room). In 1822-1823, Joseph Thackwray built an octagonal pump room "in the Chinese style" over the Crown Well, converting the surrounding paddock into "pleasure grounds" to which the public, as well as Crown Hotel guests, were admitted. Visitors to the attractively landscaped and fashionably renamed "Montpellier gardens" were admitted at the new ticket office.



The estate prospered, and in 1834 Joseph Thackwray built a special suite of baths, designed by Andrews of York. In digging the foundations, a new well, the Kissingen (A) was found, which became one of the most popular British mineral waters. Four other mineral wells were discovered: the Ammonium Well (J), the Calcium Well (H), the Lithium Well (D) and the Potassium Well (B), and an important Pure Water Well (G). The estate was now ready to meet the challenge of the Victorian age and the growth of hydrotherapy, introduced to the United Kingdom in 1842. Although evidence exist for the bottling of Harrogate Water from 1740, large scale developments did not occur until a hundred years later, when a special facility was built next to the Montpellier Baths. In 1859 the Crown Hotel and Montpellier baths were bought by Harrogate's great speculating builder, George Dawson, who extended the Crown Hotel, and built the "new Montpellier Pump Room" to replace Thackwray's little "Chinese" one of 1822. Designed by Dawson's eminent architect J H Hirst, the "New Montpellier Pump Room" was located at the southern, or Montpellier Gardens boundary, where it established itself immediately as one of Harrogate's most important social centres.



Dawson also built a bandstand, encircled by a roller-skating rink, between his new Montpellier Pump Room and the Montpellier Baths were musicians entertained visitors daily during the spa season.

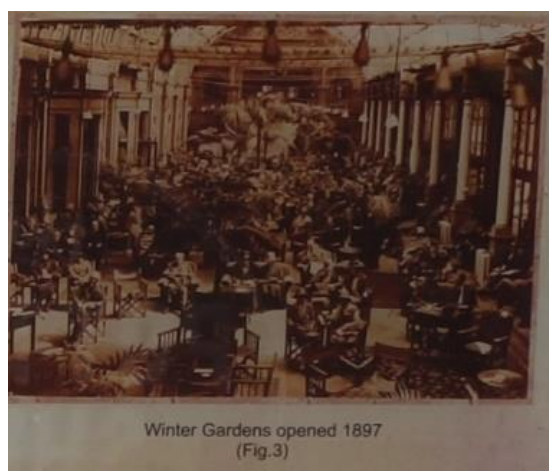


In 1884, George Dawson sold the estate, which was acquired eventually by Harrogate Council, who inaugurated plans for an ambitious redevelopment of the site, urged on by Alderman Richard Ellis. The competition to design a great new spa building was won by London Architects Baggalay and Bristowe, whose new Royal Baths were opened by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge, on 23rd July 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.



The Royal Baths
(Fig.4)

The Royal Baths incorporated a wealth of fine stonework, polished marble, carved wood and stained glass, as well as spacious Winter Gardens, luxurious Turkish Baths and the world's most advanced centre for hydrotherapeutic treatments, which ensured Harrogate's position as the British Empire's leading spa.



Winter Gardens opened 1897
(Fig.3)

Between 1909-1911 the space between the Winter Gardens and Montpellier Gardens was filled with new facilities for the Peat and Plombieres Bath, built largely at the behest of King Edward VII's surgeon Sir Frederick Treves, also famous for his work with the tragic "elephant man". Although the new Peat and Plombieres baths were utilitarian, they possessed a magnificent Edwardian baroque Waiting Hall. No further alterations were undertaken until those of 1938-9 when most of the Winter Gardens were demolished, and replaced with a large new treatment block in artificial stone (the so-called western wing, a Roman-styled "Fountain Court", and a splendid and elaborately panelled "lounge Hall". The Royal Baths, closed in 1969, however continued to be used as an adjunct to the Council's conference and exhibition business, as well as for public meetings and concerts, the continuing Turkish Baths, and the town's tourist and information office. The Royal Baths were comprehensively redeveloped from 2000-2002 by the Royal Mutual Assurance Company in a move which saw the refurbishment (for new tenants) of the old Royal Baths, Turkish Baths, Crescent Room, Central Hall, Parliament Room, Lounge Hall and the provision of a new Tourism and Information Office.

Text and pictures taken from display board in the Royal Baths car park. Board designed by DLA Architecture Ltd.