

# The Royal Baths

## A Short History

(Trifold Leaflet from Harrogate Tourist Information centre)

### HARROGATE WATER!

Harrogate's history as a 'spa town' and its immersion in water truly began in 1571, when Mr William Slingsby discovered that the waters of a local spring possessed similar qualities to those of the town of Spa in Belgium.

Over the following 200 years, and the discovery of even more medicinal springs, visitors flocked to Harrogate to 'take the waters'. The town thrived mainly on the sponsorship of wealthy patrons such as Lord Loughborough, who built the first pump room over the 'sweet spa' in 1786.

By 1835 the townspeople (most of whom were the great hoteliers), realised that a more formal approach to town improvements was needed.

In 1841 they petitioned Parliament, who granted the establishment of the 'Harrogate Improvement Commission'.

They set about improving wells, gas lighting, roads, pavements, the market, town planning, sewerage, built the Royal Pump Rooms and in 1871 constructed the 'New Victoria Baths'.



Such was the Commission's success that in 1884 Queen Victoria granted Harrogate their Incorporation as a Borough.

### WHY THE ROYAL BATHS?

Although the 'New Victoria Baths' built in 1871 were a great success, after 10 years Harrogate's mayor, Richard Ellis realised that to stay ahead of rival spas, bigger and better facilities were needed.

Consequently, an international competition was launched to find the best architectural designs. The winners were the company of 'Baggalley & Bristowe' of London. The foundation stone was laid by Charles Fortune (Mayor) in 1894 and the Baths were opened by HRH the Duke of Cambridge in 1897.



### INSIDE THE ROYAL BATHS

The first visitors in 1897 must have gasped at the opulence of the Royal Baths. The grand entrance foyer contained an octagonal mahogany 'servery' which dispensed Harrogate's mineral waters prescribed for the 'private' patients who visited. This was housed beneath a magnificent domed roof supported by black marble columns. From here patients would be directed into the 'Parliament' or 'Montpellier' rooms to change before going on for the treatments on offer, all involving the waters of

Harrogate, either for bathing or drinking. The jewel being the 'Turkish Baths'. Islamic inspired arches and screens graced the interior, which was covered in vibrant glazed brickwork, painted ceilings and terrazzo floors from Italy.



### STAFF AND VISITORS

During the peak years at the turn of the 20th Century, many wealthy and influential people visited Harrogate to 'take the waters'. Royalty, politicians and celebrities would all come for the 'Spa Season'. It was said that Government Cabinet meetings could be held here as so many ministers attended the treatments.

Visitors such as Queen Mary, Grand Duchess George of Russia, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Harry Lauder and Agatha Christie to name but a few all 'took the waters'.

Every attention was paid to their needs by a large team of qualified doctors, nurses, masseurs and attendants.

There was also a general manager in overall control of the baths, but one of the most important jobs was that of the Borough

Analyst. It was his job to ensure the purity of the waters and to monitor waste (from the patients!).



### ADVANCEMENT AND CHANGE

Over the following years extensions and improvements were made to keep up with medical and social developments. A 'Winter Garden' was soon added; this was a large conservatory like building, containing many palms and large plants. Here was an area in which to walk or to sit when the weather was poor. Adjacent was the open air Montpellier Gardens where patients could exercise. During the 1930s this was demolished to make way for new treatment rooms, which contained a roman style 'fountain court' and a large 'lounge hall' built in an art deco style.

### THE END AND NEW BEGINNINGS

The Baths survived and changed through two World Wars, numerous scientific developments and the introduction of the National Health Service but by the 1950s many of the medical treatments provided by the Baths had become outdated. So, apart from the Turkish Baths, the council closed the Royal Baths for medical use

in 1969.

From 1970 the Baths have formed part of Harrogate Borough Council's Leisure Services and like many large Victorian buildings, the Royal Baths were in need of a major cash injection. After many unsuccessful attempts to market the building, a development was agreed with Scottish Life in the late 1990s. After a multi-million pound project of refurbishment and restoration, the Baths are continuing to offer rest and relaxation, only now in the form of bars and restaurants. The building also houses the Tourist Information Centre to help take the stress out of your holiday. Also, looking just as opulent as it did in 1897 when the doors opened, after a meticulous restoration visitors now come from all over the world to see and use, one of England's last working Victorian Turkish Baths.



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