

ENTERTAINMENTS IN GEORGIAN BATH: GAMBLING AND VICE

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Everyone knows that Bath was the 'Queen of English watering places' in the eighteenth century and that what has been dubbed as a 'Georgian summer' represented the most brilliant period in the city's history. Moreover, what has been written on the subject of gambling and vice in Georgian Bath fits largely into the context of a literary kind of history that concentrates on famous visitors and the presence of a fashionable company. This essay begins with a traditional focus on the well known, but goes on to explore alternative approaches that extend the scope of the subject into a broader social and economic analysis and includes the unknown people, outside the ranks of fashionable society, who formed the bulk of the population of Bath.

Characteristic of the literary reference to gambling and vice is the following extract taken from *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, written by Tobias Smollett in 1771:

Jack Holder, who was intended for a parson, has succeeded to an estate of two thousand a year, by the death of his elder brother. He is now at the Bath, driving about in a phaeton and four, with French horns. He has treated with turtle and claret at all the taverns in Bath and Bristol, till his guests are gorged with good cheer: he has bought a dozen suits of fine clothes, by the advice of the master of Ceremonies, under whose tuition he has entered himself, he has lost hundreds at billiards to sharpers, and taken one of the nymphs of Avon-Street into keeping; but finding all these channels insufficient to drain him of his current cash, his counsellor has engaged him to give a general tea-drinking to-morrow at Wiltshire's room.¹

The featuring of a man of fashion newly come into a fortune, the mention of people of importance like the Master of Ceremonies and places of resort like Wiltshire's room, presented in an amusing and anecdotal style, are commonly found in literary descriptions reporting a visit to the city.

Much of what has been written on gambling in Bath revolves around the character and activities of Richard 'Beau' Nash. We know that Nash came to Bath in 1705 as a professional gambler and succeeded Webster, the master of Ceremonies, who died in a duel at the hands of one of his victims at play. Nash sought to impose order on activities that were potentially harmful and drew up a code of conduct for public entertainments. He banned the wearing of swords at the card table and duelling in the city streets. Another of his rules banned women from displaying the white apron commonly worn by prostitutes. Numerous stories survive of 'Beau' Nash, the worldly-wise, presiding genius at the tables; restraining wealthy, young aristocrats wet behind the ears from falling prey to professional card-sharps, extracting money for charity from the fashionable on a winning streak or generously handing over his winnings to a man in distress. In addition to the display of 'an honest, benevolent mind, with the vices which spring from too much good nature', which is how Goldsmith described Nash, the practice of gambling takes on something of the amiability of its Master of Ceremonies.

A thousand instances might be given of his integrity, even in this infamous profession, where his generosity often impelled him to act in contradiction to his interest. Wherever he found a novice in the hands of a sharper, he generally forewarned him of the danger; whenever he found any inclined to play, yet ignorant of the game, he would offer his services, and play for them. I remember an instance to this effect, though too nearly concerned in the affair to publish the gentleman's name of whom it is related. In the year 1725, there came to Bath a giddy youth, who had just resigned his fellowship at Oxford. He brought his whole fortune with him there; it was but a trifle; however, he was resolved to venture it all. Good fortune seemed kinder than could be expected. Without the smallest skill in play, he won a sum sufficient to make any unambitious man happy. His desire of gain



1 Richard Nash (Bath Reference Library)

increasing with his gains, in the October following he was at all, and added four thousand pounds to his former capital. Mr. Nash, one night, after losing a considerable sum to this undeserving son of fortune, invited him to supper. 'Sir', cried this honest, though veteran gamester, 'perhaps you may imagine I have invited you, in order to have my revenge at home; but, sir, I scorn so inhospitable an action. I desired the favour of your company to give you some advice, which you will pardon me, sir, you seem to stand in need of. You are now in high spirits, and drawn away by a torrent of success; but there will come a time, when you will repent having left the calm of a college life for the turbulent profession of a gamester. Ill runs will come, as sure as day and night succeed each other. Be therefore advised, remain content with your present gains; or be persuaded, that had you the bank of England, with your present ignorance of gaming, it would vanish like a fairy dream. You are a stranger to me; but to convince you of the part I take in your welfare, I'll give you fifty guineas, to forfeit twenty, every time you lose two hundred at one sitting.' The young gentleman refused his offer, and was at last undone!²

On reading such a tale, we may all shake our heads sadly in the knowledge that once again the folly of youth has chosen to ignore the wisdom proffered by experience. Like so many of the stories about Nash, it was repeated many times first by word of mouth and then in print, and may have 'improved' during the telling. Possibly, the most frequently told story involving Nash was his brilliant encounter with the Duchess of Marlborough, a lady more remarkable for her wit than her charity, at a time when Nash was engaged in raising charity for the building of the Mineral Water Hospital in Bath. The Duchess passed him on her way to the tables, and not being able to pass him unobserved, she touched him with her fan and said:

'You must put down a trifle for me, Nash, for I have no money in my pocket.' 'Yes, madam,' says he, 'that I will with pleasure, if your Grace will tell me when to stop;' then taking a handful of guineas out of his pocket, he began to tell them into his white hat. 'One, two, three, four, five -' 'Hold, hold!' says the duchess, 'consider what you are about.' 'Consider

your rank and fortune madam,' says Nash and continued telling, 'six, seven, eight, nine, ten.' Here the duchess called again, and seemed angry. 'Pray compose yourself, madam,' cried Nash, 'and don't interrupt the work of charity – eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.' Here the duchess stormed, and caught hold of his hand. 'Peace, madam,' says Nash; 'you shall have your name written in letters of gold, madam, and upon the front of the building, madam. Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty.' 'I won't pay a farthing more,' says the duchess. 'Charity hides a multitude of sins', replies Nash; 'twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five.' 'Nash,' says she, 'I protest you frighten me out of my wits. L--d, I shall die!' 'Madam, you will never die with doing good, and if you do, it will be the better for you,' answered Nash, and was about to proceed, but perceiving her Grace had lost all patience, a parley ensued, when he, after much altercation, agreed to stop his hand, and compound with her Grace for thirty guineas. The duchess, however, seemed displeas'd the whole evening, and when he came to the table where she was playing, bid him 'Stand farther, an ugly devil, for she hated the sight of him'. But her Grace afterward having a run of good luck, called Nash to her. 'Come,' says she, 'I'll be friends with you, though you are a fool; and to let you see I am not angry, there is ten guineas more for your charity. But this I must insist on, that neither my name nor the sum shall be mentioned.'³

Nash had a rare talent for money-raising and what today would pass for public relations. His supreme self-confidence, which bordered on effrontery at times, enabled him to hold sway as the 'king' of Bath before the nobility and even in the presence of royalty. Notwithstanding his rather showy ability, it could be argued that the words in the above dialogue are almost too perfect, as if penned by Sheridan himself. Further anecdotes depict Nash, unspoilt by his constant rubbing of shoulders with the great, possessing the common touch and above all a depth of humanity.

To give only one instance – it has been related how a gentleman of broken fortune was one day standing behind

his chair, as he was playing a game of piquet for two hundred guineas, and observing with what indifference he won the money, could not help exclaiming: 'Good Heavens! how happy would that money make me!' Nash hearing him, put the money into his hand, saying: 'Go, then, and be happy!'⁴

Despite these much advertised virtues, Nash was living dangerously in that his public position concealed the fact that he depended on a share of the profits from the tables. His undoing came when Parliament passed an Act in 1739 intended to prevent fraudulent gambling and making illegal all private lotteries, games of Faro, Basset, Hazard, Ace of Hearts and Pharoah. Frantically, new games were devised and a further Act in 1740 made illegal all games of chance involving the use of numbers and the throwing of dice. Finally in 1745 an attempt was made to suppress all public gambling by the Mayor and Quarter Sessions, but in the interval other new games followed and among them was one called Even and Odd or E.O.. This was a simple form of roulette and proved to be highly profitable to the bank. It was a game that survived long after it was declared illegal. In the early nineteenth century it was common for one of the proprietors' helpers to engage in fraudulent manipulation underneath the table, so stopping the ball from falling into an unprofitable hole.⁵ Nash brought the game from Tunbridge Wells to Bath and went into business with the proprietors of the two Assembly Rooms. E.O. was so profitable that his partners became too greedy and swindled him out of his proportion of the take. Nash claimed that he had been deprived of £20,000 at Tunbridge and Bath and proceeded against his partners.

Unfortunately for Nash, the court ruled that the agreement was not valid, so he not only failed to recover his share of the profits, but he brought to public attention what had been carefully concealed hitherto. He was not merely the patron of the gaming-houses but derived his income and position from a share of the spoils. As the Earl of Chesterfield had once replied to Nash who was bemoaning his bad luck at the table, having lost £500 the night before; 'I don't wonder at your losing money, Nash, but all the world is surprised where you get it to lose'.⁶ Now the world knew only too well. The affair dragged on and, although Walter Wiltshire of Bath, who was taken to court by

Nash, was fined £500 by the parish of St Peter and St Paul for keeping a gaming house, Nash himself was exposed to continual disputes and slanders. It was suggested that he was in league with sharpers and that he had embezzled money raised for charitable causes. Unwisely, Nash continued to bring further attention to himself by trying to defend his character in several manifestoes. Alas, writing was not his forte (as he himself acknowledged in calling his pen his torpedo) and much of it proved unintelligible to the public at large. So Nash, who made his way to Bath as a professional gamester and contributed greatly to Bath becoming a major gambling centre, was eventually undone by the public recognition of his dependence on an income from the gaming tables. Nash retained his position, but with his reputation damaged and his powers diminished, he ended his days a poor shadow of his former glory.

Whether Nash is viewed as culpable or merely unlucky in the matter of litigation over his gambling arrangements, it is perhaps unfortunate that the subject of gambling in Bath is so closely associated with his career and personality. Apart from Nash and other stories of an anecdotal kind, we have very little understanding of the pattern or the extent of gambling in Georgian Bath. R.S. Neale has referred to a few instances of action taken by the Mayor and Justices to regulate the worst effects of gambling in the city. In 1713, for instance, Thomas Tirrell was convicted and fined 40s for keeping 'A Common House of Gameing with Cards and Dice unlawfully'. He refused to pay the fine and went to gaol instead until he paid the fine and could find sureties not to keep such a house in the future. Also in 1713, John and Philip Ditcher were fined two guineas each for running a game called New Invention, in which the pieces were not marked according to law. In 1731, proclamations were issued at the Quarter Sessions against Faro and other games deemed unlawful within the city. It is not clear how effective or ineffective these measures were.⁷ It is probable that these actions represent only the tip of the iceberg. The refusal to pay fines suggests an extensive gambling practice that the authorities were struggling to suppress in the taverns and alehouses of Bath.

Clearly, more research is needed on the practice of gambling outside the ranks of the fashionable company and the Assembly Rooms. What may reasonably be suggested is that gambling was

extensively indulged in by all social groups and by both sexes in Bath and that it was particularly prevalent in the first half of the eighteenth century. If by the combined actions of the law and the local magistrates gambling was driven underground to an extent, it is clear that it continued illegally, in public houses and at the Bath races into the late Georgian period which extends to 1830. As Kellow Chesney has pointed out, a wide range of villains, from tramps who doubled card sharpening with foot-padding to the fully rigged out swell mobsmen, swooped down on Bath or Cheltenham for race meetings in the early nineteenth century.⁸

What needs to be recognised here is that Georgian Bath, by the nature of its activities – attracting a fashionable company and many others who came to mingle with them or those who repaired to Bath for their health or in search of amusement – also attracted some undesirable elements who operated in parasitic fashion preying on the gullible, wealthy visitors. Bath was a mecca for professional gamblers. As early as 1706 fifty known gamblers and sharpers descended on Bath from London: ‘They want cullies’, it was said, ‘and are forced to devour each other’.⁹ It should also be recognised that gambling in all its different arts formed part of the appurtenances, along with fine clothes, of a gentleman of fashion. During its heyday many a rogue came a fortune hunting to Bath seeking out heiresses or wealthy widows and cutting a dash at the tables was part of the technique required. Young men were trained in all the fashionable arts, practiced in all the watering places of the kingdom until their mentors thought them ready for the richest prizes, to be won in the Bath season. So gambling was extensive in Bath, not merely because it was one of the public amenities in the city, but because the presence of a fashionable company attracted criminal elements looking for easy pickings.

The prominence of ‘Beau’ Nash in the traditional story of the making of Georgian Bath provides gambling with a high profile in the activities enjoyed by the fashionable company. Much less prominent in the public mind is the presence and practice of the various forms of vice in the eighteenth century city. As Neale has wilyly suggested: ‘it is a remarkable fact about Bath today that mention of its name, unlike that of Brighton, summons up neither libertine imagery nor salacious interest. Rather it evokes a sigh! In the early eighteenth century they seemed to know better’.¹⁰

Neale claims that Bath 'was suffused in sexuality'. At the Cross Bath were:

perform'd all the wanton dalliances imaginable; celebrated Beauties, panting breasts, and curious shapes, almost exposed to public view; languishing eyes, darting killing glances, tempting amorous postures, attended by soft musick, enough to provoke a vestal to forbidden pleasure, captivate a saint, and charm a Jove . . . The ladies with their floating Jappan bowls, freighted with confectionary, knick-knacks, essences and perfumes, wade about like Neptune's courtiers, supplying their industrious joynts. The vigorous sparks, presenting them with seveal antick postures, as sailing on their Backs, then embracing the elements, sink in rapture.¹¹

Sexual pleasures were available to those of both sexes who could pay, and sexual encounters took place in the private lodgings or in the brothels (that often posed as lodging-houses) that grew up in the city. Vicarious pleasures were available in the pornographic literature of the period. For instance, in 1740, James Leake, a leading bookseller in Bath, printed a book by Thomas Stretzer called *A New Description of Merryland*. The book purported to be written by a Roger Phfuquewell of Irish descent. Merryland represented a woman's body as a 'Paradise of Pleasure, and a Garden of Delight'. Under the guise of a serious study of topography all manner of sexual attractions were discovered. Naturally, Merryland was a fruitful country and, to avoid the expense of too abundant a crop, the people had discovered birth control. By 1742 ten editions of the book were published and an illustrated version entitled *Merryland Displayed* came out as a sequel in 1741. Leake was also a skilled publicist, producing a pamphlet purporting to attack Merryland but in reality attracting public attention to the work. Moreover, the strategy worked and Merryland became the book of the season among the fashionable company in Bath. Neale sees Leake as simply responding to the demands of the market and in the words of Stretzer reprinting 'all the smutty stuff they could think of to humour the prevailing Gout of the Town, and scratch the callous Appetites of their debauched readers'.¹²

Neale has linked the growth of obscene writing during the

period 1660 to 1745 with the first substantial period of Bath's expansion and with the growth of what he called agrarian capitalism in England. The precise nature of the relationships between pornography, the growth of Bath, and the development of the British economy is not spelt out but there is an implicit assumption that obscene literature and other forms of vice increased with the rapid accumulation of wealth that took place in early eighteenth century society. In broad terms, Neale's argument is that the making of Georgian Bath was a reflection of national developments. It was not merely the work of a few talented opportunists who came to Bath fortuitously, like Nash the Master of Ceremonies, Ralph Allen who developed the Combe Down quarries and built Prior Park or the architects John Wood, father and son, who designed the King's Circus and the Royal Crescent. As an economic historian, Neale adopts what is essentially an economic analysis strongly influenced by Marxist philosophy and modern sociological theory. It produces a heady mixture that many people in Bath find hard to swallow, having been brought up on the traditional tonic of an uncomplicated story built round key personalities. Moreover, the traditional version has the great commercial merit of being agreeably saleable to the modern tourist, extending the interest in personalities to famous visitors from the world of art, music and literature. Yet the traditional history of Georgian Bath, written in the heroic vein and concentrating on a few individuals, is based on the untested assumption that 'great men' shaped the destiny of cities as that of nations. It has its parallel in the versions of modern European history built around the careers of Napoleon, Metternich, Bismark and Adolf Hitler. This is an approach that is now less fashionable among historians. Neale's analysis, however difficult some of the concepts and language employed may be for the lay reader, is in fact representative of a more modern approach to history that concentrates on the interplay between economic and social forces, the power of ideas and ideologies and the development of political movements.

So far the subjects of gambling and vice have been treated in two ways, Firstly, with the traditional emphasis on 'Beau' Nash and the fashionable company and an understanding of the practice of gambling drawing on an anecdotal and literary kind of history. Secondly, the work of R.S. Neale has been featured as the

most powerful argument that Georgian Bath was the result of national developments. In particular, the rapid accumulation of surplus wealth, derived from the expansion of commerce and the prosperity that accompanied agrarian reform, sought an outlet in extravagant pleasure seeking. Hence an important aspect of the spectacular growth of Bath was as a centre for the practice of every form of indulgence in which gambling and vice featured prominently.

A third approach requires an extensive preamble by way of explanation. It concentrates neither on the famous or fashionable. It shrinks from the audacity of a contentious interpretation setting Georgian Bath in a national context and applying a sweeping economic analysis to explain every facet of life in the city. If it is to be understood, it requires some imagination about how the idea of Georgian Bath was transformed by the Victorians, who largely disapproved of it as a 'temple of frivolity', yet were conscious of its commercial potential to attract new visitors when the city badly needed them. It also represents a kind of history that is unfamiliar to many Bath residents who are used to their history by 'royal appointment' being so accustomed to mention of the well connected. It is history that focuses upon subjects and people thought unworthy of serious study twenty years ago but who have now come into their own. It is the history of the unknown and ordinary people, in this case, the people of Bath. In attempting to reconstruct the practice of prostitution in late Georgian Bath, the recorded activities of prostitutes speak for themselves. The surviving evidence is inevitably fragmented and, to assist our understanding, some reference is made to a national dimension through example of other studies in other towns, but the analysis of prostitution in Bath reflects a local and regional economy.

To appreciate how the Victorians transformed the legacy of eighteenth century Bath for posterity, it is worth recognising the plight of the city at the end of the Georgian period. By 1830, the great heyday of fashionable Bath was at an end.¹³ The balls, the theatre, the Pump Room and the libraries were all in decline. The decline of the city as a fashionable resort had been a gradual process since the 'reign' of 'Beau' Nash. No adequate successor was found as Master of Ceremonies and alternative attractions in the form of seaside resorts and rival watering places successfully

challenged Bath's supremacy. The Prince Regent's patronage of Brighton and the rapid development of Leamington and Cheltenham, in the early nineteenth century, increasingly undermined Bath's claim as the premier resort of fashion.¹⁴ The Bath Guide could still proclaim: 'From a perusal of the foregoing scenes of amusement and recreation, it will be readily conceived that in a full season, no place in England affords a more brilliant circle of polite company than Bath.'¹⁵ Yet this was an exercise in self persuasion as much as an attempt to persuade others. Later in the same account, after listing the amenities of the city, the author deplored 'the lamentable rage for health destroying routs, [which] causes some deviation from the routine of public amusements.'

Private entertaining was beginning to replace some of the old public amusements. When the Lower Assembly Rooms were



2 The Lower Rooms, seen from North Parade, 1818 (Bath Reference Library)

destroyed by fire in 1820, it was decided not to rebuild them but to erect a Scientific and Literary Institution on the site. The Lower Rooms had suffered from the expansion of the city and a corresponding drift to the north of Queen Square where the most fashionable lodgings were concentrated. This decision not to rebuild the Lower Rooms symbolised the change from the indulgent pleasures of the eighteenth century to the more earnest activity of the nineteenth. The opening of the Literary Institution in 1825 was marked by a confident defence of the city, in the face of apparent adversity. 'It is well known', wrote Capt. Roland Mainwaring, 'that when the Institution was first projected, there were many who imagined that the literary character of Bath was not sustained by the existing race of its inhabitants, and regarded as hopeless any attempt to interest a sufficient number of persons in the completion of a design which was chiefly destined for scientific and literary purposes' but 'Bath stands redeemed from the imputation of being a city devoted to pleasure and dissipation.'¹⁶ Here it is tacitly admitted that Bath had lost its fashionable company and that institutions would have to be supported by the city's own residents. More pertinently, it illustrates the move away from personal indulgence to the nobler pursuit of moral improvement.

Despite the vain attempts to hang on to its glorious past, the city was being transformed from the mecca of the rich, in search of amusement, to a retreat for the pensioners and annuitants of the aspiring middle classes. Where in the eighteenth century Bath had courted the 'quality' for the season, in the nineteenth century it sought to tempt the 'gentility' to take up permanent residence in the city. What was to remain throughout the Victorian period and up to the present day, in the language of the Bath Guides and in the utterances of town councillors and local dignitaries, was a sense of its unique quality informed by Bath's historic past and its great natural endowment.

The ancient legend of Bladud and the healing waters, the link with classical antiquity through the Roman baths, the architectural heritage of the Georgian masterpieces, such as the King's Circus and the Royal Crescent, were the living embodiment of the historic tradition. For a time in the eighteenth century Bath had been the leading resort in the country, attracting every national figure of note and thereby adding a unique quality of fame to the

city. Famous literary and artistic associations brought the kudos of high culture. Pope, Fielding, Sheridan and Jane Austen, Gainsborough, Garrick, Smollett and Sarah Siddons are just a few of the eighteenth century figures Bath claimed for its own. These could be employed to provide a rich tapestry to the cultural traditions of the city. And with due pride and reverence, the list of star names was wheeled out to do yeoman service in the Bath guides of the Victorian period to advertise the virtues of the city of Bath.

What happened was that the Victorians, at a time of economic crisis for the city of Bath, selected the most attractive features of Bath's historic past and sold them as part of a package in order to bring new visitors and residents to replace the custom lost by the departure of the fashionable company. What was in tune with the spirit of the 1830s and 1840s were the qualities of refinement and economy aimed especially at the new 'genteel' classes. In catering for its new custom, Bath ignored the commercial and industrial activity that accounted for the employment of most of its own inhabitants, and developed a genteel image of the city that was to endure long after the circumstances that created it.¹⁷ An example of the style of selling the genteel image is contained in the following extract extolling the virtues of the city, written in 1844:

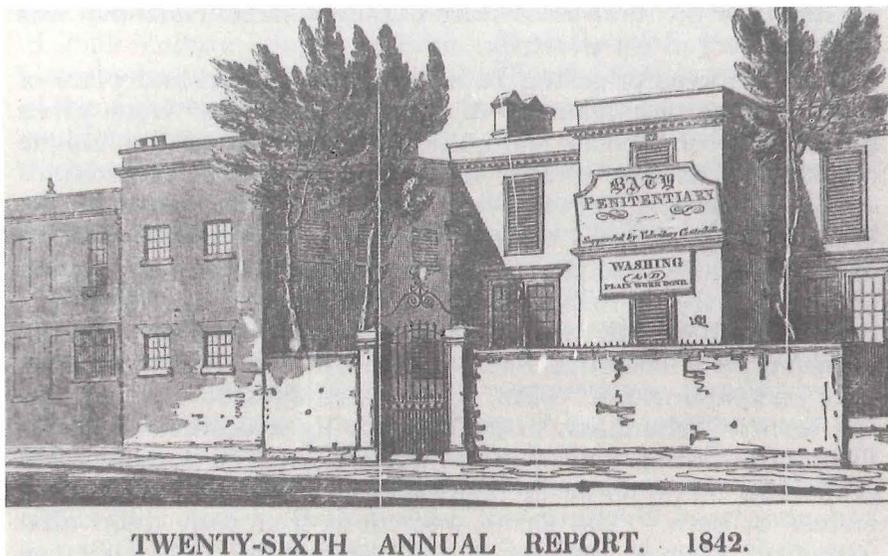
The visitant is well aware that Bath is not a city of trade. No manufactures worthy of notice is carried on within its limits, nor is it the resort of commerce . . . Of all places in the Kingdom, Bath is best fitted for the retirement of individuals with independent incomes, whether small or large. For those past the meridian in life,, its quietness, beautiful neighbourhood, and warmth of climate, particularly recommend it . . . Trade in Bath consists principally in the sale of articles connected with the refinements rather than the necessities of life.¹⁸

Also by advertising refinement and respectability, what was passed off as eighteenth century Bath (the crucial selling point in the package) were merely those aspects that fitted the needs of the time – the famous architectural heritage and the literary and cultural associations. The frivolity and pleasure seeking, especially the dissipation associated with gambling and vice, were discreetly left out of account. It was more the polite world of Jane

Austen than the more unsavoury period of 'Beau' Nash that was to be preserved for posterity.

In the process of selling Bath as a health resort and place of residence, certain features of living in the city were given particular prominence. Naturally, Bath advertised the unique qualities of its hot springs in healing rheumatic disorders.¹⁹ Added attractions included were the mild winters found in the West of England, good railway communications with every part of the kingdom, and the agreeable combination of high quality shops and the provision of cheap food, coal and lodging.²⁰ Indeed, one virtue that Bath proclaimed unashamedly, in attracting new residents, was the very low level of its municipal, poor and water rates.²¹ Bath, too, learned a lesson from its rival spa town, Cheltenham, in building up its educational facilities during the second half of the century.²² The fine buildings and parks also made its aesthetic quality another much advertised feature of Bath.²³ The list of attractions that Bath could offer varied at different periods in the century but invariably one quality was trumpeted aloud. The most compelling reason for deciding to settle in Bath, or to spend time visiting it, was that it attracted so many other people of refinement. In short, Bath became through the advertisement of its attractions, a last refuge for polite society set apart from the vulgar commercial world that appeared triumphant elsewhere.

In advertising the best features of Bath, the Victorians not only distorted the real nature of eighteenth century Bath but largely ignored the problems experienced in an expanding commercial and industrial city. Late Georgian Bath had a sizeable population of resident poor, including many female workers who were dependent on seasonal work but became largely unemployed out of season. The season for visitors that ran from November to March also brought an army of beggars and tramps, pickpockets and prostitutes to Bath, so swelling the common lodging houses of Holloway and the Avon Street district. In the southern part of the city, where fashionable lodgings had been built from the 1730s, the move northwards beyond Queen Square after the mid-century left such premises vacated and available to be let by the room to the thousands of workers required to build the new crescents and squares. It was in these densely populated, overcrowded and insanitary districts, that prostitution was concentrated.



3 Bath Female Penitentiary, Walcot Street, 1842 (Bath Reference Library)

In the early 1800s, the late Georgian period, as a result of John Wesley's influence and the Evangelical Revival, prostitution attracted attention as a moral evil. The extent of the practice and the concern about it in Bath is indicated by the founding of the Female Penitentiary and Lock Hospital in Walcot Street in 1805, as a place for rescuing fallen women and restoring them to useful employment. However, recent authorities on the subject stress the economic context of prostitution. According to Eric Trudgill, 'large numbers of women were forced on to the streets by poverty – atrociously low wages, by unemployment, by imprudence. In the hopeless squalor at the base of the social pyramid, prostitution was an accepted occupation that rarely attached any shame to its practitioners.'²⁴ Frances Finnegan in a major study of prostitution in York, a similar sized town to Bath, has also argued that poverty drove many wretched women into at least a temporary resort to walking the streets.²⁵

The surviving fragmentary evidence supports the view that much of the pattern of prostitution in late Georgian Bath can be explained by economic conditions. It appears to have been most

prominent in the southern part of the city, from the Abbey down to the River Avon, where many of the poorest inhabitants lived. Supply and demand, rather than sin, appear to have been at the root of prostitution in Bath. A high proportion of working women were employed in service industries in the city – domestic servants, laundresses and dressmakers – in lowly paid, seasonal employment and were easily open to exploitation. Neale has shown that in 1851, a third of occupied women over 20 years were engaged in domestic service and a further tenth were employed in the clothing and dressmaking trades. Moreover, there was an uneven distribution of female workers between parishes; female servants predominating in the suburban part of Lyncombe and Widcombe, Walcot and Bathwick, with those engaged in the clothing trades as dressmakers, seamstresses and milliners concentrated in the central parishes.²⁶ These were just those occupations from which prostitution recruited most successfully. Henry Mayhew, in his study of the labouring population of mid-Victorian London, found that the three leading occupations among women taken into custody as disorderly prostitutes were those of milliners, laundresses and servants.²⁷ The downward path from respectable employment to walking the streets often began with a servant girl becoming pregnant and being thrown out without a reference. Also young girls coming from the surrounding country districts to Bath, in search of excitement and employment, were easy prey to those with offers of lodgings and pretty clothes who could entice them into a life of vice. John Skinner, the Rector of Camerton near Bath, on visiting the city, was dismayed to find girls from Camerton operating as prostitutes in Bath and, as he wrote in his journal: 'I was not a little astonished, as I walked through Bath, to observe the streets so crowded with prostitutes, some of them apparently not above 14 or 15 years of age.'²⁸ With the population of Bath growing from 33,000 to 53,000 between 1801 and 1841, many young women from the surrounding districts and counties came to the city and, falling on hard times applied to the Poor Law authorities but were not always eligible for poor relief.²⁹ Without a five year residential qualification or if they had gained entitlement to relief in another parish, they were sent away empty handed.

In addition to a plentiful supply of recruits to prostitution from within the labour market at Bath, the physical expansion of the

city which doubled in size during the late Georgian period, released an ample stock of cheap rented accommodation close to the central business district of the city. Add the accumulated experience in providing lodgings for travellers of all descriptions and there were the business premises for the purposes of prostitution. The facilities of the Georgian spa were not lost on the 'Girls of the Town'. They plied their trade in the places of public amusement and recreation – along the parades, at the Theatre Royal, in Queen Square and in Victoria Park after it was opened in 1830. Public houses were also important centres of prostitution where the girls could meet potential clients and some landlords made upstairs rooms available by arrangement. In the mid-century the Bath Police had a list of 15 disorderly pubs, considered as the known haunts of thieves and prostitutes.³⁰

How many prostitutes were operating in Bath? It is only possible to make a rough estimate. Between 1820 and 1827, 77 prostitutes were apprehended in Bath, partly as a result of the Vagrancy Act of 1824 which gave powers to apprehend beggars and vagrants 'wandering abroad'. These were street prostitutes brought before the magistrates for misconduct of some kind – the use of obscene language, drunk and disorderly or causing a breach of the peace. There were other prostitutes who were not recorded because they operated from brothels in the Avon Street district. Only the owners could be prosecuted for the offence of running a disorderly house but the authorities took the view that it was better not to disturb the practice and drive it underground by such prosecutions. In the event it would take months to find where it had reappeared and the new location might prove more offensive to respectable citizens than before. The policy was to leave things alone as long as such premises were confined to the poorest quarters of the city. So, in addition to the known figure of 77 prostitutes working the streets there were others who operated from disorderly houses and their dependents, the madams and pimps who lived off their earnings together with publicans and lodging-house keepers who made rooms available to the girls and no doubt received a rent from the arrangement. Taken altogether, the numbers employed in some way in the business of prostitution in Bath in the 1820s must have run into several hundred people. One contemporary estimate suggested 'at least 300



4 Avon Street showing Georgian houses converted into lodging-houses c.1910 (Bath Reference Library)

persons who obtain a livelihood by begging, thieving, or on the miserable wages of prostitution' in Avon Street alone.³¹

If Avon Street was the red-light district of late Georgian Bath, the clients of prostitution were not confined to the poor who lived in the same quarter of the city. There was the curious paradox that prostitutes maintained the institution of marriage among the respectable classes. When young men engaged in long years of professional training could not contemplate the financial burden of marriage until about the age of thirty, prostitutes provided sexual experience before marriage when girls of their own class were bound by social convention to remain chaste or risk all prospect of marriage themselves. The social benefits of prostitution were hinted at in a satirical poem on Bath written in 1819:

'Ferret some wretched wanton from her cell,
Grant her not e'en with misery to dwell,

Give her no humble roof, no welcome door,
 Nor kindly bid her "Go, and sin no more",
 But pious drive her to unpitied doom,
 Till mercy grant a refuge in the tomb.
 Chase then the Cyprians, till not one remain,
 To lodge in Avon-Street, or Parsonage lane,
 Thro' Trim and Monmouth Street pursue your range,
 Till C---ss and P---l cry, "How people change",
 But if ye drive the w----s from Bath's chaste waters,
 Guard in a brazen tower your wives and daughters;
 Nor hope by this to polish from your brow,
 The crescent antlers that adorn it now,
 For husbands here, like bulls, seem arm'd for battle,
 And Bath, a mart for wives and horned cattle.³²

R. Rake, the author of these lines, recognised that the moral drive against prostitution was doomed to failure because it fulfilled a social need and, just as temperance campaigns thrived in the context of extensive drunkenness so the rescue of fallen women required an extensive practice of prostitution.

So far we have touched on the supply side of prostitution in the low-paid employment of women and the availability of premises for lodgings. Where then did the demand come from? Who, indeed, were the clients of the prostitutes in Bath? One obvious source of the demand were the visitors themselves, drawn to the city by the prospect of titillation, amorous dalliance, pornography and vice – all these were available in Georgian Bath. Prostitution, however, was not confined in Bath to the season or to the visitors. It occurred all the year round and there was a local demand from the inhabitants of Bath and from the surrounding area. The growth of commerce and industry generated its own trade for prostitution in addition to the needs of visitors. Farmers from the neighbouring agricultural districts who stayed overnight on market days for corn and cattle. Coal hauliers from Radstock who came to sell their coal in Bath, the market for the Somerset coalfield. Regiments of soldiers who camped outside the city and itinerant workers of all kinds who passed through the lodging-house districts. These were all potential clients of the 'Girls of the Town'.

What was the extent of the practice of prostitution in Bath? It is

possible to make a very rough estimate of the numbers of clients on the basis of the known numbers of prostitutes. The purpose of such an exercise is to consider, albeit very crudely, the scale of what might be considered as one of the service industries operating in the city. Taking the known number of 77 prostitutes apprehended in Bath during the 1820s and assuming an average clientele of 50 men per week, paying 1 shilling each for services rendered, the weekly expenditure involved would have totalled £1,925. If trade continued equally spread over the year, the total expenditure on prostitution in Bath would have amounted to £10,010 per annum. Of course it is unlikely that there would have been an even spread of business given the seasonal nature of much female employment and the fluctuations in demand arising from the Bath season. The figures represent mere speculation on the basis of very minimal evidence with all sorts of guesses and assumptions thrown in. Yet, whatever the precise figures might be, one is left with the feeling that prostitution in Bath amounted to a substantial business enterprise.

Just as with gambling, those who had recourse to prostitutes were drawn from all social classes and the following cases reveal something of the style and pattern of prostitution in late Georgian Bath. The first is in the form of a letter in the Bath Chronicle in 1815:

Scandalous

Mr ---- aged 75, of ---- Place, was lately united in the bonds of Hymen, to Miss Judy O'Rafferty, of Mansfield Court, Avon Street, aged 19. This notice is inserted by the particular desire of the bridegroom, who possesses a fortune of 300,000*l* in the Funds, to honour to his fair bride; who when found in rags, subsisting by cinder picking, and wanting even a bed to lie on, had the good resolution perseveringly to reject an offer of an annuity of 100*l* per ann., proposed as the price of the sacrifice of her virtue, Mr ---- sincerely penitent for past sins, declares to the world, that the act of justice which he has now performed, was pressed upon his conscience by the invitation of a charitable lady to visit a poor creature dying in a cellar, in extreme misery. In this poor wretch, the victim of horrible disease, the consequence of vice, he recognised a late beautiful young woman, who in the barouche of a certain

Baronet, not a year ago, attracted the admiration of the fashionable world, and whose first loss of innocence he had himself but too sad cause to remember.³³

Two clients are recorded in this instance, a wealthy resident of the city and a baronet who was probably visiting the city. Also mentioned is the prospect of marriage as a way out of prostitution for an especially beautiful girl, but all the evidence points to the more likely end of disease, poverty, squalor and an early death. Prostitutes feature prominently as suicide victims in Bath, drowning in the River Avon below Avon Street and the Broad Quay.³⁴ One such case may serve as an illustration of what was the tragic fate of many poor prostitutes. Mary Brown, the wife of a labourer and prostitute, was known to drink excessively. She operated from the Spreadeagle Inn in Horse Street (later Southgate Street) and, on the day of her death in March 1815, she was known to have shared 3 quarts of beer at the Spreadeagle and a further pint of beer and 2 glasses of gin and water in the Plume of Feathers or the Blucher's Head, also in Horse Street. Her last known client was a man in the Wiltshire Militia. About 10.30 in the evening, Mary Brown became very disorderly, using very improper language and being very abusive. The landlord of the Plume of Feathers asked her to quit the House but she refused to do so. At about 11.20 all the men in the room went out together and Mary Brown went out after them, following them down the street and very much in liquor. That was the last time that she was seen alive. She was fished out of the River Avon by a bargeman between 8 and 9 the next morning and taken to the Full Moon Yard. There were no marks of violence upon her body. The verdict of the Coroner was death by drowning.³⁵ Southgate Street formed one of the main entrances to the city and its many coaching inns brought a regular flow of traffic and custom for prostitutes operating there.

Walcot Street formed another route into the city, off the London Road, and it attracted its own additional comings and goings as the venue for the corn and cattle markets held in the city. The story of Eliza Clark, who operated from Walcot Street, also reveals a tougher policy on the part of the Bath magistrates attempting to improve the social tone in the city.

City of Bath – The Information of *John Harris* one of the

Tythingmen of the said city taken on his Oath this 15th day of May 1823 before me one of his Majesty's Justices of the peace of and for the said City –

Who on his Oath saith that on this 15th Instant *Eliza Clark* Singlewoman being in custody confessed and acknowledged to Informant that she was a Girl of the Town –

Ralph Dodd a Police Officer of the out part of the parish of Walcot on his Oath saith that the said *Eliza Clark* in the Evening of the 8th March last was delivered into Informants Custody charged with having stolen from a Farmer the sum of £3 – That the following morning she was taken before the magistrates and the charge not being established, was discharged conditionally that she then left Bath, and Informant was directed by the magistrates that if he saw her afterwards in Bath to apprehend her – That last night about half past 10 O'Clock he saw her in conversation with a man in Walcot Street near Walcot Burial ground, and she asked him to give her something to drink – That Deponent verily believes from the general conduct of the said *Eliza Clark* that she is a common prostitute and Street Walker – Wherefore he prays that she may be dealt with according to Law –

John Harris
Ralph Dodd

Sworn before me
Edwd. Anderdon³⁶

In this case the magistrates were trying to drive prostitutes away from the city with a conditional discharge but without success. Walcot Street had about ten public houses, some of them with a reputation for disorderly behaviour. Asking for a drink was a popular opening gambit and *Eliza Clark* may have had an arrangement with one of the publicans to rent one of the upstairs rooms. The farmer was probably staying overnight having come into the city for the market. Theft was commonly associated with prostitutes and £3 represented a great deal more than the likely fee for services rendered which was probably about a shilling. As late as the early years of the twentieth century the fee was only 1/6d.³⁷

Lastly, the case of *Maria Price* links together the practice of

working the streets with one of the brothels of Avon Street. The client, or potential client, was an ordinary working man named Charles Callaway.

'City of Bath The information of Charles Callaway No. 25 Lampards Buildings in the said City Plasterer taken on his oath this 5th January 1823 before me one of his Majesty's Justices of the peace of and for the said City –

Who on his oath saith that about 12 O'Clock at night on the 4th instant as he was coming up Horse Street in the Parish of St. James in the said City he was accosted by Maria Price singlewoman who asked him how he was – Examinant desired her to go away and attempted to proceed when she placed herself before him and jumped and prevented him going on – that she attended him up the street and being near the White Hart [now Barclay's Bank, Stall Street] she asked him to cross over towards a lane leading to the Stables; – as she wanted to speak to him – He went over with her and she took him down the lane and proposed to him to have Connexion with her, which he declined – She asked for money, which he refused to give her and she then said that Examinant had none – In order to satisfy her he took out a half crown, which she snatched from him; – In order to get it from her he followed her to Avon Street; and when she arrived at a house about the middle of the street, which appeared to be inhabited by Girls of ill fame, from the numbers and manner and appearance of them; when she went in and Examinant followed her to the Kitchen Door when he was ordered out by a man who appeared to be the owner of the House. Wherefore Examinant prays she may be dealt with according to Law –

Sworn before me Chas Callaway

Chas. Crook

Mayor' ³⁸

Here again the importance of Southgate Street, with its pubs and coaching inns, is in evidence. Also the White Hart was a well known coaching inn and the stables at the back of it were clearly known and used by Maria Price. She was also based in a house in Avon Street which was run by a man who probably lived off the

earnings of the girls of ill fame referred to in Callaway's evidence. If money had been obtained in the stables it would not necessarily have been paid over to the man acting as protector in Avon Street. It was income on the side and all the more acceptable to the girls if they could be sure of keeping it.

In assessing the significance of these individual cases it is clear that there was a common pattern to them. Moreover, they only assume an historical value when they are integrated into the development of the city of Bath in the late Georgian period. Just as early Georgian Bath provided a market for the indulgence of gambling among the fashionable company and all other ranks in society, so late Georgian Bath provided a market for prostitution that involved all social classes. Yet, whereas with gambling the most obvious victims were rich, young men duped out of their inheritances by professional gamblers and cardsharps, with prostitution the victims were invariably young women, not only cruelly exploited but too often sent to an early death by a combination of poverty, disease, drunkenness and despair. In this and in other respects, gambling and vice were practices with a significance that extended beyond their role as entertainments in Georgian Bath.

Notes

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- 7 R.S. Neale, *Bath 1680-1850: A Social History or A Valley of Pleasure, Yet a Sink of Iniquity*, 1981.
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- 9 *Op. cit.*, Melville.
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